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French Water Partnership's proposals for a successful UN 2026 Water Conference

The French Water Partnership brings together French public and private players of all kinds. It contributed actively to the 2023 UN Water Conference in New York where its key messages to country governments were to improve the global governance of water challenges in three ways. It explained these messages verbally to governments in the Interactive dialogue 5.

The present note presents the proposals that the French Water Partnership has just made to the organisers of the UN 2026 Water Conference in order to make it a success.

At the end of 2026, Senegal and the UAE will co-host the second UN Water Conference of this century. It seems essential to us that this rare high-level intergovernmental meeting on Water builds on the integrated vision of global water issues adopted in 2015 with the Agenda 2030, which includes precise objectives, the twenty or so water-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since 2015, i.e. for 11 years, due to the absence of a UN mechanism dedicated to water, it has not been possible to organize high-level intergovernmental work at the UN on all of these global water-related targets. At the 2023 Conference, some SDG targets were indeed considered, but individually, not as a whole, contrary to the systemic vision of the Agenda 2030. The 2023 Conference, the first this century to be devoted to all water-related issues, was in fact mainly concerned with the 2018-2028 Water Decade, whose objectives are of a different nature to the results-based objectives of the SDG targets.

Consequently, 2026 will be a major deadline for the international community and for water-related actions.

If the Conference enables progress to be made towards the twenty or so global water-related targets adopted in 2015, while maintaining a coherent overall vision that takes account of the interdependence of the many facets of water and the multiplicity of sectors needed to achieve these goals, it will be a success and a hope for more effective future action.

But we see three major risks:

- if the Conference ignores the obvious shortcomings of current policies in relation to the global objectives that are the Water-related SDG targets, the necessary actions will certainly not be stimulated and these objectives could even disappear in 2030 despite their necessity for mankind. On the contrary, the Conference should take stock of the progress made towards each target, lead to accelerated action

and affirm the need to pursue the goals beyond 2030, a subject that will be on the agenda of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2027.

- if the Conference considers only part of the global goals, for example by considering only the 8 targets of SDG6 and forgetting the important other SDG targets related to Water such as target 11.5 on water-related disasters (droughts, floods, etc.) or target ODD 13. 1 on adaptation to climate change, the integrated vision of water issues and the interdependence of the corresponding actions will disappear from the UN's future work, and the United Nations will revert to the previous fragmented vision that proved ineffective;

- if the Conference only mobilizes Ministers specialized in one part of water-related issues, despite the fact that in all countries water-related actions involve many ministries, it will not mobilize all those whose action is necessary to achieve global water-related goals, and will only lead to insufficient political results in relation to these goals. The water-related SDG targets cannot be achieved without strong, voluntary action in the agricultural, industrial, urban, financial and health sectors.

The French Water Partnership wishes the Conference to be a success. So, via the UN-DESA public consultation on the themes of the future Interactive dialogues at the Conference, we have put forward three proposals to limit these risks and enable collective progress.

These proposals are detailed in the appendix here attached.

Appendix:
Our 3 proposals for the organisation of the 2026 UN Conference on Water

1. Choosing the theme for the Interactive Dialogue 5 of the conference

In this context, and considering that Interactive Dialogues 1 to 4 will be sub-sectoral, each focusing on only some of the global water-related goals, the French Water Partnership has proposed that Interactive Dialogue 5 be devoted to the global water-related goals (20 SDG targets), considering them in their entirety and not arbitrarily restricting them to the 8 targets of SDG6. We propose to call it:

> *EN : **Action towards achieving all global water targets:** accelerating the implementation of all water-related SDG targets included in the 2030 Agenda, continuing action and maintaining a holistic water vision beyond 2030 (all SDGs)*

This will enable us to maintain an integrated vision of all water-related issues and coherent global ambitions beyond 2030.

Most of the water-related SDG targets will not be met by 2030. Consequently, it will be necessary to continue working towards their achievement beyond 2030. The content of the post-2030 multilateral sustainable development agenda will be considered by UN member states in July 2027, in line with the declaration of the 2024 Summit for the Future. The discussion will take place at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in July 2027, just seven months after the UN Water Conference. There is a risk that some participants at the HLPF will push for the abandonment of the SDGs, which would be highly detrimental to the resolution of water-related issues and would return us to the pre-2015 situation where there was only one unambitious global target related to Water. In order to usefully prepare for the HLPF debate, which will cover all topics, themes and sectors, it would be useful for the 2026 UN Water Conference to express the view that the water-related targets of the SDGs should be pursued beyond 2030.

2. Choosing the theme for Interactive Dialogue 6

In all the global water objectives adopted in 2015, there is one that no UN meeting has mentioned again since 2017 and the United Nations Environment Assembly resolution of December 2017 (UNEP/EA.3/Res.10). This is the essential goal of reducing water pollution, one of the six major water-related challenges (along with access to water and sanitation, water resources, ecosystem protection, water-related disasters and climate change adaptation), by halving untreated wastewater flows (SDG target 6.3).

Controlling water pollution and wastewater discharges is an important element of the 2030 Agenda. Specific, and ambitious, related objectives are set out in SDG target 6.3, and achieving SDG 6.3 is an essential prerequisite for achieving SDG targets 3.3, 6.2, 6.6, 14.1, 15.1 and 15.5 on health, access to safe sanitation, biodiversity, ecosystems, as well as protecting the oceans.

Despite this cross-cutting importance, at the 2023 United Nations Water Conference, these pollution-related challenges were integrated into Interactive Dialogue 2 in a very inconspicuous way: only 1 of the 64 paragraphs of the preparatory note mentions pollution, and no recommendations were proposed on actions relating to urban wastewater discharges. As a result, the summary of the conference only mentions

pollution as being affected by climate change, without making any clear recommendations in this respect, and without mentioning wastewater discharges.

This imbalance between the objective adopted in 2015 and the content of post-2017 discussions is partly due to a lack of global knowledge on wastewater discharges. As there was no information on the subject before 2015, statisticians had to start from scratch in 2016. They had to build a meaningful indicator, then collect data at national level and finally aggregate it at global level. This took years. Since the summer of 2024, we know that 42% of domestic wastewater is discharged into rivers and seas without any depollution. But unlike all the other indicators measuring progress towards the objectives of SDG 6, this statistical work is not advanced enough to measure trends over time. We still don't know whether or not the world is progressing towards the agreed target for wastewater management.

The good news is that a first estimate of these trends will finally be published before the December 2026 Water Conference. As a result, it will be possible to use this new knowledge to support a useful political debate on wastewater management at the 2026 Conference, just four years before the end of the 2030 Agenda. This rare opportunity to mobilize UN member states on water pollution control and wastewater management should not be missed.

In this context, where the reduction of pollution appears to be lagging far behind, we have proposed that Interactive Dialogue 6 be devoted to this subject with the following title:

*EN : **Improving water quality by reducing water pollution and wastewater discharge** to preserve water and groundwater and protect human and ecosystems health, biodiversity and water resources quality (SDG 6.2, 6.3, 6.6, 14.1, 15.1, 15.5)*

3. Mobilizing all the sectors that are essential to good water management

As mentioned above, there is a risk that the UN Water Conferences will become regular conferences on certain water-related topics, rather than on all of them, despite the many interactions between the different facets and issues of water.

Global water objectives will never be achieved without the positive action of many sectors for whom water is not a top priority, such as farmers, energy producers, urban planners, industries, etc.

It is certain that a UN global Water Conference attended only by water ministers will not be enough to achieve the objectives of SDG 6, or those of the dozen of other water-related SDG targets, unless all the concerned sectors actively contribute to national water policies in their own countries.

This is why we strongly suggest that you invite ministers from all sectors, including agriculture, energy, industry, cities, health and finance, to contribute actively to the 2026 UN Water Conference.