

Deepening Australia's global partnerships through cooperation on water security

Key messages

Water security is central to sustainable development and climate adaptation

- Water is at the core of sustainable development and is critical for socio-economic progress, energy and food production, healthy ecosystems, and human survival itself. It is linked to nearly every Sustainable Development Goal, and is also a rights issue.
- Climate change expresses itself through water, with nine out of ten natural disasters being water-related. Water-related climate risks cascade through food, energy, and urban and environmental systems.
- Water security is at the heart of adaptation to climate change.

Australia is a recognised world leader in water management and we should do more to leverage our expertise

- Having grappled with issues of water scarcity and insecurity, we have the know-how to assist others with what is an increasingly universal challenge. We have a strong global reputation in water governance, management and reform.
- To maximise impact through international development programs, Australia should be looking to align the greatest needs of our neighbours with the best solutions we can offer. Addressing issues and challenges related to water achieves this.
- Water brings stakeholders together. There is the opportunity to share our expertise and knowledge in a manner that strengthens cooperation and partnerships, and drives collective action and impact across the region.
- Australia's experience, expertise, and contribution to improving water security provides an opportunity to maximise impact relative to financial contribution. Our expertise, knowledge and tools can be a force multiplier for better management, better decisions, better investments and better outcomes.

Water security should be a key pillar of Australia's international development policy

- Water security is necessary for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. This should be reflected in our foreign policy and international development program.
- Efforts to improve water security can be a means by which Australia contributes to building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development and are resilient to external pressures and shocks.
- If we are to achieve climate and development related goals, water must be at the core of how we approach cooperation and building partnerships, and, ultimately, how we adapt.

Global water security matters to Australia's strategic interests

Water touches every aspect of development and links with nearly every Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). As the global population grows, there is an increasing need to balance all the competing commercial demands on water resources, so that communities have enough for their needs.¹

The world is already experiencing significant water insecurity. Pressures created by population growth (particularly increased urbanisation), economic growth, increasing demand for food, and environmental degradation are reducing both water availability and water quality.

Climate change is exacerbating this, including by reducing average rainfall in some areas and increasing the frequency and severity of droughts, storms and floods, which can damage water infrastructure and affect services. The World Meteorological Organisation estimates that **3.6 billion people had inadequate access to water at least one month a year in 2018**, and projects this to rise to more than 5 billion by 2050. Water will be at the centre of the adaptation needs of most countries – of over 1,800 climate adaptation strategies reviewed for the IPCC's 6th Assessment Report, **over 80% were water-related**.

In turn, water insecurity will generate chronic and acute issues for communities, nations and regions. Adverse impacts on livelihoods and quality of life will create the conditions for domestic instability and, at worst, mass migration. Tensions over water, including **transboundary disputes**, are increasing.

Against this backdrop, it is in Australia's strategic interest to leverage our considerable experience and expertise on water security to help achieve **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6** – 'ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' – and minimise threats to Australia's national security from regional and global instability.

Responding to the shared challenge of water security is a means for Australia to:

- pursue foreign policy outcomes for greater regional security and strengthening strategic relationships
- contribute to climate change adaptation
- underpin effective development assistance, including through support for locally led solutions and a focus on gender and other inequalities
- enhance diplomatic pathways by elevating Australia's reputation for sustainable water management
- foster trade opportunities through exchange of expertise, services and technology.

The Australian Government's domestic and foreign policy commitments support international leadership on water security

The Australian Government's domestic commitments on climate change and water provide a platform for stronger foreign policy and diplomatic leadership on water, including in the context of:

- restoring Australia's status as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific
- strengthening comprehensive ties with regional partners including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam
- establishing a Climate and Infrastructure Partnership with Indonesia.

¹ See UN Global Water Issues Overview: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/water>

Australia can show practical leadership in the build-up to the 2023 UN Water Conference

Global activity is increasing as countries prepare for the [2023 UN Water Conference](#). Marking the midpoint of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (and noting over half of the goals are inextricably linked to success on goal 6), 2023 is a critical moment for preventing the 2030 water and climate agenda from faltering.

Recent announcements have established a [Global Commission on the Economics of Water](#) and a [US Action Plan on Global Water Security](#). Australia has an opportunity to contribute to this global push. Demonstrating practical leadership on water security will also help to position Australia in relation to the [UN Biodiversity CoP 15 in December 2022](#), the [2024 World Water Forum](#) to be held in Bali, and the [UNFCCC CoP 28](#) to be held in Dubai (and later CoPs).

Australia's water experience and expertise positions us uniquely to provide practical international leadership on water security

Over decades of reform, Australia has developed considerable know-how, institutional strength, practical models and innovative technologies to help achieve water security. Importantly:

- We understand that improved governance and water management is a force multiplier for better water security – Australia cannot and should not fund all the necessary infrastructure, but we can help ensure improved governance is a prerequisite for making the right infrastructure decisions, attracting capital, and using water resources sustainably.
- We can engage as a trusted partner on water security – we are actively adapting to the impacts of a changing climate, and our water reform story is already internationally known.

Critically, we are looked to as being the gold standard of coordinated basin, regional and national approaches to improved water policy and management. Our experience and success in elevating and delivering water policy and reform through national agreements or roadmaps, committing to action and bringing about change helps provide an example for others. The [National Water Initiative](#) serves as one salient case study for others to examine and learn from.

As a country, we are unique in having this experience and it has been identified as being critical going forward. This was highlighted by our contribution to the UN / World Bank High Level Panel on Water, including through the development of [WaterGuide](#) as a universal framework for developing roadmaps and practical application of this via structured dialogues with Ministers and other senior decision makers in partner countries. There is demand for us to do much more of this.

Our particular competitive advantage is in 'upstream' strategy, policy and governance (rather than 'downstream' provision of project funding or infrastructure). If we make the most of this, we can positively influence downstream decisions and increase the impact and leverage from each dollar Australia and other financiers invest.

Australia should elevate the role of water security in international development policy and leverage associated opportunities based on our national strengths

Given its importance to international development and adapting to climate change, water and (more specifically) water security should be a core element of Australia's international development policy.

Water security is a shared challenge subject to frequent and increasing expressions of demand for support through the Australian aid program. It is an area where Australia can make a unique and valuable contribution.

Addressing water security necessitates engagement, cooperation and partnerships, and there is an opportunity for Australia to build and strengthen ties by showing leadership on water security. This plays to our strengths and maximises the contribution we can make as a nation.

Practically, we propose that the international development policy should:

- Incorporate a clear position statement on water security that creates a niche for Australia's engagement in this area
 - Such a statement should articulate Australia's commitment, objectives and offering, for the purpose of developing and designing initiatives and programs in response, and to communicate Australia's value proposition to the world.
- Mandate the development of an action agenda and complementary diplomatic strategy to give effect to Australia's position on water security, help meet the SDGs, and support Australia's national interests.