

SIWI Insight Brief

Part of SIWI's 2026 Engagement Series

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The event

World Water Week 2026 took place at a critical point for the global water agenda. Under the theme Water for People and Progress, the Week brought together actors from governments, international organizations, science, civil society, finance and business at a time when water is gaining political and economic attention, but progress towards global water goals remains too slow.

The timing gave the discussions particular significance. The review of SDG 6 at the High-Level Political Forum had recently taken place, while major international processes on climate and biodiversity and the 2026 UN Water Conference were still ahead.

Across World Water Week, SIWI convened and participated in discussions spanning water governance, finance, business, climate and water resilience, governance of the full hydrological cycle, AI, and transboundary water governance and water in multilateral processes. Discussions also brought perspectives on gender equality, youth participation and Indigenous knowledge into questions of water governance and implementation. Alongside these discussions, SIWI conducted interviews with policymakers, practitioners, scientists, financial institutions, and business leaders.

This brief presents SIWI's analysis of these discussions and interviews, informed by SIWI's institutional expertise and the priorities set out in the SIWI 2026 Policy Brief. Rather than attempting to capture everything discussed during the Week, it identifies areas of convergence and translates them into policy priorities for the next phase of the global water agenda.

At a glance: from recognition to implementation

One conclusion emerged particularly strongly from World Water Week 2026: lack of recognition is no longer the only – or necessarily the principal – obstacle to progress on water.

Water is rising on political and economic agendas. Businesses are confronting water risks across their operations and supply chains, while financial institutions are paying greater attention to water as both a risk and an investment opportunity. Communities are experiencing the consequences of water scarcity, droughts and floods, as science provides an increasingly clear picture of how the hydrological cycle connects climate, ecosystems, land and economies. Preparations for the 2026 UN Water Conference are adding political momentum and creating an opportunity to turn this growing recognition into action.

But recognition has moved faster than implementation. The barriers increasingly lie in the systems through which decisions are made: fragmented institutions; separation between water, land, and economic policy; limited implementation capacity; weak revenue models; insufficiently developed investment pipelines; and global policy processes that lack continuity between political commitments, and delivery.

The next phase therefore requires more than putting water higher on the agenda. It requires changing how water is governed, how investment decisions are made and how global commitments translate into action.

From participation to influence

Effective water governance depends not only on who participates, but on who can shape decisions and whose knowledge is recognized.

World Water Week highlighted different dimensions of this challenge. Women need stronger pathways into the water workforce, leadership and decision-making. For young people, participation needs to translate into skills, employment, and lasting institutional roles. Indigenous Peoples bring knowledge and governance practices rooted in long relationships with water, land and ecosystems that remain too often marginal to formal decision-making.

Moving from representation to influence therefore requires sustained opportunities for leadership and employment, recognition of different knowledge systems, and meaningful involvement in setting priorities and implementation. These considerations cut across the policy challenges identified during the Week and the six priorities that follow.

1. Govern the full hydrological cycle

Water governance does not yet adequately reflect how water moves through the full hydrological cycle.

Policy and institutions have traditionally focused on visible, or blue, water: rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers. Yet soil moisture, vegetation, and atmospheric moisture – green water – are fundamental parts of the same hydrological cycle. Changes in land use, forests and soils can affect rainfall and atmospheric moisture flows, water infiltration and availability for plant growth, groundwater recharge, and drought and flood risks — with impacts extending far beyond where those changes occur.

This exposes a fundamental governance mismatch. Water moves across landscapes, sectors, and borders, while responsibility is divided between ministries, agencies, municipalities, and countries. Agriculture, forestry, and land-use decisions can alter water availability without being treated as water decisions.

Governing these relationships also requires drawing on different forms of knowledge. Indigenous Peoples and local communities hold knowledge and experience of water, land and ecosystems that can contribute to understanding local conditions, managing risk and sustaining ecosystems. Recognizing this knowledge should be part of more inclusive and locally grounded water governance.

Policy recommendations

- Governments should integrate blue and green water into water, climate, land-use and development planning, while promoting wastewater reuse and circular water management where feasible.
- Water, agriculture, forestry, environment, and land-use authorities should establish joint planning and accountability mechanisms where decisions affect the hydrological cycle.
- National hydrological monitoring should expand beyond conventional measures of surface and groundwater to include soil moisture, land condition, and other relevant dimensions of the hydrological cycle.
- Governments should protect and restore forests, wetlands and other ecosystems that regulate water flows, strengthen water retention, and support the functioning of the hydrological cycle.
- Indigenous Peoples and local communities should have meaningful opportunities to contribute knowledge and influence decisions affecting the water systems, lands and ecosystems with which they are connected.

2. Put water at the centre of climate and economic decision-making

Water policy cannot succeed if responsibility for water remains concentrated within water and environment institutions.

Agriculture, energy, industry, infrastructure, trade, cities and technology all depend on water and influence its availability and quality. Yet major decisions in these sectors can still be made without adequately accounting for water.

The consequences are increasingly economic and affect people's livelihoods. Drought can constrain agriculture, technology use, and industrial production. Flooding can disrupt businesses and infrastructure. Water scarcity can affect energy generation, urban development, and investment. Poorly managed land and vegetation can weaken the water cycle on which economic activity depends.

The implication is not simply that other sectors should prioritize water. Water considerations need to become part of the information and incentives shaping their decisions.

The same applies to climate policy. Although many climate impacts are experienced through water, water-related risks are not consistently translated into climate planning, finance, and investment priorities.

The water community also needs to demonstrate how better water governance contributes to objectives governments already prioritize, including economic resilience, food and water security, health, employment and environmental protection.

Policy recommendations

- Governments should integrate water across the national instruments to implement the Rio Conventions, including Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and climate implementation frameworks, as well as National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and National Action Plans (NAPs) to combat desertification. supported by climate-water risk assessments that inform planning and investment.
- Governments should require integrated economic, agricultural, energy, industrial, infrastructure and land-use strategies to assess their dependencies on and impacts on water, with finance and economic ministries systematically involved in national water-, land-use-, and energy planning and investment decisions.
- Water risks should be incorporated into national economic and resilience assessments and climate-finance decisions, particularly where scarcity, flooding or deteriorating water quality could affect growth, employment, public expenditure or long-term resilience.

- Companies should incorporate water availability, quality and flood risk into enterprise-risk management, capital allocation and long-term planning, including risks within their supply chains.
- Financial institutions should assess water dependencies and risks in lending and investment decisions.
- Governments should improve access to credible water-risk information and provide predictable regulatory frameworks that enable businesses and financial institutions to assess risk and invest in water resilience.
- Water institutions should work with major water-dependent sectors to identify how stronger water governance can support wider economic and social priorities.

3. Fix the conditions that allow finance to flow

Closing the water financing gap requires more than mobilizing additional capital.

Investment in water remains difficult where regulatory frameworks are uncertain, institutions lack capacity, projects are poorly prepared, or credible mechanisms for recovering operating and maintenance costs are absent. New financing instruments cannot resolve these underlying constraints.

A basic distinction is therefore needed between financing water resources management and restoration of the hydrological cycle and paying for water services. Restoring the hydrological cycle is connected to investments in sustainable land management and landscape restoration at basin and watershed scale in collaboration with other sectors. Water services and infrastructure ultimately depend on sustainable funding through some combination of tariffs, taxation, and transfers. Without these foundations, attracting additional capital will remain difficult.

Public resources may also remain unused or inefficiently deployed because ministries, utilities and service providers lack implementation capacity. Meanwhile, repeatedly funding isolated projects can leave countries dependent on further external support when projects end.

The objective should be financing systems in which policy, institutions, revenue, project preparation, and different sources of capital reinforce one another.

Financing also needs to align more closely with regional priorities and data. Africa's Water Vision 2063 provides a shared continental direction, yet an estimated USD 50 billion is needed annually for water and sanitation, compared with around USD 12–15 billion currently mobilized. In India, local water budgeting and water security planning show how data on water conditions and needs can be more closely connected to planning and spending decisions.

Financial sustainability and equity also need to be considered together. Water investments need to account for affordability and ensure that communities with fewer resources or less potential to generate financial returns are not systematically left behind.

Policy recommendations

- Sustainable management of water resources and restoration of the hydrological cycle should be better linked to investments in land and ecosystem restoration and water retention in landscapes. This means influencing investments in agriculture, forestry, energy, and ecosystem protection.
- Countries should establish sustainable funding and revenue models for water infrastructure and services, with clear roles for tariffs, taxes, and transfers.
- Development finance should support institutional capacity, project preparation, procurement, operation and maintenance alongside physical infrastructure.
- Governments and development partners should address barriers to effectively using existing water budgets as well as mobilizing new capital.
- Public and concessional finance should be used strategically to reduce risks and mobilize additional capital where appropriate, rather than treating private finance as a substitute for effective public institutions.
- Financing should increasingly support longer-term, programmatic approaches that strengthen institutions and create sustainable systems beyond individual projects.
- Financing frameworks should assess who benefits and who may be excluded, with mechanisms to protect affordability and direct resources towards underserved groups and communities.
- Global water and financing processes should build on existing regional visions, policies and investment plans, connecting global priorities to progress already underway at regional and national levels.
- Governments and financing institutions should better connect data on water stress and local needs with expenditure and results, strengthening accountability and enabling resources to be directed where they are most needed.

4. Advance cooperation across shared waters

Water crosses borders between communities, municipalities, sectors, and countries. This creates shared risks, but also opportunities for cooperation – increasingly important at a time of profound global uncertainty, when the number of armed conflicts is at a record high and interstate conflicts have reached their highest level since World War II

Effective cooperation does not always begin with a comprehensive political agreement. Practical collaboration on meteorological information, early warning, scientific exchange, and eventually hydrological data can establish mutual benefit and build relationships needed to address more sensitive questions.

Water diplomacy therefore needs to be understood as a sustained process. Different contexts require different approaches, but lasting cooperation depends on institutions, relationships, information and capacity that survive individual negotiations.

Cooperation must also respond to a changing hydrological cycle. Climate and land-use change can alter water availability across borders, making it increasingly important to connect management of shared rivers and aquifers with land, ecosystems and climate resilience.

Policy recommendations

- Countries sharing water resources should invest in durable cooperation mechanisms, including basin institutions, data and information-sharing, and sustained diplomatic and technical engagement. International and regional partners should support long-term, locally rooted capacity and help maintain dialogue during periods of political tension.
- Where formal negotiations are difficult, governments and partners should combine cooperation on data, science and early warning with informal Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogue to build relationships and create pathways towards formal cooperation.
- Countries and partners should connect water diplomacy with cooperation on energy, food, land, ecosystems and disaster risk reduction, using these interdependencies to create new entry points for dialogue and practical cooperation.
- Shared waters governance should integrate climate resilience, land use, ecosystems and the full hydrological cycle into basin-level planning and cooperation.

5. Build continuity and accountability into global water governance

Global water governance remains fragmented. Water connects climate, biodiversity, ecosystems, land and sustainable development, yet these global processes continue to be negotiated, financed and implemented largely separately. At the same time, the global water agenda itself lacks sufficient continuity between major political moments.

Greater coherence does not require merging these frameworks. It requires governments and international institutions to identify their water interdependencies, align implementation where objectives intersect, and establish clearer mechanisms for following up water commitments over time.

Greater coherence is also needed within the global water agenda itself. The renewed sequence of UN Water Conferences represents political progress, but moving from 2023 to 2026 and then 2028 will not itself create an effective global water architecture. The Interactive Dialogues provide an opportunity to build political momentum and advance action, but continuity also requires mechanisms for follow-up, accountability and institutional leadership between conferences.

The 2026 UN Water Conference therefore provides an opportunity not only to generate new commitments, but to strengthen the process through which they are carried forward into the 2027 SDG Summit and preparations for 2028 and the Post-2030 Agenda.

Policy recommendations

- Governments and international institutions should integrate water, including blue and green water, across climate, biodiversity, land and development frameworks and strengthen coordination between their implementation processes.
- National commitments and implementation should be better aligned across global frameworks including the Rio Conventions to reduce duplication, conflicting objectives, and fragmented investment.
- Member States should use the 2026 UN Water Conference to establish clearer mechanisms for follow-up, accountability and institutional responsibility between global water conferences, ensuring continuity of the Interactive Dialogues and selected Flagship Initiatives and supporting sustained commitment and funding for implementation.
- The 2023, 2026, and 2028 UN Water Conferences should form a continuous process, with outcomes from Abu Dhabi informing preparations for 2028 and the conclusion of the Water Action Decade. This process should also help shape a post-2030 agenda that better reflects globally agreed water priorities and strengthens the foundations for more coherent global water governance.

- The 2027 SDG Summit presents an opportunity to strengthen continuity, coordination, and accountability on water and ensure its integration across the post-2030 agenda.

6. Make implementation the measure of success

The international water agenda has generated commitments, initiatives, and growing political recognition. The harder task is translating them into change on the ground.

This requires connecting global ambition with national priorities and local delivery. Commitments need responsible institutions, financing, implementation capacity and ways to measure whether conditions are actually changing.

Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy provides one example of an implementation-oriented approach, combining long-term direction with milestones for 2033, 2043 and 2063, supported by an implementation plan and flagship programmes.

Implementation also depends on who has influence. World Water Week highlighted the need for stronger pathways for women into the water workforce and leadership, and for youth participation to translate into skills, employment and lasting institutional roles. For Indigenous Peoples, meaningful participation includes recognition of rights, knowledge and governance practices connected to water, land and ecosystems. Inclusive and equitable governance is therefore a practical condition for delivery, not only a principle.

Implementation is also more than delivering technical solutions. In disaster resilience, for example, early-warning technology only delivers its full value when communities can respond, institutions are prepared and sustained investment supports the wider systems needed for resilience.

Policy recommendations

- Global commitments should include implementation pathways specifying responsibilities, financing, milestones, and mechanisms for measuring and reporting on progress.
- International agreements and outcomes should build on regional agendas, national priorities, and experience. Governments should translate international commitments into national and subnational planning rather than create parallel implementation structures.
- Development partners should strengthen the capacity of ministries, local authorities, utilities, basin organizations, and communities responsible for delivery.
- Women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and other affected stakeholders and rightsholders should be involved early enough to influence priorities, investment and implementation, rather than consulted only after key decisions have been made.
- Governments and partners should create sustained pathways for women and young people into water institutions and the workforce, including through professional development, mentoring, networks, skills development and employment opportunities.
- Indigenous and local knowledge should be recognized alongside scientific and technical evidence where it can strengthen locally appropriate and sustainable implementation, while respecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- Flagship initiatives for the 2026 UN Water Conference should have defined objectives, responsible actors, financing pathways, results-based indicators and metrics for monitoring, and follow-up mechanisms.
- Success should be measured through improvements for people, economies and ecosystems, not the number of commitments or initiatives announced.

From Stockholm to Abu Dhabi

World Water Week took place as preparations for the 2026 UN Water Conference were moving from technical discussion towards political outcomes. This creates an opportunity – but also raises the bar for success.

Political attention alone will not be enough. The Conference needs to create conditions through which political ambition can continue after delegates leave Abu Dhabi.

The six Interactive Dialogues offer an opportunity to connect issues traditionally addressed separately. Their flagship initiatives should avoid creating new silos and instead respond to implementation needs that may cut across several dialogues.

World Water Week suggests several practical tests for Abu Dhabi. The Conference should advance a more continuous global framework for water, with clearer follow-up and accountability. It should move financing discussions beyond the volume of capital towards the governance and institutional conditions required for investment. It should bring the full hydrological cycle more clearly into international water governance. And it should ensure that global outcomes build on and support implementation at local, national, regional and transboundary levels.

The Conference sits between the 2023 and 2028 UN Water Conferences and ahead of the 2027 SDG Summit. Its outcomes should inform both.

The objective should not simply be a successful conference. It should strengthen the mechanisms that turn international cooperation on water into better governance and sustained implementation.

SIWI perspective

World Water Week 2026 revealed a global water agenda in transition.

The case for water is increasingly understood beyond the traditional water community. Governments are giving it greater political attention. Businesses are experiencing water as operational risk as the planet has transgressed the planetary boundaries for both blue and green water. Financial institutions are exploring water as an investment issue. Science is expanding understanding of the hydrological cycle and how it is impacted by rapid climate and land-use change. And countries are again preparing to meet at the highest international level specifically on water.

But the systems surrounding water have not changed at the same pace.

Water is still too often separated from decisions about land, food, energy, industry, infrastructure, and economic development. Investment discussions can focus on finding new capital without addressing the governance and revenue conditions that determine whether investment is viable. Global commitments can remain disconnected from the institutions responsible for implementation. Participation can also remain disconnected from meaningful influence over the decisions that determine water outcomes.

This is why governance matters. It is how knowledge informs policy, priorities shape investment, different interests are negotiated and international commitments are translated into implementation and collective action.

The next phase of the global water agenda should therefore focus less on generating further recognition of the problem and more on changing the systems through which water decisions are made.

Looking ahead

World Water Week is one stage in a wider sequence of global processes in 2026.

The months ahead provide an opportunity to connect water more effectively with climate, biodiversity, land, economic development and international cooperation, while moving from recognition towards implementation.

SIWI will carry the evidence and policy priorities emerging from Stockholm into the international processes ahead, while continuing to test them against experience from governments, communities, science, business, finance and practitioners.

Ultimately, progress will not be measured by how often water appears on international agendas. It will be measured by whether decisions, investment, and implementation change as a result.

Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI), an independent and non-profit organization, based in Stockholm and working globally, advances water's role in secure, equitable, and sustainable futures. We convene partners across sectors, translate knowledge into policy and practice, and strengthen capacity to co-create lasting water solutions.