Policy brief

The Blue Thread: Connecting the Rio Conventions through water security

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WaterAid

SANITATION AND WATER FOR ALL

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Addressed to Parties to the three Rio Conventions, including their national focal points and relevant ministries responsible for climate change, biodiversity, land, water and sanitation; and to governments participating in the 2026 UN Water Conference, particularly through the Interactive Dialogues on Water for Planet and Water in Multilateral Processes.

The brief also provides recommendations for the Rio Convention Secretariats, their Joint Liaison Group, relevant UN entities, financing institutions and other stakeholders supporting coordinated implementation.

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Summary

The Rio Conventions share a common challenge: climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation are increasingly undermining water security. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) all depend on healthy water systems to achieve their objectives. Because water underpins the goals of all three Conventions, we can deliver critical outcomes through global coordination on water in the Rio Conventions. Addressing water challenges, whether too much, too little, or too polluted, delivers shared benefits for people and nature. Investing in water security strengthens climate resilience, restores ecosystems, reduces land degradation and drought, and improves public health, livelihoods, and economic growth. Water security can deliver multiple, mutually reinforcing benefits for nature and people, at every level, from global to local. Yet water remains insufficiently recognised as an integrating principle in the implementation and financing of the three Conventions. Climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect marginalised populations; water security offers a practical entry point for advancing equity and climate justice across the Rio Conventions, while upholding the human rights to water and sanitation.

This brief calls for renewed political leadership and coordinated institutional action to place water security at the heart of the Rio Conventions. While considerable technical progress has been achieved in recognising and addressing the interdependencies between water, climate change, biodiversity and land degradation, experience shows that technical cooperation[i] alone is insufficient to secure sustained integration across multilateral processes.

Stronger political commitment from Parties, supported by Convention Secretariats and relevant coordination mechanisms, is now needed to translate this progress into coherent mandates, aligned national policies, coordinated implementation and investment. In 2026, the UN Water Conference presents an opportunity to place water security at the heart of Rio Conventions' cooperation, and as each Convention holds its Conference of the Parties (COP), this is a critical opportunity to connect the Conventions through water security, from the UNCCD COP in Ulaanbaatar to the CBD COP in Yerevan to the UNFCCC COP in Antalya, culminating with commitments at the UN Water Conference in Abu Dhabi. Together, the Rio Conventions address systemic risks that impact long-term water security, and the success of their operational cohesion should be measured, in part, by whether people are more water-secure, with reliable, safe, and climate-resilient water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

Against this backdrop, Parties should use the 2026 UN Water Conference to advance five priority commitments:

- Elevating water security as a cross-cutting priority and operational link across the Rio Conventions through the Joint Liaison Group of the Convention Secretariats.
- Strengthening the institutional consideration of water within the UNFCCC.
- Strengthening interministerial coordination to align national planning instruments and investment strategies across the Rio Conventions.
- Mobilising integrated financing for water, climate, nature and land restoration.
- Measuring Rio Conventions' success through improvements in people's water security.

i. Technical cooperation can include activities such as capacity building initiatives and joint projects and advocacy and exchange of technical expertise.

Background: Why water security is the blue thread connecting the Rio Conventions

Land degradation, droughts and water scarcity. Land restoration improves soil moisture, ecosystem functioning and soil productivity, while supporting water availability and quality. Conversely, continued land degradation, compounded by climate change, exacerbates drought impacts and water scarcity, threatening ecosystems, livelihoods, food security and access to safe drinking water. It is estimated that 3 out of 4 people will experience drought impacts by 2050.[1] The impact of droughts on available water supply puts communities at risk of water scarcity and weakens health and economic outcomes. These interdependencies highlight the importance of integrated approaches to land restoration, drought resilience, and sustainable water resources management, which can deliver mutually reinforcing benefits across the objectives of the UNCCD, UNFCCC, and CBD.

Healthy ecosystems and biodiversity at the heart of water security. Biodiversity depends on healthy rivers, wetlands and aquifers. When natural ecosystems, such as forests, are protected, land and water resources are protected from degradation and continue to provide their life-giving services. Loss of forests leads to deteriorating freshwater quality and quantity.[2] These systems do not operate in isolation from social and human activities, which directly impact their functioning. When wastewater is discharged untreated, it pollutes rivers, wetlands, coral reefs, and seagrass beds that buffer storms and store carbon. In 2024, 3.4 billion people worldwide – two in five – still lack a safely managed sanitation service,[3] meaning waste is not disposed of safely, leading to pollution and biodiversity loss. Untreated wastewater represents a major threat to freshwater and coastal ecosystems. It is estimated that more than 80% of wastewater worldwide was discharged into the environment without treatment.[4] Although more recent global monitoring remains insufficient to establish a comprehensive estimate covering both domestic and industrial wastewater, the latest data show that 44% of domestic wastewater was still not safely treated in 2024.[5]

Climate change multiplies existing threats: Across global environmental challenges, climate change emerges as a critical force that intensifies risks, including drought, floods, and extreme heat. Most importantly, 90% of climate impacts are felt through water, or need water to address them.[6] Adapting to climate impacts requires resilient water and sanitation systems, as explicitly recognised in the water and sanitation target of the United Arab Emirates Framework for Global Climate Resilience under the Global Goal on Adaptation. At the same time, safely managed sanitation

and wastewater systems contribute to climate mitigation through reduced greenhouse gas emissions and to biodiversity protection by preventing pollution of freshwater and other ecosystems. Water is therefore an essential element in addressing the interlinked climate, biodiversity and land degradation crises.

Water security for people and planet. Water is a connected system that links climate, ecosystems, and land health, supporting climate resilience, ecosystem integrity, and sustainable land management. The ultimate purpose of global environmental commitments should be to protect the natural systems on which life depends, while improving human well-being and ensuring a sustainable future for both people and nature.

Water security provides a vital measure of progress towards these objectives, reflecting both the health of freshwater ecosystems and tangible benefits for people, including reliable, safe water, sanitation, and hygiene; food security; improved health and livelihoods; and economic productivity.

A people-centred approach to water security must be grounded in the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, ensuring that integrated environmental policies contribute to equitable, affordable and sustainable access to essential services. This requires particular attention to populations facing discrimination, exclusion and heightened vulnerability to climate and environmental risks, as well as their meaningful participation in decisions affecting water resources and services. Land degradation, drought, climate change, and biodiversity loss all threaten water security, leaving millions globally exposed to water and food insecurity, loss of life, and loss of livelihoods.

According to the World Bank Group, water-dependent sectors support around 1.7 billion jobs globally, making water security inseparable from jobs, growth, and stability.[7] Further, investing in climate-resilient water and sanitation generates substantial social and economic returns. In Africa, every US$1 invested in climate-resilient water and sanitation generates at least US$7 in economic returns,[8] strengthening resilience, productivity and public health.

Leveraging existing momentum

Momentum towards greater cohesion among the Conventions is growing:

The Joint Liaison Group (JLG) provides an important institutional mechanism for coordinating the three Rio Conventions. Established in 2001, it brings together the secretariats of the CBD, UNCCD and UNFCCC to exchange information, enhance coordination and identify opportunities for joint action. It provides an important institutional bridge between Conventions with distinct mandates and governance structures, while supporting country-driven collaborative actions at the national level. Strengthening this cooperation could help translate commitments to greater coherence into more integrated national planning, implementation and investment.

Learning from mainstreaming water in the UNFCCC. Experience from efforts to mainstream water within the UNFCCC offers an important lesson for cooperation across the three Rio Conventions. Technical engagement, knowledge generation and participation in existing processes have contributed to significant progress in recognising water-related challenges and solutions. However, Parties need to translate this progress into sustained institutional integration through stronger political mobilisation. Technical cooperation and political leadership must therefore advance together, with countries championing water security within Convention decision-making processes and supporting appropriate institutional arrangements for its continued consideration and implementation.

The UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation and mainstreaming water within the Rio Conventions. Institutional separation between national authorities responsible for water and sanitation and those leading engagement in the Rio Conventions remains a challenge. This can limit the integration of water and sanitation priorities into Convention processes and national implementation frameworks. Addressing this divide requires stronger interministerial coordination, greater capacity among water and sanitation institutions to engage in Rio Convention processes, and their systematic involvement in developing national positions and implementation strategies. The UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation recognises the challenges of fragmentation and supports mainstreaming water and sanitation across the Rio Conventions,[9] and political initiatives can reinforce these efforts. The SWA Heads of State Initiative,[10] supported by partners including WaterAid, mobilises high-level political leadership for water and sanitation, while the Madrid High-Level Leaders Compact on Water Security and Resilience[11] provides a foundation for strengthening political commitment and whole-of-government action.

Country-led actions are building momentum. The Belém Joint Statement on the Rio Conventions, adopted at UNFCCC COP30, aims to bridge institutional silos among climate, biodiversity, and land degradation efforts. The joint statement was signed by the then COP presidencies of the UNFCCC (Brazil), the CBD (Colombia and Armenia), and the UNCCD (Saudi Arabia and Mongolia); it further encourages the adoption of integrated reporting platforms and stronger engagement from non-party stakeholders and vulnerable groups. In addition, the current and incoming Rio Conventions COP Presidencies, the Executive Secretaries of the three Rio Conventions, international organisations and financial institutions held a High-Level Dialogue at the 2026 UNCCD COP17 to strengthen cooperation.[12] The voluntary, country-led Rio Synergies Group for Action aims to help align partnerships, finance, data, and investment pipelines with integrated solutions, while also increasing efficiency and reducing costs. For countries, coordination reduces the planning and reporting burdens for each Convention through shared priorities for water security.

A Party-led process to elevate water within the Rio Conventions. A core principle of international environmental law, including the three Rio Conventions, is the party-driven process, whereby only Parties to the Conventions have the formal authority to initiate processes or propose new agenda items. However, in practice, each convention operates under its own legal framework and rules of procedure.[13] The Rio Synergies Action Group provides a useful model of how Parties can lead integration across the three conventions. Looking ahead, the SDG Summit in September 2027 presents a strategic opportunity to strengthen the integration of water into Rio Convention processes, identify pathways to enhance institutional synergies and mobilise country champions from the Rio Synergies Action Group to advance a coordinated, party-led agenda on water, within the operational structures of the Rio Conventions.

Countries are building synergies under the Rio Conventions – and water cuts across commitments

Rwanda: Coordinated land restoration overlaps the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), and Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets, saving an estimated **USD 45.6 million per year** (a 56% cost reduction).

Türkiye: Introduced a dedicated **Rio Synergies Protocol** in 2025, establishing a joint working group and an annual action plan across national focal points to bridge institutional silos across government.

Panama: Launched the **Nature Pledge,** which unifies climate, biodiversity, and land commitments under a single national framework with shared tracking indicators. This enables more efficient joint reporting against shared areas across the conventions.

Sources:

- Rio Conventions Joint Capacity Building Programme (Online course), 2026.
- From Yerevan to Antalya: What COP 17 and COP 31 can do for climate, nature, and land | International Institute for Sustainable Development.

The upcoming 2026 UN Water Conference is a critical moment to strengthen the global water agenda. Discussions through the interactive dialogues – Water for People, Water in Multilateral Processes and Water for Planet – signal the potential to integrate water within the Rio Conventions.[14]

A clear flagship initiative that places water at the heart of connecting the Rio Conventions will drive more coordinated policies and investment. Joint statements and Presidency-led initiatives have shown growing recognition of the need for sustained cohesion across the Rio Conventions, including the COP28 Joint Statement on Climate, Nature and People, the Synergies Collaboration Platform established to support its implementation, and the COP31 Presidency's Rio Synergy track.[15,16]

The next triple COP year will be in 2028, presenting an opportunity to generate greater political attention to achieving more coordinated approaches in 2027 as Parties prepare for the next COPs and the 2028 UN Water Conference.

Water-Related Commitments in the Rio Conventions

The proposed launch of a flagship initiative at the UN Water Conference aims to advance water as a connected agenda across the conventions, with a roadmap for action. This is an important step towards ensuring water governance is not fragmented across the three Rio Conventions and towards recognising that the hydrological cycle is the connective system linking climate, biodiversity, and land outcomes.

Member States already express water-relevant commitments through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs), and Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) targets. Each instrument shows real progress, but the three remain only loosely connected: NDC water targets are rarely aligned with NBSAP freshwater-ecosystem provisions or with LDN's dependence on restored hydrological function, soil moisture, groundwater recharge, and riparian zones. The result is duplication of effort in some places and gaps in delivery in others, at a moment when governments can least afford either.

2026 brings the three Rio Convention COPs, the HLPF's in-depth review of SDG 6, and the UN Water Conference into a single, sequenced year, and the UN Water Conference, strategically positioned to consolidate the year's outcomes:

- **UNCCD COP17:** Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 17–28 August 2026, the first of the three, framing land and drought resilience.
- **CBD COP17:** Yerevan, Armenia, 19–30 October 2026, the first global review of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- **UNFCCC COP31:** Antalya, Türkiye, 9–20 November 2026, building on the Global Goal on Adaptation agreed at Belém.
- **2026 UN Water Conference:** Abu Dhabi, 8–10 December 2026.

Priority actions for placing water security at the heart of the Rio Conventions

To translate the current political recognition of the importance of prioritising water security across the Rio Conventions through tangible implementation, we recommend the following actions:

Launching Water in the Rio Conventions flagship initiative at the 2026 UN Water Conference. The proposed Water in the Rio Conventions flagship initiative at the 2026 UN Water Conference can mobilise political commitment among Parties, strengthen cooperation across the three Rio Conventions, support coordinated national policies, implementation and investment plans, and build on existing institutional mechanisms, including the Joint Liaison Group. At the country level, the initiative should include a mapping of success cases where alignment has been achieved through a focus on water. This builds on existing mappings launched in 2026 under the CBD COP, which mapped more than 400 activities for synergies.[ii]

Water security provides a practical framework for aligning climate, biodiversity and land restoration objectives. Actions such as ecosystem restoration, climate-resilient water and sanitation services, drought-resilience planning, and sustainable groundwater management can simultaneously contribute to NDCs, NAPs, NBSAPs, and LDN targets.

Aligning these planning processes reduces duplication, improves efficiency and strengthens outcomes for both people and planet. Implementation of commitments under the flagship initiative will require joint engagement by national authorities responsible for water and sanitation and those representing Parties to the Rio Conventions, ensuring that the political outcomes of the UN Water Conference are translated into relevant Convention processes, national planning instruments, and implementation arrangements.

ii. A "multilevel road map for enhancing cooperation, policy coherence and synergies across the Rio conventions," was presented to parties in CBD/COP/17/11. The mapping study for the roadmap originally identified more than 400 possible actions; but the road map distils these down to 46, grouped under eight building blocks that run from aligned national strategies to resource mobilization, and sequenced to 2028, 2030, and beyond.

Based on this analysis, Parties should commit to:

1. **Positioning water security as a cross-cutting priority across the Rio Conventions through the Joint Liaison Group.** Water security must be embedded as a core cross-cutting theme within the Joint Liaison Group and related workstreams, ensuring that the biodiversity, climate, and land degradation agendas reflect water security challenges and solutions. The JLG should facilitate structured engagement with civil society and other relevant stakeholders, including representatives of marginalised groups, to inform coordinated action across the three Conventions. This can be further strengthened by including shared water security indicators in the group's next work plan in support of coordinated outputs.

2. **Strengthening interministerial coordination to align national planning instruments and investment strategies.** Aligning national policies and plans—including National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), Land Degradation Neutrality targets (LDNs), and National Drought Plans (NDPs)—with implementation and investment strategies can deliver lasting, cross-cutting benefits when water security is central to social, ecological, and economic outcomes. Parties should establish or strengthen institutional mechanisms to coordinate the ministries and national focal points responsible for the Rio Conventions, as well as those responsible for water, sanitation, finance, and other relevant sectors. These mechanisms should support the development of joint national positions, coordinated planning and implementation, and capacity strengthening, so water and sanitation institutions can engage effectively in Rio Convention processes. Coordination can also help identify investment priorities that advance objectives across multiple Conventions.

3. **Mapping existing success cases and mobilising integrated financing for water, climate, nature and drought resilience.** Development banks, climate funds, and biodiversity and land restoration financing mechanisms should prioritise investments that generate simultaneous benefits for water security, climate resilience, biodiversity, land restoration, and drought resilience. The three conventions are supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). GEF funding supports integrated, multi-convention projects and a mapping of success cases in financing integrated interventions at the country level is required. Similarly, initiatives such as Water Forward[17] present a unique opportunity to drive integrated country plans through country-led water compacts. The three pillars across water for people, food and planet align with the Rio Conventions' distinct mandates. These country-led compacts, developed through high-level political commitment, pave the way for inclusive development and strategic financing for water security. Such financing efforts can build on existing political commitments and high-level leadership platforms, including the SWA Heads of State Initiative and Madrid Compact, to strengthen government ownership and interministerial coordination.

4 **Measuring the Rio Conventions' success through improvements in people's water security.** With technical support and coordination facilitated by the JLG and relevant Convention bodies, Parties should align existing water-related indicators across the Rio Convention frameworks, including the Global Goal on Adaptation. This would support more coherent national planning, investment and reporting. The indicators should guide coordinated action and assess whether implementation is delivering resilient water and sanitation services, restoring land and freshwater ecosystems, and strengthening resilience to drought. Monitoring should also reflect the human rights to water and sanitation, using disaggregated data on access, affordability, service quality and inequalities. It should build on existing national and international monitoring frameworks rather than create parallel reporting requirements. Beyond monitoring outcomes, political commitments should include clear implementation responsibilities, measurable milestones and nationally owned, multi-stakeholder accountability processes that enable regular progress reviews. Existing approaches, such as SWA's Mutual Accountability Mechanism,[18] offer practical experience in translating government commitments into measurable actions, strengthening stakeholder engagement and sustaining accountability for implementation.

5 **Strengthening and reaffirming existing processes in preparation for the September 2027 SDG Summit and Post-2030 Agenda, including the institutional consideration of water within the UNFCCC.** The Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action provides an important political and partnership platform for advancing water-related climate action. Building on this momentum, Parties should explore opportunities to strengthen the institutional consideration of water within the UNFCCC, including through a recurring, formally mandated dialogue linked to relevant Convention processes and work programmes. Such an approach could provide a progressive pathway towards more sustained institutional arrangements, potentially including a standing COP agenda item, while complementing existing initiatives and avoiding duplication. Existing initiatives, including the Rio Trio Initiative at COP29 and joint statements by the Rio Convention Presidencies, provide additional political foundations to strengthen cooperation across the three Conventions. Further, revisiting synergies with water as the common thread, for example through the Rio Synergies Action Group ahead of the September 2027 SDG summit, is essential to ensure progress ahead of the development of a post-2030 Agenda.

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