



ADDRESSING THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The world is grappling with how to combat poverty, inequality, disease and environmental degradation — all complex and interdependent problems compounded by climate change. And addressing these issues is fundamental to humanity’s continued survival on the planet. In 2015, United Nations member countries developed and adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at ending poverty, fighting inequality and tackling climate change by 2030.

Water: At the Core of Sustainable Development

Water is central to managing multiple interrelated risks: climate change, food security, health and sanitation, floods and droughts. It flows through and underpins all of the SDGs, and it is the focus of Goal 6, which aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” Meeting Goal 6 is crucial for achieving much of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Integrated management of freshwater resources is critical to harness synergies as well as to manage potential trade-offs across sectors and regions, to ensure availability and sustainable management of water for all.

The Freshwater Health Index and SDG Goal 6

Conservation International is a founding partner of the Freshwater Health Index, a tool that measures the overall condition of freshwater ecosystems and their ability to support healthy and economically-sustainable populations. The Index is designed to provide guidance to decision-makers that will lead to better management — and will help monitor progress in meeting Goal 6 and all of the SDGs more broadly.

Using the Freshwater Health Index, countries can look comprehensively at the sustainability of their freshwater systems. The Index offers indicators under three major categories related to freshwater ecosystems, their services (including water for drinking and crops, mitigation of floods and other risks, etc.), and water governance. Individual indicators are also aligned closely with specific SDG 6 targets. The tables below detail how individual Freshwater Health Index components can be used to support SDG Goal 6.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 6

Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

SDG Target 6.1:

By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.

Indicator 6.1.1:

Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services.

The Freshwater Health Index measures “distribution of benefits from ecosystem services,” of which, safely managed drinking water services is the primary sub-indicator. While there are already standard methods for calculating SDG Indicator 6.1.1 at the national level, the Index provides additional, spatially-explicit information at the sub-basin scale, thereby linking supply to access.

SDG Target 6.3:

By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.

Indicator 6.3.2:

Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality.

The Freshwater Health Index measures water quality against both ecological and human health standards. This provides decision-makers with a standard way to assess compliance with “good” quality standards and will help in setting interim targets and monitoring progress toward meeting Target 6.3.

SDG Target 6.4:

By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity.

Indicator 6.4.2:

Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources.

Water supply reliability is one of the indicators measured by the Freshwater Health Index. It allows decision-makers to see, at a sub-basin scale, where demand is exceeding sustainable supply and where action is needed to strengthen environmental flow requirements or improve water use efficiency.

SDG Target 6.5:

By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate.

Indicator 6.5.1:

Degree of integrated water resources management implementation (0-100).

Indicator 6.5.2:

Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation.

The Freshwater Health Index includes a Governance & Stakeholders survey administered to stakeholder groups, designed to assess key dimensions of integrated water resources management (IWRM). The Index helps decision-makers identify specific aspects of IWRM that need attention and, critically, where there is disagreement among decision-makers on their collective priorities or progress.

SDG Target 6.6:

By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.

Indicator 6.6.1:

Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time.

Using the Freshwater Health Index indicators for Ecosystem Vitality — such as deviation from natural flow, land cover naturalness, channel modification, and biodiversity — decision-makers have a rigorous and comprehensive measure for Target 6.6. The Ecosystem Vitality group of indicators also helps set priorities for improving water-related ecosystems and setting priorities for either protection or restoration.

SDG Target 6.B:

Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.

Indicator 6.B.1:

Proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management.

Freshwater Health Index sub-indicators for Stakeholder Engagement include “Information access and knowledge” and “Engagement in decision-making processes,” which provide decision-makers with more detailed information on the degree and quality of local community participation.

Conclusion

Protecting and sustainably managing freshwater ecosystems is essential in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. The Freshwater Health Index provides a way to measure key targets within SDG 6, ensuring sufficient quantity and quality water for people, including economic needs, while maintaining vital ecosystems. **It also provides a framework for measuring and reporting on these targets at a sub-national level, to highlight within-country variability and prioritize actions.**

The Index will help diagnose deficiencies in the water governance system, so decision makers can prioritize necessary reforms and be more responsive to the challenges of reducing poverty, ensuring food security, developing clean energy, and

meeting water demand. Most importantly, it assesses both the social and environmental dimensions of water, bringing all relevant stakeholders together and providing a comprehensive picture of freshwater health.

The Freshwater Health Index has been successfully applied in China, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, and is now being implemented in several countries in Latin America. It was designed especially for developing countries, where freshwater challenges are both urgent and complex, but where data availability varies widely. The Freshwater Health Index team can thus provide the tools and technical assistance required to implement the Index, and to build the capacity in countries as they begin initial reports on their progress toward the SDGs.

For More Information

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