



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

The Sixth Goal of Sustainable Development in Iraq: Reality and Remedies

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Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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Al-Bayan Center pursues its vision by conducting independent analysis, as well as proposing workable solutions for complex issues that concern policymakers and academics.

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The Sixth Goal of Sustainable Development in Iraq: Reality and Remedies

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Introduction

In the declaration of sustainable development in 2015, when the member states of the United Nations unanimously adopted the Sustainable Development Plan for 2030 with its 17 goals, 169 targets, and 2231 indicators, it was stated: “We aspire to a world where human rights, human dignity, rule of law, justice, equality, and non-discrimination are respected. A world where race, ethnic origin, and cultural diversity are respected. A just and equitable world, tolerant and open, where no societies are left behind, and where the needs of the most vulnerable groups are met.” This plan aims to guide global and national development policies and to provide new options and opportunities to bridge the gap between human rights and development. It forms a general framework that guides global and national development efforts.

The sixth Sustainable Development Goal, entitled “Clean Water and Sanitation,” aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The goal includes sub-objectives such as drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, wastewater, water quality, World Water Day, water use efficiency, World Toilet Day, water stress management, cross-border cooperation, ecosystem systems, and international cooperation. Despite increased access to clean water in recent decades, population growth and climate change threaten to exacerbate water scarcity in many countries. Since the

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1960s, about two-thirds of countries have experienced an increase in water stress. The Sustainable Development Plan for 2030 includes a commitment to participate in systematic monitoring and review of progress towards desired goals and targets using a set of relevant global indicators.

The United Nations collaborates with the Iraqi government and other national partners through the Joint Strategic Framework of the United Nations, under the umbrella of the Iraqi Vision 2030 and national transformation programs, to support the achievement of sustainable development goals by addressing the challenges and opportunities of development in Iraq, which is facing several crises, including the water pollution crisis resulting from various factors such as industrial and population pollution, whether intentional or due to negligence and weak oversight by health and environmental institutions.

The World Bank identified the water stress rate in Iraq in 2020 at around 80%, which is a very high percentage¹, exacerbating Iraq's exposure to the crisis of drought and water scarcity due to climate change and arbitrary actions by riparian states in releasing agreed water shares and diverting the course of several rivers. This has led to a severe exacerbation of the water crisis, negatively impacting the agricultural, health, and environmental reality of Iraqi society, foremost among them being the problem of pollution of drinking water, which threatens the collapse of the ecosystem and environmental diversity.

1. International Organizations' Reports on Water Pollution Issue:

A. In August 2019, the World Bank issued a report indicating that the world is facing an unprecedented water quality crisis, leading to the loss of one-third of potential economic growth in severely polluted

1. <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdcatlas/goal-6-clean-water-and-sanitation/?lang=ar>

areas, endangering human well-being and environmental safety. The report, titled “Quality Unknown: The Unforeseen Water Crisis,” illustrates how the combination of bacteria, sewage, chemicals, and plastics can deplete oxygen from water supplies, turning water into a toxic substance for humans and the ecosystem. To highlight this issue, the World Bank worked on providing the world’s largest database on water quality from field monitoring stations, remote sensing technology, and machine learning. The report concludes that the lack of clean water supply limits economic growth by one-third and calls for immediate attention at global, national, and local levels to these risks facing both advanced and developing countries. The report recommended a set of measures countries can take to improve water quality, including improving environmental policies and standards, accurate monitoring of pollution levels, establishing effective law enforcement systems, and creating water treatment infrastructure supported by incentives for private investment, and accurate disclosure of information to incentivize citizen participation.²

B. Human Rights Watch announced in a report released on July 22, 2019, that Iraqi authorities have not ensured for nearly 30 years that the residents of Basra have access to sufficient drinking water fit for human use, leading to ongoing health concerns. This situation peaked with a severe water crisis that resulted in at least 118,000 people being hospitalized in 2018 and led to violent protests. The report, titled “Basra Thirsty: Iraq’s Failure to Address the Water Crisis,” indicates that the crisis is the result of complex factors that, if left untreated, are likely to lead to the spread of waterborne diseases in the future and continued economic hardships. Authorities at both

2. World Bank: Deteriorating water quality reduces the economic growth rate by a third in some countries. Available at the link: <https://www.albankaldawli.org/ar/news/press-release/2019/08/20/worsening-water-quality-reducing-economic-growth-by-a-third-in-some-countries>

the local and federal levels have not done enough to address the dire situation, and satellite images analyzed by the organization showed waste accumulating along the channels flowing into the Shatt al-Arab in downtown Basra from March 2018 to February 2019.³

C. According to a UNICEF report titled “The Looming Drought: Impact of Water Scarcity on Children in the Middle East and North Africa,” published in August 2021, the report indicates that nearly 3 out of 5 children in Iraq cannot access safe water services, and less than half of the schools across the country lack basic water services, endangering children’s health, nutrition, cognitive development, and future livelihoods. The reports also note that the Middle East and North Africa region will be the most water-scarce region in the world, with nearly 66 million people living in the mentioned region lacking basic sewage systems, with very little mention of treated wastewater.⁴

D. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, issued a report after a visit to southern Iraq in August 2023, clarifying that Iraq is among the most vulnerable countries to climate change due to a combination of high temperatures, lack of rainfall, drought, water scarcity, and frequent sand and dust storms. In addition to recurrent drought conditions, pollution contributes to environmental degradation in the region, with millions of cubic meters of industrial waste being dumped into rivers and waterways feeding the marshes. Environmental protection advocates confirm that pollution from fossil fuel projects in Basra province, which hosts most of Iraq’s vast oil and gas reserves, has reached unprecedented levels. This pollution is a major cause of cancer, kidney failure, and

3. Iraq: Water crisis in Basra Decades of mismanagement, pollution and corruption <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/07/22/331730>

4. The impending drought: Water scarcity threatens life and development in Iraq.» Available at: [<https://iraq.un.org/ar/142207>]

other⁵ diseases witnessing an increase in the number of cases in Basra.

2. Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Goals in Iraq:

The management of water resources in Iraq holds crucial strategic importance for the Iraqi government and relevant institutions due to its direct connection to numerous vital sectors and its significant contribution to shaping any future development plans. However, the plans, programs, policies, and actions undertaken by Iraqi institutions do not adequately align with the magnitude of the risks posed by the water pollution issue, presenting a serious obstacle and challenge to achieving Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals:

A. Despite recent humanitarian, security, and political challenges, Iraq, classified as one of the upper-middle-income countries, continues to face challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The government persists in incorporating Sustainable Development Goals into the National Development Plan 2018-2022 and has established the “National Committee for Sustainable Development,” chaired by the Minister of Planning. This committee is tasked with monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and providing reports on the country’s development to a “High-Level Follow-up Group.”

In 2019, with the support of the United Nations Development Program, the Iraqi government submitted its first Voluntary National Review report to the High-Level Political Forum. The review came as a result of a series of consultations that helped gather valuable insights on priorities and challenges, involving stakeholders from

5. «Climate change and pollution threaten Iraq’s ancient marshes.» Retrieved from: [<https://www.ohchr.org/ar/stories/2023/11/climate-change-pollution-threaten-iraqs-ancient-marshes>]

academia, civil society organizations, the private sector, women's rights advocates, youth, and parliament members. The review focused on implementing the priorities of Iraq's 2030 vision and the related Sustainable Development Goals, namely (human development and gender equality) for Goal 16 (good governance and safe society), for Goals 8 and 9 (economic diversity), for Goals 6, 11, and 13 (sustainable environment). However, after submitting the first Voluntary National Review, the country faced political instability, which led to the government's attention being diverted away from the sustainable development path. Iraq's announced index score is 63.1 in terms of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goals 1, 3, 4, and 5, and it ranks 113 out of 166 globally.⁶

B. Despite significant efforts by water sector institutions, particularly the Ministry of Water Resources, which supervises water resources and implements infrastructure projects such as dams and irrigation channels, with support from other ministries like the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Health, those efforts do not match the magnitude of risks and depletion facing the water file in the country. Primitive methods persist, and state institutions are far from sustainable water use, whether for human, agricultural, industrial, or other purposes. Iraqi farmers still use archaic irrigation methods to irrigate their crops, surpassing the water quotas of other farmers in their region or even at the city level. The violations against river sanctities continue, with waste and pollutants being dumped into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, not to mention agricultural drainage (sewage water), which is one of the factors polluting the rivers, resulting from the drainage of irrigation residues and soil washing from cultivated lands, carrying the salinity resulting from it, in addition to chemical and natural fertilizer residues added to agricultural lands.

6. United Nations Framework for Sustainable Development Cooperation in Iraq 2020–2024. United Nations Office, Baghdad, 2021, p. 12.

C. Iraq generally lacks modern technological methods in managing its water resources, whether surface or groundwater, especially concerning water harvesting and industrial water supply. Due to technological deficiencies, approximately 20% of water is lost in fish farming basins due to high evaporation rates and inefficient basin management compared to closed basin technology. Moreover, the underutilization of technology results in losses in drinking water, sewage water, and industrial water, which are discharged directly into the river without treatment, leading to water pollution.⁷

3. Solutions and Remedies to Address Water Pollution:

The seriousness of the water pollution problem in Iraq, accompanied by various crises such as rainfall shortages, climate change, and arbitrary water policies by neighboring countries, necessitates the development of effective strategic plans and cooperation among various governmental institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations, and social entities. Utilizing agreements and partnerships with international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union to ensure the reduction and mitigation of water pollution is crucial. Adopting policies, plans, and programs, including:

A. Allocating and providing sufficient funds for the infrastructure budget of the water resources sector and its institutions, especially the Ministry of Water Resources, is essential and should be considered a national requirement.

B. Providing sufficient water for vital sectors to ensure progress and prosperity through the establishment of an advanced and innovative

7. «Roadmap: Water Dialogue a Sustainable Vision for Water Resources Management in Iraq.» Parliament Organization, Germany, October 2021, Baghdad, p. 43.

system that considers household basic needs and is equally efficient.

C. Activating water protection laws and awareness-raising rules and presenting them to legislative bodies. The law should emphasize the importation of economically feasible tools and machinery.

D. Enhancing the quality of water supplies and activating the smart system for monitoring water quality to prevent various diseases and leakage in the pipeline system. In this context, knowing the cost of treating water-related diseases is worth evaluating against the investment in water quality. A portion of the healthcare budget is used for water from an economic perspective. In this case, to develop the quality of water and the water supply system, a part of the healthcare budget is used for water from an economic perspective.

E. Water pollution has serious effects on human health and well-being, so it is essential that government institutions specialized in water, health, and environmental sectors prepare policies, plans, and procedures capable of reducing the pollution of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and protecting the quality of water in them. The first of these measures is not to discharge heavy sewage and wastewater into the rivers and their tributaries, and to work on treating it before it reaches the rivers, with the reuse of that water in irrigating soil and crops.

F. Encouraging the use of pollution control devices in modern and new factories and providing appropriate support and financing to build water treatment and purification plants according to the latest international standards, dealing with industrial waste and residues in clean ways away from surface and groundwater, preventing the dumping of pollutants and wastes near or into rivers. Additionally, reducing the use of harmful pesticides in the environment contributes to addressing water pollution.

G. Establishing a strong enabling environment with strong national policies and systems to address water shortages, including groundwater extraction, water accountability, and data analysis.

H. Implementing plans that address climate change phenomenon, prioritizing water and allocating sufficient financial budget to address water shortages.

I. Establishing coordination committees between relevant institutions such as municipalities, water and environment directorates, health, agriculture, energy, finance, national institutions, and stakeholders in the sector to support public policy review and increase technological capabilities.

J. Supporting capacity building for relevant institutions in the water sector, including regulatory bodies of water facilities, to provide clean water, especially in communities heavily affected by updating old infrastructure, preparing sustainable operations, and reducing water waste.

K. Developing plans and warning systems for public health authorities to inform residents when drinking water in a community is contaminated or suspected of contamination, and the steps to take to mitigate damage, and establishing protocols for government officials to respond to and lift warnings.

L. Activating the partnership agreement with the United Nations and its agencies and activating the cooperation agreement between the European Union and Iraq, signed on May 11, 2012. The objectives of this partnership include providing a suitable framework for political dialogue between the parties to allow for the development of political relations; enhancing trade, investment, and harmonious economic relations between the two parties (enhancing sustainable economic

development), especially regarding Article 90, titled Developing cooperation in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas. The goal of this article is to enhance cooperation in agriculture, forestry, rural development, promote diversification, and sound environmental practices, sustainable economic and social development, food and to achieve this goal, the parties will study several files, including measures related to sustainable economic and social development in rural areas, including sound environmental practices, forests, research, knowledge transfer, access to land and water management, rural development, and food security. Measures related to preserving agricultural heritage and knowledge that give their populations their unique identities, including cooperation in geographical indicators, exchange of experiences at the local level, and network development. And updating the agricultural sector, including agricultural practices and diversification of agricultural production.

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