Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

SDG Compass

The role of business

Access to water and sanitation are basic human rights and are critical sustainable development challenges. These challenges will only worsen and the impacts on people will only increase as competing demands for clean fresh water (agriculture, households, energy generation, industrial use, ecosystems) are exacerbated by the effects of climate change putting more pressure on water quality and availability. These conditions will create increasing risk for businesses, governments, communities and the environment.

Business can contribute to the alleviation of these water challenges by adopting a water stewardship strategy that addresses the economic, environment, and social dimensions of water. By adopting stewardship, companies are able to make a positive contribution to improved water and sanitation management and governance that addresses their risks while contributing to sustainable development. This means adopting values and practices that aim to safeguard long-term availability of clean water and the provision of sanitation for all stakeholders in a watershed.

Key business themes addressed by this SDG

- Sustainable water withdrawals
- Improved water quality through effluent treatment
- Improved water efficiency through application of 5R principles: reduce, reuse, recover, recycle, replenish
- Equal, affordable, and safe, access to water access, sanitation, and hygiene for employees and communities
- Protection of water-related ecosystems and biodiversity

Examples of key business actions and solutions

The below examples are non-exhaustive and some may be more relevant to certain industries than to others.

- Prioritize water efficiency across operations by installing best practice technologies for water conservation, in particular in water scarce areas.
- Educating employees about the importance of water efficiency, including tying performance bonuses or operations-based incentives to efficient practices.
- Mitigating against water pollution with state-of-the-art wastewater treatment processes for effluent discharge.
- Development of innovative manufacturing processes such that substances with high water contamination potential are eliminated and substituted with materials that are easier to remove from water systems.
- Invest in water treatment so that municipal treatment facilities are not overburdened by industrial waste-water.
- Collect and treat agricultural run-off and use as fresh water source.
- Integrate gray water back into building operations, reducing the amount of potable water needed to flush toilets.
- Reduce the likelihood of groundwater contamination by treating and processing all waste with exceptional precaution, according to local and federal guidelines.
- Invest in clean-up when necessary, restoring sites to pre-spill quality levels.
- Educate consumers about appropriate water behaviors, explaining global water quality and scarcity issues, thus attempting to shift the negative implications of the use phase associated with many consumer products.
- Invest in water and sanitation projects or infrastructure in under-served regions.
- Ensure that all employees and their families have ample access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, and raise awareness about hygiene practices.
- Invest in clean-ups and restoration of water ecosystems to ensure sustainable water withdrawals.
- Prohibit the use of chemicals and materials that can be particularly detrimental to water quality if improperly disposed.

United Nations Global Compact

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- Working with other groups such as governments, community groups, peer companies to improve local water governance or on water projects to address identified challenges.
- Ensure that the voices of women and girls, who are disproportionately impacted by inadequate WASH facilities, are included in water and sanitation management strategies.

Examples of key business indicators

- CEO Water Mandate's Corporate Water Disclosure Guidelines: Average water intensity in water-stressed or water-scarce areas
- GRI G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, G4-EN8:Total water withdrawal by source
- GRI G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, G4-EN9: Water sources significantly affected by withdrawal of water
- GRI G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, G4-EN10:Percentage and total volume of water recycled and reused
- GRI G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, G4-EN22: Total water discharge by quality and destination
- GRI G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines, G4-EN26: Identity, size, protected status, and biodiversity value of water bodies and related habitats significantly affected by the organization's discharges of water and runoff
- WASH Pledge and Guiding Principles for Implementation, WH4.4: Number of employees receiving hygiene training and awareness raising

The complete overview of business indicators can be found at www.sdgcompass.org

Examples of key business tools

- WBCSD Global Water Tool
- Water Footprint Network (WFN) Assessment Tool
- Water use assessment within LCA

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The SDG targets

6.1 By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all
6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations
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
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
6.5 By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate
6.6 By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes
6.a By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation related activities and programs, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies
6.b Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management