

International governance and the challenges of *sustainable water management*

LUCIEN CHABASSON AND JEAN-YVES LAUTRIDOU

Water is a global common good. Yet we are facing a structural ‘water crisis’: 2.1 billion people still do not have reliable access to safe drinking water, and ecosystems are collapsing. Stating that water is a priority is essential, but it is not enough: it is imperative to recognise water as a vital resource, central to all development models across all economic sectors and human activities: agriculture, energy, land use planning, health, industry and international solidarity.

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Ahead of the 3rd United Nations Water Conference (Abu Dhabi, December 2026), the EESC is assessing the capacity of the current international governance framework to address the challenges of water management.

The aim is to draw up practical proposals to strengthen the effectiveness, coherence and legitimacy of multilateral action.

The water crisis we are facing is not merely a matter of local shortages, but of structural deficits resulting from a combination of climate change, population growth and the intensification of water use. It is also deeply inequitable, as it disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls in rural areas.

40% of the world’s population relies on transboundary water resources. Water can therefore be either a source of conflict or a catalyst for peace. The EESC advocates that active water diplomacy, based on international conventions, is one of the most effective bulwarks against geopolitical instability in the 21st century.

For the EESC, water is therefore a matter of sovereignty, solidarity and international stability. The decisions taken in the coming years will have a lasting impact on future generations: they can either prolong a trajectory of tensions, shortages and inequalities, or pave the way for a more resilient, equitable and sustainable model

The key issues of the water conference

- Sustaining and building on progress in global water governance.
- Mobilising funding commensurate with needs.
- Strengthening international cooperation, particularly transboundary agreements.
- Setting targets and commitments.
- Pursuing the SDGs beyond 2030.

How can we address the challenges of international water management?

The EESC has put forward 14 practical recommendations; this document outlines some of the key areas of these proposals.

1 Water diplomacy for peace

With 153 countries sharing transboundary resources, water must become a catalyst for cooperation, lest conflicts arise. In an international context marked by a proliferation of climate, geopolitical and environmental crises, water-related issues are taking on an increasingly strategic dimension. It is within this framework that the concept of hydrodiplomacy, which the EESC calls for the promotion of, comes into play. Hydrodiplomacy enables agreement to be reached on common management rules, particularly in transboundary basins, and helps to maintain dialogue.

2 Strengthening un institutions

The current governance structure is too fragmented. The EESC calls for **UN-Water's resources** and coordination powers to be strengthened. It also proposes making the cycle of United Nations conferences a regular three-year event in order to maintain constant political pressure to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.

3 Sanitation and green water: key issues to be highlighted

The issue of sanitation is complex and often overlooked. The EESC stresses the urgency of addressing sanitation and hygiene, which are cornerstones of global public health, and calls for a massive financial and technical commitment from donors in this specific area. There is currently no international text addressing the issue of green water. Green water refers to 'the proportion of water from atmospheric precipitation that is absorbed by vegetation'. It is therefore essential to incorporate the benefits of green water into the way we manage land use and natural habitats, and to direct investment towards their conservation.

4 Preventing conflicts over the use of water resources

Freshwater abstraction has tripled over the past 50 years. As uses and demands increase (agricultural irrigation, domestic, industrial, energy and environmental needs), conflicts and competition are likely to arise between stakeholders. One of the major challenges is to ensure food security and the well-being of an ever-growing population against a backdrop of water scarcity.

THE RAPPORTEURS

Lucien Chabason

lucien.chabason@lecese.fr
(33)1 44 43 64 22

Lucien Chabason is a Senior Advisor at the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI), which he represents on the Environment and Nature Group. He sits on the Committee on European and International Affairs of the EESC.

Jean-Yves Lautridou

jean-yves.lautridou@lecese.fr
(33)1 44 43 64 07

Jean-Yves Lautridou represents the Fédération Communication Conseil Culture (F3C) within the CFDT group at the CESE. He sits on the Committees for Economic and Financial Affairs, European and International Affairs, and the Overseas Territories Delegation.