

FAQ

Here we will answer your Frequently Asked Questions. If you have any question not covered here, contact our Help Desk at SDG632@un.org

General Questions about the SDGs

Why do countries need to report on the SDGs?

The SDGs provide a framework for governments to develop policies and programmes to target today's most urgent issues, and for civil society to hold governments to account. To ensure progress and strengthen accountability, it is essential to set up solid mechanisms for results monitoring and reporting.

In the context of SDG6 credible and timely water and sanitation data provide numerous social, economic and environmental benefits in both public and private sectors, in particular:

- **Stronger accountability:** Data can communicate that work is being done and progress is happening. Data can enable greater transparency, which reduces the incidence of waste and corruption.
- **Attract commitment and investments:** Data can quantify problems and make it easier to communicate needs for political commitment and public and private investments.
- **Evidence-based decision-making:** Data can inform policy and decision makers of where to focus efforts and which solutions are most effective to ensure the greatest possible gains with existing resources.
- **Leaving no one behind:** Disaggregated data can help identify specific groups or areas with unmet needs and higher levels of risk, to which interventions can be targeted.

Who's who on the UN side of the SDGs?

There are four organisations involved in SDG indicator 6.3.2.

1. UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme is the custodian of three Goal 6 indicators, indicator 6.3.2 on ambient water quality, 6.5.1 on integrated water resource management, and 6.6.1 on extent of freshwater ecosystems
2. GEMS/Water – Global Environment Monitoring System for Freshwater, is the technical partner for SDG indicator 6.3.2. GEMS/Water has been collating water quality data since 1978 and provides [capacity development](#) in all aspects of freshwater quality monitoring and assessment, and hosts [GE MStat](#) the
3. [UN-Water](#) – Coordinates the efforts of UN entities and international organizations working on water and sanitation issues. UN Water coordinates all Goal 6 under the [Integrated Monitoring Initiative for Goal 6](#).
4. UNSD – United Nations Statistical Division compile and disseminate global statistical information, develop standards and norms for statistical activities, and support countries' efforts to strengthen their national statistical systems. UNSD receive all of the SDG submissions from countries

Why do I keep receiving so many requests to report on SDG indicators?

Since the adoption of the SDGs, there has been at least one round of global data compilation for each of the eleven indicators under SDG 6. In March 2020 the second round of global data compilation for seven of the SDG 6 indicators was launched and therefore the respective custodian agencies are contacting the relevant country focal points with requests for data. In your role as a SDG 6 focal point you might receive requests from several custodian agencies for different SDG 6 indicators. The seven indicators for which the data collection is taking place in 2020 are:

- 6.3.1 "Proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater flow safely treated"
- 6.3.2 "Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality"
- 6.4.1 "Change in water use efficiency over time"
- 6.4.2 "Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources"
- 6.5.1 "Degree of integrated water resources management implementation"
- 6.5.2 "Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation"
- 6.6.1 "Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time"

What happens to my submission?

In close cooperation with the 6.3.2 Helpdesk, the submitted country data will be validated and thereafter, along with regional and global estimates, incorporated into the annual SDG progress reports, to inform follow-up and review at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. Detailed progress reports for all SDG 6 indicators will be published in 2021 to inform a number of important events in the coming years, including a high-level meeting of the President of the General Assembly in 2021, and the United Nations Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the International Decade for Action in 2023. The data are also published in indicator-specific databases as well as the [SDG 6 Data Portal](#).

Who can contribute data?

Within a country, data on water and sanitation are collected by a wide variety of stakeholders. For example, the Ministry of Environment may look after data on ambient water quality, whereas the national statistical office has overall responsibility for SDG reporting. For each SDG indicator the technical focal point, who is the main point of contact for the custodian agency, is the main actor in the 2020 Data Drive, as they will receive the request for data. As national water quality data might be scattered among different departments as is often the case for example for surface waters and groundwaters, the technical focal points are encouraged to work with colleagues within and outside their organization to compile the data and report them to the custodian agency. Apart from national monitoring programmes, the data used to calculate the indicator could also come from monitoring stations associated to academic research or private companies using freshwater for their production processes.

Questions about indicator 6.3.2

What is ambient water quality?

Ambient water quality refers to natural, untreated water in rivers, lakes and groundwaters. Recognising that ambient water quality is not linked to any single use of water, and that it refers to the quality of water in the natural environment which supports healthy ecosystems and serves as the source for all possible uses is critical for its management.

Why is indicator 6.3.2 important?

Indicator 6.3.2 provides a mechanism to determine whether efforts to improve water quality are working. It provides information on where water quality is good and where it is not, and how water quality is changing over time. It also helps to target capacity development efforts. This is true at global, regional, national and sub-national levels.

How does the indicator work?

Water quality is classified as either good or not good by measuring physical and chemical parameters that reflect natural water quality, together with major human impacts on water quality. The indicator methodology asks countries to collate water quality data for bodies of water such as sections or tributaries of a river, a lake or an aquifer and to use these data to classify the quality of water against target values that protect human and ecosystem health. The core elements of the indicator ensure the indicator is globally comparable, yet there is flexibility within the methodology to ensure it remains nationally relevant.

What type of data can be used to report?

The indicator, at its most basic level, relies on water quality data from *in situ* measurements and the analysis of samples collected from rivers, lakes and aquifers. The core parameter groups of Level 1 are oxygen, salinity, nitrogen, phosphorus and acidification. The methodology is designed to be as inclusive and flexible as possible. Countries with limited monitoring activities, or partial data for core parameter groups, or who may use alternative approaches to monitoring can still report to the limit of their capacity.

How old can my data be?

It is recommended that data from the previous three years to the reporting year are used. For example, in 2017 we asked for data from 2014 - 2016. This year, we are asking data collected between 2017 and 2019 to be reported.

Data can be from one single year during that three-year period, or preferably from across all three years. Using data from all three years is preferable because any inter-annual variations are reduced. For example, data from a particularly wet year may differ from a dry year.

What are core parameter groups?

The core parameters groups are relevant for Level 1 reporting only. These are oxygen, salinity, nitrogen, phosphorus and acidification. These core parameters groups are most often measured using the parameters dissolved oxygen, electrical conductivity, total nitrogen (or dissolved inorganic nitrogen), total phosphorus (or orthophosphate) and pH respectively.

What is the difference between Level 1 and Level 2 reporting?

Level 1 reporting is limited to the the core parameter groups, whereas Level 2 can be anything else. Level 2 may include Earth observation products, biological data, citizen science data or any other type of water quality data that can be used to classify a water body.

Is Level 2 reporting necessary?

Reporting at Level 2 is optional. GEMS/Water will supply the output of a global Earth observation (EO) water quality product for large water bodies for review that countries may use if they choose to do so. This global EO product was created to provide information as a sub-indicator of SDG indicator 6.6.1

What is an RBD?

Countries are asked to report at the river basin level. These are referred to as **Reporting Basin Districts (RBDs)** because, although they are based on river basins, they apply to rivers, lakes and aquifers. Depending on the size of a country, there may be several RBDs within the national borders or, alternatively, the country may be wholly within a single RBD. For large countries, reporting by these hydrological units allows differences in water quality to be made clear for managers and policy makers. The RBD concept provides a practical spatial unit that can be used for management purposes. This is especially relevant for countries that share transboundary waters where strategic efforts to assess and manage water quality are of benefit to all countries.

What is a water body?

A water body can be one of three types: (i) a section or a tributary of a river; (ii) a lake; or (iii) an aquifer.

It is these smaller discrete units that are classified as being either "good" or "not good" water quality.

It is at this local level that impacts of poor water quality are felt, and where actions to improve quality are realised. Ideally, river water bodies should be delineated to ensure they are homogenous in terms of water quality. This allows the water body to be classified as good or not using fewer monitoring stations. Each lake and aquifer water body may require many monitoring locations to ensure that quality can be classified reliably.

What are target values?

Indicator 6.3.2 uses a target-based approach to classify water quality. This means that the measured values are compared with numerical values that represent "good water quality". These targets may be water quality standards that are defined by national legislation or they may be derived from knowledge of the natural or baseline status of water bodies.

How is a water body classified as "good"?

For Level 1 reporting, a water body is classified as "good" if 80 per cent or more of the monitoring data meet their associated target values. For example, if there were 100 measurements and 80 or more meet their target, the water body would be classified as "good".

Does indicator 6.3.2 consider just freshwater?

Yes. Indicators associated with the marine environment are covered under SDG 14: *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*