

Sri Lanka: SDG 6.5.1 reporting – building the basis for improved Integrated Water Resources Management

In 2023, the Ministry of Irrigation – Sri Lanka Country Focal Point for reporting the status of indicator SDG 6.5.1, which focuses on the degree of IWRM implementation, completed the country's 3rd reporting cycle successfully. This triennial report to the UNEP is crucial for understanding a country's water management challenges, progress, and plans. The reporting process was facilitated by GWP Sri Lanka (SLWP) coordinated by GWP Under the guidance of UNEP. The average score for Sri Lanka is 49, indicating moderate implementation. This year, the reporting involved a multi-stakeholder consultation workshop, emphasising collaboration and knowledge sharing among the participants. Lessons learned highlighted the need for continuous training, collaboration with funding partners, fair cost recovery in water distribution and addressing challenges in the enabling environment, institutions, management instruments, and financing. The report guides future efforts towards achieving sustainable water management by 2030.

Background

Although Sri Lanka was well on track to achieve considerable progress towards 2030, it was hampered due to two extreme events, setbacks due to the COVID 19 pandemic and the country's economic debacle. Still, there is consensus among key water agencies on the establishment of a Water Resources Secretariat in line with the approved water policy. Furthermore, as of today, the country has implemented a substantial number of projects by incorporating climate-resilient water resources plans and completed at least 11 river basin plans that address climate change impacts on water resources and river health. However, the unhealthy financial situation does not allow the government to allocate financing for new developments and most of the planned investments are continuing with a reduced budget.

Reporting on the status of implementation of SDG 6.5.1 itself is mandatory for all nations, an inclusive and equitable reporting process provides crucial information on a country's key challenges, progress, and ways forward to attain sustainable water management. Moreover, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) requires a multidisciplinary approach, therefore it is equally important to introduce the IWRM principles to other disciplines as well as gather their views to develop a comprehensive report. To ensure this, all key stakeholders and relevant actors were consulted through a multi-stakeholder approach and incorporated their views on how to assess the current status and challenges ahead of the next reporting cycle. The process was able to create awareness and knowledge management on IWRM and mobilise the commitment of decision-makers to institutionalise IWRM elements.

The reporting is done by answering 33 questions and assessing the degree of implementation on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 = Very low, 20 = Low, 40 = Medium-low, 60 = Medium-high, 80 = High, and 100 = Very high. The justification for the scoring has to be supported in a brief status description, followed by the way forward to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 6.5 by 2030. The

questions are organised according to the four main pillars of IWRM: Enabling Environment, Institutions and Participations, Management Instruments, and Finance (learn more about the survey [here](#)). This year, slight changes were made in the questionnaire to include climate change.

Sri Lanka complied with the process and participated in all 3 reporting cycles so far. Aligned with the reporting cycle, Sri Lanka conducted its baseline reporting in 2017 and its first progress report in 2020. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Focal Point (i.e. Ministry of Irrigation) managed to conduct the reporting through an orientation programme followed by a roundtable discussion by engaging only 10 water sector representatives. The third reporting was conducted in 2023, with the help of GWP Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Water Partnership/SLWP) which was supported through the [SDG 6 -IWRM Support Programme](#) of the Global Water Partnership (GWP).

Actions taken

In 2023, at the request of the Country Focal Point (Ministry of Irrigation), SLWP/GWP with the guidance of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) provided financial support, to conduct the consultation process to record the views of key stakeholders in the water sector of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, a facilitator was hired based on Focal Point's proposal, to conduct the stakeholder consultation and complete the survey on time.

The main multistakeholder consultation workshop was held on 19 September 2023, at the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) in Colombo organised by the SLWP with the guidance of the Ministry of Irrigation, Sri Lanka. It was attended by 36 participants out of 48 invited. The representation included Stakeholders from the Government, Academia, and Non-Government Sectors. Seventeen different agencies of the government were represented at the consultation. The well represented consultation was a result of several orientation sessions that were conducted with key water agencies and extensive discussions had been carried out in advance with the country focal point, Eng (Ms) Namalee Madawalagama, Additional Secretary to the Ministry of Irrigation and her team of the Ministry of Irrigation. The facilitator and SLWP also attended to those discussions and clearly defined the responsibilities to organise the multi-stakeholder consultation and for finalizing the SDG 6.5.1 report. The invitation and list of stakeholders were prepared by the Country Focal Point, Eng (Ms) Namalee Madawalagama assisted by Eng. (Mr) Rohan Perera, Director of the Ministry of Irrigation, Sri Lanka.

The programme of the workshop consisted of the following sessions.

1. Welcome and introduction by Country Focal Point
2. Orientation on IWRM
3. Instructions and clarification for group work and the approach to fill the survey instrument
4. Group work
5. Final presentations by the leaders of the groups

For the group work, participants were requested to form four groups corresponding to the four dimensions of IWRM: Enabling environment, Institutions and Participation, Management instruments and Financing, according to their institutional and functional backgrounds. The process, interpretations, and entries to Description and Progress and Way Forward were presented

by Mr Paul Glennie, Coordinator UNEP, and explained in detail to the participants. The orientation of the groups further explained how the terminology applies to the Sri Lankan context.

Following the group work, the responses from group leaders were collected and compiled to complete the first draft of the survey instrument before forwarding it to UNEP. Several follow-through sessions were conducted to address the comments received from the SDG 6.5.1 Help Desk in order to complete the final draft.

The facilitator of the workshop, Mr Ananda Jayaweera, shared his reflections from the workshop. He pointed out how the high turnover of government staff and the election cycles of the country affect the reporting. The staff positions of the ministries are typically held for less than three years before one is moved to a different office. Drawing on experience from previous reporting and years of experience with the government sector, Mr Ananda Jayaweera emphasizes the importance of continuous training and education on IWRM reporting. “During the next two years, there could be another person introduced as the Country Focal Point and everything has to be repeated,” says Mr Jayaweera. Second, party politics and changing interests with the introduction of new governments affect public administration, and IWRM is rarely on the agenda. Therefore, constant advocacy for its importance needs to be recognized for attaining SDG 6.5.1 by 2030.

Outcomes

The Final Survey was completed by 20 October 2023 and shared with the SDG 6.5.1 Help Desk by the Country Focal Point for SDG 6.5.1. Apart from the report itself, a noteworthy but hard-to-measure outcome of the reporting process was the relations built and knowledge shared between stakeholders. These relations are the very basis for integration of water resource management.

The Country Focal Point, Eng (Ms) Namalee Madawalagama puts it thus: “The process was important because in Sri Lanka, more than 17 institutions are working on water focusing different subsectors. They all have their different perspectives regarding water as each and every one of them carries out service delivery to cater to various needs of the people. As an example, in the Irrigation Department, we used to think only about the supply of water for irrigation and flood control and not focused on the other challenges related to water. Whereas, in the future, that will change because, when we start talking about integrated water resource management, every aspect of water should be coordinated on one platform. An inclusive approach has to be in place to implement IWRM effectively”.

Reflecting on the process leading up to the main workshop and the reporting, Eng (Ms) Madawalagama, further pointed out the significance of the collaboration with SLWP, as opposed to other donors. “Normally, in Sri Lankan context, when an NGO is the funding agency, they take the lead role. Whereas in this case, it was different, SLWP supported us to gather all relevant stakeholders to a common table, initiate a dialogue and come to one common solution.” She also noted that a few important stakeholders, including the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Fisheries, who were not present during the workshop, would be essential to invite for future workshops.

The round table discussions held before the main workshop allowed the Country Focal Point to disseminate the key messages of IWRM to a wider audience. The discussions held prior to the

consultation and for report validation were also attended by more than ten officials representing the Ministry of Irrigation and Mahaweli Authority. The Country Focal Point also noted how the participants appreciated the opportunity to contribute and attended the workshop till the end because they considered it important to have their say in the final report. “Their contribution was extremely good” she explains.

With regard to institutions and participation, a lack of coordination was identified as the main challenge to the implementation of IWRM. Representatives of the Ministry of Water Supply highlighted that the National Coordination Meeting conducted by the Secretary to the Ministry, a Multistakeholder Platform for the WASH sector could serve as inspiration for a similar formal coordination mechanism for IWRM.

Management Instruments cover a wide range of tools including regulations, techniques, targets, water charges, and tariffs, technical guidelines, and monitoring of water resources availability and quality. The group found that considerable efforts are needed to build institutional capacity to institutionalize IWRM elements in the water resources assessment, river basin planning, and sustainable utilization for equitable allocation. This is to be addressed through a comprehensive technical assistance programme to develop hardware and software to incorporate IWRM targets in river basin planning. This means that water resource plans need to be prepared based on quantitative, qualitative, and ecological perspectives through a participatory approach. The establishment of the proposed National Water Resources Secretariat will provide an opportune moment for introducing IWRM elements.

However, Sri Lanka’s water sector is manned by very high-quality professionals and future professionals will soon enter the workforce. IWRM capacity building is incorporated into the curricula of engineering undergraduates and post-graduates.

In the discussion on the enabling environment, the group identified the main challenges to progress in the adoption of a National Policy for Water Resources. The economic crisis in the country would be a major factor in hampering the next steps in institutionalizing the recommendations of the policy, therefore, even if the drafting of water law needs acceleration but may be delayed due to changes in priorities.

Sri Lanka has scored 49 as the average score on IWRM implementation in the 3rd reporting cycle conducted in 2023. While the component ‘Institutions and Participation’ scored 63 as the highest, the component ‘Financing’ scored the lowest, only reaching 32. Sri Lanka’s prospects of making steady progress towards achieving satisfactory implementation of IWRM by 2030 is high, considering the fact that Sri Lanka has a strong institutional base in the water sector.

Lessons learned

The lessons learned from the SDG 6.5.1 reporting can be drawn both from the process of organizing the multi-stakeholder consultation and follow-through meetings and from the content of the

stakeholder discussions held during the workshop. The following section describes the lessons learned from each of these components.

Lessons drawn from the process

- The multi-stakeholder consultation and follow up discussions leading up to finalizing the reporting conducted in collaboration of SLWP facilitated to bring all relevant stakeholders of IWRM to a common table and to come to a consensus on the status, progress and way forward.
- The reporting started very late therefore the outcome of the report was not inclusive. The strict division of the groups restricted the cross-reference between groups and some of the cross-cutting issues were not being shared in depth during the workshop and only being unveiled after the workshop during the writing of the report. Therefore, in future workshops, it will be crucial to create a space for discussing potential interventions even between the groups to gain the most synergies from the unique settings of a multi-stakeholder consultation.

Lessons drawn from the workshop discussions

- In order to ensure an enabling environment it is the key to prioritize drafting of a water law for the country and the establishment of a National Water Resources Secretariat as per approved National Policy for Water Resources.
- Efforts should be taken to build institutional capacity to institutionalize IWRM elements in the water resources assessment, river basin planning, and sustainable utilization for equitable allocation.
- With the current adverse economic situation, Sri Lanka will not be able to complete the process to achieve SDG 6.5.1 due to a lack of financial resources. The current practice is that the water for irrigated agriculture is free and the recurrent cost of management of infrastructure is also provided under the national budget. While mobilizing international funding the Participants suggested developing a mechanism for charging commercial bulk water users to generate funds to perform essential IWRM functions.