

A POLICY SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR ADVANCING SDG-6 ACHIEVEMENT IN TUNISIA

UN SYSTÈME D'ACCOMPAGNEMENT POLITIQUE POUR FAVORISER LA RÉALISATION DE L'ODD-6 EN TUNISIE

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ABSTRACT

Since 2016, countries committed to achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations. However, progress reports on SDG 6 indicate insufficient improvement caused by the lack of data to inform indicators. Developing and implementing tools to support developing countries facing data limitation is more than urgent to enhance their progress toward meeting their objectives. The paper aims to introduce the Support System for SDG 6 (SDG-PSS) developed to help government officials and stakeholders navigate limited data conditions and promote evidence-based policy, and to evaluate the enabling environment for achieving SDG 6. The tool is structured around 6 critical components applicable to SDG 6 targets and indicators: Capacity, Finance, Policy and Institutional, Gender, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)/Resilience, and Integrity. In Tunisia, a multidisciplinary and multi-sectorial expert working group was established, bringing together representatives from governmental institutions, academia, and civil society to contextualize and implement the tool.

The process involved the identification, validation, and analysis of data through collaborative efforts, fostering consensus-building and transparent reporting. Finance and capacity were among the most relevant components in the Tunisian context. Finance emerged among priority components due to the need for adequate and sustainable funding mechanisms to support water policies and implementation plans. Capacity challenges were underscored by shortage of qualified human resources and technical expertise, exacerbated by staff retirement and limited recruitment. Gender mainstreaming was deemed less relevant, though still important, with several frameworks and initiatives implemented at national, regional and local levels.

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The SDG-PSS contributed to improving stakeholders' understanding of SDG 6 targets and indicators, strengthening inter-institutional cooperation, and raising awareness of the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration for sustainable water governance. To ensure the long-term sustainability and impact of the tool, high-level political endorsement and the establishment of a permanent national committee are recommended.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Support System; Qualified human resources; Frameworks and initiatives; Cross-sectoral collaboration.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis 2016, les pays se sont engagés à atteindre les 17 Objectifs de développement durable (ODD) adoptés par les Nations unies. Cependant, les rapports d'avancement concernant l'ODD 6 indiquent des progrès insuffisants dus au manque de données permettant d'étayer les indicateurs. Il est plus qu'urgent de développer et de mettre en œuvre des outils destinés à aider les pays en développement confrontés à des contraintes en matière de données, afin de renforcer leurs progrès vers la réalisation de leurs objectifs. Cet article vise à présenter le Système de soutien pour l'ODD 6 (SDG-PSS), développé pour aider les responsables gouvernementaux et les parties prenantes à faire face à des conditions de données limitées et à promouvoir des politiques fondées sur des données probantes, ainsi qu'à évaluer l'environnement propice à la réalisation de l'ODD 6. Cet outil s'articule autour de six composantes essentielles applicables aux cibles et indicateurs de l'ODD 6 : capacités, financement, politiques et institutions, égalité des sexes, réduction des risques de catastrophe (RRC)/résilience, et intégrité. En Tunisie, un groupe de travail multidisciplinaire et multisectoriel d'experts a été mis en place, réunissant des représentants d'institutions gouvernementales, du monde universitaire et de la société civile afin d'adapter l'outil au contexte local et de le mettre en œuvre.

Ce processus a impliqué l'identification, la validation et l'analyse des données grâce à des efforts collaboratifs, favorisant ainsi la recherche d'un consensus et la transparence des rapports. Les composantes « Financement » et « Capacités » figuraient parmi les plus pertinentes dans le contexte tunisien. Le financement est apparu comme l'une des composantes prioritaires en raison de la nécessité de disposer de mécanismes de financement adéquats et durables pour soutenir les politiques de l'eau et les plans de mise en œuvre. Les défis en matière de capacités ont été mis en évidence par la pénurie de ressources humaines qualifiées et d'expertise technique, exacerbée par les départs à la retraite du personnel et un recrutement limité. L'intégration de la dimension de genre a été jugée moins pertinente, bien qu'elle reste importante, plusieurs cadres et initiatives ayant été mis en œuvre aux niveaux national, régional et local.

Le SDG-PSS a contribué à améliorer la compréhension des parties prenantes concernant les cibles et les indicateurs de l'ODD 6, à renforcer la coopération interinstitutionnelle et à sensibiliser à l'importance de la collaboration intersectorielle pour une gouvernance durable de l'eau. Afin de garantir la pérennité et l'impact à long terme de l'outil, un soutien politique de haut niveau et la mise en place d'un comité national permanent sont recommandés.

Mots-clés : Objectifs de développement durable; Système de soutien; Ressources humaines qualifiées; Cadres et initiatives; Collaboration intersectorielle.

INTRODUCTION

Lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals on the water sector nationwide advocate an effective planning, policy and preparation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. With less than five years ahead, the United Nations progress report shows clearly that it is severely off track with only 17% of the SDG targets on track and 48% showing moderate to severe deviation (UN, 2024).

SDG 6 on water and sanitation seeks to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, focusing on drinking water and sanitation, the sustainable management of water resources, water quality, integrated water resources management, water-related ecosystems, and the

enabling environment (WWDR, 2024). Accordingly, many countries are expected to be at risk of water crisis by 2030 due to the increasing water scarcity, water pollution, water-related disasters, and the ongoing degradation of water-dependent ecosystems (Guppy and Anderson 2017). Many developing countries also are struggling to put together substantive SDG action plans (Weitz et al., 2017). Consequently, progress has been very difficult to measure as water-related development falls behind other priorities.

According to water experts and national decision-makers, achieving SDG 6 targets requires a strong enabling environment. The latter is defined as “the set of interrelated conditions in the political, legal, economic, and social domains that influence policy outcomes positively, such as good governance, strong institutions, research and development, health and education, social and legal protection, and gender equality.” (OECD, 2016). UN-Water have outlined four stages to SDG 6 progress, the first of which is to adapt enabling environments to act as a means of implementation (UN-Water, 2016). Effective implementation involves assessing national challenges and addressing gaps through practical policies, frameworks, and action plans (Guppy, 2017). Many countries are underperforming to produce accurate, timely and disaggregated data to enable progress evaluation toward the SDG 6 achievement and government agencies often lack the capacity to collect data and perform the analyses required to address water-related economic and social challenges (WWDR, 2024). High-quality data are essential to create evidence and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses (UN, 2024). Despite the registered progress, missing data for many targets and indicators and evidence on the enabling environments of SDG 6 may undermine progress needed to achieve this goal by 2030 (Water in the World We Want, 2021). Therefore, it is pressing to develop, tailor, adopt, and implement tools to support developing countries falling short of data to identifying priorities, developing solutions, monitoring implementation and undertaking the necessary adjustments.

In 2016, in the framework of the project “Water in the World We Want”, The United Nation University for Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) in collaboration with the Korea Environment Corporation (K-eco), the Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea, and UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD), developed an initiative aiming to ensure more effective evidence-based policy- and decision-making on water-related SDGs at the national level, and to accelerate the SDG 6 implementation in countries overall. Six countries (Ghana, Costa Rica, Pakistan, and Republic of Korea), among which Tunisia, were selected to champion the tool, based on their geographical regions, income status, and water resource profiles, to test and customize the developed tool, called SDG Policy Support System (SDG-PSS), in various socio-political environments (UNU-INWEH, 2016).

In 2016, Tunisia has signed a letter of agreement with the UN system to support the integration and establishment of an instrument for monitoring-evaluation and reporting of the SDGs. It has integrated the SDGs in the National Development Plan (2016-2020) with embedded indicators to reduce the burden of data collection and indicators development (UNDP, 2017). Despite the substantial progress recorded in achieving SDGs at the continental (Tunisia ranked 1st in Africa) (SDSN, 2020) and national levels (>67% of the SDGs achieved in 2019), Tunisia is still in need of a large amount of timely accurate and high-quality disaggregated data. Overall, 90 out of the 244 indicators (66%) of the 17 SDGs were collected. Though, there is a gap of 137 indicators (56%) because they are either not produced (88) or 49 inexistent (RNV, 2021). Within this project framework, Tunisia has committed to develop, customize, adopt, and implement the SDG-PSS under its national conditions. The present paper aims to introduce the policy support tool and its features by showcasing challenges and opportunities for using it in Tunisia in order to evaluate the enabling environment created for achieving SDG 6. The paper highlights pertinent preliminary results on the usefulness of the tool for developing evidence-based policies through selected country context-relevant components.

METHODOLOGY

Description of the Policy Support System for SDG 6

The SDG 6 Policy Support System (SDG-PSS) is a tool developed in an attempt to address evidence gaps in the means of implementation of SDG 6 in countries while tackling some of the barriers to policy

and implementation planning. SDG-PSS is meant to help countries produce evidence on the enabling environments of all SDG 6 targets and indicators. Technically, it was initially created as an Excel-based tool; today it has evolved into a user-friendly web-based system (Water in the World We Want, 2019). It is built based on more than 20 well-established internationally tools (Guppy, 2017). The SDG-PSS is organized around six policy components (Figure 1), namely: Capacity; Finance; Policy and Institutional; Gender mainstreaming; Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Resilience; and Integrity (Table 1). The “Status” component is a quantitative component meant to inform the baseline figures and the aspiring targets for 2030 (Guppy, 2017).

The components are made of systematic questionnaires that apply to all targets and indicators of SDG 6 with qualitative and quantitative questions/responses. Each component of the tool can be updated regularly as new tools emerge. Results can be viewed in tables by the stakeholder representative assigned to customize the tool. The comprehensive fit-for-purpose evidence are then analyzed and translated to be compared across all components and across all SDG 6 targets (Figure 1). This evidence is displayed in a Summary View with a traffic light color to inform about the status of registered progress (Figure 2). An e-course and technical guidelines were elaborated by UNU-INWEH, revised by the champion countries, and integrated to the tool to take the users through a step-by-step pathway that also describes what the summary view includes, how it has been designed, and what it represents.



Figure 1. The components of the SDG-PSS that applies to the SDG 6 indicators

Table 1. Description of the six components of the SDG-PSS (Guppy, 2017)

	Component	Description and relevance to countries' policies
Implementation Capacity	Capacity	Countries must have the ability to obtain, strengthen and maintain the capability to set and achieve their own development objectives
	Policy and Institutions	Putting SDG 6 into action requires horizontal and vertical policy coherence, and the ability of institutions to make evidence-based decisions and build, implement and enforce inter-related policies
	Finance	Countries must define the costs and benefits of achieving each SDG 6 target, and align the national finance system to SDG targets, in an inclusive, green economy that supports water-related development
Implementation Sustainability	Gender	Country policies must address women's specific water-related needs and empower women to participate at all levels of water management, including in decision-making and policy implementation, in ways defined by them.
	DRR/Resilience	Countries must have robust mechanisms to anticipate and reduce water-related disaster risk to protect communities; to assist communities to recover from water-related disasters; and to protect water assets, including infrastructure, from hazard impacts.
	Integrity	Countries must end corruption and mainstream integrity and transparency practices across water policies, institutions and governance frameworks for greater accountability and trust in decision-making



Figure 2. Summary view of the SDG-PSS (Green: adequate progress; light blue: in progress; red: inadequate progress; black: no data).

Customizing the SDG-PSS for Tunisia

Each of the champion countries has tailor the tool according its specific SDG 6 constellation (geographical, financial, social, economic, environmental, institutional, etc.). Consequently, Tunisia has developed its own methodology and adopted its own process for creating evidence based on the SDG-PSS. **The first stage** was related to the establishment of the Experts Working Group (EWG), a preliminary step toward the official commitment of the stakeholders and their respective institutions in the project. **The second stage** consisted in the tool customization based on a process designed by the EWG and including the revision of the content, the design and usability, and syntax and translation. This task was carried out during the first phase of the project (2017-2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Enforcing the multi-institutional and multi-sectoral collaboration around SDG 6

In Tunisia, the project implementation was conducted by two leading institutions, under the flagship of the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Fisheries (MARHP), namely the National Research Institute for Rural Engineering, Water and Forestry (INRGREF), as representative of academia in charge of scientific coordination, and the Office of Planning and of Hydraulic Balance (BPEH), as representative of the policy- and decision-makers. Both have collaboratively established the multi-institutional and multi-sectoral EWG assigned the following tasks: i) evaluation of the components' relevance; ii) contextualization of the tool; iii) identification of new experts to support the project progress; identification of funding opportunities for holding national events; iv) contribution to discussions, publications, and reports at the national level. It was an accomplishment to bring around the same table more than 15 experts representing more than 12 departments from 4 leading ministries, NGO, and international organizations. The close participation of leaders from the development sector in strong collaboration with researchers was crucial for maintaining the cohesiveness of the EWG, capitalizing collective knowledge and expertise, raising awareness about SDG 6, and disseminating the project outputs. In Tunisia, for building a strong basis for collaborative work, the main challenges experienced by the leading institutions were related to securing the support of policy- and decision-makers and identifying the key institutions and resource experts to collect data and carry out the project. Meanwhile, in Costa Rica, a technical group in charge of water statistics and data was set up to contribute to the development and implementation of the SDG-PSS. In Pakistan, taking in consideration the geographical and political settings, a group of professionals and policy makers discussed the critical components through a SWOT

approach. In revenge, in Brazil, the National Water and Sanitation Agency (ANA) acting as the focal point for SDG 6 assigned a consultant to assist in the SDG-PSS implementation (Water in the World We Want, 2019).

Customizing the process to create authoritative evidence

The EWG members agreed on the methodology for guaranteeing the full participation of the stakeholders and for achieving the objectives of the project. The country-tailored process is summarized in the following steps (Figure 3):

1. The EWG began navigating the questionnaires and **identifying the type of data required**. For quantitative questions, EWG members relied on their respective expertise and collective understanding to determine the most appropriate data source. Qualitative questions, however, required a more extensive discussion.
2. Once the type of data was defined, **sources were identified**. When needed, external resource persons were consulted.
3. During **data collection**, EWG members started initially mobilized information from their respective institutions and professional networks before extending their research to other organizations. This step helped uncover the causes of data gaps and unavailability.
4. EWG members started **filling out the questionnaires** collaboratively under the coordination of the SDG-PSS administrators who are exclusively authorized to upload data on the platform. This feature guarantees data security and confidentiality.



Figure 4. The process adopted by the EWG for the implementation of the SDG-PSS

5. While uploading the data, the EWG members attempt to **reaching consensus**, especially around the qualitative answers, for validating them collectively to ensure the reliability of the evidence.
6. **Interpretation and reporting** are the final steps toward evaluating the outputs. The Summary View and the graphics are produced by the tool to illustrate the evidence created by the SDG-PSS and to help reporting to policy- and decision-makers. The enabling environment for each indicator and component is evaluated against the baseline and country's aspiration; both annotated in the component "Status" beforehand. The SDG-PSS is expected to be updated annually to track the country progress and adjust plans.

Examples of accomplishments for creating evidence and key advancements for tailoring the SDG-PSS

In Tunisia, the components Finance, Integrity, Capacity and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) were ranked most relevant by the EWG and the stakeholders; Gender and Institutions were evaluated relevant but

less important at this stage. The following is an example of interpretation (Figure 3.) for the components Finance, Capacity, and Gender based on EWG collaborative effort.

Finance assessment: Finance emerged as the top priority component due to the economic crisis the country was undergoing and the need for well-funded implementation plans for the water and sanitation sectors. As for the indicator 6.1, the access to water supply remains problematic because of unsolved financial and institutional aspects at the regional and local levels. At local level, rural water supply is managed by water users' associations (GDA), structures that are undergoing financial constraints limiting their effectiveness. Regarding other targets like 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6 and their respective indicators, some of the weaknesses were related to the lack of dedicated budget for implementation, especially for the indicator 6.6 deemed as the most lagging. Indeed, except the indicators 6.5.2 and 6.6.1, the financial flow is relatively well assured and framed for investment in water infrastructure, particularly for WASH. For tackling the financial planning challenges, since 2016, five ministries were applying the « budgetary management » (GBO) approach. The latter is based on pertinent indicators aligned with the SDG-PSS philosophy. A representative of the GBO unit was part of the EWG to inform on the new financing mechanisms of the water sector and to facilitate the interpretation.

Capacity assessment: Capacity-related challenges were underscored by several stakeholders of the public water sector as a general shortage in human resources including skilled staff for data collection, monitoring, processing, evaluation and reporting. This applies to various domains, depending on the SDG 6 target. This problem is exacerbated by several factors, including financial ones. Retirement and the limited recruitment are among the trickiest obstacles for the implementation of strategies, action plan, and even technical tasks. Another emerging problem is the brain drain and the existing opportunities offered by the private sector, financially and carrier-wise more appealing for the young generations aspiring for less conventional perspectives. From the water legal perspective, capacities specialized in laws enforcement are tremendously missing and lawyers specialized in the water sector are lacking. One important issue was underlined as related to equity due to the persisting disparities in skilled staff between urban and rural areas for the water and sanitation services; this applies as well to upstream and downstream of watershed.

Some improvements were observed in the mechanisms addressing capacity building at the national level for SDG 6. In that, capacity building actions were supported in the framework of regional and international initiatives led by technical and financial partners like FAO for the target 6.4. and UN-water for the target 6.5. Besides, some leading ministries are on track for building critical capacities to support action plans for SDG 6. For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Fisheries has established solid institutions with capacities dedicated to agricultural scientific research and agricultural extension (IRESA and AVFA).

Gender mainstreaming: Overall, obstacles for mainstreaming gender in the water sector cover among others: i) a poor comprehension of the gender approach, ii) a lack of gender disaggregated data on SDG 6, and iii) an insufficient capacity (moderators and trainers specialized in gender mainstreaming at regional level) and tools. Based on the SDG-PSS evidence, the EWG confirmed limited access of women, at the regional level, to information and knowledge for acquiring agricultural inputs, technologies, and financial and professional services (loans, subsidies, etc.). Women continue to face limited access to skills development opportunities compared to men. On another note, women are underrepresented on the boards of water users' associations accounting for only 3-4%. Consequently, they are excluded from decision-making, despite the key role they play in water supply and water management in the household and farm operations. Evidence generated by the SDG-PSS showed inadequate progress and lack of evidence for gender mainstreaming in the drinking water sector. Women also are insufficiently informed about opportunities for education and income-generating activities and are lacking concrete action to tackle the adaptation to climate change and water scarcity. To tackle these weaknesses, Tunisia has launched several gender mainstreaming initiatives since 2016 aligned with SDG 5 and SDG 6. The low commitment of women as member of Water Users' Associations and their low involvement as decision-maker was tackled by the GBO by creating a gender-related indicator (percentage of women on the boards of water users' associations) and adopting it by the "Water Program-P3". Moreover, the establishment in 2016 of the « National Council of Peers for Equality and

Equal Opportunities between Women and Men” was one of the major achievements aiming to produce quantitative/qualitative indicators on the integration of gender approach in socioeconomic and political activities, to develop a strategy and promote gender mainstreaming in politics and social development. The internationally fund-supported National Strategy for socio-economic empowerment of rural women and girls (2017) is aligned with SDGs and is aiming to enhance the participation of women in public life and local governance and to produce gender-disaggregated data and statistics for decision-makers and policy-makers to develop and evaluate development plans and strategies. Since 2020, a gender-driven indicator for monitoring and evaluating the progress of Master Plans and strategies was elaborated (available at GBO). At local level, action plans were promoted based on participative and integrated approach for building and strengthening local capacities of the rural populations to allow their self-development. The participatory approach implemented through Development Committees is tackling awareness, diagnosis, programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

Countries are often confronted with competing development priorities while efforts to generate data and evidence needed to support informed decision-making remain insufficient. Evidence production related to the enabling environments for achieving SDG 6 is particularly lagging behind. In this context, innovative tools and approaches can help create an authoritative evidence framework and support multi-sectoral collaboration. The SDG-PSS is an innovative tool structured around six critical policy components. The tool, initially tailored and implemented by selected champion countries, is a cross-sectoral collaboration a multilingual platform, a useful strategic evidence-based tool that can help developing countries falling short of data assess, monitor, and report on the progress in creating an enabling environment to achieve SDG6 targets. SDG-PSS offers a comprehensive framework with a systematic approach for all SDG 6 targets and indicators, translating data from various databases into a "fit-for-policy" framework. The contextualization of the SDG-PSS is an important step to obtain reliable outputs. In Tunisia, the implementation of the SDG-PSS enhanced the collaborative work among representatives from different sectors and institution. It facilitated constructive discussions to identify strengths and weaknesses, data gaps, policymaking shortcomings, and opportunities related to SDG 6 achievement.

The process also enhanced awareness among participating institutions and working group members, providing a broader and more integrated understanding of SDG 6 targets and indicators through the tool's component-based approach. Collaboration between governmental institutions and the research community proved essential for generating evidence and informing decision- and policy-makers about the status of national water policies. Capacity-building efforts enabled stakeholders to better capitalize on the outputs generated through SDG-PSS. The collaborative process was instrumental in reaching consensus, collecting both qualitative and quantitative information, and ensuring a shared interpretation of results. Although SDG-PSS is widely recognized in Tunisia as a valuable assessment and policy-support tool, it has not yet received formal institutional endorsement. Strong political commitment at the highest level is therefore needed to fully integrate the tool into national policy processes. To ensure the long-term sustainability and effective use of SDG-PSS outputs, the establishment of a permanent national committee is recommended to oversee implementation, coordination, and continuous monitoring.

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