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REALISING AUSTRALIA'S GLOBAL CONTRIBUTION TO WATER SECURITY

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Enhancing water security is a key means to addressing global development, economic and security challenges – especially in a changing climate. Australia has invested in action on water security beyond our borders for years, and has a recognised claim to world-leading capability. But our capacity to influence has not been deployed strategically and remains underutilised.

Australian leadership on water security in this decade can serve our foreign policy goals and contribute to social, economic and environmental outcomes. Acting now will leverage upcoming global fora and give the 2030 water and climate agenda the best chance of success.

To this end, the Australian Government should develop a

position statement and action agenda on global water security, with a practical initiative on water security diagnosis as a key mechanism for advancing its strategy.

Global water security matters to Australia's strategic interests

The world is already experiencing significant water insecurity. Pressures created by population growth (particularly increased urbanisation), economic growth, increasing demand for food, and environmental degradation are reducing both water availability and water quality.

Climate change is exacerbating this, including by reducing average rainfall in some areas and increasing the frequency and severity of droughts, storms and floods, which can damage water infrastructure and affect services. The World Meteorological Organisation estimates that 3.6 billion people had inadequate access to water at least one month a year in 2018, and projects this to rise to more than 5 billion by 2050. Water will be at the centre of the adaptation needs of most countries – of over 1,800 climate adaptation strategies reviewed for the IPCC's 6th Assessment Report, over 80% were water-related. In turn, water insecurity will generate chronic

and acute issues for communities, nations and regions. Adverse impacts on livelihoods and quality of life will create the conditions for domestic instability and, at worst, mass migration. Tensions over water, including [transboundary disputes](#), are increasing.

Against this backdrop, it is in Australia's strategic interest to leverage our considerable experience and expertise on water security to help achieve [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 6](#) – 'ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all' – and minimise threats to Australia's national security from regional and global instability.

Responding to the shared challenge of water security is a means for Australia to:

- + pursue foreign policy outcomes for greater regional security and strengthening strategic relationships
- + contribute to climate change adaptation
- + underpin effective development assistance, including through support for locally led solutions and a focus on gender and other inequalities
- + enhance diplomatic pathways by elevating Australia's reputation for sustainable water management
- + foster trade opportunities through exchange of expertise, services and technology.

The Australian Government's new domestic and foreign policy commitments support international leadership on water security

The new Australian Government's domestic commitments on climate change and on water provide a platform for stronger foreign policy and diplomatic leadership on water, including in the context of:

- + restoring Australia's status as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific
- + strengthening comprehensive ties with regional partners including Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam
- + establishing a Climate and Infrastructure Partnership with Indonesia.

Australia can show practical leadership in the build-up to the 2023 UN Water Conference

Global activity is increasing as countries prepare for the [2023 UN Water Conference](#). Marking the midpoint of the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (and noting over half of the goals are inextricably linked to success on goal 6), 2023 is a critical moment for preventing the 2030 water and climate agenda from faltering.

Recent announcements have established a [Global Commission on the Economics of Water](#) and a [US Action Plan on Global Water Security](#). Australia has an opportunity to contribute to this global push. Demonstrating practical leadership on water security will also help to position Australia in relation to the UNFCCC CoP 27 in November (and later CoPs), the [G20 Environment and Climate Ministerial Meeting in Bali](#) in November, the [UN Biodiversity CoP 15](#) in December, and the [2024 World Water Forum](#) – also in Bali.

Australia's water experience and expertise positions us uniquely to provide practical international leadership on water security

Over decades of reform, Australia has developed considerable know-how, institutional strength, practical models and innovative technologies to help achieve water security. Importantly:

- + We understand that improved governance and water management is a force multiplier for better water security – Australia cannot and should not fund all the necessary infrastructure, but we can help ensure improved governance is a prerequisite for making the right infrastructure decisions, attracting capital, and using water resources sustainably.
- + We can engage as a trusted partner on water security – we are actively adapting to the impacts of a changing climate, and our water reform story is already internationally known.

Australia is well positioned to provide know-how on improved governance and institutional design, policy and economics, tools for catchment and urban water planning and management (including water-sensitive urban design), water markets, groundwater management and managed aquifer recharge, water measurement technology, water science, environmental water use, water efficiency, water quality, digitalisation and innovation, and water and climate data. Our particular competitive advantage is in 'upstream' strategy, policy and governance (rather than 'downstream' provision of project funding or infrastructure). If we make the most of this, we can positively influence downstream decisions and increase the impact and leverage from each dollar Australia and other financiers invest.

Specifically, the Australian Government has recently invested in the development of a practical tool for defining, evaluating and reporting on town and city water security. A working definition for town and city water security has significant potential to both operationalise the high-level definition of water security that underpins Sustainable Development Goal 6 and help to establish a common understanding of the scale of challenges faced by communities across the globe. Beyond this, the diagnostic tool – modified for international settings – could be a powerful demonstration of Australia's know-how and its commitment to provide practical tools to countries grappling with water insecurity. After extensive

consultation and testing, this tool is being considered by all governments on next steps.

Australia could work with partner countries to further trial the town and city water security definition and diagnostic tool – to enable further tailoring to their settings and build capability in its application. Using such a practical tool to help spearhead Australia's global leadership effort on water security would exemplify the kind of engagement that we seek to develop – in a similar way to bilateral engagements with countries that sought Australia's expertise as a result of our participation in the UN-World Bank High Level Panel on Water (2016-18).

Next steps can include a position statement and action agenda on global water security

Given the imperatives and diplomatic opportunities provided by the global water agenda over the next 6 months, Australia should move now to:

- + Develop a clear position statement on water security and foreign policy that creates a niche for Australia's reinvigorated engagement on climate change in the area of climate adaptation for water security; such a statement should articulate Australia's commitment, objectives and offering – for the purpose of developing and designing initiatives and programs in response, and to communicate Australia's value proposition to the world.
- + Develop an action agenda and complementary diplomatic strategy to give effect to Australia's position on water security for the 2023 UN Water Conference, with options including:
 - + Using an amended version of the existing definition and diagnostic tool for water security for towns and cities to spearhead Australia's practical efforts on water security, including by piloting the diagnostic in selected cities outside Australia through bilateral engagements
 - + Identifying key partners for a bilateral and/or multilateral leaders' dialogue on water security
 - + Integrating water security as a key focus for development assistance – whether by gifts or loan facility – and supporting headland projects on water security with key partners
 - + Seeking leadership roles in global water activities where aligned with Australia's interests and practical to do so, such as former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's membership of the Global Leadership Council for Sanitation and Water for All
- + Maintaining a strong commitment to support water resource management and WASH programs in the Indo-Pacific.