

18th Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA)

Water. Harvests. Our Future

Background paper

Water is the basis of all life and of any economic activity. Access to clean water is inextricably linked to the human right to adequate food. Today, there are already more than two billion people suffering from water stress. Climate change, over-exploitation and the pollution of water resources are further exacerbating the situation. Even countries with moderate climates, such as Germany, are increasingly suffering from temporary water scarcity in some regions. Agriculture is severely affected by climate change and water stress. Agriculture is the world's largest consumer of water, accounting for 72 percent of total use according to FAO, which is why it plays a key role and can make a major contribution to finding a solution. A growing global population requires more food and potable water. At the same time, water reserves need to be preserved and increased. Due to this dual challenge, water resilience is becoming increasingly important. Ensuring that there is sufficient clean water is an essential factor, since there is no food without water!

The international community has already put water resilience at the top of its global political agenda. The United Nations created momentum for water by hosting the landmark United Nations Water Conference in 2023. This impetus towards more commitment, efficiency and cooperation in water policies will be taken up by the 2026 GFFA. We want to join forces to feed farmers' concerns and needs on the one hand and the potential solutions they can provide on the other into the new international developments.

Let us use the GFFA and the ensuing 2026 UN Water Conference to give a strong voice to agriculture, forestry and fisheries and put the topic of water and food security at the top of the international agenda. We want to focus on the following four topics:

1. Using Water Sustainably

Due to the fact that global water stress and the need for water are both increasing at the same time, we need smart solutions that make careful use of our precious water resources. To this end, it is key to have sustainable agricultural production methods that protect soils, strengthen water retention and contribute to pollutant-free ground and surface waters. Nature-based solutions are also vitally important, such as the preservation of the humus content in soils, the conservation of woodlands, the conversion of forests, the introduction of agroforestry systems and the protection and renaturalisation of moorland and wetlands. We also need a practice-oriented interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research sector and the continued development of efficient infrastructure and innovative technologies, such as smart irrigation control, water retention measures, wastewater purification and the desalination of water. Good practice examples will be used to present and discuss all these potential solutions at the GFFA.

2. Strengthening the Blue Bioeconomy

Maritime regions unite us across the globe: they are key for global security, economic power and the environment. The 2025 GFFA on bioeconomy highlighted the importance of the blue bioeconomy and referred to it as one of the central pillars for regional development, diversification of income sources and environmental protection. The use of previously untapped renewable aquatic resources and new methods is particularly valuable, since this helps create new sources of income for the fisheries sector and other sectors and this can help strengthen rural areas near inland waters or on the coast. In addition, the cultivation of marine biomass such as seaweed, algae and molluscs can help achieve environmental goals. This enables, for instance, nutrients polluting coastal waters to be absorbed. Some areas in the Global South, in particular, have a significant potential for cultivating blue biomass. The GFFA intends to provide key impetus to the international dialogue on the blue bioeconomy.

3. Finding Constructive Solutions to Competing Uses

Water resilience is promoted by having water users make clear agreements and by avoiding competing uses between different sectors. This can be achieved if all stakeholders contribute to the sustainable stewardship of water and if there are cross-sectoral policies and strong legislative frameworks combined with institutions and strategic planning and implementation. Clear and reliable water rights also foster the access of vulnerable groups to water and hence secure these groups' food production and livelihoods. Strengthening water resilience also strengthens peace and development at both global and local level, as water scarcity and hence scarcity of food can exacerbate conflicts, provide a breeding ground for violence and cause displacement and migration. At the GFFA, we also want to discuss the nexus between water, food security and peace and use concrete examples to show how politics, industry, academia and society can future-proof water governance.

4. Strengthening International Water Governance

The United Nation's water governance is said to be fragmented. Due to the high number of stakeholders, platforms and initiatives, there is a lack of coordination and administration at global level. Complex and cross-border topics such as water and food security, however, urgently require international cooperation, governance and knowledge sharing at all levels. The debate at the GFFA will focus on how to overcome the fragmentation of international water governance and how to better position the agricultural sector as a key water stakeholder. Because strong water governance also strengthens the right to food!