

2026 United Nations Water Conference

Interactive Dialogue 1 - Water for People

I. Introduction (500 words)

Safe, climate-resilient, and accessible Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services are key to fulfill the Human right for safe drinking water and sanitation and its 5 principles of **sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water** and **safe, hygienic, secure, and socially/culturally acceptable sanitation**. WASH services in public institutions, particularly in healthcare facilities and schools are a fundamental requirement. Without them, these institutions cannot fulfill their core mandate of safeguarding the health and well-being of patients and learners. Particular attention is needed to ensure dignified, safe and contextually appropriate access for women and girls, other vulnerable and marginalized groups such as homeless persons, and reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities in accordance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). WASH in healthcare facilities is critical for infection prevention and control, reduction of antimicrobial resistance, maternal and newborn health, patient and staff safety, and overall quality of care. Likewise, WASH in schools is every child's right and it is fundamental for students' health, dignity, school attendance, including continued attendance for girls, and learning outcomes.

Open Defecation Free (ODF) status is recognized as a concrete goal that must be reached on the way to safely managed sanitation. Efforts to maintain ODF status at local, regional and country levels demonstrate progress and the importance of continued visibility in this area.

II. Status and trends (1000 words)

Support should be put on on SDG 6 targets 6.1 on drinking water, 6.2 on sanitation and hygiene, and 6.3 on wastewater treatment, safe reuse and water quality, while building on the connections with SDG 2 on zero hunger, SDG 3 on health, SDG 4 on education, SDG 5 on gender equality, and SDG 10 on inequalities.

Access to safely managed drinking water and safely managed sanitation remains out of reach for billions of people, particularly in rural areas. Pollution continues to undermine human and environmental health. The effects of climate change compound the existing challenges, often triggering displacement.

In 2024, 176.6 million people required humanitarian WASH aid, yet only 48 million were given access. Humanitarian WASH sector received only a third of required funding with further reductions expected.

- III. **Challenges and emerging issues** (2000 words): This section will highlight challenges and opportunities relating to the topics addressed in the interactive dialogue, particularly those that have emerged or become more urgent since the 2023 Water Conference. This section will also identify interlinkages and synergies between the relevant SDG 6 targets and other SDGs.

Significant challenges remain in embedding human rights principles into national legal and policy frameworks, monitoring frameworks and budgets, particularly with regard to addressing non-discrimination and ensuring the rights of those left behind. Ensuring universal access to safe, climate-resilient and accessible WASH services in all public institutions continues to be an unmet challenge. This applies not only to addressing infrastructure gaps but also to strengthening institutional capacities for the effective management and sustainable operation and maintenance of existing systems. Funding sources are often not sustainable and not diverse enough. Adequate costing of the WASH investments and a finance strategy are lacking. It is therefore important to address the importance of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and the human rights to water and sanitation both at the Human Rights Council (HRC) as well as the UN General Assembly.

Water and sanitation utilities play a key role in ensuring the human rights to water and sanitation. Underperforming utilities lead to operational and financial inefficiencies impacting the delivery of WASH services. Universal WASH coverage in low-income and informal urban settlements and in remote rural areas remains a global challenge.

Water quality is under threat from unimproved sanitation, untreated or insufficiently treated wastewater, agricultural runoff, industrial effluents and plastic pollution. These pressures, are aggravated by the impacts of climate change, hinder the use of drinking water and recreational water, exacerbate waterborne diseases and antimicrobial resistance, and undermine both environmental and human health. Addressing these challenges require multisectoral action in a One Health approach.

Land-use degradation and changes, including forest and wetlands degradation pose a further challenge to the water cycle including precipitation, water retention and quality. Natural ecosystems including forests and wetlands provide crucial ecosystem services on which around 1.6 billion people depend worldwide.

WASH is closely linked to nutrition and child development. WASH interventions that target nutritionally vulnerable populations can address underlying drivers of malnutrition and improve child health.

Water among other natural resources is increasingly a source of conflict, particularly in those areas hardest hit by the effects of climate change. In more than 120 ongoing conflicts, freshwater resources and related infrastructure are increasingly degraded, disrupted, and deliberately weaponized against civilians. Disrupted WASH systems force reliance on unsafe sources, undermine agriculture and livelihoods, and displace communities. In humanitarian and fragile contexts, safe, dignified and accessible WASH, including aspects of Menstrual Health and Hygiene, are indispensable for managing crisis-related mobility. In protracted armed conflicts, impacts can accumulate and lead to reduced community resilience as well as hinder post-conflict peacebuilding. Attacks on freshwater resources and related infrastructure can act as a trigger or multiplier of conflicts, intensify local grievances, fuel instability, and pose threats to regional and international peace and security. Strengthening the WASH humanitarian-development-peace nexus remains a pressing challenge to ensure that emergency responses are resilient and linked to longer-term development outcomes.

- IV. **Solutions** (2000 words): This section will offer action-oriented, innovative, and pragmatic solutions to challenges. It will shine a spotlight on impactful initiatives, programs and projects from around the world that can be scaled up and/or transferred to other contexts. Potential partnerships among Member States and with other stakeholders will feature prominently.

Embedding human rights principles into national legal, policy and monitoring frameworks and budgets strengthens accountability and guides investments. Human rights-based approaches to WASH empower communities and rights-holders to participate actively and to hold duty-bearers accountable. The Conference should provide recommendations on the fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation, including a sound and reliable methodology to monitor progress. Member states should commit to and be supported to align their national monitoring efforts to the human rights to water and sanitation and the existing global monitoring frameworks of SGD 6.1 and 6.2., thus harmonizing, simplifying and standardizing national and global monitoring, providing a strong foundation for water and sanitation in a post2030-framework. This also includes the process of aligning and harmonizing already existing monitoring efforts and to support the simplification and standardization of systems, which would not only improve data quality, but also enhance international comparability and significantly reduce the administrative burden for countries.

Maintaining ODF status is an essential solution on the path to safely managed sanitation. Visibility and commitment to ODF across local, regional and national levels can support further progress and must be complemented by sustainable financing, behavior change, and long-term operation and maintenance.

Infrastructural WASH developments complemented with WASH education as well as the sustainable operation, maintenance and management of the WASH services within settings, including menstrual health and hygiene management, are key to addressing hygiene concerns, reducing water related diseases and poverty, and tackling gender inequality. Achieving sustainable WASH access in all schools and healthcare facilities requires a paradigm shift: beyond just building infrastructure, equal attention must be given to the long-term management, operation, and maintenance of these services. Gender-responsive and socially inclusive programming is needed to transform longstanding disparities.

Improving water quality requires better regulation, investment in safely managed sanitation, sustainable wastewater treatment, and sustainable water infrastructure and sustainable economic activity. Supporting establishment of finance strategies for the sector and stronger and well-coordinated efforts to develop and scale local currency financing solutions, that tap into underutilized sources of funding including private sector, local banks and the capital market. Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) and approaches such as the One Health Framework can foster collaboration across sectors and strengthen responses to water-related risks, while addressing pollution challenges.

Ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, grasslands, and soils play an important role in maintaining water sources, retention and water quality. Sustainably managed ecosystems and Nature-based Solutions are therefore crucial to safeguarding ecosystem services for human well-being and resilience to climate change. More integrated approaches are needed to combine efforts on WASH and Food and Nutrition Security for stronger health outcomes and to make peoples' lives and livelihoods more resilient to climate change and other external shocks.

In fragile and conflict settings, WASH responses should be prioritized in areas with highest risks and needs. Respect for humanitarian principles and effective implementation of the International Humanitarian Law are essential obligations of all states and parties to the conflict.

Strengthening the WASH humanitarian-development-peace nexus is necessary to ensure that emergency responses are resilient and linked to sustainable long-term outcomes. This includes addressing the needs of displaced population, and communities living in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Infrastructural WASH developments combined with investment in a strong, diverse, and adequately trained workforce is essential to deliver sustainable and universal WASH services. Well-performing and independent water and sanitation utilities have the capacity to expand their service coverage to underserved urban-poor communities while ensuring long-term maintenance.

Digital monitoring tools, open data, and innovative approaches to financing, including climate finance and blended public–private models, can enhance accountability, improve service delivery, and ensure sustainability.

Commitment should be aimed at supporting WASH implementation worldwide. Building on existing tools and resources, such as those developed under the WHO EURO/UNECE Protocol on Water and Health and UNICEF and WHO's Joint Monitoring Programme, is a way to enhance cooperation and accelerate progress.

V. Recommendations and conclusions (2000 words)

- The Conference should provide clear recommendations on the fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation, supported by a reliable methodology for monitoring progress. Indicators should be improved and extended to cover affordability, accessibility, quality, acceptability and availability, and reporting under the Universal Periodic Reviews should be strengthened. There should also be clear recommendations on how existing monitoring systems can be better aligned, harmonized as well as simplified to improve data quality, but also enhance international comparability and significantly reduce the administrative burden for countries.
- Particular attention should be given to WASH in healthcare facilities, schools, and public spaces, with clear recommendations on improving the long-term management, operation, and maintenance of these services, with a focus on women, girls, and persons with disabilities, and the homeless.
- Strengthen WASH in humanitarian and fragile contexts, and link short-term responses to longer-term development.
- Support initiatives aimed at strengthening compliance with International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law and the delivery of humanitarian outcomes such as ICRC Global IHL Initiative, WASH Roadmap and its Call to Action, and the Global Alliance for Sparing Water from Armed Conflicts.
- Commitment to supporting WASH implementation worldwide and underline the importance of building on existing frameworks and tools such as the WHO EURO/UNECE Protocol on Water and Health should be reaffirmed.
- Scale commitment at the highest political level by supporting relevant initiatives at the highest political level where possible.
- Promote conflict sensitive WASH service delivery that contributes to social cohesion, particularly in fragile areas.

VI. Guiding questions (1000 words)

Human rights and inclusion

- How to ensure the human rights to water and sanitation are embedded in national laws, policies, and budgets?
- How to address systemic inequalities in access to WASH, including in the design and delivery of services, in order to achieve more equitable outcomes? How to ensure women, girls, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups are meaningfully involved in WASH decision-making and monitoring?
- How is data used to identify gaps, target resources, and hold governments or service providers accountable?
- Are communities empowered to participate in monitoring and advocacy for WASH improvements?
- What measures ensure dignified, safe, and contextually appropriate access to WASH for vulnerable populations (including refugees, displaced persons, and the urban poor)?
- How are WASH responses in emergencies linked to long-term development and sustainable outcomes?
- How can fragile, conflict-affected, and displaced populations be adequately considered in WASH planning?
- How to make sure that humanitarian and development assistance as well as climate finance reaches those in fragile and conflict settings?
- How to reverse the trend of normalization of deliberate attacks on WASH infrastructure in armed conflicts?

Equity & Gender

- How to design WASH programs designed to address gender disparities and promote social inclusion?
- How can WASH interventions be tailored to empower women and girls while improving service delivery?
- How are menstrual health and hygiene needs integrated into schools, healthcare facilities, and public spaces?
- How can Open Defecation Free (ODF) status and safely managed sanitation services be maintained and scaled?
- How can water quality be ensured and challenges such as chemical, microbial, and emerging contaminants be addressed?

Behavior Change and Education

- How can hygiene promotion and behavior-change campaigns be effectively implemented in schools, healthcare facilities, and communities?
- How does WASH education integrate health, nutrition, and environmental awareness?
- *What should the role of development partners and the private sector be in supporting skill-building and institutional strengthening?*

Governance

- What are best practices and institutional mechanisms for integrated water resources management (IWRM) and inter-sectoral coordination?
- How could we strengthen the capacity of regulation authorities around the globe?
- How can WASH investments be planned sustainably with life-cycle costing, including operation, maintenance, and replacement?
- What strategies are effective in training, retaining, and building capacity in the WASH workforce?
- How can governments capacitate the workforce in education or health settings, to manage and maintain the WASH Services?
- *How can we build champions for water, sanitation, hygiene and wastewater treatment in national and local government and use them to accelerate action?*
- *How can we work across government ministries and departments (health, agriculture, hygiene, water resources) to optimize investments in water, sanitation and hygiene and ensure that they contribute to health, food security, equality and nation-building?*
- *What concrete actions can we take to build trust and transparency in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, ensuring the participation and consultation of all stakeholders?*

Innovation and Technology

- How can digital tools, including AI, remote sensing, or data platforms help to track WASH service coverage, quality, and equity?
- How are innovative technologies and low-cost solutions applied in resource-constrained or crisis settings?
- Are emerging risks (e.g., climate change, water pollution, antimicrobial resistance) being addressed through technological and management innovations?
- *What are the data gaps that are holding back planning, investment and monitoring of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals? What support do governments need to fill them?*
- *What is the best way to track action over the next eight years? What are the most important actions to track for governments and development partners?*