

2026 United Nations Water Conference

Interactive Dialogue (a): Water for people: the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies

Concept Paper prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

I. Introduction (500 words)

Safe drinking water and sanitation are recognized human rights indispensable for life, health, dignity, and the realization of all other human rights. All human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. The denial of water and sanitation directly undermines the enjoyment of other rights, such as the rights to life, health including sexual and reproductive health, adequate housing, food, education, and work.

Protecting freshwater ecosystems is also crucial to uphold the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. The links between the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and other human rights are multidimensional.

The human rights to water and sanitation derive from the right to an adequate standard of living, protected under, inter alia, article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and enshrined in Article 11(1) of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The human rights to water and sanitation have also been recognized by the UN General Assembly (resolutions 64/292 and 70/169) and the UN Human Rights Council (resolutions 15/9 and 33/10).

In its General Comment No. 15, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) clarified that everyone is entitled to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic uses. The right to sanitation entitles everyone to have physical and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, and socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity.

Furthermore, safe drinking water and sanitation are underlying determinants of health.¹ Environmental hygiene is an aspect of the right to health, encompassing taking steps on a non-discriminatory basis to prevent threats to health from unsafe and toxic water conditions.²

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) [Advisory Opinion of 23 July 2025](#) views that “a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a precondition for the enjoyment of many human rights, such as the right to life, the right to health and the right to an adequate standard of living, including access to water, food and housing.”

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, States must take deliberate, concrete, and targeted steps to progressively realize these rights, using the maximum of available resources and ensuring non-discrimination and equality³. A human rights-based approach to water governance is essential, recognizing water as a public good and prioritizing access for life over economic uses.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, through SDG 6, commits to ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Yet progress remains uneven and insufficient. In the remaining five years, acceleration of progress is critical, while planning beyond 2030 must begin. This forward thinking cannot detract from urgent action now, as evidence shows that speeding up progress will depend on systematically integrating human rights approaches into SDG implementation.

II. Status and trends (1000 words)

Unequal enjoyment of the human rights to water and sanitation

The world remains far from fulfilling the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. As of 2024, an estimated 2.1 billion people still lacked access to safely managed drinking water services, and 3.4 billion lacked safely managed sanitation services, including 354 million practicing open defecation. At schools, 447 million

¹ [E/C.12/2000/4](#), para. 11.

² [E/C.12/2002/11](#), para. 8.

³ A/HRC/45/10

children lack basic drinking water services, and 427 million lack basic sanitation services, disparities that disproportionately affect girls.⁴ These figures represent not only service gaps but human rights violations, that undermine health, dignity, and equality for billions. According to UN-Water's 2024 Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) report, at current rates of improvement, universal coverage will not be reached before 2060. Even where infrastructure exists, quality, affordability, and reliability, remain critical obstacles to realizing these rights.

Many of the challenges to achieving gender equality in access to water and sanitation are well documented. **Women and girls** disproportionately bear the main burden of collecting household water and care work responsibilities, including those affected from waterborne diseases and climate-induced water scarcity. This unpaid labour restricts their time for education, income opportunities and leisure, while affecting their health, privacy, safety, and dignity. These unequal impacts are rooted in systemic gender-based discrimination.

In 2024, 1.8 billion people globally were living in households where water is collected from sources located off premises. In 70% of these households, women and girls were primarily responsible for water collection, spending 250 million hours per day on that task, over three times more than men and boys.⁴ This time-consuming burden undermines girls' right to education, as it often results in missed school days, reduced academic performance, and higher school dropout rates among girls. It also heightens their risk of child marriage, sexual violence and unwanted pregnancies, further jeopardizing their education and economic opportunities, violating their rights, and putting their lives in danger.⁵

As water sources diminish, women and girls face greater risks. Walking longer distances to access water and toilets exposes them to exploitation, violence, and health hazards. Despite these realities, women and girls remain largely excluded from decision-making processes concerning water resources and services contributing to the perpetuation of structural gender-discrimination. Women's and girls' voices are indispensable to ensuring that their needs are understood and prioritized.

⁴ World Health Organization/United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP), 2025. [Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/Goal-06/); <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/Goal-06/>

⁵ [A/HRC/RES/57/13](#); World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2023. [Women and girls bear brunt of water and sanitation crisis](#); A/HRC/53/40 and A/HRC/52/50.

The lack of access to adequate water and sanitation services, especially for menstrual health and hygiene management, in schools, workplaces, health centres and public facilities and buildings, constitutes a barrier to gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, including the rights to education, to health, including to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to safe and healthy working conditions, and to participate in public life. The lack of water and sanitation services in schools meeting the needs of menstruating girls negatively affects their attendance at school, leading to missed classes, reduced academic performance and dropout rates. To fully realize their rights, women, girls and menstruating people must be able to menstruate in safety and dignity, with access to toilets, hygienic products, adequate facilities, privacy, and access to safe and continuous supply of water.

Persons living in informal settlements and slums and people experiencing homelessness often do not have access to adequate water and sanitation services and they may face harassment or criminalization and are often excluded from formal service provision due to insecure tenure, lack of legal recognition, and discriminatory policies, leaving them reliant on unsafe, unreliable, and costly alternatives to access water. By the end of 2024, more than 1.1 billion people resided in slums and informal settlements⁶.

As stated by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, many **Indigenous Peoples**⁷ and impoverished rural communities face persistent barriers to realizing their human right to safe drinking water, despite living near fresh water sources like rivers, lakes, and aquifers. Many communities are located in remote areas with limited infrastructure, forcing reliance on untreated water from natural sources that are increasingly contaminated by extractive industries mining, agribusiness, and megaprojects. This degradation of water quality, combined with long distances to safe sources, undermines health, dignity, and equality.

People on the move, including **migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, as well as nomadic and traveller communities**⁸, face legal or

⁶ <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2025/04/2503673e.pdf>

⁷ [A/HRC/51/24](#) and [A/77/167](#)

⁸ For more information on “Duties of States towards refugees and migrants under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” see: E/C.12/2017/1

policy barriers, such as restrictive documentation requirements or a lack of formal documentation, exclusion based on migration or displacement status, mobility restrictions, or rules tied to service eligibility, often excluding them from public water and sanitation services and infrastructure provision systems, particularly when living in inadequate housing, such as informal settlements, camps or border areas.

Persons with disabilities experience physical, financial and institutional barriers to accessing water and sanitation services, with facilities rarely designed to meet their needs, thereby denying them safe, affordable and dignified access.⁹

Older persons can experience abandonment and neglect, and often depend on care and support from others, including in domestic and institutional settings, which limit their enjoyment of the rights to water and sanitation. Amid environmental or humanitarian crises, older persons may be reluctant or unable to leave dangerous areas due to their health conditions, impaired mobility, disability, and poverty, thus suffering from limited access to water and sanitation.

Prisoners and detainees may face substandard detention settings as a form of neglect or punishment amidst deprivation of safe drinking water and sanitation in overcrowded or unsanitary facilities.¹⁰

Workers, particularly those in the informal economy, may face unsafe or unhealthy working environments due to lack of access to safe drinking water. For example, migrant workers who rely on informal or seasonal employment in outdoor or temporary settings without safe drinking water and sanitation, experience increasing risks of dehydration during heatwaves, exposure to unsafe or contaminated water, and illness linked to poor environmental conditions.

⁹ A/HRC/46/46

¹⁰ [E/C.12/2002/11](#), para. 16 (g); Querol, M., 2019. [Protecting the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation of Vulnerable Groups: Leaving No One Behind Assessment Toolkit](#), p. 11, *Human Right 2 Water*.

- 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.

Shrinking civic space and risks to human rights defenders

The ability of rights-holders to claim and defend their rights to water and sanitation is increasingly constrained, including through legal and policy restrictions on the right to participation, the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association, among others. Human rights defenders, environmental activists and journalists face stigmatization, intimidation, criminalization, threats, and reprisals in many jurisdictions, for exercising their public freedoms and influencing public discourse for positive changes. Participation processes are frequently tokenistic and consultative rather than deliberative, excluding individuals, groups, and communities most affected by water scarcity or pollution. Therefore, restrictions to civic space, and attacks against civil society actors and human rights defenders, contravene articles 19, 21, 22, and 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and undermines the accountability essential to a human-rights-based approach.

Under the Secretary-General's [Call to Action for Human Rights](#), the [UN system-wide Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#) outlined key roles of the UN system in promoting participation of civil society in UN's processes, protecting those at risk, and promoting enabling spaces. The UN Special Rapporteur stresses that civil society participation is essential for democratic water governance, ensuring rights holders – not just stakeholders – can influence decisions¹¹. Therefore, the establishment of a formal mechanism in UN-Water to promote meaningful, inclusive and safe participation of civil society in the intergovernmental and entity processes, including protection of civil society actors from threats, intimidation and reprisals, will help to address existing asymmetries between States and civil society in global governance, and allow for civil society voices to be heard and contributions to be taken into account. Such a mechanism could include a dedicated organizational structure to promote civil society engagement for example through a dedicated civil society section/unit and focal points, and the creation of permanent civil society advisory mechanism.

¹¹ [A/80/117](#)

The role of local governments in realizing the human rights to water and sanitation

Local and regional governments are on the frontlines of addressing environmental degradation, including pollution and climate change, while also bearing responsibility for safeguarding human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. States' obligations under international human rights law extend to all levels of government, and to any exercise of governmental authority.¹² Regardless of how the State divides its administrative powers, all local and regional governments have shared and complementary duties with the State to respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights to water and sanitation and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Local governments' ability to meet their human rights obligations often falters because of fragmented coordination, limited technical capacity, restricted fiscal, technological and human resources, and/or weak accountability systems. Where local governments are mandated to deliver water and sanitation services without matching financial resources, whether through budget transfers from the central government or their sourced revenues, the realization of human rights is undermined. This imbalance undermines the local governments' ability to plan, invest, develop, and sustain human rights-compliant water and sanitation services, particularly for people in marginalized situations.

Human rights economy

Water should primarily be considered as a human right and a public good and not as a commodity or a financial asset. The market logic of maximizing return on investment, when applied to water, negatively affects access to water, in particular for vulnerable groups and does not respect human rights nor the Sustainable Development Goals, and consequently, fails to deliver for people and the planet. In many countries, the content of public budgets does not always reflect human rights obligations, and the budget planning process may not be carried out by applying human rights principles of participation, accountability and transparency. Furthermore, austerity measures and privatization of water services have produced retrogressive effects that are prohibited under CESCR General Comments No. 3 and No. 15.

¹² [Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties \(1969\)](#); For more information on the responsibility of States for internationally wrongful acts, the International Law Commission's Article on the [Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts \(2001\)](#).

Corporate over-extraction, pollution, and land-use conversion often proceed without human-rights impact assessment. Documented cases reveal business involvement in abuses of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, often compounded by migrant worker exploitation, reprisals against environmental human rights defenders, child labour, and gender-based violence in agricultural supply chains, extractive industries, oil extraction, and other environmentally harmful or high-risk industries.¹³

Unclear or insecure water tenure

The legal and customary arrangements that determine who can use, control, and manage water undermines the realization of human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. When water rights are tied to land ownership or lack of recognition, it fosters discrimination, enables land and water grabbing, and undermines accountability for States' obligations under international and could **undermine democratic governance and accountability**.¹⁴

- 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.

Addressing inequalities

It is essential to tackle entrenched discrimination and inequalities in access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate sanitation to accelerate progress by 2030 and beyond. Persistent inequalities in access to water and sanitation reflect and exacerbate multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion, for example for women and girls, minorities, persons with disabilities, older persons, Indigenous Peoples, asylum seekers, refugees, internally displaced persons, and those living in informal settlements, rural areas and in a situation of poverty or homelessness. International human rights law obliges States to respect, protect and fulfil the rights to water and sanitation for all without discrimination, prioritizing those

¹³ See examples of the latest news relating to the field of business and human rights by the [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#), such as cases in [Israel / OPT](#); [Dominican Republic](#); [S. Africa](#); [Sri Lanka](#); [Laos](#); [Canada](#); [Ukraine](#), etc.

¹⁴ [A/80/117](#)

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Secure water tenure

Securing water tenure is essential to realizing the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. States should establish clear legal and customary frameworks that guarantee everyone's right to use and manage water, independent of land ownership. This requires recognizing water as a public good, protecting all users without discrimination, and embedding participation and free, prior, and informed consent in governance processes. By ensuring legal certainty and inclusive decision-making, water tenure systems can prevent discrimination, curb land and water grabbing, and strengthen accountability for States' human rights obligations

The role of local governments in realizing the human rights to water and sanitation

As the closest level of governance to communities, local governments have a critical role to ensure that local laws, policies, services, and processes align with international human rights norms and standards. By fostering safe and meaningful participation of local communities, civil society, academia, national and local human rights institutions, and other stakeholders, particularly individuals and groups in marginalized situations, local governments can ensure that laws, policies and programmes respond to the needs of local communities on water, sanitation, and the environment, as well as related recommendations made by the [United Nations human rights mechanisms](#) ([Treaty Bodies](#), [Universal Periodic Review](#), and [Special Procedures](#)).¹⁵

Community-based water management has consistently proven to be an effective and equitable way to realize the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation. Rooted in participation and local knowledge, these systems ensure water is managed as a public good, strengthen accountability, and improve sustainability. Evidence shows that where communities govern water, access is more inclusive, services are better maintained, and resilience to climate and environmental risks increases – making community management a cornerstone of democratic water governance¹⁶.

¹⁵ OHCHR, 2025. [Guidance Framework for Creating a Human Rights City](#); For more information on how to use the OHCHR Universal Human Rights Index: [Help - How to use UHRI](#); for more information on integrating human rights into the development of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presented at the High-Level Political Forum: [HR and VNRs Guidance Note](#) – this is also applicable to Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

¹⁶ [A/HRC/54/32](#)

Human rights economy

A human rights economy ensures that water governance, development, economic, industrial, and trade agreements and policies, investment decisions, and business operations are firmly guided by human rights standards and principles. It is crucial for States to ensure **alignment of economic policies with human rights** by investing sufficiently in water and sanitation public services, refraining from austerity measures, social cuts and retrogressions, designing progressive tax systems for greater equality and generating the resources needed to realize human rights for all. In the context of international human rights law, the immediate obligation of non-discrimination requires States to ensure that budget allocation and expenditure aim at eliminating inequalities in access to water and sanitation. States must also ensure the rights of access to information and public participation in the context of water governance and ensure access to justice and remedy for water-related human rights violations and abuses.

In the context of water scarcity and overexploitation of water resources, international human rights law sets out that priority in the allocation of water resources should be given to personal and domestic uses, to uphold human dignity, life and health, as opposed to other uses such as industry or large-scale agriculture. However, taking into consideration article 1, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which provides that a people may not “be deprived of its means of subsistence”, States should ensure that there is adequate access to water for subsistence farming to realize the right to food. Water resources should be managed sustainably to ensure safe and sufficient water for both present and future generations, including through water pricing that encourages the efficient use of water. On the other hand, the affordability of water and sanitation for all must be ensured even in times of water scarcity.

In addition, all business enterprises, regardless of their size, sector, operational context, ownership, and structure, have the responsibility to respect internationally recognized human rights, including the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation and the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. As recognized in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), this responsibility is a global standard of expected conduct which exists independently of States’ abilities and/or willingness to fulfil their own human rights obligations, and it exists over and above compliance with national laws and regulations protecting human rights, including the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

V. Recommendations and conclusions (2000 words)

Recommendation 1: Ensure the enjoyment of human rights to water and sanitation for all, with targeted measures for individuals and groups that face discrimination or are in a situation of disadvantage. States, at all levels of government, should implement laws and policies in consultation with rights holders that address direct and indirect discrimination in access to water and sanitation management and services, including water tenure. The capacity of local governments to better understand and fulfill human rights obligations in the context of water and sanitation should be strengthened.

Recommendation 2: Protect and promote civic space and enable safe, meaningful, and inclusive participation of civil society and rights-holders in water governance. People and communities, particularly groups that face discrimination or are in a situation of disadvantage, as well as water and environmental human rights defenders must be able to meaningfully and safely participate in the management of water resources, services and ecosystems.

A dedicated **Civil Society Mechanism should be established under UN-Water** (autonomous, representative, resourced) with **formal channels** to participate in and to contribute to the work governing bodies and their decisions, and to track follow-up and implementation.

- Building on the successful model of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) under the Committee on World Food Security, the establishment of a Civil Society Mechanism under UN-Water would serve as a critical milestone. This Mechanism would act as a formal and autonomous space for civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples, social movements, local communities, human rights defenders, and diversity of other rights-holders to contribute systematically and independently to the global water and sanitation agenda and its outcomes. It would institutionalize structured and safe participation, ensuring that the perspectives and lived experiences of those most affected by water and sanitation inequalities inform all deliberations and outcomes of UN-Water and related intergovernmental processes.
- The Mechanism should be guided by the principles of transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and independence, providing a safe and enabling environment for engagement, including by addressing protection needs of those who engage with UN Water and related processes, by

preventing and responding to act of intimidation and reprisals against those defending water and sanitation rights. It should also promote knowledge-sharing, and facilitate collaboration among civil society, youth, Indigenous Peoples, academia, and central, regional and local governments.

Recommendation 3: States should guarantee that water management laws, policies and programmes are firmly and primarily guided by human rights norms and standards. In particular, they should establish water pricing that ensures an efficient, sustainable, non-discriminatory and affordable use of water, prioritizing personal and domestic use of water. Adequate budget should be allocated and spent on the provision and maintenance of water services at the national and local levels.

States should regulate business conduct to ensure respect for human rights and access to remedy in line with the UNGPs. Business enterprises, consistent with the UNGPs, should conduct human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for how they address their adverse impacts on water and sanitation rights. They should ensure meaningful consultation with affected communities, publicly disclose water use and pollution data, and provide effective operational-level grievance mechanisms.

Recommendation 4: Ensure adequate integration of the human rights to water and sanitation into the post-2030 Agenda as an enabler of progress on sustainable development. The new development framework must systematically embed human rights-based approaches, including reaffirming water and sanitation as legal entitlements and human rights obligations. The development goals should include rights-based language and measurable and concrete targets that draw upon existing recommendations from international human rights mechanisms. The normative content of the human rights to water and sanitation (availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, quality) as clarified by CESCR General Comment No. 15. should guide engagements on the post-2030 Agenda, with adequate priority also given to human rights experts, practitioners and affected communities in developing the post-2030 Agenda.

While the Pact for the Future sets the start for the Member State discussions on ways to advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond at the 2027 SDG summit, States and many other stakeholders are already developing some thinking around the post-2030 Agenda. In doing this, it is critical to (1) address the shortcomings of the 2030 Agenda (such as insufficient understanding and uneven application of the

“Leave No One Behind” commitment; data gaps and challenges with tracking progress; inadequate resources for implementation; exclusion of some population groups from meaningful engagement in sustainable development or from benefitting equally from SDG implementation) and (2) to ensure human rights and human rights-based approaches are at the heart of not only the discussions but also the recommended actions.

To ensure no one is left out of left behind in efforts to achieve sustainable development that also fulfils human rights, the post-2030 agenda must renew and strengthen its human rights focus. It needs to make better use of the human rights norms and standards, of the analyses and recommendations made by international human rights mechanisms. It also needs to advance human rights-based approach to data to promote development that benefits all people and the planet, development that is sustainable and is conducted within planetary boundaries, and development that leave no person and no country behind. Embedding equality, non-discrimination, participation, and accountability across all sectors, including in economic and environmental policy-making, to strengthen water and sanitation laws, policies, plans and governance systems, needs to be part of the discussion on the successor of SDG 6.

VI. **Guiding questions (1000 words)**

The following questions guide the interactive dialogue:

- What good practices and successful policy or regulatory measures have States, businesses and the UN entities implemented to guarantee universal access to water and sanitation for all, including women and girls, and particularly for groups facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination?
- What effective measures or examples demonstrate how local and regional governments can be supported to fulfill their duties to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation?
- What governance models or mechanisms have proven effective in protecting civic space, preventing reprisals and ensuring meaningful participation of rights-holders, especially those facing discrimination, in water and sanitation decision-making?

- What concrete examples demonstrate how States have aligned their economic policies with human rights obligations to advance universal access to water and sanitation and ensure no one is left behind?
- What concrete measures can be taken by States and the UN system to ensure that the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are central to the post-2030 agenda?