2026 UN WATER CONFERENCE

Stakeholder and Rights Holder Declaration

Your Voice.
Our Water.
Our Shared Future.

A joint Declaration from stakeholders and rights holders, calling for water and sanitation to be permanently anchored at the highest level of the United Nations system and its Member States.

Contents

	Preamble	3
CHAPTER 1	Key priorities for water until and beyond 2030	4
CHAPTER 2	A permanent and inclusive intergovernmental water process	6
CHAPTER 3	Joint implementation, mutual accountability and learning	8
CHAPTER 4	The role and value of stakeholders and rights holders	11
	Our commitments for the road ahead	12

Abbreviations

HRWS	Human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SWS	United Nations System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene

KEY TERMS IN THIS DECLARATION

Stakeholders and rights holders include individuals, groups, communities, organizations, institutions and networks that hold rights, have interests or responsibilities, or contribute to, influence or are affected by decisions and actions relating to water and sanitation. These include, but are not limited to, Indigenous Peoples, grassroots movements, local communities, civil society organizations, women, youth, workers and trade unions, farmers, persons with disabilities, displaced communities, communities discriminated against on the basis of work and descent, local governments, utilities, operators, municipalities, academia and research institutions, professional networks and private-sector enterprises and business and industrial associations, with particular attention to marginalized and/or vulnerable people and other underrepresented groups.

Stakeholders include actors whose knowledge, expertise, responsibilities or engagement contribute to water and sanitation governance. Stakeholders may have interests, responsibilities or influence without necessarily being rights holders.

Rights holders are those entitled to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation (HRWS), as well as inherent, collective, customary and Indigenous Peoples' rights as affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Adequate water and sanitation services as defined by the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation entitle everyone, without discrimination, to have sustained access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use and to have physical and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity.

Marginalized and/or vulnerable people refers to people discriminated against on the basis of race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status; people living in informal settlements, small island States or rural communities; people affected by climate impacts, including those facing desertification, land degradation, drought, flooding or water scarcity; and people affected by conflict or humanitarian crises.

Preamble

1 Water is life, and sanitation is dignity: their recognition by the United Nations (UN) as human rights affirms this. Together, water and sanitation are the foundation of health, livelihoods, peace, resilience, and food and nutrition security. Water security, including effective wastewater management, is a prerequisite for sustainable economic development, resilient infrastructure and sustainable value chains, and underpins planetary health.

2 Our world faces a deepening water crisis. Billions of people still lack safely managed drinking water and sanitation, as well as basic hygiene services. Water pollution, water grabbing, groundwater depletion, ecosystem degradation, climate change, urbanization, armed conflict, discrimination and growing inequality place mounting pressure on communities.

3 While important progress has been achieved, the world remains off track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 and other water-related SDG targets on poverty (1.4), diseases (3.3, 3.9), schools (4.a), gender (5.4), habitat (11.1), disasters (11.5), adaptation to climate change (13.1), biodiversity (15.1), safety (5.2, 16.1) and land-based pollution discharged to oceans (12.4, 14.1). The planet, its biodiversity and ecosystems are under unsustainable pressure from human activities, undermining current and future water security. These are challenges of governance, inequality and discrimination, justice and political action, and are not merely technical or financial. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated policymaking, political will, visionary leadership and accountability across sectors. It also requires a permanent multilateral process on water and sanitation, anchored at the highest levels of the UN system and Member States, to sustain political commitment and to keep water central to global agendas.

4 As recognized in the 2022 Dushanbe Declaration, collaboration among water users and stakeholders across society should be strengthened, moving beyond traditional water sector boundaries to accelerate the transition towards water-smart societies. Water must be governed as an ecosystem that sustains life, recognizing its multiple values and cultural significance. Governance must fulfil the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, uphold dignity, protect and enhance ecosystems, and safeguard planetary health for present and future generations, while addressing inequality and discrimination, including in crises and conflicts.

5 Decisions should be informed by the best available evidence from diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous Peoples' knowledges, recognizing the diverse contributions of stakeholders and rights holders. This requires meaningful participation and leadership of all stakeholders and rights holders, especially marginalized and/or vulnerable people.

6 To date, no formal mechanism enables stakeholders and rights holders to coordinate, consolidate inputs and speak collectively in UN water processes, despite their central role in elevating water at all levels of society, developing sustainable solutions and holding governments accountable. This Declaration process seeks to address this longstanding global water governance gap by providing a collective platform for stakeholder and rights holder voices to inform decision-making.

7 This Declaration is both an outcome and a starting point. Developed in under 100 days, it represents twelve stakeholder constituencies and multiple consultation rounds, formats and channels. It does not claim to represent the full diversity of water and sanitation actors, perspectives and communities. It aims to lay the foundation for sustained, inclusive stakeholder and rights holder engagement in global water governance, ensuring meaningful participation, effective representation, and regional and gender balance.

8 This Declaration gives stakeholders and rights holders a collective voice and a common framework for action, setting priorities, identifying solutions and advancing shared accountability for implementation. Addressing the global water crisis requires cooperation across sectors, borders and generations, backed by financing, implementation, transparency and accountability that turn commitments into lasting progress.

CHAPTER 1

Key priorities for water until and beyond 2030

9 Water and sanitation must remain a distinct global priority beyond 2030, recognizing water as a common good and placing the HRWS, equality, non-discrimination, intergenerational equity and ecosystem integrity at the heart of water governance. A whole-water-cycle, source-to-sea approach protecting all water sources must overcome fragmented governance, including for transboundary and shared waters in line with the principles of international water law, and safeguard the ecological functions that sustain water quality, recharge and availability. This approach must also secure universal, climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), including in crises.

We urge Member States to:

10 – Retain dedicated global water and sanitation goals beyond 2030, preserving at least the ambition of SDG 6, all its targets and other water-related SDG targets;

11 – Adopt a cross-sectoral approach that integrates the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation (SWS), whole-water-cycle management, ecosystem protection and the three Rio Conventions;

12 – Strengthen public institutions and transboundary cooperation, and reinforce institutional and workforce capacity and diversity at all levels to deliver reliable, safely managed and lasting water and sanitation services for all;

13 – Ensure that public funding remains the cornerstone of water and sanitation, and that public support is not conditional on private participation, by providing predictable, earmarked core public funding, including through public development banks, for climate-resilient WASH, wastewater and faecal sludge management; strengthening water and sanitation utilities, including those under local government management, to finance investment, operations, maintenance and workforce capacity; and enabling public-public, public-community and public-private partnerships that complement public investment and strengthen service delivery;

14 – Ensure that all providers and financing arrangements, public and private, are subject to transparent governance, human rights safeguards and community oversight, delivering measurable public-interest outcomes and guaranteeing affordability;

15 – Prioritize marginalized and/or vulnerable people, ensuring adequate water and sanitation services, and ending open defecation and discriminatory or segregated access;

16 – Eliminate manual scavenging; ensure safe and decent working conditions, occupational health and safety, labour rights for water and sanitation workers in formal and informal settings, and a just transition that protects workers' livelihoods, rights and dignity. No worker should be left without a secure source of income as unsafe sanitation practices are phased out;

17 – Reform subsidies that fail to reach the poorest or undermine sustainable water management, while expanding priority investments in climate-resilient WASH, including early warning systems for all, community and utility preparedness, groundwater and water-quality monitoring, safely managed sanitation service chains, and freshwater ecosystem conservation and restoration, including environmental flows;

18 – Transparently monitor and regulate water withdrawals and pollution, enforce discharge standards for industry and large-scale agriculture, prioritize human rights and ecosystem needs in water allocation—recognizing nature as fundamental for life—and apply the polluter-pays principle; regulate, and where necessary prohibit, activities that disrupt the water cycle, including fracking and unsustainable and harmful mining; and advance a climate-just energy transition that accounts for its water intensity, while ensuring transparent reporting and accountability;

19 – Promote water efficiency and circularity across sectors, including water-efficient technologies, wastewater reuse, resource recovery and digital monitoring, through cooperation between public authorities, utilities, industry and research institutions, and integrate water security into industrial strategies, investment planning and infrastructure development.

We call on Member States, development partners and donors to:

20 – Reverse declining assistance for WASH, prioritizing countries affected by fragility; protect civilians' access to WASH services during armed conflict, displacement and climate-related disasters; and protect life-saving and anticipatory humanitarian WASH funding, even when reducing overall official development assistance.

CHAPTER 2

A permanent and inclusive intergovernmental water process

21 Fragmented global water governance, weak coordination and power imbalances undermine coherent multilateral action, preventing the needs, values, practices and knowledge systems of diverse stakeholders and rights holders from influencing decisions. Water therefore requires a mandated institutional home within the UN system, with periodic and inclusive UN Water Conferences supported by a permanent secretariat to coordinate follow-up to water-related decisions. To strengthen accountability, equality and transparency, we also call for a formal, inclusive mechanism that guarantees stakeholders and rights holders continuous and accountable participation in multilateral water processes, with demonstrable and meaningful input into agenda-setting, decision-making, implementation and review.

22 The 2026 UN Water Conference, the recently adopted UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution mandating the periodicity of UN Water Conferences beyond 2028, and the 2028 UN Water Conference, with the Dushanbe Water Framework as a negotiated outcome, are an opportunity to establish a regular UN-led intergovernmental process as proposed by the co-chairs of Interactive Dialogue (E): Water in Multilateral Processes.

A permanent intergovernmental water process

We urge Member States and the UN system to:

23 – Build on the 2026 UN Water Conference and its summary of proceedings, including all Interactive Dialogue recommendations, and adopt further UNGA resolutions to strengthen the new three-year cycle of UN Water Conferences into a robust and permanent intergovernmental process, mandating negotiated outcomes, clear responsibilities, systematic follow-up and a dedicated secretariat, supported by the diplomatic role of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water;

24 – Strengthen coordination and policy coherence across the UN system, operationalize the SWS, and strengthen the mandate and leadership of UN-Water to coordinate and support the implementation and monitoring of all water-related SDG targets;

25 – Anchor water in the mechanisms of the three Rio Conventions and the climate-land-food-health-biodiversity nexus, and strengthen water cooperation and engagement in multilateral processes, including stakeholder and rights holder perspectives and recommendations;

26 – Adopt at the 2028 UN Water Conference a negotiated Dushanbe Water Framework that translates SDG 6 and future water and sanitation goals and targets into an ambitious implementation framework informed by regional, basin and transboundary practice;

27 – Ensure that the Secretary-General's report ahead of the 2031 UN Water Conference systematically incorporates evidence and perspectives from all relevant stakeholders and rights holders, including through direct and meaningful engagement with marginalized and/or vulnerable people and other underrepresented groups.

An inclusive stakeholder and rights holder mechanism

We urge Member States and the UN system to:

28 – Establish a permanent, inclusive UN Stakeholder and Rights Holder Mechanism as a mandated pillar of the UN-led intergovernmental water process through a follow-up UNGA resolution to the 2026 UN Water Conference;

29 – Move from consultation to meaningful participation by establishing transparent pathways, formal procedures and support for stakeholders and rights holders to engage across all UN Water Conferences—including their preparations, high-level segments, outcomes and reviews—with traceable responses and accountability mechanisms that show how their views are reflected in the process;

30 – Ensure equitable, transparent, geographically and gender-balanced representation in the mechanism through inclusive and transparent selection procedures that safeguard independent, diverse and meaningful participation, with appropriate conflict-of-interest safeguards to prevent undue influence, transparent processes that demonstrate how inputs have been included and clear accountability and follow-up procedures;

31 – Address structural and financial barriers—including jargon, linguistic divides, participation costs, limited access to information and digital exclusion—by connecting participation from the local to global level with existing national, subnational and basin-level stakeholder and rights holder mechanisms, enabling inclusive regional, multilingual, online and in-person participation, and establish dedicated and predictable financial support and targeted capacity building for stakeholders and rights holders;

32 – Ensure meaningful participation in the 2028 UN Water Conference and its preparations, including the development of the Dushanbe Water Framework, by convening inclusive national and basin consultations before and after the Conference to inform country positions, commitments and follow-up; keeping transparent records of inputs received and explaining clearly how they have been considered; defining clear accountability mechanisms; and providing timely, transparent support, prioritizing marginalized and/or vulnerable people with capacity building, clear input timelines, transparent special accreditation and financial support, and access to all conference spaces, including all Interactive Dialogues;

33 – Task the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Water and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation to co-design, with stakeholders and rights holders, proposals for the mandate, membership, selection/rotation criteria, governance, and operating and funding arrangements of the mechanism, including:

34 ◦ an independent, well-resourced, multi-stakeholder advisory board to facilitate the mechanism, with balanced regional and constituency representation, as well as gender parity, including marginalized and/or vulnerable people and other underrepresented groups, and with clear conflict-of-interest rules, to safeguard its integrity and credibility;

35 ◦ a UN-led secretariat, with dedicated staff and predictable core funding, for coordination and engagement with global, national and subnational stakeholder platforms and thematic sector networks that feed into the mechanism.

CHAPTER 3

Joint implementation, mutual accountability and learning

36 Water and sanitation commitments must translate into measurable, equitable and gender-responsive outcomes grounded in the HRWS that improve people's lives, and recognize water's ecological, environmental and cultural values. Implementation should be country-led, inclusive and transparent. Fragmented efforts, insufficient collective action, weak coordination and institutional capacity, and persistent inequalities in access to financing continue to impede progress and delivery. Gaps in independent, transparent review obscure whether pledges lead to disbursement of funds, service delivery and benefit to communities.

37 Joint action must reinforce existing systems that already meet equality, sustainability and working standards, including government-led national platforms that align partners behind country-led plans, clarify shared responsibilities and ensure coordinated follow-through. Mutual learning and accountability must combine transparent tracking with participatory review across stakeholders and water forums, using evidence and community experience to identify gaps and trigger corrective action.

Joint implementation

We urge Member States, UN entities and development partners to:

38 – Integrate SDG 6 and related targets, human rights obligations and relevant voluntary pledges into existing costed national, subnational (including district) and basin-level plans and compacts, including applicable Heads of State Initiatives, and ensure alignment with climate, biodiversity and disaster risk frameworks, including Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans, and humanitarian–development WASH coordination, through whole-of-government coordination;

39 – By 2028, update these plans to identify responsible institutions, financing, country-defined milestones and measurable indicators, to accelerate delivery by 2030 and sustain progress beyond it, with 2028 serving as an interim planning milestone rather than a new deadline for all commitments;

40 – Translate national, basin-level and local priorities into technically sound, financially viable and implementation-ready project pipelines, with clear responsibilities, realistic delivery schedules and long-term operational planning, linking integrated water resources management with sustainable infrastructure and adequate water and sanitation services; engage utilities, technical and research institutions, financing partners and responsible private-sector actors early, and align bilateral and regional technical and financial cooperation with country-led priorities;

41 – Ensure rights-compliant financing that prioritizes public and community-centred approaches and covers full lifecycle costs, including operations, maintenance, institutional and workforce capacity and climate resilience; enable public financing for subnational governments and utilities to deliver universal services and advance SDG 6, alongside democratic monitoring, oversight and enforceable safeguards;

42 – Enable meaningful participation of stakeholders and rights holders in planning, implementation and evaluation, through existing government structures, national water community councils, coordination mechanisms and partnerships;

43 – Support country-led platforms and demand-led technical assistance coordinated through sector networks, including Water Operators' Partnerships, to fill gaps and avoid duplication. Convene periodic participatory reviews through national and basin-level coordination mechanisms with stakeholders and rights holders, with findings informing corrective action, national and international accountability processes and the 2028 UN Water Conference's final review of the International Decade for Action 'Water for Sustainable Development', 2018–2028.

Mutual accountability and learning

We urge Member States, UN entities and development partners to:

44 – Strengthen transparent, participatory, publicly accessible accountability systems at national, subnational and local levels, incorporating gender-responsive and socially inclusive planning and budgeting that address the differentiated needs of stakeholders and rights holders, linking commitments, financing, implementation and governance across UN Water Conferences, and support evidence as well as science-based, independent reviews of the implementation of water and sanitation commitments, with sustained and adequate funding, complementing, not replacing or diluting, States' human rights obligations on water and sanitation;

45 – Strengthen existing monitoring by coordinating and complementing the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene of the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund for WASH service outcomes, the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water for WASH systems, the UN Environment Programme's Global Environment Monitoring System for Freshwater, the wider UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 and the Water Action Agenda platform to fill gaps in equality and sustainability monitoring rather than create parallel systems;

46 – Trace funds from allocation to results, distinguishing grants from loans; disaggregate data by sex, age, disability, income and location, and assess inequalities, humanitarian emergencies, water-polluted areas and climate-related disruptions, as well as locally led innovations and source sustainability; and ensure capacity-proportionate reporting, supported by adequate financing and technical assistance for developing countries;

47 – Ensure prioritized public budget allocations, including for maintenance, formal handover agreements defining responsibilities for community-managed systems, and public disclosure of progress against service, equality and rights outcomes, including whether services reach marginalized and/or vulnerable people and remain functional over time, rather than financial disbursements alone; have national water authorities publish annual SDG 6 progress reports outlining barriers and corrective actions; and work with UN-Water to integrate stakeholder and rights holder progress reports and monitoring mechanisms into the annual SDG 6 special event to review delivery gaps between conferences;

48 – Institutionalize citizen-led accountability through social audits, community scorecards and grievance redress; strengthen the institutional, technical and financial capacity of local governments to convene periodic participatory reviews, building on existing local water committees and coordination mechanisms; ensure that accountability mechanisms guard against corporate capture and undue influence and enforce safeguards for all actors based on the HRWS and water as a public good;

49 – Strengthen or establish national and regional multi-stakeholder platforms for mutual learning and knowledge exchange, connecting utilities and water operators with women's professional networks, academia, youth organizations, technology providers, innovators and other relevant stakeholders and rights holders to share evidence and practice, develop leadership and replicate and scale successful locally appropriate solutions.

CHAPTER 4

The role and value of stakeholders and rights holders

50 We envision inclusive, equal, gender-responsive and evidence-informed water governance at all levels, including global and transboundary processes, where stakeholders and rights holders shape decisions and co-create solutions. Partnerships based on solidarity, transparency and mutual accountability, combining knowledge systems, research, innovation, responsible technology and regional cooperation, enable locally owned, context-responsive initiatives that sustain healthy water-related ecosystems, retain water's multiple values and ensure adequate WASH services for all. Achieving SDG 6 and related targets requires meaningful participation, cooperation, capacity building and sustainable investments that address inequalities, empower communities and translate commitments into tangible results. Yet participation remains uneven, ad hoc and often tokenistic, with persistent barriers to influencing decisions.

We urge Member States to:

51 – Institutionalize meaningful participation of stakeholders and rights holders, directly and through their umbrella organizations, throughout the policy and project cycle at local, national, basin, regional, transboundary and multilateral levels, supported by predictable financing and capacity development, prioritizing marginalized and/or vulnerable people;

52 – Ensure that young people have sustained and meaningful roles in water governance, supported by education, scientific mentoring, dedicated resources for participation and long-lasting cooperation with universities and basin-level governance institutions;

53 – Advance women's equal leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation across water governance, research, utilities and service delivery, including through access to decision-making, finance, technology, skills and decent work;

54 – Recognize the HRWS in domestic legislation where absent and ensure implementation and enforceability; uphold Indigenous Peoples' distinct rights under UNDRIP, including free, prior and informed consent, and respect their governance authority;

55 – Respect and enable water and sanitation workers' labour and trade union rights, ensure decent work and safe, healthy working conditions, and recognize their professional and community-based expertise;

56 – Recognize and strengthen public, community and other responsible water and sanitation utilities, operators and service providers as key implementation partners, and enable their expertise and operational experience to inform policy, planning, investment and capacity development;

57 – Recognize the contribution of responsible private-sector actors to implementation, and enable their participation where it advances human rights and public-interest outcomes, subject to enforceable safeguards applicable to all actors; require disclosure and management of conflicts of interest, protect decision-making from undue influence, and explain transparently how participation has informed decisions;

58 – Support stakeholders and rights holders as innovators and implementation partners by enabling equitable access to appropriate technologies, digital solutions and artificial intelligence, including through technology transfer, open knowledge and capacity development, while preventing digital divides and other inequalities;

59 – Recognize Indigenous Peoples' knowledges, science and local knowledge on an equal footing in water governance and decision-making and financially support community-led water governance and management;

60 – Eliminate caste- and descent-based discrimination in access to adequate water and sanitation services, and ensure affected communities participate meaningfully in decision-making;

61 – Guarantee safe, non-discriminatory participation, free from intimidation, gender-based violence and retaliation, including for women, water and environmental defenders, while protecting independent civic engagement and human rights.

Our commitments for the road ahead

62 Stakeholders and rights holders can accelerate progress and drive action when they are meaningfully included, adequately resourced and enabled to contribute their diverse expertise, networks and knowledges.

In turn, we commit to:

63 – Mobilize our networks across the water and sanitation lifecycle for consultations and collaboration ahead of 2028 and all future UN Water Conferences, prioritizing marginalized and/or vulnerable people;

64 – Engage our constituencies in shaping the design of a permanent UN Stakeholder and Rights Holder Mechanism and participate transparently and accountably in its future work through our representative organizations and alliances, with consultation before engagement and reporting back afterwards;

65 – Co-design and co-deliver inclusive, practical local solutions through strategic partnerships that catalyse sustainable development and ensure lasting benefits for local communities and ownership by Indigenous Peoples;

66 – Collectively mobilize funding, technical assistance and partnerships for community-led water management and initiatives, particularly those led by underrepresented groups, including through public-community partnerships, peer learning and resources that strengthen community autonomy and decision-making;

67 – Support country-led implementation of water-related targets through complementary expertise and resources from diverse stakeholders and rights holders, subject to human rights safeguards, strengthening inclusive planning, implementation and monitoring, local institutions, responsible investment and innovation, and accountability for equality and sustainability outcomes;

68 – Strengthen long-term partnerships for mutual knowledge and technology transfer, vocational training, peer-to-peer learning and institutional capacity development that combine local knowledge and practical experience with scientific, engineering and operational expertise;

69 – Contribute, where feasible, to official SDG 6 follow-up and review with complementary evidence from citizen science, community-led monitoring, academic research, Indigenous Peoples' knowledges and the expertise of frontline workers, including on discrimination and inequalities in access to adequate water and sanitation services;

70 – Promote open access to non-sensitive data, research findings and monitoring methodologies, while respecting Indigenous Peoples' data sovereignty, community rights and privacy;

71 – Participate in national joint sector reviews and facilitate exchanges among communities facing shared structural challenges;

72 – Register our own commitments and publicly report progress, including setbacks, through existing mechanisms such as the Sanitation and Water for All Mutual Accountability Mechanism;

73 – Defend the independence and safety of civil society, community representatives, researchers, journalists and human rights and environmental defenders, including against intimidation, reprisals and undue influence;

74 – Apply the standards we advocate for: transparent representation, human rights-based approaches, environmental due diligence and accessible, inclusive processes.