

Water Justice Manifesto

The undersigned organizations, Indigenous Peoples, social movements and water defenders address the United Nations at the 2023 UN Water Conference to amplify the voices of the unheard and insist that the following fundamental issues be placed at the center of water policies at the global, regional, national and subnational levels:

1. Access to water and sanitation are fundamental human rights. Water is a common good, and must be accessible to all without discrimination, under public control and not a commodity. Personal and domestic uses of water, including for hygiene, should have the highest priority over productive uses, such as agri-business and industry.
2. Water policies must prioritize the sustainable management of rivers, lakes, wetlands, springs, and aquifers, guaranteeing their good ecological status, within the framework of the human right to a healthy environment and as key to confronting ongoing crises of pollution, deforestation, desertification, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Governments must ensure that agri-business and industrial users are accountable and responsible for their use of and impact on all natural resources, including water, based on legislation, regulation and enforcement and not rely on voluntary measures.
3. Indigenous Peoples have distinct and inherent rights, as well as their own knowledge systems to relate to water in a harmonious way, and States must, therefore, recognize their status as collective subjects of rights and respect their territorial rights, their right to self-determination and their right to be consulted to obtain free, prior and informed consent to any project that affects them, and ensure that the management of their livelihoods, including water, is carried out in accordance with their own standards, in compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
4. States should give due recognition and support to community water and sanitation management practices, as well as to the organizations promoted, among others, by rural communities and Indigenous Peoples, by developing public-community partnerships respectful of their knowledge and traditions.
5. In most countries, rural populations and those living in informal urban settlements are the most discriminated against in terms of access to water and sanitation services. It is the obligation of states to make access for these populations their highest priority. International cooperation must prioritize these groups in its actions.
6. The active, free, and meaningful participation of "rights holders" in all water policy issues should be recognized, supported and guaranteed, with an emphasis on the substantially equal participation of women, overcoming the marginalization they suffer, despite the fact that they bear the greatest responsibility for and the work of supplying water to their families. Such participation must have the capacity to influence decision making, overcoming false participatory models, which only legitimize decisions taken by societal elites.

7. Water and sanitation services must always be guided by human rights, leaving no one behind, including those who, because they live in situations of vulnerability, marginalization or poverty, find it difficult to pay. Privatization, commodification or financialization of water and sanitation services are a risk to the fulfillment of human rights, and should therefore not be considered as policies at the global, national or local level, as well as in international cooperation, which should instead promote public ownership and management, strengthened through public-public and public-community partnerships.
8. States must protect and guarantee the rights of workers, as well as decent, fair and equitable working conditions. Access to services in spheres of life outside the home must urgently receive a high level of priority in public policies, including access in public spaces, workplaces, detention centers, schools and health facilities, and marketplaces where traders sell food and other goods in the informal economy.
9. To solve the water crisis the current fragile UN multilateral framework must be overcome by moving toward governance that can meet the challenges presented above, establishing an intergovernmental mechanism for regular water and sanitation meetings, and concrete mechanisms for monitoring the commitments made, in which human rights subjects and holders participate fully, effectively and meaningfully.

As human rights holders and water defenders, often criminalized and persecuted for defending human rights, we demand that the UN prioritize dialogue and collaboration with frontline communities in the implementation of SDG 6 including Indigenous Peoples, peasant communities, those living in informal settlements, populations discriminated against on the basis of gender, descent and class, and all those who still do not have guaranteed access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

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