

What's next: the legacy of the UN Water Conference

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After some days of reflection, I want to share my thoughts on the UN Water Conference, which was undoubtedly a historical event for all those committed to the human rights to water and sanitation.

First, I would like to congratulate the President of the UN General Assembly and the UN Secretary-General, as well as the co-host member states, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Republic of Tajikistan. For the first time in 47 years, the UN family gathered to host a global event on water; this is in itself a positive achievement. The UN provides an important platform to discuss the fundamental human rights to water and sanitation and I welcome the decision to hold a third UN Water Conference in 2025.

Moreover, I genuinely hope that the spotlight that this Conference gave to the global water crisis will continue through the upcoming SDGs Summit and the Summit of the Future in 2024.

The human rights to water and sanitation

I must be honest; I feel disappointed by the lack of attention that the Conference gave to human rights. In November 2022, the Human Rights Council conveyed the [Social Forum "Water for Human Rights and Sustainable Development"](#) which urged the Conference to incorporate a human rights-based approach to water and sanitation. Such an approach was unfortunately neglected during the Conference, and appears nowhere in its outcome, namely the [game changers](#).

We know that there are 2 billion right-holders without guaranteed access to safe drinking water and more than 4 billion without basic sanitation. We know Member States are obliged by international law to fulfil their rights.

Recommendations:

- ✓ I urge all States to recognize the human rights to drinking water and sanitation in national laws and develop budgetary, and other public policies that implement the rights to water and sanitation for all, particularly those left behind.
- ✓ I urge all States and those institutions committed to providing funding in the water and sanitation area to prioritize those 2 billion rights holders in their policy, programme and funding provisions.

Water as a common good

I found the idea of *the water cycle as a global common good* promising. Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the characterization of the concept requires an in-depth discussion that should include all areas of expertise and experience. It is of concern that the idea is only being considered from an economic perspective, leaving human rights and people out of the discussion and definition of the concept. As the UN Secretary-General affirmed in his closing remarks, water should be managed as a common good. Inasmuch it is essential for life. For many years, I have insisted on recognizing water as a common good, managed through the primacy of general interest by public institutions and water and sanitation providers. I established the bases of this concept in my thematic report to the General Assembly in 2021 [Risks and impacts of the commodification and financialization of water on the human rights to](#)

[safe drinking water and sanitation](#). In this report, I argue that sustainable water management entails a participative ecosystem approach linked to territories, water basins and aquifers. As climate change strategies show, mitigation could be global, but adaptation strategies will only work with a solid territorial approach.

Recommendation:

- ✓ I urge the UN and its Member States to initiate a participatory dialogue to define the concept of water as a common good.

Scientific solutions

I noted that one of the primary focuses of the Conference's discussions was on scientific-technological solutions. Many of the proposed solutions I heard confuse science with technology and disregard the sciences that study nature, ecosystems, and the economy in places of extreme poverty.

Recommendation:

- ✓ I call on the scientific panel created by the Conference to review a scientific approach solely based on technology and promote a strategy in line with what has been proposed by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#): a water transition based on territorial adaptation together with an energy transition.

Traditional and Communities' knowledge

Traditional knowledge and the experience of communities in managing their water sources should also be prominent in the conversation. Throughout the Conference, civil society representatives had very little time to contribute with their expertise and knowledge in ecosystems management and water governance. Thus, the valuable lessons stemming from the practices of democratic water governance, that their communitarian management systems have offered, were not heard at the Conference.

Recommendations:

- ✓ I call on Member States and the UN to integrate and support traditional and communities' knowledge and expertise through public-communitarian partnerships.
- ✓ I also urge to create a safe space within the scientific panel to be established in follow up to the Conference to include water experts from communities and territories under conditions of equality so that their knowledge and experiences become integral part of the solutions.

UN institutional architecture for water

I welcome that one of the outcomes of the Conference will be the surge of a robust UN architecture for water and sanitation which should contribute to strengthening the UN role in the water sector. In this regard I commit myself to coordinate and join forces with the future Special Envoy, toward achieving SDG 6 with a human rights-based approach. I want to remark the importance of coordination among our work, to avoid risks of duplication.

The participation of right holders in the UN architecture for water

I want to highlight what was, in my view, a defining moment of the Conference, which, however, happened in the margins of the official programme: the [Water Justice Manifesto](#). This Manifesto was supported unanimously, for the first time, by social movements, NGOs and representatives of Indigenous Peoples, peasant organizations, river defenders, trade unions,

public water operators, women's and youth organizations, environmental defenders, community systems, churches and interfaith platforms, universities and researchers, in short, water defenders, in their capacity as rights holders, with the support of 500 organizations. I believe this unprecedented document deserves the attention of Member States. In addition, representatives of the Indigenous Peoples of the seven socio-cultural regions presented the [Indigenous Peoples Declaration](#).

Recommendations:

- ✓ I urge Member States and the UN to agree on a system whereby civil society actors, water defenders, women, youth, Indigenous peoples, peasants, and all water rights holders become part and parcel of the architecture that will support the implementation of the Conference's outcomes. As stressed at the Social Forum of the Human Rights Council, the UN and Member States must give due recognition to water defenders who are often criminalized, repressed, and even killed for defending the human rights to water and sanitation.
- ✓ I also call for the participation of women to be reinforced and encouraged in the UN architecture for water as they assume a more onerous burden to ensure access to water in the homes and communities that lack it. I urge the UN Secretary-General and the future Special Envoy in consultation with civil society and rights holders to set up a system for direct and meaningful participation of rights holders.
- ✓ I call on the UN to facilitate the participation of rights holders in UN events, particularly in plenary sessions and interactive dialogues. Given the enormous economic and visa difficulties that prevented several social leaders from travelling and participating in this Conference, I propose that online interventions be made possible in such future events. I also suggest that the UN revise the criteria for registering local governments representatives and public service providers as they are crucial to fulfilling the human rights to water and sanitation and should be given their own standing at a UN water conference and other relevant events.

I remain available to dialogue with, and support, all actors to integrate the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation within the UN development agenda and the UN common agenda. And I remain committed to build bridges in order to bring rights holders, water defenders, and social movements working for the human right to water closer to global decision making processes.
