2026 United Nations Water Conference
High Level Preparatory Meeting
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Interactive Dialogue A: Water for People: The human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies

Context: Since 2015, significant progress has been made in reaching people with safely managed drinking water and sanitation and basic hygiene (WASH). Yet, as of 2024, more than 2.2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water, 3.5 billion are without safely managed sanitation, 2 billion lack basic hygiene services, and 447 million children go to schools without basic drinking water.[1] Lack of WASH causes 1.4 million deaths annually,[2] and more than 1 billion people are served by health facilities without even basic water.[3] Rural communities continue to lag behind their urban counterparts, with access to basic WASH services often three times lower than in urban areas, yet due to urbanization and population growth, progress in many urban areas has stalled or regressed.[4] Seven out of 10 women and girls aged 15 and older have primary responsibility for fetching water, compared to men and boys.[5] Children under the age of 15 who are living in conflict areas are, on average, nearly three times more likely to die from diseases linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from direct violence.[6]

Challenges: Since 2023, donor commitments to the sector have decreased; climate, economic, social, political, and health polycrises have increased; and water-related violence and attacks on water have accelerated.[7] Weak systems, human resources gaps, insufficient financing, and the humanitarian-development divide persist, creating barriers to sustainability, exacerbating inequalities, and preventing countries and regions from achieving universal access. As we approach and look beyond 2030, leaving no one behind must be the priority. This includes a focus on gender, age, indigeneity and ethnicity, disability, relative wealth, and geography (including people on the move). To achieve this, three priority action areas with policy options are emerging.

Accelerate Realization of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation (HRWS)
- Incorporate HRWS into WASH policies, subsidies, and incentives;

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[1] WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP), Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2024: special focus on inequalities. 2025.
[2] WHO, Burden of disease attributable to unsafe drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene: 2019 update
[3] WHO/UNICEF, Essential Services for Quality Care: Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, Health Care Waste and Electricity Services in Health Care Facilities, 2025.
[4] JMP 2025.
[5] JMP, WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene: Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: Special focus on gender. 2023.
[6] United Nations Children's Fund, Water Under Fire: For every child, water and sanitation in complex emergencies, Advocacy alert, UNICEF, New York, March 2019.
[7] Pacific Institute, Water Conflict Chronology.

- Prioritize investments that drive WASH-related human rights for the underserved, including for women and girls (e.g. menstrual health and hygiene, prevention of gender-based violence);
- Increase meaningful inclusive participation of under-represented groups in water and sanitation governance processes and workforces; and
- Monitor HRWS by incorporating key systems indicators (e.g. from "Align to Accelerate") pertaining to policies, planning, human resources, finance, and equity into national monitoring systems and public progress reports.

Increase WASH System Resilience to Climate Change, Conflict, and Emergencies
- Prioritize financing for countries and communities facing a polycrisis of fragility, vulnerability to climate change impacts, and low WASH access or high inequality;
- Innovate to improve climate resilience and adaptive measures (e.g., increasing the use of solar power and nature-based solutions);
- Strengthen the humanitarian-development nexus to reduce impact of recurring crises and maximize limited resources; and
- Increase technical and personnel capacity to consistently provide water and sanitation services in emergencies and drive coordination during protracted crises and across the humanitarian-development continuum.

Strengthen WASH Systems
- Build resilient systems and capacity that can prevent outbreaks of diseases, such as cholera, and withstand climate impacts and other crises;
- Strengthen and enforce regulations, standards, and certifications that drive service quality and accessibility; market development, especially for sanitation and menstrual health; workforce training and safeguards; and equity-based analysis and targeting;
- Set up coordination, monitoring, and evaluation frameworks within and beyond the sector, including for WASH in schools and healthcare facilities, and develop and implement a holistic results framework that enables stakeholders across sectors to align and maximize benefits for those most likely to be left behind;
- Establish incentives that increase public budget allocation and improve budget execution, support innovation and WASH markets, reduce inefficiencies, increase sector creditworthiness, and leverage private sector involvement.

Guiding Questions
1. How can states effectively translate HRWS into enforceable policies, strategies, laws, budgets and accountability mechanisms that reduce inequalities and tie WASH to other key agendas?
2. What processes should be strengthened and concrete actions taken to improve the humanitarian-development nexus?
3. What incentives lead to resilient systems, reducing the focus on infrastructure as the outcome and instead improving equity, quality, and sustainability?
4. Considering the 2023 ID1 background document and contextual changes since 2023, how can we advance this Leave No One Behind agenda before 2030?