

What Human Rights can bring to SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation

Key Messages

SDG 6 aims to "*Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.*" Human rights provide both the normative foundation and legal obligations that guide how this goal should be achieved.

Water and sanitation are public goods – not commodities

Ensure Use of the Maximum Available Resources with a focus on non-discrimination

States must take deliberate, concrete, and targeted steps to progressively realize these rights, using the maximum of available resources with a focus on ensuring non-discrimination and equality.

- This means States should take a comprehensive approach when implementing water and sanitation projects and move towards **increased quantitative and qualitative coverage** while also eliminating inequality and discrimination.

- A greater focus on human rights and long-term vision within plans and projects would help to rebalance provision, ensuring that increases in access do not have the effect of increasing inequalities between individuals and groups, prioritizing leaving no one behind, ie. ensuring that no discrimination takes place in the process and that the requirements of different individuals and groups are met, paying special attention to the needs of people in vulnerable situations.

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Non-discrimination in access to water and sanitation

SDG 6 must close gaps—not simply increase averages. Human rights prohibit discrimination in access to basic services. This strengthens SDG 6 by requiring that access to water and sanitation:

- cannot exclude or disadvantage marginalized groups;
- must actively address structural inequalities affecting women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrants, IDPs, rural poor, people in informal settlements, etc.

- This requires laws and policies developed in consultation with rights holders, addressing all forms of discrimination, and strengthening local governments' capacity to fulfil human rights obligations in water and sanitation management.
- States should also protect the right to water and sanitation by setting fair and affordable water pricing that prioritizes personal and domestic use.

Participation in water and sanitation governance

States should protect and expand civic space to ensure safe, inclusive, and meaningful participation of civil society and rights-holders in water governance. They must guarantee that marginalized groups and water and environmental human rights defenders, in particular, can actively and safely engage in managing water resources, services, and ecosystems.

This is aligned with SDG 6.5 on integrated planning and 6.b on community participation.

Obligation to Protect

States should protect the right to water and sanitation by:

- setting fair and affordable water pricing that prioritizes personal and domestic use;
- effectively regulating and monitoring third parties, including businesses, in particular require companies to conduct human rights due diligence, to consult affected communities, to disclose water use and pollution data, and to provide effective and accessible grievance mechanisms – in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

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Cross-Cutting Human Rights Priorities

Across all laws, policies, programmes, and decisions on water and sanitation, one must ensure:

- **Equality and non-discrimination** in access and service delivery, prioritizing those furthest left behind.
- **Use of maximum available resources** to progressively realize universal access.
- **Participation, access to information**, and **accountability** in decision-making.
- **Recognition of water as a public good and human right**.
- **Secure water tenure** to prevent exclusion, land and water grabbing, and discrimination.
- **Regulation of private actors and corporate responsibility** through human rights due diligence and transparency.
- **Climate resilience** and **environmental sustainability** grounded in human rights.
- **Disaggregated data and monitoring** to track inequality and ensure no one is left behind.
- **Access to justice and remedy** for water and sanitation rights violations.
- **Integrate gender-responsive water and sanitation planning and eliminate all gender-based inequalities and intersecting forms of discrimination**.

Scan the QR code to check the concept paper developed by OHCHR for one of the interactive dialogues on the human rights to water and sanitation at the 2026 United Nations Water Conference.

Scan the QR code to check the policy brief and its key messages, both developed by OHCHR on behalf of UN-Water, entitled "Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action."