Intervention at the Panel on Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. Human Rights Council – 59th Session

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Excellencies, thank you for inviting me to participate in this panel. I also want to express my special gratitude for the dual mandate entrusted to me through a resolution of the Human Rights Council:

1. To ensure that the human rights dimension is properly reflected in the agenda and outcomes of the Conference, and
2. To promote broad and inclusive civil society representation at that conference.

These were two real challenges that I aimed to address during the 2023 Water Conference, though I must admit the results were mixed. We managed to overcome doubts and even mistrust from social movements regarding the UN's call for the Conference. Let us not forget that only one UN Water Conference had taken place previously, almost half a century ago, in Argentina. Since then, the private sector has filled the void left by the United Nations, organizing the World Water Forums. That is why it was crucial, Excellencies, that you, the UN Member States, assumed leadership and convened the 2023 Water Conference. In the end, we managed to bring several hundred representatives from social movements, NGOs, Indigenous organizations, and community networks from all continents to the Conference, despite the enormous effort required to secure visas and cover travel and accommodation expenses. But when they arrived, they found not a single representative among the panelists of the five interactive dialogues. Worse yet, they could not even access the plenary sessions, they had to remain outside. On top of that, we barely managed to get the term “human rights” mentioned, and only timidly, in one of the five interactive dialogues.

Looking ahead to 2026, we must do better, Excellencies. With the Council's support, I trust that the 2026 Conference will focus its attention on the billions of people who, as rights-holders of access to safe drinking water and sanitation, are criminalized and persecuted when they dare to claim those rights. I hope that effective spaces for participation and recognition of these rights-holders will be opened, so that the Conference becomes a space for listening, dialogue, and cooperation with Indigenous peoples, social movements, and NGOs—those who came to New York in 2023 and knocked on the UN's doors with the Manifesto for Water Justice in hand, signed by more than 500 organizations from every continent.

I want to express my recognition and gratitude for the open and collaborative attitude I’ve encountered from Senegal and the United Arab Emirates as co-hosts of the Conference. As I’ve reported, from the mandate we have built a major social platform that includes

representatives of Indigenous organizations from all regions, leading NGOs, social movements, and networks of local and community institutions from all continents. It is a broad, diverse, and powerful representation of rights-holders fighting worldwide for the realization of SDG 6 and the human rights to water and sanitation. All are ready to participate once again—but this time, I hope it will be meaningful participation, Excellencies.

Finally, allow me to draw your attention to a key issue looking ahead to 2028: the institutionalization of the Water Conference as a regular meeting led by Member States.

Let me offer a reflection, Excellencies. Imagine there were no World Health Organization, and the body convening us periodically to discuss potential pandemics like COVID-19 and other public health threats was the pharmaceutical lobby, instead of WHO. Well, that is exactly what has been happening with water governance. The United Nations cannot continue to abdicate its responsibility on such a vital issue as water management, handing it over to private corporations. And this is not a critique of private corporations—it's a call to responsibility for us, the United Nations.

The 2023 Conference generated hope among social movements defending water and rivers. It remains to be seen whether that Conference, along with those of 2026 and 2028, will mark the end of a goodwill initiative—or the beginning of a path of commitment and responsibility from the United Nations in the face of the global water crisis, amid the dark outlook brought by climate change.

Excellencies, I invite you to unite around the following goals:

1. Institutionalize the Water Conference under UN leadership;
2. Make the Conference a space for listening, dialogue, and collaboration with rights-holders—the defenders of water and rivers, with women at the forefront, who work and fight daily for their rights and for the achievement of SDG 6. This must be reflected in their inclusion, at a minimum, in each of the interactive dialogues;
3. Open space for municipalities and community authorities responsible for water and sanitation services to participate in the Conference;
4. Ensure that the human rights dimension of water and sanitation is fully included in both the interactive dialogues and the final documents of the Conference—based on listening to the cries of those who have been silenced.

Look, Excellencies, friends—those who suffer such severe problems as lacking access to safe drinking water may not be right about everything they say. But if we truly want to understand these problems and move toward solutions, we must listen to them—because they are the ones who best know the struggles they face each and every day.