

UN 2023 Water Conference

Concept note: Hearing the Unheard, Human Right to Water and Sanitation Side Event (#HearingTheUnheardHRWS)

17 January 2023



1. Background

The UN 2023 Water Conference (UN Water 2023) will take place at UN Headquarters in New York, 22-24 March 2023, co-hosted by the governments of Tajikistan and the Netherlands. The Conference will include an opening and closing session, six plenary sessions, and five interactive dialogues, as well as side events organised by participants. It will result in a summary of proceedings from the UNGA President that will feed into the 2023 session of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

As a first step to implement the UN Water Expert Group on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene's Human Rights to Water and Sanitation Roadmap ([approved April 2021](#)), [End Water Poverty](#) among others contributed to the design of the OHCHR's "listening exercise", a dialogue between various Special Procedures mandate holders (Special Rapporteurs) of the Human Rights Council and marginalised groups, with two main objectives:

- a) "Inform, seek inputs from, identifying gaps and further needs, and engage networks of key vulnerable populations, women & youth groups, CBO, FBOs, Human Rights Defenders, CSOs active in climate justice, trade unions, water operators across regions, to support the implementation and monitoring/ evaluation of the UN-Water human rights roadmap; and to
- b) Identify priority issues and key messages to influence the development of the UN-Water human rights to water and sanitation/ LNOB policy brief and the overall UN-Water advocacy strategies, focusing on women, girls, and key vulnerable groups, using bottom-up approach, engaging rights-holders in message definition in a local to global advocacy process, and bringing up stories from the ground".

The UN-Water listening exercise was delayed and so OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, Simavi, End Water Poverty, KEWASNET and RWSN collaborated to co-host a similar exercise at the Stockholm World Water Week in August 2022¹. We gathered video material and facilitated the online participation of different marginalised groups² in four countries who spoke to three questions:

- a) How does a lack of safe, adequate, affordable, acceptable, available water and sanitation **affect** your community?
- b) What **actions** have you taken to address this and what **responses** have you received from government?
- c) What **support and action** do you want to see from the international community and the UN?

¹ For more see #HearingTheUnheardHRWS on Twitter.

² These included farmers living in closed civic space in Iran: Nikahang Kowsar (Abangan Iran); Slovo Park Community Development Forum (SPCDF), a local leadership structure in Slovo Park informal settlement (South Africa); Lerato Marole and Susan Mkhwanazi; Sanitation workers (Kenya); Sally Njambi Wambui (Founder and CEO Directways Networking and Deputy Chairperson of Women in Water and Sanitation Association (WIWAS) Kenya); a survivor of sexual abuse and exploitation in the water sector (Kenya) Moraah Wanjiku – not her real name - ("Sex for Water" survivor living in Kibera, Kenya); Input from indigenous Khmer groups (Cambodia): Nang Noy.

The plan is to expand these inputs by gathering and editing video material speaking to the same questions from additional groups across all regions of the world as part of a #HearingTheUnheardHRWS digital campaign to be launched ahead of UN 2023 and used as a vehicle to amplify these voices during and after the Conference, published also through the #JusticeBeginsHere campaign.

2. Rationale³

Despite an explicitly inclusive vision, the travel costs, visa requirements, accreditation criteria and protocols of UN Water 2023 exclude grassroots groups. The UN system is premised on the assumption that Member States act in the interests of and represent their constituents, but:

- a) Marginalised/ grassroots groups are “left behind” the Water Action Agenda and often excluded from formal participation and accountability processes, and from global decision-making processes and engagements. This is structural and structural interventions are needed to change it if we really want to reach the most left behind.
- b) In increasingly [repressive contexts](#), Member States seldom speak on behalf of grassroots groups without the necessary documentation, resources, or capacity to engage or who oppose State or State-sanctioned private actions or actors. Even where they are engaged, marginalised groups seldom have the resources or capacity to engage in public consultation processes, which are often opaque, technical, and not in their home language

We aim to bring the voices of grassroots groups (their lived experience; their agency, and their demands to the United Nations) to UN Water 2023 in a side event, in the interactive dialogues, in general assemblies and through #HearingTheUnheardHRWS and [#JusticeBeginsHere](#) digital campaigns. We will partner with Member States who are committed to expanding civic space, OHCHR and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, and local government representatives.

The “Hearing the Unheard” side event will foreground representatives from marginalised groups, who do not have the ECOSOC status or special accreditation to participate in person in New York. We have gathered (and will continue to gather and edit) video material from groups including informal settlement leadership, pastoralist farmers, dispersed rural communities, indigenous groups, rural and peri-urban women, pit emptiers (small scale private sector actors), informal traders and workers, speaking to each of the questions set out above.

3. Objectives

³ Adapted from SWW session description: In 2010, UNGA adopted the resolution, which “recognized the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights”. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, included a specific reference to the human rights to water and sanitation (HRWS); dedicated two SDGs to gender equality and reducing gender inequalities, and made leaving no one behind a cross cutting-objective of all SDGs, including SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation. While these commitments have been instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by those in vulnerable situations, individuals and groups living without legal status or in repressed civic spaces are delegitimised and or criminalised and therefore unable to demand and/or enjoy such rights.

- To create a space in UN Water 2023 for groups unheard in local, regional, and global processes and systems in order to amplify their lived experience, agency and demands of the UN and their Members States.
- To foster dialogue between State and non-State actors.
- To identify new and emerging issues and key messages to influence the development of UN-Water advocacy strategies, focusing on women, girls, and key excluded groups, using a bottom-up approach, engaging rights-holders in message definition, and bringing up action-oriented insights from the ground.
- To disseminate inputs in #HearingTheUnheardHRWS digital campaign which aims to:
 - Generate dialogues and conversations across sectors and actors
 - Gather key messages, experiences, and recommendations from marginalised groups
 - Strengthen awareness across a wide audience and target new audiences, of the water and sanitation challenges - legal, institutional and policy- that marginalised groups face to support advocacy
 - Influence governments and other actors to adopt concrete measures to achieve human rights principles and standards and to inform recommendations to CESR, CEDAW, CMW and CRPD.

4. Partners⁴

End Water Poverty with OHCHR, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Water and Sanitation; Water Integrity Network (WIN); ONGAWA Engineering for Human Development; Simavi; WASH United/ Make Rights Real; Coalition Eau; ESCR-Net; Franciscans International; ANEW; Water Youth Network; United Youth for Peace, Education, Transparency and Development in Liberia (UYPETDL) Inc.; RWSN; KEWASNET; Water Witness International; Freshwater Action Network Mexico; Redes del Agua Latin America; ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability; Tahzing Dong, Bangladesh; United Cities and Local Government (UCLG), with Member State support from Liberia and South Africa.

5. Partner with us!

Partner with us in hosting the proposed side event, help identify a venue, build momentum and participation in the side event, gather video material from marginalised groups to amplify in the Conference and beyond it, and talk to your Member State delegations to include in these grassroots testimonies in general assemblies and interactive dialogues.

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⁴ This is an indicative list, and the group of partners is growing.