

Values and principles for End Water Poverty

A global coalition with a stronger southern-led governance to advance the human right to water and sanitation through a decolonial advocacy

Final version agreed at the Steering Committee in December 2024



EWP is a global coalition of grassroots organizations, community-based groups, national and regional CSO networks, trade unions, social movements, and INGOs. Through context-specific advocacy and community-led mobilization strategies, EWP works to strengthen and consolidate southern-led governance rooted in evidence, local knowledge, and lived experience. Its goal is to advance the human right to water and sanitation through a decolonial advocacy agenda.

The process to achieve our aim should be grounded in values and principles that align with universal human rights and address the specific realities, structural inequalities and challenges faced by communities in the Global South.

EWP Steering committee has agreed that these values and principles guide the coalition's work, to ensure that the advocacy and campaigns that EWP implement are deeply rooted in local knowledge, community experiences, and priorities identified by people living in the global south. This document should help to facilitate the understanding of what we mean as a "Southern led coalition" and will guide the governance, development of the strategy, campaigns and the fundraising to fulfill the human right to water and sanitation.

Key Values

1. Social Justice and Equitable Access for All:

The coalition champions water and sanitation policies that prioritize universal access, addressing systemic disparities affecting diverse vulnerable and marginalized populations. Specific focus areas include:

- **Women and girls:** Ensuring menstrual hygiene management, safety from violence, and addressing caregiving roles.
- **Children:** Prioritizing schools and child-friendly spaces for access to safe water and sanitation.
- **Indigenous peoples:** Ensuring access while respecting traditional knowledge and cultural practices in water resource management.
- **Racial and ethnic minorities:** Combating structural discrimination that affects their access to resources.
- **Refugees and displaced populations:** Addressing acute and protracted needs in camps and host communities.
- **Rural and informal settlements:** Bridging gaps in services for those in geographically or economically marginalized areas.
- **Elderly and persons with disabilities:** Designing inclusive infrastructure and services that address mobility and accessibility challenges.
- **LGBTQ+ communities:** Ensuring safe and non-discriminatory access to public facilities and services.
- **Homeless and incarcerated populations:** Providing access to public sanitation and water services tailored to urban and peri-urban realities.
- **Workers in high-risk sectors:** Supporting sanitation access for informal and low-income workers (e.g., waste-pickers, manual scavengers, and farmers).

2. Addressing Historical and Structural Injustices

Recognizing the interplay of historical, colonial, patriarchal and structural injustices, the coalition calls for:

- **Gender justice:** Acknowledging that Women and girls are impacted the most in their health, education, work opportunities and quality of life due to the lack of water and sanitation. Solutions should be planned and designed through a gender and human rights approach.
- **Reparative justice:** Advocating for policies and investments that compensate for inequities caused by colonization and systemic discrimination.
- **Environmental justice:** Acknowledging that marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by climate change, water scarcity, and pollution, and prioritizing solutions that address these intersections.
- **Economic justice:** Opposing privatization models that exploit water as a commodity at the expense of people.

3. Self-Determination and Sovereignty

Communities must have the right to design, govern, and manage water and sanitation systems according to their values and needs. The coalition supports:

- **Decolonizing water management:** Rejecting external, one-size-fits-all approaches in favor of locally informed, context-specific solutions.

- **Participatory governance:** Empowering local leaders, women, youth and marginalized groups to drive decision-making processes.
- **Knowledge-sharing:** Supporting the Global South in defining and sharing sustainable practices through South-South cooperation but also North-South sharing.

4. Cross Sectoral and Intersectional Approaches to Policy and Practice

Water and sanitation issues are interconnected with broader challenges, requiring cross-sectoral and intersectional collaboration to ensure:

- **Health equity:** Safe water and sanitation access for health centers, but also for disease prevention, maternal health, and nutrition.
- **School's access and education:** Provision of quality water and sanitation facilities in schools to support attendance, especially for girls during menstruation, and inclusion of water, sanitation and hygiene education in school curricula and programs
- **Environmental and Climate resilience:** Adaptive strategies to protect water-cycle ecosystems, water sources from over-extraction, pollution and WASH facilities and treatment systems from climate variability.
- **Rural-Urban planning:** Addressing inequalities in rapidly urbanizing areas by integrating water and sanitation into housing and infrastructure policies; and by integrating rural & urban management systems to ensure environment and water cycle as per geographical and cultural context of the communities.

5. Solidarity and Collective Action

- **South-South cooperation:** The coalition should emphasize cooperation and mutual support among Southern communities, social movements, and organizations, recognizing shared struggles and experiences in accessing water and sanitation. Solidarity is key to building collective power to resist global corporate interests and policies that loot, pollute and monopolize water and harm local communities.
- **South-South/North-South collaboration:** The coalition should keep generating south-south dialogues and working tables to analyze common challenges, share success alternatives, identify common goals, challenges or areas of improvements to strategize together for regional and global impact. The coalition will continue to facilitate North-South dialogue and learning
- **International solidarity:** The coalition should also advocate for global solidarity to influence international institutions, such as the United Nations, Financial Institutions, development banks, and others, to respect the rights of Southern communities including particular indigenous peoples communities, support their self-determination, and reject policies led by global north institutions such as loans with conditionalities that have condemned countries to lack of budget for their own social development and those that prioritize profit over people privatising facilities that don't comply with human rights standards.

6. Decolonization of Knowledge and Power

- **Recognition of local and indigenous knowledge:** The coalition would recognize indigenous and local knowledge systems in the development of water and sanitation solutions, recognizing the value of traditional practices, organization models and sustainable water management techniques that have been developed over centuries.
- **Challenging colonial structures:** The coalition would actively challenge the colonial structures that continue to shape the political, economic, and social landscapes in the Global South, particularly those that have historically undermined local water governance and access to resources.
- **Power shift:** The coalition would work to shift power from top down policies of transnational corporations, international financial institutions, and colonial-era policies to local led policies and communities, ensuring that those most affected by water scarcity and sanitation issues have decision-making authority and access to funding.

7. Inclusivity, Interculturality and Diversity

Inclusion of marginalized voices: The coalition would ensure that the most marginalized groups—such as women, youth, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, and racial minorities—are not only included in discussions and effective regional/national consultations mechanisms but are also given leadership roles in the development of the advocacy agenda and campaigning strategy of the coalition.

Respect for Cultural Diversity: Promotes respect differences and cultural values, particularly recognizing the plurality of visions, customs, knowledge and practices around water and sanitation access.

Intersectionality: The coalition would embrace an intersectional approach to advocacy, recognizing that struggles for water and sanitation access are interconnected with broader struggles for justice, including climate justice, racial justice, gender equality, economic justice, and environmental justice.

8. Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Justice

- **Sustainable and just water management:** The coalition would champion water governance systems that are ecologically sustainable, ensuring the protection of water ecosystems and natural resources, and promoting water management practices that safeguard the environment for future generations.
- **Climate resilience:** Given the increasing threats of climate change, the coalition would advocate for climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure and conservation of ecosystems linked to water cycles that can withstand climate impacts, particularly in vulnerable regions of the Global South.
- **Rejection of extractivism:** The coalition would reject extractive models of resource management, particularly those that privatize, grab or pollute water and treat it as a commodity rather than a public good, promoting instead community-led, sustainable management of water resources.

Principles (understood as external rules)

1. Advancing on Human Rights to Water and Sanitation - as Universal, Indivisible and Interdependent

- **Human rights are indivisible and interdependent:** Water and sanitation should be recognized as integral to a broad framework of human rights, including the rights to health, safe environment, food, housing, and life. The coalition would promote an understanding that the realization of water and sanitation rights is a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of all other human rights.
- **Collective rights over individualism:** Focus on the collective rights of communities to manage and govern their water resources, ensuring that the benefits of these rights are shared equitably, particularly among marginalized groups
- **Governments have the primary responsibility to promote, protect and fulfil human rights:** It is governments who are responsible for guaranteeing people's right to water and sanitation, and must take appropriate steps to prevent, investigate, punish and redress private actors' abuse. Monitor the implementation or violation of the human right to water and sanitation, and holding corporations accountable is core in our coalition.

2. Recognition and Acknowledgement

- **Recognizing local capacity for participatory governance:** The coalition would focus on recognizing the capacity of local organizations, social movements, and communities to advocate for their own rights and to engage effectively in water governance. This includes supporting training programs on water and sanitation rights and their link with environmental and climate justice but also ensuring that affected people are the protagonists in policy and project planning and implementation. EWP will have to ensure participatory mechanisms to ensure it is members-led and southern-led.
- **Acknowledge local knowledge:** Promote grassroots knowledge and advocacy tools, empowering communities to not only fight for their rights but also to offer solutions and alternatives to the current models of water and sanitation governance and take control of their own resources.

3. Transparency, Accountability, and Integrity

- **Accountable water governance:** The coalition would promote transparency and accountability in all levels of water and sanitation governance, ensuring that governments, corporations, and other actors are held responsible for upholding human rights and preventing corruption or mismanagement of water resources.
- **Community-led accountability:** Share tools to local communities to monitor and/or hold accountable the entities responsible for water management, ensuring that policies and practices are responsive to their needs and rights.

4. Participation, analysis and consensus

- **Shared analysis** will be important to share the different perspectives of southern members but also those of the global Global north members as allies.
- **The coalition should strive through participatory mechanisms for consensus** in decision making as a member-led network but respecting the autonomy of individual participants' positions. Participatory mechanisms should be a priority and coordinators at regional level should be structuring and leading those mechanisms.
- **Encouraging a culture of learning**, exchange, challenge, debate within the coalition. Embracing the diversity and plurality of members' views is important.

5. Long-Term Vision for Justice and Transformation

- **Sustained advocacy for structural change:** The coalition would work toward long-term structural change, seeking to transform the political, economic, and social structures that perpetuate inequalities, particularly in access to water and sanitation. This includes advocating for policy changes that prioritize human rights, equity, and sustainability over profit and corporate interests.
- **Reimagining water as a commons:** The coalition would promote the idea of water as a common good, emphasizing its role in sustaining life and ecosystems rather than as a commodity to be privatized and exploited. This vision would call for the establishment of inclusive, democratic, and accountable water governance systems based on the recommendation to prioritize water use made by the Special Rapporteur Human Rights to water and sanitation in his report on “Water and economy nexus: managing water for productive uses from a human rights perspective”.¹

By centering justice, sustainability, and local knowledge, the coalition will work to ensure that access to clean water and safe sanitation are rights for all people, everywhere, while respecting local knowledge and leadership in the Global South. These values and principles will guide a Southern-led, decolonial advocacy coalition focused on the realization of human rights to water and sanitation.

With those values and principles, some changes suggested for our vision:

Our vision

We envisage an engaged, emboldened and united **Southern-led** civil society coalition campaigning for governments to respect, protect and fulfil people’s human rights to safe water and sanitation as **universal, indivisible and interdependent**.

To achieve this, we work at different levels to advocate from the local realities for change:

Locally

Change starts at the grassroots. We dedicate most of our **unrestricted** budget to members to design and deliver localised community-led action through the Claim Your Water Rights campaign.

Nationally

We also provide support to member’s national advocacy aims under our global campaign. These could include changes in policy, practice, regulation or legislation; sustainable funding for quality public water and sanitation services; and holding governments accountable to political pledges and human rights obligations.

Regionally

We support regional networks to influence regional bodies, events and processes. Regional CSO network representatives are voted by their networks onto our Steering Committee, representing their constituencies in governance and strategic decisions.

Globally

We use global platforms to amplify the voices and demands of **Southern** civil society and marginalised communities. For example, we support members to engage different United Nations bodies and mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review and the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation.



¹ Water and economy nexus: managing water for productive uses from a human rights perspective: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/127/91/pdf/g2412791.pdf>