





WATER, RIGHTS AND POWER:

Tackling Inequality through Democratic Governance

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3
2. INTRODUCTION 3
3. THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER: FROM COMMITMENT TO DELIVERY 5
4. INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION: WHO IS STILL BEING LEFT BEHIND? 7
5. DEMOCRATIC WATER GOVERNANCE: ACCOUNTABILITY, PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC TRUST 9
6. PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS 10
7. CONCLUSION: WATER AS A TEST OF RIGHTS, GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL WILL 11

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Water is often regarded as a technical sector, defined by pipes, pumps and treatment plants, but it is also one of the most visible tests of whether rights, equity and democratic governance are being delivered in people's daily lives. Despite major progress since 2000, billions of people still lack safely managed drinking water and sanitation, and those left behind are often the same groups with the least power to influence budgets, services and decisions.

This brief argues that the global water crisis is not only about scarcity or infrastructure gaps. It is also about governance: who is prioritised, who pays, who benefits, who is heard and who can challenge failure. The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation provide a practical framework for action, requiring services that are available, safe, accessible, affordable and accountable for all, without discrimination. Yet many countries still face major gaps in implementation, financing, regulation, monitoring and institutional coordination. National averages can hide the exclusion of rural communities, informal-settlement residents, displaced people, Indigenous Peoples, women and girls, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

Club de Madrid is calling on political leaders to treat democratic water governance as a priority for rights, equity and public trust. This means moving from commitments to delivery through transparent information, independent oversight, anti-corruption safeguards, inclusive participation, accessible complaint systems and financing that prioritises the people and places furthest behind. Leaders must look beyond infrastructure and finance alone, and reshape the systems of power and accountability that determine who receives safe and affordable services, who is heard, and who can challenge failure. Water can either deepen inequality and mistrust, or become a foundation for rights, resilience, public confidence and inclusive development.

2. INTRODUCTION

Water is often treated as a technical sector: a matter of pipes, pumps, treatment plants, utilities and infrastructure finance. But for those living without safe access, it is immediate, life threatening and deeply political. Access to safe water determines whether a child can survive, whether a girl can go to school, whether an older person or person with disabilities can live safely and independently and whether a community can withstand drought or flooding. This makes water one of the most direct ways people experience inequality, exclusion and the presence or absence of accountable government. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation is therefore not only a development target. It is a test of human rights and the effectiveness of democratic governance.

Significant progress has been made in terms of access to water globally. Between 2000 and 2024, 2.2 billion people gained access to safely managed drinking water and 2.8 billion gained access to safely managed sanitation.[1] Yet the remaining gaps are stark. In 2024, 2.1 billion people still lacked safely managed drinking water, equivalent to around 26 per cent of the global population, while 3.4 billion lacked safely managed sanitation, equivalent to around 41 per cent.[2][3] These figures are not only service-delivery statistics. They reveal where public systems are failing to reach people equally, where budgets are not translating into results, and where rights exist on paper but remain out of reach in daily life.

The people most affected are often those with the least power to demand change: low-income households, informal settlement residents, rural and remote communities, displaced people, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, children, older persons and communities living in fragile or climate-exposed settings.[4] This means the global water crisis is not only about scarcity. It is also about discrimination, affordability, location, political neglect and unequal access to public decision-making.[5] These inequalities are being intensified by climate change, conflict, population growth, displacement, fragility and rapid urbanisation. Droughts, floods and damaged infrastructure are placing growing pressure on water systems, while the population, including in informal settlements, are expanding faster than services can respond. Yet the problem is also political.

The 2025 UN-Water GLAAS report shows that many countries have policies and plans in place, but still face major gaps in financing, implementation, monitoring, regulation and institutional coordination.[6]

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[1] WHO and UNICEF (2025) *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: Special focus on inequalities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240115149

[2] WHO and UNICEF (2025) *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: Special focus on inequalities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240115149

[3] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024) *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results*. https://desapublications.un.org/publications/world-population-prospects-2024-summary-results

[4] WHO and UNICEF (2025) *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: Special focus on inequalities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240115149

[5] UNICEF (2025) *Fast facts: 1 in 4 people globally still lack access to safe drinking water – WHO, UNICEF*. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-1-4-people-globally-still-lack-access-safe-drinking-water-who-unicef

[6] WHO / UN-Water (2026) *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025. UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water, GLAAS 2025 Report*. https://www.who.int/publications/b/82189

The World Bank similarly finds that water insecurity and fragility reinforce one another where institutions are weak, infrastructure is degraded and public resources are strained.[7]

This is why water must be understood as a governance issue as much as a service issue. The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation require services that are available, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable for all, without discrimination. They also require accountability, access to information and meaningful participation by the people most affected by water decisions. The UN Special Rapporteur has therefore placed democratic water governance at the centre of a human rights-based approach, emphasising that rights holders must be able to influence decisions that affect their lives.[8]

Water also exposes unequal power relations. Women and girls often carry the greatest burden when services fail: the 2026 UN World Water Development Report estimates that they spend 250 million hours every day collecting water globally, while remaining under-represented in water governance and infrastructure decision-making.[9] Children face heightened health, education and protection risks when safe water and sanitation are unavailable, especially in schools, health facilities and humanitarian settings. Persons with disabilities and older persons also face additional barriers when infrastructure is inaccessible, information is not provided in accessible formats, or decision-making excludes their voices, and many indigenous persons continue to lose access to the land and water resources that are critical for their survival, dignity and culture.

For political leaders, the message is clear: water security depends on democratic governance that is transparent, accountable and intentionally focused on equity. A rights-based approach can help rebuild public trust, reduce inequality, strengthen resilience and protect human dignity by making exclusion visible and correctable. In an era of climate stress, social fragmentation and declining trust in institutions, water is one of the clearest tests of whether governance is delivering for people, especially those with the least power to demand change.

[7] World Bank (2017) *Turbulent Waters: Pursuing Water Security in Fragile Contexts*. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/d8a81c85-c1d5-5c66-b2e0-3f37dc77f20c

[8] United Nations General Assembly (2025) *Human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation: Note by the Secretary-General. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, A/80/117*. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4086250

[9] UNESCO / UN-Water (2026) *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2026: Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities*. https://www.unesco.org/en/world-water-report-2026

3. THE HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER: FROM COMMITMENT TO DELIVERY

The human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are practical standards for how governments plan, finance, regulate and account for services. Recognised by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010, and clarified as distinct but closely related rights in 2015, they require governments to guarantee availability, safety and quality, accessibility, affordability and accountability in water and sanitation services *(Table.1)*.[10][11][12] These standards are inseparable from non-discrimination, participation, access to information and accountability.

For governments, this creates concrete duties.[13][14] States must avoid discriminatory allocation, arbitrary disconnections, pollution of water sources and destruction of basic infrastructure. They must regulate utilities, landlords, industries and other providers so they do not contaminate water, overcharge users or exclude informal settlements, rural areas or marginalised groups. They must also adopt laws, policies, budgets and systems that progressively extend safe services to all, with priority for those furthest behind. Water therefore moves beyond charity or infrastructure delivery. It becomes a core duty of the state.

The current rights-to-delivery gap is not mainly a lack of global commitments. It is a failure of public systems. The 2025 UN-Water GLAAS report shows that many countries have policies and plans in place, but implementation remains weak because of insufficient finance, poor budget execution, limited regulation, weak monitoring and fragmented institutional responsibilities.[15] Around three quarters of countries report financing plans for drinking water and sanitation, yet implementation gaps remain significant, especially for rural sanitation.[16] Only 42 per cent of countries report that affordability is defined in policies or plans, and fewer than half report national affordability targets for drinking water.[17]

Regulation and accountability also remain weak. GLAAS finds that only 29 per cent of countries report an autonomous agency regulating urban drinking water, and only 21 per cent report urban drinking-water surveillance at 95 to 100 per cent of the required frequency.[18] Many systems still rely on national averages that hide disparities by income, geography, disability, ethnicity, age, gender or displacement

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[10] United Nations General Assembly (2010) *Resolution 64/292: The Human Right to Water and Sanitation*. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/687002/files/A_RES_64_292-EN.pdf

[11] United Nations General Assembly (2015) *Resolution 70/169: The Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation*. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/821067/files/A_RES_70_169-EN.pdf

[12] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2010) *Fact Sheet No. 35: The Right to Water*. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet35en.pdf

[13] Ibid.

[14] United Nations General Assembly (2025) *Human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation: Report of the Special Rapporteur, A/80/117*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a80117-report-special-rapporteur-human-rights-safe-drinking-water-and

[15] WHO / UN-Water (2026) *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025.* https://www.who.int/publications/b/82189

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

status. Without disaggregated data, governments cannot see who is excluded. Without complaint mechanisms, citizens cannot challenge unsafe, unaffordable or discriminatory services.

Additionally, equitable and effective financing remains a critical challenge for the sector. The World Bank estimates that developing countries face an annual water and sanitation spending shortfall of US$131.4 to US$140.8 billion, while budget execution in the wider water sector averages only around 72 per cent.[19]

The policy implication of this is clear. The human right to water cannot be delivered by infrastructure alone. It must be delivered through democratic governance: clear legal duties, transparent budgets, independent regulation, disaggregated data, public participation and remedies when people are excluded.

Table 1. From rights to delivery: What governments must guarantee and track[20][21][22]

Human rights standard	What it means in practic	What governments should track
Availability 	Enough water for drinking, cooking, handwashing, menstrual hygiene and domestic sanitation, delivered reliably and continuously enough to be available when needed, including during seasonal stress, droughts, floods and other climate shocks.	Population with water on premises and available when needed; continuity of supply and hours of service; frequency and duration of interruptions; functionality rates; drought, flood and contingency planning.
Safety and quality 	Drinking water that is free from faecal contamination and priority chemical contamination, and acceptable in taste, odour and colour. Sanitation must safely contain, transport, treat and dispose of or reuse excreta and wastewater, including under climate stress.	Independent water-quality surveillance; share of services free from contamination; implementation of water safety plans and sanitation safety plans; safe management across the sanitation service chain; service resilience after floods, droughts or other shocks.
Accessibility 	Water and sanitation must be safely reachable within the home or immediate vicinity, or through a safe route if off premises. Services must be usable by children, older persons and persons with disabilities, and available in schools, health facilities and other public settings.	Collection time and distance; proportion of households with on-premises services; disability access and usability audits; safety risks on access routes; WASH coverage in schools and health care facilities.
Affordability 	Tariffs, connection fees and other direct or indirect costs must not force households to sacrifice food, housing, health care, education or other basic needs. People unable to pay should be protected through targeted subsidies, social protection or other public support.	Tariff burden as a share of household income or expenditure; connection-fee burden; subsidy coverage and targeting; arrears and disconnections for inability to pay; whether affordability is defined and tracked in law, policy or regulation.

[19] World Bank (2024) *Funding a Water-Secure Future: An Assessment of Global Public Spending*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/funding-a-water-secure-future

[20] UN-Water (2026) *Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action: Key Messages*. https://www.unwater.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/hrpolicybrief2026_keymessages_12march2026.pdf

[21] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025) *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Water Resilience*. https://europe.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/water%20paper%20280525.pdf

[22] WHO and UNICEF (2025) *Essential Services for Quality Care: Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, Health Care Waste and Electricity Services in Health Care Facilities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240114463

Accountability 	People must be able to access clear information, participate in decisions, raise complaints and secure remedy when services are unsafe, unaffordable, inaccessible or discriminatory. Institutions should publish results, explain failures and be subject to independent oversight.	Existence and use of complaint and remedy systems; complaints resolved within set timeframes; publicly accessible quality and performance reports; independence and capacity of regulators; surveillance carried out at required frequency; participation of women and marginalised groups in oversight processes.

4. INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION: WHO IS STILL BEING LEFT BEHIND?

WHO/UNICEF evidence shows that water and sanitation inequalities remain concentrated among people in low-income countries, fragile contexts, rural communities, children, and minority ethnic and Indigenous groups.[23] People in least developed countries are more than twice as likely as others to lack basic drinking water and sanitation, and more than three times as likely to lack basic hygiene. In fragile contexts, safely managed drinking-water coverage is 38 percentage points lower than elsewhere.[24] These gaps reflect not only scarcity, but who is visible in data, who is prioritised in budgets, who can afford services, and who has enough political voice to demand change.

Poverty and geography remain the major drivers of this inequity. Between 2015 and 2024, global safely managed drinking-water coverage rose from 68 per cent to 74 per cent, but rural coverage remained far lower than urban coverage, rising from 50 per cent to 60 per cent compared with 83 per cent in urban areas.[25] Safely managed sanitation improved from 48 per cent to 58 per cent globally, yet rural coverage still lagged behind, rising from 36 per cent to 49 per cent compared with 59 per cent to 66 per cent in urban areas.[26] Informality deepens exclusion: UN-Habitat estimates that more than 1.1 billion people live in slums or informal settlements, where insecure tenure, lack of legal addresses and weak political representation often block access to formal water and sanitation services.[27]

Gender exposes how water insecurity turns service failure into unpaid labour and lost opportunity. The 2026 UN World Water Development Report estimates that women and girls spend 250 million hours every day collecting water, and that women are responsible for collecting water in over 70 per cent of unserved rural households.[28] Poor sanitation and inadequate menstrual health support also disrupt education, work and social participation: across 41 countries, an estimated 10 million adolescent girls aged 15–19 missed school, work or social activities between 2016 and 2022 because of inadequate sanitation and menstrual health conditions.[29] Yet women remain under-represented in water

[23] World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2025) *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: Special focus on inequalities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240115149

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2025) *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: Special focus on inequalities*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240115149

[27] UN-Habitat (2025) *World Water Day 2025: Glacier preservation and informal settlements*. https://unhabitat.org

[28] UNESCO / UN-Water (2026) *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2026: Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities*. https://www.unesco.org/en/world-water-report-2026

[29] Ibid.

governance. Data from 64 utilities in 28 low- and middle-income countries show that fewer than one in five water workers were women.[30]

Children, persons with disabilities, older persons and Indigenous Peoples face distinct but overlapping forms of exclusion. In 2023, 447 million children lacked drinking water at school, 427 million lacked usable single-sex sanitation, and 646 million lacked handwashing facilities with soap and water.[31] Persons with disabilities, who make up more than 16 per cent of the world's population, may be counted as having household access even when services are unusable in practice.[32] UN DESA finds that persons with disabilities are less likely than others to live in dwellings with safe drinking water, improved sanitation and on-premises bathing facilities, while 42 per cent of public places to obtain drinking water in developing countries are not accessible for wheelchair users.[33] Older persons face many of the same barriers, yet age-related WASH barriers remain poorly captured in global monitoring.[34] Indigenous Peoples, estimated at 476 million people globally, face exclusion that is also territorial and cultural, with many communities losing access to lands and waters central to health, livelihoods, culture and self-determination.[35]

Exclusion persists because many systems measure coverage more easily than they measure power, usability or voice. National averages can hide informal settlement exclusion, intrahousehold barriers, unaffordable tariffs, inaccessible design and the absence of Indigenous, minority or displaced communities from administrative datasets, and finance and governance failures further compound this. **For democratic governance, the implication is clear: governments must make exclusion visible, fund the people and places furthest behind first, and create channels for affected communities to influence, monitor and challenge water decisions.**

Table.2 Who is still being left behind?

[30] Ibid.

[31] World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2024) *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools 2015–2023: Special focus on menstrual health*. https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2024-wash-schools

[32] World Health Organization (2023) *Disability*. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health

[33] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2026) *UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2024: Executive Summary*. https://desapublications.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2026-02/NewDDR2024-Executive-Summary.pdf

[34] World Health Organization (2025) *Ageing: Global population*. https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/population-ageing

[35] UNESCO and IPACC (2025) *The Indigenous Experience of Water in Africa*. https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/04/UNESCO-IPACC-Pub_IndigenousPeoplesWaterAfrica_EN.pdf

Group	Main barriers	Priority policy response
Women and girls 	Unpaid water collection, unsafe sanitation, menstrual-health barriers, weak representation in governance.	Prioritise on-premises water, safe sanitation, menstrual hygiene facilities, gender-responsive budgeting and women's leadership in water institutions.
Children 	School WASH gaps, disease exposure, menstrual-health barriers, fragility.	Ring-fence WASH budgets for schools, prioritise fragile contexts and require safe, private and inclusive sanitation.
Persons with disabilities and older persons 	Physical inaccessibility, reliance on assistance, inaccessible information, poor measurement.	Apply universal design, fund household and public-facility adaptations, collect person-level access data and involve representative organisations in planning and implementation.
Informal-settlement residents 	Insecure tenure, lack of legal address, shared or off-plot services, weak political representation.	Decouple service access from tenure status, expand settlement upgrading, legalise safe connections and strengthen representation in local planning.
Indigenous Peoples 	Loss of land and water access, pollution, weak recognition of customary rights, exclusion from governance.	Protect land and water rights, require free, prior and informed consent, and include Indigenous governance systems in water decisions.

5. DEMOCRATIC WATER GOVERNANCE: ACCOUNTABILITY, PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC TRUST

Water governance is about power: who controls information, who makes decisions, who pays, who benefits, who is heard, and who can force correction when systems fail. Without democratic governance, water decisions can become opaque, captured by narrow interests, and disconnected from the people most affected by unsafe, unaffordable or unreliable services.

Transparency is the first condition for accountability. Governments should publish clear information on water quality, service continuity, tariffs, subsidies, budget allocations, budget execution, procurement and complaints. Yet the 2025 GLAAS report shows that while most countries have national WASH monitoring indicators, only around a third track governance, affordability or equity, and only 43 per cent of countries with urban drinking-water regulators publish publicly accessible water-quality reports.[36] This matters because service users already finance a large share of the sector: in 40 reporting countries, households contribute around 50 per cent of total WASH expenditure through tariffs and out-of-pocket

[36] WHO / UN-Water (2026) *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025. UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water, GLAAS 2025 Report*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240118980

payments.[37] When people pay but cannot see performance, costs, risks or remedies, exclusion remains hidden and distrust can prevail.

Independent regulation and oversight are also critical. Regulators should protect the public interest by monitoring tariffs, quality, safety, environmental compliance and provider performance. But many systems lack the independence or authority to do this effectively. GLAAS finds that only 29 per cent of countries report an autonomous agency regulating urban drinking water, while 64 per cent report overlapping institutional roles and only 21 per cent report urban drinking-water surveillance at 95–100 per cent of the required frequency.[38] Where ministries both own and regulate providers, or where providers effectively monitor themselves, citizens are left without credible independent checks on tariffs, safety, service quality or environmental compliance. This weakens transparency, limits meaningful participation and makes it harder for people to challenge failures in the services they rely on.

Participation and complaint mechanisms turn rights into something real and tangible for service users. The UN Special Rapporteur recently placed democratic water governance at the centre of a human rights-based approach, stressing transparency, accountability and the need for broad social participation, including the equal participation of women.[39] But this participation must be real, inclusive and financed. GLAAS reports that 92 per cent of countries define community participation procedures in law or policy for rural drinking water, yet only 9 per cent report sufficient finance and 13 per cent sufficient human resources to support participation.[40] Evidence reviews show that accountability and advocacy interventions can improve responsiveness, inclusion and policy change, but service improvements are weaker when participation is not backed by authority, finance and enforcement.[41]

Anti-corruption and protection against capture are therefore not optional add-ons. They are core to equitable water security. The World Bank estimates that average water-sector budget execution is only around 72 per cent, meaning more than a quarter of allocated public funds are left unused.[42] Weak procurement, opaque contracts, poorly targeted subsidies and fragmented mandates allow better-connected groups to influence decisions on connections, tariffs, enforcement and investment. A democratic approach requires open contracting, conflict-of-interest rules, independent audit, public reporting on subsidy incidence and clear safeguards where private or blended finance is used.

Public trust depends on whether people see institutions acting fairly, competently and in the public interest. Research on trust in water governance finds that trust is an enabling condition for effective water management, but evidence remains fragmented and often weak for marginalised groups and the

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] United Nations General Assembly (2025) *Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation: Report of the Special Rapporteur, A/80/117*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a80117-report-special-rapporteur-human-rights-safe-drinking-water-and

[40] WHO / UN-Water (2026) *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025. UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water, GLAAS 2025 Report*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240118980

[41] Hepworth, N.D., Brown, B.D. and Brewer, T. (2022) "Accountability and advocacy interventions in the water sector: a global evidence review", *H2Open Journal*, 5(2), pp. 307–322. https://iwaponline.com/h2open/article/5/2/307/88802/Accountability-and-advocacy-interventions-in-the

[42] World Bank (2024) *Funding a Water-Secure Future: An Assessment of Global Public Spending*. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/funding-a-water-secure-future

Global South.[43] The policy signal is clear: water services build legitimacy only when people can see the data, understand the tariff, raise complaints safely, participate in decisions and watch regulators correct failure. In this sense, democratic water governance is not only about better systems. It is about restoring the social contract around one of the most basic conditions of life.

6. PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

Political leaders must play a direct role in turning water from a source of inequality and mistrust into a foundation for rights, resilience and public confidence. The priority is not only to mobilise more finance or build more infrastructure, but to reshape the decisions that determine who receives safe and affordable services, who pays, who benefits, who is heard, and who can challenge failure when it occurs. The following priority actions set out practical steps for decision-makers to strengthen accountability, address exclusion and move from formal commitments to the realisation of the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, for all.

i. Make the human rights to water and sanitation enforceable in law, budgets and regulation: Governments should embed these rights in national legislation, service standards, tariff rules, public

[43] Voogd, R., Rudberg, P.M. and Alkan Olsson, J. (2022) "A systematic review on the role of trust in the water governance literature", *Water Research X*, 16, 100147. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2589914722000172

budgets and independent regulatory mandates, with clear remedies when services are unsafe, unaffordable or discriminatory.

ii. Target public finance to the people and places furthest behind: Water investment should prioritise low-income households, informal settlements, rural communities, fragile contexts, schools, health facilities, persons with disabilities, older persons, Indigenous Peoples and displaced communities, supported by disaggregated data, equity-based budgeting and targeted subsidies.

iii. Strengthen transparency, independent oversight and anti-corruption safeguards: Governments should publish clear information on water quality, service continuity, tariffs, subsidies, procurement and budget execution, while strengthening independent regulators, public-health surveillance, open contracting, audits and conflict-of-interest rules.

iv. Make participation and complaint systems real, resourced and inclusive: Communities should be able to influence water decisions before failure occurs and seek remedy when services fail. Participation and complaint systems should be accessible, time-bound, safe from retaliation and open to women, young people, persons with disabilities, older persons, informal settlement residents, Indigenous Peoples and displaced communities.

v. Put women and girls at the centre of water governance, not only water collection: Governments should prioritise on-premises water, safe and private sanitation, menstrual hygiene facilities (including for women with disabilities), gender-responsive budgeting, and female leadership in utilities, regulators and local water committees.

vi. Integrate water into climate resilience, disaster risk reduction and protection into WASH service delivery, especially in the most fragile contexts: Governments should plan water services that can remain safe and functional in the face of droughts, flooding, conflict, displacement and other shocks by protecting and upgrading essential infrastructure, strengthening emergency preparedness and early warning systems.