



PEOPLE'S WATER FORUM STATEMENT ON THE UN 2026 WATER CONFERENCE

January 26, 2026

BACKGROUND

The 2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 will be held in the United Arab Emirates from 2 to 4 December 2026, co-hosted by Senegal and the United Arab Emirates as per United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution [78/327](#)¹.

The 2026 Conference follows the 2023 UN Water Conference as the second UN-convened international meeting to address global challenges in water access and management. The 2026 Water Conference will conclude with a summary of proceedings identifying areas of “accelerated and collective action to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6.”

In the lead-up to the conference, a preparatory meeting will be held in Dakar, Senegal, in January 2026. The Conference and preparatory meeting are being organized around six *interactive dialogues* on the following themes: Water for People, Water for Prosperity, Water for the Planet, Water for Cooperation, Water in Multilateral Processes and Investments for Water.

In this statement, the People's Water Forum outlines our key concerns regarding the capture of UN Water Conferences and affiliated processes by dominant state and corporate interests and the consequent sidelining of the UN's human rights mandates. We reiterate the demands of the Water Justice Manifesto signed by more than 500 organizations and launched at the UN 2023 Water Conference. We also echo the demands of the Africa Water Justice Network calling on the global community to address the “water justice crisis driven by privatization, extractivism, ²pollution, debt and corporate capture of water governance.

OUR KEY CONCERNS

1. Multistakeholderism and the marginalization of human rights mandates

The Conference architecture entrenches multistakeholder governance as the dominant mode of engagement, placing corporations and financial actors on equal footing with states and communities whose lives and livelihoods depend on water. The increasing influence of

¹ United Nations General Assembly. (2025). *Modalities of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference to accelerate the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all* (Res. A/RES/78/327) <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/327>

² United Nations. (2025, June 12). *Conference SG background note for 9 July PGA session: Preparatory process of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference* (Note by the Secretary-General of the Conference). United Nations Sustainable Development. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Conference%20SG%20Background%20Note%20for%209%20July%20PGA%20session_12%20June.pdf



corporations and corporate lobby groups has undermined public faith in the UN's capacity to generate meaningful global strategies and international programmes capable of eliminating poverty and social inequities³.

The multistakeholder approach reframes water as a site of negotiation among “stakeholders” rather than a human right. This approach will be further entrenched by the proposed United Nations System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation to be led by a newly appointed Water Envoy. By emphasizing multistakeholderism and private-sector partnerships, the UN appears to be diluting the human rights mandates and its historical role in ensuring member states' compliance with international human rights law.⁴

As the world remains off-track in its progress towards SDG 6 a human-rights-centred approach would prioritize the meaningful participation of rightsholders whose lived experiences are essential to articulating pathways forward, rather than the corporations or investors with financial stakes in business opportunities. In other words, an international plan to address water-related crises must be driven by human rights norms such as the accessibility and affordability of water and sanitation services, rather than by financial metrics such as profitability, creditworthiness or bankability.

2. Lack of open, accessible channels for public participation/involvement of marginalized communities

There are no clear, accessible, or adequately resourced mechanisms to ensure the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, informal settlement residents, rural communities, small-scale farmers and other frontline communities. As a result, participation has largely been limited to well-resourced NGOs, academics from Northern institutions and private sector participants, reproducing existing inequities in power and decision-making over water.

The failure to create opportunities for remote/hybrid participation prevents many organisations and communities that lack resources, or that are unable to obtain visas, from participating. This oversight is inexcusable, particularly given the increasing availability of technological tools and the clear environmental benefits of reducing travel in a context of climate chaos.

We call on the organizers of the UN 2026 Water Conference to allocate adequate funds and resources to allow for meaningful participation of frontline communities. This should include support for travel and mechanisms enabling online participation. Furthermore, we demand that a diverse set of voices within the community sector and non-governmental organisations are present, not only the corporate-orientated global NGOs. Without this, the same silences and limited outcomes of the 2023 conference will be reproduced.

³ Manahan, M. A., & Kumar, M. (2021). *The great takeover: mapping of multistakeholderism in global governance* (B. Brennan, G. Berrón, M. Drago, & L. Paranhos, Eds.). People's Working Group on Multistakeholderism.

⁴ Karunanathan, M. (2019). *Can the human right to water undo neoliberal water governance?* *Geoforum*, 98, 148–156



We also call on the UN to meaningfully engage subnational public sector actors involved in the delivery of water and sanitation services including municipal and community water operators and water workers and their trade unions. Together, these public and community sector operators and their workers are responsible for more than 90% of water and sanitation services worldwide. They offer grounded expertise in the day-to-day practical realities of service provision and resource management that is essential to articulating collective responses to the challenges of achieving SDG 6.

3. Lack of clear commitments and outcomes

Unlike other meetings anchored in international treaty obligations, such as the yearly Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings organized under the aegis of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN Water Conferences lack clear outcomes and accountability mechanisms. Rather than articulating a clear plan to address vast gaps in access to water and sanitation, the 2023 conference generated a Water Action Agenda featuring over 800 self-reported pledges from a wide range of actors including governments, corporations and civil society organizations without mechanisms of accountability or enforcement.

Continuing with this approach for the 2026 Conference will enable governments to claim progress without accountability, obscure ongoing human rights violations and fail to address the chronic underfunding of public infrastructure and services, among other structural limitations.

4. Focus on finance and the private sector

Each of the Interactive Dialogues includes an explicit focus on the financial obstacles to the realization of SDG 6 and envisioned solutions. While we acknowledge the tremendous funding gaps among countries in the global South, the promotion of private investment as a panacea ignores decades of research demonstrating the failures of privatization strategies imposed through loan conditionalities and structural adjustment programs in the Global South. Water privatization has consistently failed to deliver equitable, affordable and accountable access to water and sanitation services, prioritizing profits over human rights. Across contexts, it has deepened inequality, undermined public oversight, and weakened the capacity of states to ensure universal service. Since the early 2000s, hundreds of municipalities have transitioned back from private to public water and sanitation services⁵.

Yet rather than strengthening the enabling conditions for publicly funded, owned and operated services, “blending financing” mechanisms promoted by the World Bank, OECD and other institutions, seek to pave the way for a new era of privatization based on the widely disputed assumption that private finance leads to better management of public services. The focus of blended finance is to sweeten the deal for the private sector by leveraging limited public funds to de-risk private investments and ensure their greater rates of return.

⁵ Lobina, E., Kishimoto, S., & Petitjean, O. (2014). Here to stay: Water remunicipalisation as a global trend (Public Services International Research Unit, Transnational Institute & Multinational Observatory).



Moreover, the reduction of water crises to a crisis of finance obscures the structural causes of poverty and global inequality stemming from colonialism and ongoing power relations between and within states.

5. Debt Justice

Debt justice is inseparable from water justice. Global water injustice reflects broader patterns of uneven development produced by centuries of colonialism, followed by decades of trade injustice and structural adjustment. In Africa, where debt levels are reaching crisis proportions, the African Water Justice Network argues that debt servicing is undermining government capacity for public spending on water, sanitation and health.

We reiterate the Africa Water Justice Network's rejection of "blended financing" and other predatory financing mechanisms that ultimately transfer the costs of essential services onto individual users through tariffs and service fees.

6. Green growth and market-environmentalism

In the area of water resource governance, market-based water allocation, valuation and conservation mechanisms deepen power asymmetries by distributing water according to ability to pay rather than according to need. Water markets, payment-for-ecosystem-services and other "fortress conservation" mechanisms have served to dispossess and displace Indigenous communities while entrenching the rights of corporations responsible for over-exploitation and contamination of watersheds⁶.

As the Africa Water Justice Network argues, Europe's so-called green growth strategies are driving new waves of land and resource grabs in Africa. Across Namibia, Mauritania, and South Africa, proposed green hydrogen projects threaten to divert scarce water from communities to export-oriented industries reproducing colonial patterns of resource appropriation in the guise of climate action.

7. Silence on water deprivation as a tool of genocide in Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and other regions

Despite the emphasis on "water cooperation" as a core theme of the UN 2026 Water Conference, conference processes and documents have remained silent on the use of water deprivation as a tool of genocide in Palestine, Sudan, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and elsewhere. In each of these contexts, the deliberate denial of access to safe water, the destruction of water infrastructure, and the obstruction of humanitarian access have played a central role in rising death tolls, forced displacement, and the collapse of relief mechanisms.

⁶ Moore, M. (2024). *Water trading markets: Facilitating financial flows through the hydro-social cycle?* Geoforum, 150, 103977.



The UN Water Conference's claims of addressing pressing global water issues have no credibility without the explicit recognition of the grave injustices unfolding in Palestine and Sudan and the contexts that have produced them.

OUR CALL TO ACTION

We reiterate the 9 demands of the [Water Justice Manifesto](#) signed by more than 500 organizations and launched at the UN 2023 Water Conference. We echo the demands of the Africa Water Justice Network representing organizations and frontline communities throughout the continent.

Building on these collective efforts, we call on the international community (including United Nations member states, agencies and multilateral institutions) to commit through the 2026 UN Water Conference to establish a formal intergovernmental mechanism that will:

- ensure the primacy of human rights including the collective hydro-territorial rights of Indigenous peoples;
- establish binding commitments to ensure universal access to water and sanitation services that meet human rights norms and standards by 2030;
- ensure the meaningful participation of rightsholders rather than stakeholders;
- recognize public sector and community-based expertise including that of public municipal and community water operators, public sector workers and unions, human rights defenders and community organizers, small-scale farmers, rural communities, and others at the frontlines of struggles to defend public water services, communal water systems and local watersheds;
- create enabling conditions for public and community-led water and sanitation services through public funding, public-public and public-community partnerships;
- cancel unsustainable debt to free fiscal space for equitable public services in the Global South and end private, profit-seeking financing mechanisms such as blended financing for essential services;
- reject green growth and market-based governance models that deepen global inequities in access to and control over land and water resources, and
- ensure that UN water conferences create formal space for addressing urgent global human rights crises, including the genocides in Palestine and Sudan, where water deprivation and the destruction of water infrastructure have played a central role, and commit to international action to prevent water from being used as a tool of mass violence.

ABOUT THE PEOPLE'S WATER FORUM

The People's Water Forum is a global coordinating platform for water justice networks around the world. Our regional and sectoral networks bring together hundreds of frontline water defenders, environmental justice organizations, labour unions, public water operators, faith-based organizations, research institutes and critical scholars. We organize for water justice



by amplifying the struggles of frontline communities and grassroots movements working to defend water as a human right and a shared commons that is essential to life and dignity against ongoing processes of privatization, commodification and ecological destruction.