SDG 6: Make water and sanitation rights a reality

“Every target of the MDGs depends on the achievement of the water and sanitation target”¹

The 270-member civil society coalition End Water Poverty welcomes the necessary inclusion of a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) dedicated to water and sanitation in the UN Open Working Group outcome document. However, we call on UN member states negotiating the SDGs to ensure that human rights is the framework for all the SDGs, in particular SDG 6, focused on water, sanitation and hygiene.

We demand that:

1) Member states continue to show the welcome support they have done so far for an all-important dedicated water goal which prioritises people’s access to water and sanitation and participation in its management, alongside sustainable management of water, the improvement of water quality and protection of water-related ecosystems. This is not only of immense importance for sustainable development as a whole, but in high demand from the public and civil society.

2) We believe SDG 6 must explicitly name the progressive realisation of the human right to water and sanitation as its target, with an accompanying range of indicators focused on monitoring implementation of the right. We are concerned that the “mainstreaming” approach to incorporating human rights has led to some human rights standards and principles being excluded, e.g., ensuring sanitation is acceptable, opposing discrimination, and ensuring accountability.

We suggest SDG 6 is amended as follows:

Goal 6. Ensure availability, sustainable management of water, and the progressive realisation of the human right to water and sanitation for all

6.1 by 2030, achieve the realisation of the human right to water through universal and equal equitable access to available, safe and affordable drinking water for all - in homes, schools, workplaces, health centres and refugee camps, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

6.2 by 2030, achieve the realisation of the human right to sanitation through universal and equal access to adequate, affordable and acceptable and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all - in homes, schools, health centres and refugee camps, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations - and end open defecation.

The Importance of WASH

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) underpin life – they are central to sustainable economic and social development, and environmental sustainability. Yet despite the importance of water and sanitation to all aspects of development, there remains an ongoing crisis of water and sanitation poverty:

- An estimated 1.8 billion people – one in four people in the world – use unsafe, faecally contaminated water which can come from sources currently classified as ‘improved’; many more may lack access to water that is affordable and continuously available.

- At least 2.5 billion people – one in three people – lack access to an ‘improved’ sanitation facility, as currently monitored; many more may lack access to sanitation that is culturally acceptable or affordable. An estimated 1 billion people defecate in the open.

- These figures are even more stark at regional levels: in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are likely more than 300 million – more than 35% of the population – without access to an ‘improved source of drinking water’, as currently monitored; in South Asia, 692 million people – 90% of whom are in India – practise open defecation.

Some consequences of this:

- Around 760,000 children aged under five-years-old die every year – more than 2,000 every day - from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation.

- Women in the global South spend 200 million hours a day collecting water, walking on average 6km a day carrying an average weight of 20KG.

- Estimated total economic losses from inadequate water and sanitation supply are $260 billion a year.

Make our human right to water and sanitation a reality

The human right to water and sanitation was first recognised by a 2010 UN General Assembly Resolution (64/292, para. 1) – this confirmed it as a human right in itself, and a right essential to the realisation of all others. Subsequent UN Human Rights Council resolutions further clarified the meaning of the right, which was universally recognised by the UN General Assembly in 2013 (Resolution 68/157). UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, explains:

“This means that for the UN, the right to water and sanitation is contained in existing human rights treaties and is therefore legally binding.”

To ensure that no one is left behind, in particular the most vulnerable and marginalised, the SDGs must be framed by existing human rights obligations, which contain the principles of non-discrimination, participation and equality. For example, the principle of equality requires that inequalities are eradicated through targeting the most marginalised. Without this approach, many SDG targets would not be met.

As the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) states, the MDGs: “…were not adequately aligned with human rights and did not give sufficient attention to discrimination and inequalities”.

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2. WHO/Unicef Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP)
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. World Health Organisation factsheet no.330
7. World Bank Water and Sanitation Programme
8. Ibid.