

Joint position paper of European Union NGOs for the preparation of the UN Water Conference 2026

An ambitious, action-driven, and inclusive process



Context

The UN 2023 Water Conference was the largest-ever gathering of Members States and stakeholders to deliberate on water. The overall conclusion of the conference was that **“the global water cycle is a global common good; the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation must be accessible to all populations without further delay, and rather than being a threat to life and health, water must become a catalyst for health and well-being, securing nutrition and energy for all”¹.**

The UN 2026 Water Conference is a crucial step towards strengthening global water governance and accelerating the implementation of the human rights to water and sanitation and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6. Water is critical not only to achieve SDG 6, but all the other SDGs.

The conference takes place against the backdrop of a worsening water and sanitation crisis, exacerbated by the growing impact of climate change as well as increasing fragility, humanitarian crisis and declining international funding.

The preparatory process, including the high-level preparatory meeting in Dakar in December 2025, will be a strategic opportunity to formulate the objectives of the conference, ensure follow-up to the commitments made in 2023, translate commitments and initiative into tangible outcomes of the conference and reinforce the multi-stakeholder dynamics, notably guaranteeing the effective participation of civil society.

Below are our collective recommendations to the EU from 23 (signatory organisations) for a successful UN 2026 Water Conference.

Networks:



Organisations:



1. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [\[Online\]](#)



Recommendations for the organisation of the UN Water 2026 conference

Secure high-level political mobilisation

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- **Ensure high-level political mobilization among EU member states** throughout the preparation process. Remain active in the preparation process and encourage absent or less active countries to contribute

- **Facilitate high level attendance of the 2026 meeting** (Goal: higher level of participation than the 2023 – eight Heads of State, three Vice Presidents, three Heads of Government, six Deputy Prime Ministers, some 120 ministers and 17 heads of IGOs and specialized agencies)

Secure meaningful civil society inclusion

The 2026 Conference must be grounded in inclusive preparation, as emphasized by the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water, Ms. Retno L.P. Marsudi, during the UN Water Conference multi-stakeholder informative webinar in March 2025: "It is vital to listen to the inputs and aspirations of all stakeholders before determining the vision of the UN Water Conference 2026."

Enhance inclusive engagement and representation of civil society, indigenous peoples, and youth before, during, and after the conference through the following actions:

- **Establish formal consultation mechanisms** during the preparatory phase to ensure civil society perspectives are meaningfully reflected in official conference outcomes and documentation. This could include:
 - The creation of **thematic civil society working groups** aligned with the six interactive dialogue topics;

- The establishment of an **advisory group to the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water**, composed of representatives from diverse constituencies, including civil society, indigenous peoples, and youth

- **Facilitate broad and equitable participation** of civil society by providing financial, logistical and administrative support—such as increased accreditation, visa facilitation, and a funding mechanism — to enable meaningful engagement at the conference
- Virtual formats should be proposed with a few inperson/hybrid milestones along relevant regional events
- **Ensure multi-stakeholder facilitation of the Interactive Dialogues** and the development of their concept notes, with particular attention to incorporating the perspectives of marginalised groups
- **Invite civil society representatives to deliver formal closing statements** that capture diverse stakeholder perspectives on conference proceedings and ensure these statements are integrated into the official conference summary of proceedings



UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water, Ms. Retno L.P. Marsudi, during the UN Water Conference multi-stakeholder informative webinar in March 2025: "It is vital to listen to the inputs and aspirations of all stakeholders before determining the vision of the UN Water Conference 2026."

Break silos and align/engage with other processes

- **Engage a broad range of stakeholders**, including political decision-makers from water-related sectors
- **Align the Conference process and outcomes with other major international processes** (Sandai, Climate COP, Biodiversity COP, Desertification COP, United Nations Environment Assembly, humanitarian forums, etc)
- **Develop a comprehensive communication strategy** to elevate water-related issues across other sectors and events, enhancing the visibility of the conference process and outcomes, and fostering cross-sectoral engagement and contributions

Demonstrate strong diplomatic commitment

The 2026 Conference must be a Conference of Action, as emphasized by His Excellency Ambassador Diome, Deputy Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations, during the UN Water Conference multi-stakeholder informative webinar in March 2025: “Senegal and the United Arab Emirates are convinced that the 2026 conference must be one of action—focused on concrete solutions and accelerated commitments”².

- **Transition from declaratory non-binding commitments to actions and implementation** by developing and presenting measurable targets, accompanied by detailed national implementation roadmaps with clear timelines, responsible agencies, and resource allocations
- **Strengthen and institutionalize the Water Action Agenda platform** as a robust and transparent accountability mechanism which tracks progress on commitments and Interactive Dialogue priorities, disaggregated financing flows, and which aligns with SDG 6 monitoring under the UN-Water framework
- **Ensure that sanitation and hygiene services are given equal consideration as water** in the conference agenda, with commitments grounded in a human rights approach. Priority should be given to those in the most marginalized or vulnerable situations, who face the greatest barriers to realizing their rights

2. Multi-stakeholder Webinar on the 2026 UN Water Conference, March 2025 – [Online](#)



II.

Recommendations to the EU and its member states on the themes of the UN 26 Water Conference



We recommend that the EU and member states consider the following adjustments and additions: we generally support the newly proposed themes by the co-hosts of the UN26 Water Conference. However, we recommend that the EU and member states consider aligning with the civil-society recommendations in this paper.

Interactive Dialogue 1: Water for People

WE STRONGLY ENCOURAGE TO BUILD UPON THE FOLLOWING TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 1³:

- “Government leadership and willingness to drive change is key.
- Funding and financing from the public sector, private sector and donors must increase dramatically.
- Governments must develop policy to guide funding and financing decisions and strategies; attracting and making best use of funding and finance.
- Governments and development partners see the need to develop a capable and motivated WASH sector workforce, investing in people and institutions.
- Data and evidence are key to progress, and must reflect the needs of all people, including the marginalized. Data must drive decision-making and be used to reinforce accountability.
- Governments and partners need to encourage WASH innovation and experimentation”

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Affirm or reaffirm access to drinking water and sanitation as fundamental human rights** by:
 - strongly recalling them at the Conference and in the preparatory process, fully integrating them into their legal framework
 - fighting inequalities and ensuring universal affordable access to drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene services by **increasing and directing their Official Development Assistance (ODA) toward vulnerable populations most at risk of being left behind, using reliable WASH analytics and evidence** such as the [WASH Insecurity analysis](#).

- Elevate WASH as an essential foundation for health and human development, and **ensure its systematic integration across areas of their external action**—particularly within sectors such as education, nutrition, and health
- **Take measures to mitigate the risks of increased private sector involvement:**
 - EU aid funding should prioritise micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and local value chains in partner countries.
 - Maintaining government leadership and alignment with national strategies
 - Ensuring market-driven approaches are compatible with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards; as well as rights-based and equity-driven principles, so the poorest and most vulnerable populations are not excluded from accessing basic services
 - Ensure private sector investments and blended finance instruments adhere to strong accountability and transparency standards

3. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [Online]

Interactive Dialogue 2: water for prosperity

WE STRONGLY ENCOURAGE TO BUILD UPON THE FOLLOWING TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 2⁴:

- “Integrated water resources management is key to address the whole hydrological cycle, and to achieve, by 2030, the universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.
- Protecting and restoring healthy ecosystems which are essential for health, for successful mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, for agriculture, for safe drinking water and for reducing disaster risks.”

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Formally recognize the importance of a commons-based approach** grounded in the human right to water, which emphasizes water as a common good that must be safeguarded and governed in the interest of all
- **Promote a collective, participatory and rights-based approach** to the governance of water resources and management of WASH services that ensures the leadership of local communities and the engagement of women, youth and indigenous peoples in planning, decision-making, implementation and accountability processes
- **Encourage greater international support for WASH systems strengthening** and capacity development to build resilient and sustainable services for all

Interactive Dialogue 3: Water for Planet

WE ENCOURAGE TO BUILD UP ON THE FOLLOWING TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 3⁵:

- “Adopt an “Inter-COP” process to connect, integrate, and fully implement water-related decisions made at global assemblies
- Follow a Water Action Workflow encompassing six steps: risk awareness, risk identification, designing countermeasures, funding, multi-stakeholder participation, and on-site implementation
- Climate resilient water management is a fundamental part of adaptation and mitigation of climate change”

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Be more specific on its commitment to build capacity** on drought and flood risk management in its external action.
- **Position water as a top priority within climate change adaptation financing mechanisms.** Promote the increase (both quantitative and qualitative) of climate adaptation funding for the sustainable and equitable management of water resources and for drinking water supply
- **Integrate WASH and nature-based solutions to strengthen water resilience** in territories, while valuing and building on local knowledge and expertise

4. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [\[Online\]](#)

5. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [\[Online\]](#)

Interactive Dialogue 4: Water for Cooperation

WE STRONGLY ENCOURAGE TO BUILD UPON THE FOLLOWING TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 4⁶:

“Water diplomacy is a key enabler for peace and water security. Transboundary water cooperation and cooperation on groundwaters needs to be accelerated greatly to meet SDG 6”.

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Encourage and support South-South and North-South cooperation** for effective transboundary water management
- **Encourage the ratification of the Helsinki (UNECE 1992) and New York (UNWC 1997) international conventions** on transboundary water cooperation
- **Embed WASH within the EU peace and security agenda**, recognizing access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) as a fundamental cornerstone of peace and stability in fragile regions. The EU must establish robust frameworks for transboundary coordination that respect equitable water rights and create platforms for inclusive dialogue across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus

- **Reclaim global leadership in delivering SDG 6a and 6b**—ensuring water, sanitation, and hygiene for all—by implementing a strategic shift in their ODA allocation priorities for the WASH sector. This should include:

- Reversing the documented decline in ODA for WASH to reflect the urgency and scale of unmet needs
- Rebalancing funding portfolios to prioritize vulnerability over creditworthiness, ensuring grant-based support is directed to least developed countries and fragile contexts
- Increasing financial support to basic water and sanitation services, especially where access remains critically low

- **State clearly EU support to multilateralism and international cooperation on water** and continue to play an active role in initiatives to strengthen the global water governance (*see specific recommendations on global water governance in the item below*)

Interactive Dialogue 5: Water in Multilateral Processes

WE STRONGLY ENCOURAGE TO BUILD UPON THE FOLLOWING TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2023 UN WATER CONFERENCE INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE 5⁷:

- “Transform the multilateral system for water within the UN system (UN Special Envoy for Water; strengthening UN-Water; and Strengthening the connections among existing mechanisms to collect and share data on water, for early warning alerts and analytics to inform policy instead:
- Bring together every stream of finance – [...] bringing together both public and private streams of finance internationally to lower the cost of capital for water, especially in the developing world

- Incentivize joint action on the ground through networked multi-stakeholder coalitions – local communities, Indigenous Peoples, civil society organizations, local and national governments, and international organizations
- Develop skills and build capacity globally – especially for women and those working at the frontlines of water conservation”

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Support broadening the scope of this theme beyond global governance** to place local governance and leadership at the forefront, and consider renaming it to: ‘Local Leadership and Global Water Governance’

6. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [\[Online\]](#)

7. Summary of Proceedings UN 2023 Water Conference from the UNGA President [\[Online\]](#)

The Interactive Dialogue should address issues such as:

- Strengthening the enabling environment for local leadership by supporting policy and budget decentralization reforms that enhance local authorities' capacity over water resources and service delivery, while promoting accountability at the subnational level
- The possibility to further track and report on the share of WASH ODA that reaches local actors, disaggregated by geography, actor type, and function
- **Prioritise the operationalisation of the Water Action Agenda at local level** by identifying practical pathways to implement future commitments and addressing existing barriers that hinder the realisation of current pledges⁸
- **Strengthen global governance on water:**
 - Guarantee the coherent implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation

This could include encouraging the co-chairs of each Interactive Dialogue at the UN Water Conference to proactively mainstream water-related objectives across relevant UN processes and agendas—for example, a country co-chairing Dialogue 1 on Water for Health could introduce a resolution at the World Health Assembly to formally embed WASH priorities into national health strategies

- Ensure dedicated resources for the UN Special Envoy for Water beyond 2026 and establish an intergovernmental process on Water with regular UN conferences on water beyond 2028
- Position water and WASH as a key issue in a post-2030 agenda

➤ **Establish a global accountability and monitoring framework:**

- Encourage Member States to adopt a UN General Assembly resolution to anchor the results and commitments made during the Conference
- Establish a transparent and inclusive monitoring and reporting mechanism for the Water Action Agenda by 2026, including specific tools to track progress on commitments and financing flows

Disclaimer: The suggestions for this dialogue could possibly be integrated into the newly proposed interactive dialogue 1 of the co-hosts.

Suggested new Interactive Dialogue 6: Leaving No One Behind: Inclusive WASH solutions for humanitarian crises and marginalized communities

Despite the fact that more than 188 million people were in need of WASH humanitarian Assistance in 2023⁹, humanitarian WASH needs were largely overlooked in the 2023 conference's interactive dialogue. This omission is evident in the summary of proceedings, which fails to mention the terms 'humanitarian' or 'fragility' once—let alone address their specific challenges. Likewise, structurally marginalized groups such as rural communities, indigenous peoples, and residents of informal urban settlements were largely excluded from government attention during the 2023 conference.

Nevertheless, we commend the EU for being one of the few governmental actors to table humanitarian WASH pledges at the 2023 UN Water Conference, including the following:

- "The EU commits to advocacy activities on Humanitarian WASH and International humanitarian law under the work programme of the 2023 European Humanitarian Forum
- The EU commits to support the link between International humanitarian law (IHL) and humanitarian WASH aid through the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Advocacy Plans, especially in regions where civilian water infrastructure is increasingly under attack (such as the Sahel region, Ukraine)."

8. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Mapping and Progress of the UN 2023 Water Conference Water Action Agenda, 30 May 2024 [\[Online\]](#)
9. 2023 Global Humanitarian Need Overview [\[Online\]](#)

WE ALSO CALL ON EU AND MEMBER STATES TO:

- **Advocate for a dedicated 6th theme focused on “Leaving No One Behind: Inclusive WASH Solutions for Humanitarian Crises and Marginalized Communities.”** This would allow the conference to:

- Serve as a platform to explore practical solutions¹⁰ with a wider and more diverse range of actors, bringing critical expertise to the table.
- Foster collective agreement on the need to better understand fragility and marginalized populations as a core analytical lens for both service delivery and the protection of water ecosystems.
- To call for a global compact on inclusive and equitable WASH access, anchored in international human rights instruments and guided by the principle of “leave no one behind”.

- Encourage countries to table commitments to invest in, test, and scale innovative approaches tailored to these more complex settings and populations.

- **Promote the integration of life-saving and resilient WASH as a core priority** within the EU and Member States’ humanitarian funding and policy frameworks
 - by encouraging partners to embed WASH outcomes at the heart of health, nutrition, and protection interventions
 - by actively endorsing and advancing the [Call to Action for Survival and Resilient WASH](#) of the Humanitarian WASH Road Map, including through formal signature through the EU and member states —following the example set by France and Slovenia.
- **Increase support to WASH in crisis response planning and funding allocations**, including to humanitarian WASH Coordination platforms.
- **Prioritise support for community-led and locally designed WASH solutions.**
- **Commit to supporting innovative, system-strengthening interventions tailored to fragile and complex governance settings”**Commit to support innovative system-strengthening interventions tailored to complex, multi-layered governance environments.
- **Expand nexus collaboration and cross-sectoral partnerships** with climate, peace-building, and development actors to reduce the needs for humanitarian WASH response.
- **Promote protection of WASH systems under IHL** and support local actors to monitor attacks on WASH systems and their impacts on vulnerable communities.



10. <https://endwaterpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/Leave-No-One-Behind-Policy-brief.pdf>