

Flagship Initiative

Workstream 1 — Promote human-rights-based approaches to water, sanitation, wastewater, and water quality across all contexts

Interactive Dialogue (a): Water for People

2026 United Nations Water Conference

Part 1 — Submission details

Submitting organisation	<i>Water Integrity Network</i>
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Part 2 — Flagship Initiative

Initiative title <i>A short, clear name (maximum 15 words).</i>
Water Equity Charter: A Global Commitment to Dismantle Systemic Inequality and Secure a Fair Water Future for All
Guiding question(s) addressed <i>Indicate which of the guiding questions above the initiative addresses (state the number(s)). Multiple questions may be selected where relevant.</i>
1, 3, 4 and 5
Problem <i>Describe the systemic challenge that the initiative seeks to address and explain why a coordinated, multi-stakeholder response is required. Explain why this issue is important for advancing the human rights to water and sanitation. (Maximum 150 words)</i>
The initiative addresses systemic inequalities that prevent progress towards universal water security and the human rights to water and sanitation. Despite sufficient global knowledge, technology and wealth, 2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water and progress towards SDG 6 remains off track. The Unequal Waters analysis shows that water insecurity follows the distribution of power through six reinforcing mechanisms: political exclusion, resource capture, rights denial, knowledge suppression, process capture, and the social reproduction of disadvantage. These mechanisms are rooted in historical dispossession, political capture and the unaccountable application of market logic to a non-substitutable public good. Because these inequalities operate across governance, finance, law, data systems, professional practice and social norms, they cannot be addressed through isolated technical interventions. A coordinated, multi-stakeholder response is required to dismantle the inequality trap and secure a fair water future for all.
Description <i>Describe the initiative, its overall vision, and the shared objective it seeks to achieve. Explain why the initiative is catalytic, transformational, and capable of mobilising stakeholders around a common goal. (Maximum 250 words)</i>
The Water Equity Charter is a global commitment to dismantle systemic inequality and secure a fair water future for all. Proposed by the Water Integrity Network and informed by

the Unequal Waters initiative, the Charter reframes the challenge from closing the water gap to addressing the inequality trap.

The Charter seeks commitments from governments, civil society, development partners, development banks, researchers, indigenous peoples, youth networks and other stakeholders to implement six principles:

- Power redistribution – ensuring meaningful participation, representation and accountability to affected communities.
- Resource reorientation – directing finance and investment towards those furthest behind and ensuring decent wages and working conditions in high water-use enterprises.
- Rights recognition – strengthening protection of the human right to water, customary water rights, the rights of poor and marginalised communities and the workplace rights of workers.
- Knowledge democratisation – closing data gaps and mainstreaming local and indigenous knowledge into water science and decision-making.
- Process transformation – reforming institutions and funding systems to ensure transparency, accountability and inclusion.
- Social transformation – addressing the structural inequalities that determine who bears the burden of water insecurity.

The Charter provides a practical framework for action, accountability and collaboration and seeks to place equity, accountability and rights at the centre of future water governance and action.

Transformational impact and expected results

Describe how the initiative will drive systemic change at scale. Outline measurable outcomes, expected benefits, and accountability mechanisms. Explain how the initiative moves beyond dialogue and commitments towards concrete action and results. (Maximum 250 words)

The initiative seeks transformational change by addressing the six reinforcing mechanisms that perpetuate water injustice rather than treating their symptoms. It aims to shift water governance, finance, legal frameworks, knowledge systems and institutional practice towards greater equity and accountability.

Expected results include:

- Stronger participation, representation and accountability for communities most affected by water insecurity.
- Increased allocation of finance and investment towards underserved and marginalised populations.
- Stronger legal protection for human, customary and indigenous water rights and improved protection of workers in water-dependent industries.
- Improved visibility of underserved populations through better data and recognition of local and indigenous knowledge.
- More transparent, inclusive and accountable institutions, funding systems and policy processes.
- Greater attention to structural inequalities linked to gender, class, caste, ethnicity, geography and indigeneity.

The Charter moves beyond dialogue by establishing a practical framework for action and accountability that governments, civil society organisations, development partners and other stakeholders can adopt and implement. By addressing the root causes of exclusion and inequity, it seeks to accelerate progress towards SDG 6 while contributing to climate resilience, poverty reduction, gender equality, public health and sustainable development.

Human rights and inclusion focus

Explain how the initiative advances the human rights to water and sanitation, including the AAAQ principles, and benefits people in vulnerable situations. (Maximum 150 words)

The Charter is explicitly grounded in the human rights to water and sanitation and seeks to ensure that those furthest behind are prioritised in decision-making, financing and implementation. It promotes meaningful participation, representation and accountability for affected communities and strengthens protection of human, customary and indigenous water rights.

The initiative recognises that water insecurity is disproportionately experienced by women and girls, indigenous peoples, lower-caste groups, informal settlement residents, workers in water-dependent industries and other marginalised populations. It seeks to address the structural barriers that limit access to safe, acceptable, accessible, affordable and quality water and sanitation services by advancing rights recognition, equitable resource allocation, improved accountability and inclusive governance.

Alignment with SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework

Explain how the initiative contributes to one or more SDG 6 accelerators: financing and investment, innovation and technology, capacity development, and data and information systems. (Maximum 150 words)

The initiative contributes directly to several SDG 6 accelerators.

Financing and investment: through resource reorientation towards underserved and marginalised populations.

Capacity development: through commitments to participation, accountability, institutional reform and community empowerment.

Data and information systems: through knowledge democratisation, closing data gaps and improving visibility of excluded populations.

Innovation and governance practice: through a new framework that addresses systemic inequality, strengthens rights, values local and indigenous knowledge and promotes transparency and inclusion.

By addressing structural barriers to equitable water governance and service delivery, the Charter supports accelerated and more inclusive progress towards SDG 6.

Evidence Base and Strategic Rationale (Mandatory)

Provide evidence from existing or past projects, programmes, policies, partnerships, or initiatives demonstrating why the proposed approach is likely to succeed. Include measurable results, lessons learned, evaluations, and references. (Maximum 300 words)

The Charter draws on case studies, evidence, practice and learning accumulated across four decades and synthesised through the Unequal Waters initiative. The underlying analysis demonstrates that the principal barriers to shared water security are structural and political rather than technical.

The evidence highlights that approximately 2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water and that progress towards SDG 6 would need to accelerate sixfold to achieve global targets. The analysis identifies six mutually reinforcing mechanisms of water inequality: political exclusion, resource capture, rights denial, knowledge suppression, process capture and social reproduction of disadvantage.

The background paper documents how these mechanisms operate across diverse contexts. Examples include informal settlements in Nairobi where residents pay many times the formal water tariff, the gendered burden of water collection affecting millions of women and children in sub-Saharan Africa, the exclusion of indigenous and customary rights from formal legal systems, and the depletion of shared groundwater resources in Peru's Ica Valley through unequal patterns of water allocation and economic development.

The analysis further demonstrates that isolated technical interventions frequently fail because they do not address the structural mechanisms that reproduce inequality. Lasting change requires coordinated action across governance, finance, legal systems, data systems, professional practice and social norms.

The Charter translates this evidence into a practical framework for collective action built around six disruption principles: power redistribution, resource reorientation, rights recognition, knowledge democratisation, process transformation and social transformation.

Builds on existing efforts

Describe how the initiative strengthens, complements, or scales existing commitments, platforms, and initiatives. (Maximum 150 words)

The initiative builds directly on the Unequal Waters seminar series convened by the Government of South Africa, Water Integrity Network, Water Witness International and Sanitation and Water for All. It draws on extensive evidence, practical experience and multi-stakeholder dialogue developed through this process.

The Charter complements and strengthens existing commitments to SDG 6, the human rights to water and sanitation, water integrity, climate resilience and social justice. Rather than creating a parallel process, it provides a unifying framework that connects existing efforts through a common focus on addressing systemic inequality and ensuring that those furthest behind are prioritised.

Partners, governance and stakeholder engagement

Describe the stakeholders involved and explain governance arrangements, leadership structures, and accountability mechanisms. (Maximum 150 words)

The initiative is proposed by the Water Integrity Network and has been developed through multi-stakeholder and multi-country collaboration. It draws on engagement with Sanitation and Water for All, the Government of South Africa, Water Witness International and a broad range of practitioners, researchers, policymakers and civil society actors.

The Charter is intended as a multi-stakeholder commitment involving governments, civil society organisations, development partners, development banks, indigenous peoples' representatives, youth networks, researchers and other actors. Its governance approach is grounded in participation, accountability, transparency and inclusion, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that communities most affected by water insecurity have meaningful representation in decision-making and implementation

Existing Member State / stakeholder support

Identify Member States, organisations, or stakeholders that currently support, participate in, or have endorsed the initiative. (Maximum 100 words)

The initiative is being advanced by the Water Integrity Network and draws on collaboration with the Government of South Africa, Water Witness International and Sanitation and Water for All through the Unequal Waters process. These organisations and partners have

contributed to the development of the underlying analysis and the proposed Charter framework.

Potential Member State / stakeholder support

Identify potential Member States, organisations, or stakeholders that could support, champion, finance, or participate in the initiative. (Maximum 100 words)

Potential champions identified in the proposal include South Africa, Zambia and Finland. Additional support may come from indigenous peoples' representatives, youth networks, progressive development banks, civil society organisations, research institutions, development partners and a coalition of Global South governments. The Charter is intended to remain open to endorsement by all UN Member States, development partners, private sector actors and civil society stakeholders.

Existing financing / resource mobilisation

Describe any existing funding, investments, technical assistance, partnerships, or resource-mobilisation mechanisms that currently support the initiative. (Maximum 130 words)

Existing collaboration, technical contributions and partner engagement is taking place through the Unequal Waters seminar series and associated partnerships involving the Water Integrity Network, Water Witness International, Sanitation and Water for All and the Government of South Africa.

Potential financing / resource mobilisation and financing strategy

Describe how the initiative will mobilise the financial resources, investments, technical assistance, innovation, partnerships, and political support required for implementation and scale-up. Identify potential funding sources, financing mechanisms, investment opportunities, and strategic partnerships over the medium to long term, including how it could leverage existing programmes, financing facilities, donor commitments, public budgets, private-sector engagement, or blended finance. (Maximum 300 words)

The Charter is intended to mobilise political commitment, collaboration and action across governments, civil society, development partners, development banks, researchers and other stakeholders. Through endorsement and implementation of the Charter principles, it seeks to influence future policy, investment and institutional reform towards equity-focused water outcomes.

The initiative aims to build a broad coalition committed to addressing systemic water inequality and to encourage the alignment of existing programmes, investments and partnerships with the Charter's six principles. Potential support may come from governments, development partners, development banks, civil society organisations and other stakeholders committed to advancing water justice, human rights and SDG 6.

The proposal does not establish a dedicated financing mechanism. Instead, it provides a common framework through which existing and future investments, programmes and partnerships can be aligned to address structural barriers to water security and ensure that resources reach those furthest behind.

Implementation horizon

The medium- to longer-term timeframe for delivery beyond the 2026 Conference. (Maximum 70 words)

The Charter is intended to operate beyond the 2026 United Nations Water Conference as a medium- to long-term framework for action, accountability and collaboration. It will remain open to endorsement and implementation by governments and stakeholders committed to dismantling systemic inequality and securing a fair water future for all.