Integrating human rights in the WASH agenda to leave no one behind in SDG 6. Expert consultation to WSSCC's Strategy 2021 - 2025 with OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, and civil society social justice networks engaged in High Level Political Forum.
In 2020, the world will celebrate Agenda 2030’s 5th anniversary and the 10th anniversary of the recognition of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation by UNGA as essential to the realisation of all human rights. The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights invited the Special Rapporteurs on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation and on the Right to Education and CSO networks engaged in UN policy advocacy platforms (Women; Children and Youth; Older Persons; Persons with Disabilities; Indigenous Peoples; Education and Academia; ESCR-Net and the Human Rights Institute, Columbia University) to discuss how to fully integrate the framework of the human right to water and sanitation in WSSCC’s Strategy 2021 - 2025 to support countries in the implementation of SDG 6.2: “By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations”. The key questions were: (1) How can we practically engage in-country with the furthest behind to include them in WASH and other essential services and reduce inequalities, ensuring societal support and mutual accountability? and (2) How can we ensure those who are most affected by poor sanitation and hygiene are meaningfully represented in policy and decision-making at national, regional and global levels?

Key interventions

James Wicken, Head of Global Policy Advocacy and Innovation, WSSCC

WSSCC is strengthening the rights-based approach to strategy and programming, and the cooperation with human rights mechanisms globally and in countries where we intervene. We step up our engagement with non-WASH actors to make ‘Leave No One Behind’ a real way of working and not just a catchphrase.

Craig Mokhiber, Director, OHCHR New York Office

Water and sanitation are human rights, not commodities for sale to those who can afford it. But the capture of the public sector by powerful private actors is closing the participation of those very rights holders who should benefit from adequate water and sanitation. But we’re not unarmed: we have human rights and the SDGs, the first human rights-based global development framework.

We have water defenders, social movements, CSO actors. And resources: in 2018 global military expenditure was 1.7 trillion dollars. So, it’s a question of capture of the rules of the game, to align them with human rights, rather than with narrow interests of wealth and power.
Leo Heller, Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation

Incorporating human rights is not an 'a la carte' menu, but a framework, whose elements apply together, to look at the most vulnerable, create participatory spaces, deal differently with information, work on accountability, and articulate all this together, in a comprehensive way. 2020 marks the 10th anniversary of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. What has the UN done to incorporate them in national frameworks? To operationalize this framework through a UN entity could be a benchmark, a showcase for other field actors.

Enrico Muratore Aprosio, Technical Expert, EQND, Gender and LNOB, WSSCC

To achieve SDG 6.2, we bring together WASH actors, human rights organizations, civil society groups at country, regional and global levels, to secure the benefits of sanitation and hygiene all, and confront the root causes of inequalities. We focus on UN official frameworks to ensure accountability on specific progress for those furthest behind.

Sally-Anne Way, OHCHR

The UN guidance LNOB: A UNSDG Operational Guide for UN Country Teams teaches us that LNOB is not just about reaching the poorest of the poor, it is about addressing the structural and economic reasons why people are excluded and discriminated against, why there are vast inequalities in water, education and all the rights. The questions are: 1) who is left behind, which groups; 2) why they are still left behind; 3) what should be done, and 4) who should do it.

Orsolya Bartha, Stakeholder Group for Persons with Disabilities

WSSCC provided data showing worldwide access to WASH services. Can you disaggregate these numbers by vulnerable groups and show how many are persons with disabilities, or elderly above a certain age, or women and girls? Data is extremely important, especially for VNR and the HLPF.
JoAnn Kamuf Ward Human Rights Institute, Columbia University

Disparity impacts more on communities of immigrants, therefore, many people who are lacking access are not necessarily citizens but are still entitled to the rights and the social protections.

Jennifer Rigg, Education and Academia Stakeholder Group

It’s critical for policy making bodies to truly engage in a really participatory way, going beyond a box-checking exercise, and making sure that everybody, not just citizens are able to participate at these policy making levels.

Koumbou Boly Barry, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education

I am ready and available to see the next steps after the roundtable, because if WSSCC and CSOs can support me with data and research, I will dedicate one of my next reports to the mutual influences of the human rights to water and sanitation, health and hygiene, and education.

Erica Dhar, Stakeholder Group on Ageing

We talk about racism and sexism, but we don’t talk about ageism. People over the age of 60 or 65 are told, sorry, we’re not collecting data on violence against women past the age of 49, therefore there are no services for you. So, I think using media is a very effective tool to address social bias.
Key messages and recommendations to WSSCC

1. 10 years after the recognition of the human rights to water and sanitation, we need to explore to what extent they were integrated by countries and in UN Country Teams’ work.

2. It is key to infuse the human rights framework into WSSCC’s agenda also as a benchmark for other actors in the field. Hygiene, particularly MHM, is a key entry point for the rights-based approach, to look at the integration of rights and showcase how nationally and internationally the interdependence of the rights can be mobilised and operationalised.

3. Leaving no one behind means going beyond WASH service provision, to address the structural reasons why people are still marginalized, excluded and discriminated against.

4. UNSDG LNOB guidance looks at people as rights-holders, and at governments as duty-bearers. Rights holders go beyond citizens. Many marginalized people are not necessarily citizens (migrants, refugees, stateless) but are still entitled to their human rights. Indigenous peoples should be acknowledged not as vulnerable groups but as indigenous people, to link directly to the UN Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

5. Leaving no one behind requires data disaggregation by gender, age, disability, and by vulnerable groups and the human rights based approach to data collection.

6. The concept of ‘capture’ of the functions of State needs to be integrated in WSSCC analysis and strategy. When engaging in public-private partnerships for SDGs, the risks for sectors like water, sanitation and education, need to be scrutinized.

7. WSSCC’s role is to facilitate informed participation of rights-holders, in processes affecting their access to WASH services. After inputs are received there must be a feedback loop, so that people who invested time in these processes know that this was worthwhile.

8. Stress must be placed on accountability and on working with High Level Political Forum and Voluntary National Reviews, and human rights mechanisms, Universal Periodic Review, Treaty Bodies and Special Rapporteurs, and sectoral mechanisms, Sanitation and Water for All, Joint Monitoring Program (JMP), Global Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS), TrackFin to support States in monitoring data/reporting on progress for those furthest behind.

9. Accountability goes beyond the circle of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and should reach the wider public, to promote social transformation. Communicating with the public and using media is key to change the mindset and allow structural change for rights.

10. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education requested WSSCC and CSO support to produce a report on the mutual influences of the human rights to water and sanitation, health and hygiene, and education.

The full report and film of the consultation are available at wsscc.org.

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