

A water secure world can only happen through the “long-term engagement of underrepresented groups across the water sector”

As of July 2010, access to clean drinking water and sanitation was recognised as a human right. However, more than a decade on, two billion people, equivalent to 25% of the global population, lack access to safely managed drinking water. In order to effect change, and improve the current state of access to clean water, as recognised by Secretary-General António Guterres in his opening remarks to the UN 2023 Water Conference¹ in closing the water management gap, “governments must develop and implement plans that ensure equitable water access for all people while conserving this precious resource”. As such, promoting a water secure world can only happen through the “long-term engagement of underrepresented groups across the water sector” with key decision-makers.²

Directly addressing this prerequisite to improve the current state of clean water access, the special event on water leadership: uniting for a sustainable world specifically, featured a cross-sectoral discussion, with the objective of amplifying the voices of often underrepresented groups, including youth, women, Indigenous Peoples and local government authorities, to help determine how to best unite across generations, geographies, sectors and cultures for a more sustainable world.

In India, almost 50-million-person hours were spent by women on water collection each day

Marginalised and underrepresented groups are undoubtedly disproportionately affected by the lack of access to clean drinking water. In particular, women and girls in many societies are responsible for collecting water, an activity which takes away valuable time, affecting their ability to study and/or work. For instance, a 2018 national survey in India revealed that of 64 million households in which women collected water from off-premises sources, almost 50-million-person hours were spent by women on water collection each day. Consequently, by failing to provide safely managed water and sanitation, women and girls are more vulnerable to security and health risks, especially due to stigma surrounding menstruation and therefore the ability to live in dignity. At the root cause of this disproportionality exists cultural norms, inequitable distribution of roles, resources and power, especially in developing countries, that pushes women out of decision-making roles. It should therefore come as no surprise that women are significantly underrepresented in water leadership roles where critical decisions on water and investment allocations of water are made. As a result, a vicious cycle exists whereby a reversal in a severe underrepresentation of women in water leadership roles is unlikely which subsequently leads to a dire and unjust situation failing to improve. However, in addressing the above, “ensuring that women have equal access to water resources and water and sanitation services, as well as ensuring that women are well represented as water leaders, policy makers and professionals, is essential for promoting water security and also accelerating progress on the sustainable development goals”.³

In attempting to increase the number of women in water leadership positions, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) state the following voluntary commitments: to better measure and track gender dimensions of women’s water insecurity, and women’s representation in water leadership and policy making roles, including the need for enhanced data collection efforts and establishing baselines; shared transformative practices which have good potential for scale-up and replication to enhance women’s leadership in water resilience and security; establish a multi-stakeholder platform, and an inclusion round-table to exchange ideas and views on how to accelerate women’s inclusion in water; and promote investments in gender equity in the water sector.

¹ United Nations, 2023a

² United Nations, 2023b

³ Silvia Cardascia, Water Resources Specialist – East Asia Department, ADB

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Despite the importance of underrepresented groups, such as women, the lack of political will to address the vast shortfall in underrepresented groups' engagement in water decisions is evident. Of 420 actionable commitments tabled with the SWA over the past five years, with approximately half coming from 55 national governments: 10 relate to gender (7 of which from civil society organisations); 7 relate to marginalised groups (all of which from civil society organisations); 3 relate to youth; and 0 relate to Indigenous communities. While 20 commitments established by governments relate to inequalities and leaving no one behind, underrepresented groups' engagement and inclusion in water decisions is critical to their achievement, as previously stated, throughout the solution design, development and implementation process can be considered essential.

Youth are critical to promoting a water secure world and “fundamental to the full development of [the Dominican Republic]”

Examples of youth engagement and inclusion throughout the solution design, development and implementation process are well documented. Nepal-based Drink Penny, for example, places youth at the centre by bridging the gap between water utilities and communities' information flow by focusing on cross-sectoral diagnostics, empowering youth to lead while collecting data, conducting analysis and reporting to support local water utilities. In addition, the Global Youth Movement for Water for instance, chaired by the ISW, is a coalition of 370 youth water sector organisations and allies aiming to support, empower and connect youth networks to provide solutions for important water, environmental and societal challenges and to be recognised active, capable, reliable and credible stakeholders and changemakers in decision-making and policy shaping processes with the ultimate goal of creating a water secure world for all. While Switzerland has recently committed to supporting the Global Youth Movement for Water for another 10 years, focusing on the global youth movement for water, many youth organisations are volunteer-based, urgently requiring financing, especially given the connecting role that youth play in solving local water issues, raising awareness around water issues, uniting across borders, sharing information and strengthening relationships amongst communities.

The valuable and enthusiastic role of youth, who recognised by UN1FY are “also want to be part of the solution”⁴, is therefore critical to not only promoting a water secure world, but as recognised in the Dominican Republic, “fundamental to the full development of our country”, whereby “the comprehensive full-fledged development of our country can only be done if we really involve women and young people in all the programmes”⁵. Following programme development with UNESCO, the Dominican Republic created a network of certified facilitators to roll-out an education programme across the country, including a space where children and young people can go to learn about water and river basins, with the aim of creating a generation that are committed to the environment, and who are prepared to mitigate the effects of climate change.

“By sharing power, we all gain more water solutions and innovations, not lose them”

In mitigating the effects of climate change, and addressing water insecurity, Indigenous Peoples' cultural sciences globally “can be the very mechanism, or the missing ingredient, for change, of the long-term management and sustainability of ... water”⁶. However, despite the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (no. 169), which mandates governments to consult Indigenous communities, Indigenous Peoples face great barriers to participation across the water sector, including a lack of trust in Indigenous knowledge and leadership, a failure to acknowledge the traumatic histories and current realities of Indigenous Peoples when collaborating, and a fear of giving up power, seats and change. As a result, “the barriers that have

⁴ Maria Mercedes Kuri, Regional Youth Focal Point, UN1FY

⁵ Olmedo Caba Romano, Executive Director of the National Institute of Hydrologic Resources of the Dominican Republic

⁶ Dr. Phil Duncan, Australian Rivers Institute

been created by the violation of [Indigenous] rights will not only create problems for Indigenous Peoples, but will create problems for all of us, because the solutions that [Indigenous Peoples] bring are the best solutions for all peoples and our planet”⁷. Therefore, it is essential that governments and societies recognise and value Indigenous knowledge, science and way of life regarding interactions with the environment and nature because “by sharing power, we all gain more water solutions and innovations, not lose them”⁸.

In attempting to erode existing barriers to Indigenous Peoples’ participation across the water sector, Indigenous Peoples’ rights must be fully upheld and implemented. However, it is not simply a case of abiding by rule of law, but there needs to be a cultural and societal behavioural shift towards a belief held by all that Indigenous issues are global, environmental and climate issues, where it is recognised that Indigenous Peoples are there to protect the environment for everyone. In addition, Indigenous Peoples’ opinions and perspectives must be heard, consulted and incorporated into policies, achieved through dialogue and discussion, especially at conferences and forums. As such, relevant pathways must be identified and created for young Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous communities to attend conferences and forums.

“The water sector does not understand, very well, the meaning of accountability”

Delivering on both existing and future commitments relating to the engagement of underrepresented groups requires strong accountability. However, as mentioned by Léo Heller, the second UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation between 2014-2020, “the water sector does not understand, very well, the meaning of accountability”. It is therefore important that key decisions makers consider the dimensions of understanding accountability, including: responsibility – the need to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of each actor; responsiveness – those responsible need to give adequate responses to demands in a proactive, accessible and understood way; and enforceability – people should be enforced to be accountable. More specifically, building accountability and creating an effective monitoring and evaluation process across the water sector should adopt a human-rights based approach where “water is a common, public good, one that must serve communities and be used in the interest of the community”⁹. As a result, any such process should include: local access to information and participation in public policy development; underrepresented groups’ participation in the policy development process, where governments consider, and listen to, the demands and needs of underrepresented groups; and the freedom to hold governments accountable should be available to all.

Indeed, national governments have received much criticism and intense scrutiny on their ability to turn commitments into action. When thinking about underrepresented groups, the following considerations can be adopted to ensure the follow-up process captures commitments: develop the necessary tools to enable access to important information; financial budgets should respond to the most fundamental needs; establish consultative groups to promote accountability regarding water obligations, where water rights groups and other marginalised groups are part of this process; among the most unequal services globally, WASH services require tailored policies, rather than treating a population as homogeneous; create multi-stakeholder platforms and spaces at the national level to ensure underrepresented groups’ participation to give a voice and platform to the most marginalised.

⁷ Janene Yazzie, Delegate, International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)

⁸ Brook Thompson, Yurok and Karuk Native American; PhD student, UC Santa Cruz

⁹ Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, current UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to water and sanitation

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Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that the participation of underrepresented groups, including youth, women and Indigenous Peoples are essential to promote a water secure world. However, the lack of commitments relating to underrepresented groups, which in turn is unlikely to promote underrepresented groups' participation and inclusion in water decisions, highlights the need for significant change, such as ensuring that women are well represented as water leaders, policy makers and professionals, recognising the power of youth through financing volunteer-based youth organisations, and valuing Indigenous knowledge, science and way of life.

The “long-term engagement of underrepresented groups across the water sector” is not only essential, it is rightful. Water is a “common good” for all, meaning that no one person or group, should be disproportionately affected by the lack of access to clean drinking water, or denied this basic human right. In a moment where global water insecurity intensifies, the voice of underrepresented groups must be heard and respected, represented at leadership positions and incorporated into policy decision-making. In closing the session, and to quote Amy Syvrud, Principal at Aither, “don’t stand in front of us, stand beside us. Don’t just hear, listen. Don’t stay quiet, speak up, and every action, just like every drop of water, counts. Together we can make a comeback, we can fill up the glass”.

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