



UN WATER



HUMAN RIGHTS
TO WATER AND
SANITATION



UNITED NATIONS



People gather water at the well in Dakhla Refugee Camp, Western Sahara. UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Access to water and sanitation are recognized by the United Nations as human rights, reflecting the fundamental nature of these basics in every person's life. Lack of access to safe, sufficient and affordable water, sanitation and hygiene facilities has a devastating effect on the health, dignity and prosperity of billions of people, and has significant consequences for the realization of other human rights.

People are rights-holders and States are duty-bearers of providing water and sanitation services. Rights-holders can claim their rights and duty-bearers must guarantee the rights to water and sanitation equally and without discrimination.

Challenges and opportunities

International human rights law demands a specific focus on those people who do not fully enjoy their rights, leading to explicitly 'pro-poor' development in many countries. It also requires a commitment to progressively reduce inequalities by tackling the discrimination and stigmatization that can lead to people being excluded from, or marginalized in relation to, water and sanitation access.

The 'human rights-based approach' stresses the correspondence between rights and obligations, providing a framework for Member States and other organizations that aims to ensure that respect for human rights are integrated into development plans at all levels.

What are the rights and what do they mean?

- The right to water entitles everyone to have access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use.
- The right to sanitation entitles everyone to have physical and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, and socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity.

Definitions

- **"Sufficient"**: The water supply for each person must be sufficient and continuous for personal and domestic uses. These uses ordinarily include drinking, personal sanitation, washing of clothes, food preparation, personal and household hygiene.
- **"Safe"**: The water required for each personal or domestic use must be safe, therefore free from micro-organisms, chemical substances and radiological hazards that constitute a threat to a person's health. Measures of drinking-water safety are usually defined by national and/or local standards for drinking-water quality.
- **"Acceptable"**: Water should be of an acceptable colour, odour and taste for each personal or domestic use. All water facilities and services must be culturally appropriate and sensitive to gender, lifecycle and privacy requirements.
- **"Physically accessible"**: Everyone has the right to a water and sanitation service that is physically accessible within, or in the immediate vicinity of the household, educational institution, workplace or health institution.
- **"Affordable"**: Water, and water facilities and services, must be affordable for all.



Facts and figures

- The human right to safe drinking water was first recognized by the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council as part of binding international law in 2010. ([UN, 2010](#))
- The human right to sanitation was explicitly recognized as a distinct right by the UN General Assembly in 2015. ([UN, 2016](#))
- Studies in Africa and Asia show that the poorest 20% of the population spend between 3 to 11% of their household income on water. This calculation does not include the cost of the time women spend on collecting water and managing water and sanitation facilities. ([UNDP, 2006](#)).
- Indigenous and tribal peoples care for an estimated 22% of the Earth's surface, and protect nearly 80% of the remaining biodiversity on the planet, while representing only 5% of the world's population ([ILO, 2017](#)).

Find out more:

[ILO: Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents through Decent Work.](#)
[Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation](#)
[OHCHR, UN Habitat, WHO: Fact sheet on Human Right to Water](#)

