



SANITATION AND WATER FOR ALL

Briefing Note on Human Rights and Systems Strengthening

Introduction

Water and sanitation services do not exist in a vacuum, neither do the systems upon which they rely. Beyond technical and financial challenges, there are wider political and integrity challenges that have a powerful impact on how services are accessed and by whom.

The human rights framework allows us to look at systems more broadly than is possible when considering water and sanitation as stand-alone development issues. Human rights aim to right the wrongs, to counter societal norms that may be discriminatory and perpetuate inequalities. This briefing note considers why it is critical to integrate human rights principles into the analysis and implementation of systems approaches, to ensure that services are equitable and sustainable.

Together with partners¹ from the Make Rights Real initiative, the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) global partnership has developed this briefing note² to accompany governments and development partners in evaluating how human rights principles can be integrated into their systems strengthening efforts. It also introduces the PASTE process for integrating human rights principles into systems strengthening approaches, where each letter represents a human rights principle: Participation, Accountability, Sustainability, Transparency and Equality and non-discrimination. This highlights and reveals where human rights principles can deepen planning and monitoring processes for systems for water and sanitation service provision.

Why integrate human rights principles into systems strengthening?


Despite significant efforts, billions of people still face the economic, social, health, discriminatory and environmental consequences of inadequate access to water and sanitation services.³ Historically, initiatives addressing these challenges have been fragmented across different institutions working on water, and on sanitation. They have focused on the construction of infrastructure or on policy reforms in isolation from each other and from the people in need of services. However, a transformative shift is underway—one that views water and sanitation as interconnected systems influenced by finance, governance, technology, and the unique environmental, social, and cultural contexts in which they operate.

The human rights framework likewise uses a systemic approach to identify and remove barriers to water and sanitation services for all. It highlights challenges of power, politics, and integrity and provides a lens to expose and address power imbalances and the resulting inequalities. Human rights principles, as defined in human rights law that UN Member States have agreed to, brings a level of authority and accountability.

Engaging with human rights in this way challenges the view that they are only a legal issue, to be enforced. Integrating human rights principles into systems approaches shows their role in guiding analysis to achieve services for all. These proactive efforts have often been overlooked or downplayed.

Human rights organizations and Special Rapporteurs⁴ on water and sanitation have done much work to identify and articulate how human rights standards and principles oblige governments to act on financing, legislation, planning, service delivery, and monitoring – and how governments that already do this often contribute to more effective and inclusive service delivery.

Recognizing water and sanitation as human rights helps to define what constitutes ‘adequate access’ and provides guidance in decision-making for financing, planning, implementation, monitoring and regulatory frameworks. For example, human rights terms, agreed by the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly eliminate

any ambiguity about the meaning of key concepts often used in systems strengthening processes, including ‘(substantive) equality’, ‘accountability’ and ‘(meaningful) participation’. The first  **UN Special Rapporteur’s handbook** on the human rights to water and sanitation clarifies how human rights principles can be integrated into ‘building blocks’.

Human rights rest on core principles: non-discrimination, equality, participation, access to information, accountability, and sustainability. These principles establish clear obligations that governments, as duty-bearers, must realize progressively. Critically, individuals must be able to hold them to account for their actions or inaction.

At the core of system strengthening within the water and sanitation sector is the understanding that all essential components for delivering water and sanitation services are interconnected and inseparable. These components, known as “building blocks,” include governance, financing, institutions, delivery mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, training, and capacity building. In simpler terms, each building block must be effective on its own, yet work in coordination with others to create an effective system.

However, this simplification, while useful for initiating planning processes, limits a deeper understanding of how systems function within political, cultural and social contexts.

Without a critical lens, well-intentioned reforms may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities rather than address them. Human rights principles play a crucial role by reintroducing political dimensions to “systems strengthening”. To achieve universal access to safely managed water and sanitation services, without discrimination, it is necessary to assess which systems are preventing progress, and which need to be strengthened.

This model has been utilized by SWA, UNICEF, IRC WASH and WaterAid among others to support governments and other partners in analysing how to improve services. Efforts have been made to include issues of equality and inclusion into these frameworks, generally by adding specific building block that addresses these issues.⁵ But as this briefing note explains, this is not sufficient, as equality and non-discrimination, and all human rights principles must be integrated into every aspect, into every building block.

Human rights principles act as a compass, guiding systems strengthening efforts to tackle inequalities head-on and ensure no one is left behind.

Systems strengthening building blocks include aspects such as governance, financing, institutions, delivery mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, training and capacity building. As these building blocks are not created within a mandatory framework, implementing governments, institutions and organisations adapt or prioritise them to reflect their own requirements. The systems strengthening building blocks are sometimes presented as value-neutral, or technocratic choices. However, system design and implementation are often shaped by broader political contexts and institutional priorities, which can influence how resources and responsibilities are allocated. In many cases, the absence of a policy may reflect competing priorities or capacity constraints. Recognizing this can open dialogue on how to elevate key issues through inclusive planning and targeted investment. There are often issues of integrity, trust, and power imbalances that exist within and between different levels of government, politicians, economic interests, and the public. Power dynamics contribute to the political choices of continued exclusion of certain individuals and groups from safely managed service provision.

Widening the development paradigm, challenging existing narratives

An appealing aspect of systems strengthening approaches is their apparent neutrality. They are non-controversial. However, there is a risk that without a critical lens, this can become simplistic and mask existing controversies. Human rights provide a compass to navigate ethical dilemmas that may unintentionally perpetuate inequalities.

For example, it is important that systems are efficient and effective, but they can contain power dynamics that mask where this efficiency harms certain population groups. By applying a human rights perspective, we can uncover how existing systems benefit certain individuals or groups while excluding others, ensuring that our efforts to strengthen systems do not unintentionally deepen exclusion. This is a difficult terrain for many

organisations to navigate, given existing power differentials, and the authority and obligatory nature of human rights can support stakeholders in providing robust arguments and accountability processes for challenges to those in power.

The most familiar of these are the systems of patriarchal power structures that exclude women and girls and others who do not fit traditional gender identities. Analysing water and sanitation systems from a gender perspective reveals significant impacts on women's rights. The most common argument in the water sector for challenging gender inequality focuses on the time savings for women who endure long travel or waiting times to collect water. While time savings for women are often highlighted, a more holistic gender lens reveals additional dimensions of inequality that merit attention in policy and planning.

Gendered engagement is entrenched in our societies and includes unpaid and underpaid work for the management of water and sanitation. Despite being foundational to the functioning of all societies, this unpaid work remains largely unrecognized in policy discussions. Moreover, gender-based violence relating to access to water and sanitation is systemic. A human rights lens of women's rights and gender equality can provide guidance.

Another example of this may be municipalities that work to improve services but fail to include people living in informal settlements or working in informal markets due to perceptions of illegality, impermanence and unsuitability for a modern city. The intent to improve services can, therefore, exclude many city dwellers from accessing essential services, perpetuating inequalities. In these situations, excluded populations will find their own generally inadequate and often burdensome provisional solutions. Ensuring opportunities for residents of informal settlements to engage in planning processes can support more inclusive and responsive service delivery across the urban landscape. Human rights provide useful insights into wider inequalities that impact access to water and sanitation.

Economic policies also warrant scrutiny through a human rights lens. For instance, when tariff increases are proposed to enhance economic efficiency, it is crucial to assess which households may be excluded from access as a result. Similarly, subsidy programs must prioritise reaching the most vulnerable populations, ensuring that financial support does not disproportionately benefit affluent households⁶. Without deliberate attention to

equality and non-discrimination, the system may unintentionally reinforce the status quo. Integrating human rights helps ensure that inclusion is actively pursued, not assumed.

A human rights perspective compels us to ask critical questions of how, and why, systems exclude certain populations. Addressing these questions is central to improving systems but also to ensuring that they serve as instruments of inclusion.

Using human rights to analyse barriers beyond the water and sanitation sector

The human rights framework provides a lens to examine systems more broadly than just considering water and sanitation as independent development issues.

Around 700 million people, 8.6% of the global population are living in extreme poverty of less than USD 2.15. Efforts to reduce this number have stalled.⁷ People living in rural areas and informal settlements, on the periphery of the 'formal' city, suffer from a lack of water and sanitation, as well as wider insecurity and exclusion – from markets, from health centres and educational opportunities. Over half of Nairobi's population live in informal settlements occupying only five percent of the city's land, generally situated in the most precarious places.⁸

There are no water and sanitation service options that can address these deeply entrenched inequalities without long-term public finance.

A human rights lens directs our attention to the need to address the root causes of poverty in order to improve access to services. Fixing the systems that cause poverty may be the best way to improve access to water and sanitation.

Existing narratives of 'willingness to pay' and 'cost recovery' that require households to cover the full cost for water and sanitation services must be fully interrogated to ensure human rights compliance with the affordability standard. This entails ensuring that tariffs are affordable and allow for equitable access to services, while also promoting the financial sustainability of systems.⁹

Recent reports from the African Investment Programme and the World Bank state that water and sanitation are funded mostly through public sources (86% of all finance) predominantly from tariffs and taxes. External funding—7% from donors, 2% from private investors, and 6% from other sources—makes up the rest.¹⁰ These funding sources often wield outsized influence compared to their size, with multilateral development banks still pushing for more private investment even though evidence suggests that public sector finance remains predominant. Significantly, for the implementing agency, public finance is cheaper than private finance, as it can function for the public benefit, without the profit motive.

This model is generally combined with conditions of 'de-risking' and government guarantees that tie up public resources. Further, these repayable loans are generally for infrastructure investments that tend not to benefit poorer households¹¹. If infrastructure investments underperform, there is a risk that financial shortfalls could shift the burden to public resources or user tariffs, disproportionately affecting lower-income households. Austerity measures may be introduced to recoup costs and public services will go underfunded, due to resources being dedicated to repaying loans.¹² Civil society voices are not always systematically included in infrastructure planning processes, especially where private financing is involved. Creating more structured engagement mechanisms could help ensure that long-term impacts are more equitably considered. A human rights lens reveals potential violations in the global financial system, by introducing the principles of participation, access to information and accountability.

The 2024 report by the **Global Commission on the Economics of Water** makes the point that viewing water and sanitation (and other public services) as common goods changes perceptions of how they are financed. This report also advocates for the restructuring of global financial systems to adapt current lending practices. **Governments need room to invest in vital services before repaying debts.** This suggests that alternative systems of financing must be considered to support governments in achieving their goals of universal access to water and sanitation.

Along with household contributions, government budgets remain the most significant source of funding for water and sanitation. There are a range of strategies that can be implemented to improve efficiencies in the sector, including through

preventing corruption in procurement; reducing non-revenue and unaccounted-for water; improving bill collection, particularly from institutions and businesses; increasing participation in decision-making and more equitable tariff structures.

However, as long as low-income countries remain indebted to external investors and are required to repay loans at market rates of interest – typically in foreign currency – the national budget available for water and sanitation will remain limited. Additionally, if these governments are unable to repay existing loans due to currency failures and other systemic financial issues, they will also struggle to attract further investment.

Integrating human rights into specific building blocks using 'PASTE'

The Make Rights Real consortium created a process for integrating human rights principles into systems strengthening approaches, known as 'PASTE'. Each letter represents a human rights principle: Participation, Accountability, Sustainability, Transparency and Equality (and non-discrimination). This is not to be understood as a route to exhaustive (and exhausting) checklists, but as a prompt for deeper engagement with all relevant stakeholders when discussing each of the building blocks.

In this example, the building block Finance has been



assessed using this PASTE process.

Finance and human rights are generally not discussed together. However, human rights principles are particularly relevant for discussions on finance, particularly for the aim of 'leaving no one behind'.

While the human rights framework includes clear expectations regarding the use of financial resources, financial planning processes have not always explicitly integrated these principles. Bridging this gap offers an opportunity for more inclusive and equitable service delivery. International treaties such as Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) require governments to use "the maximum of [their] available resources" to progressively realise human rights. This means they must make plans to comply with human rights using all their available resources, without discrimination, prioritizing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable individuals and groups. Where these resources are not available within the domestic budget, governments must look to external sources – including from other governments. Therefore, when planning public policies and budgets for water and sanitation, governments must keep in mind their human rights obligations and allocate resources accordingly.

To "PASTE" the human rights principles onto the Finance building block, there are clear considerations.

Meaningful Participation in financial decision-making processes is essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, and equality. It ensures that all stakeholders, including users and marginalised groups, can impact policies and resources in a manner that reflects their needs and priorities, leading to greater equality and sustainability in service delivery. One specific question relating to the text above is how civil society organisations are able to engage in discussions on types of infrastructure to be invested in, and the associated government guarantees for finance that will require long-term debt repayments to private sector investors.

Accountability ensures that the relevant institutions responsible for funding allocation and expenditure are answerable to the service providers, whether public or private, and to the communities they serve. Accountability requires access to justice and robust oversight systems from those entities accountable for managing financial resources. Again, in the example given in the text, governments must be held accountable for decisions on where and under what conditions they acquire finances, and for what purpose these finances are being secured and how decisions are made on the types of infrastructure that

is to be constructed.

The human rights principle of Sustainability seeks to ensure long-term access to these essential services, strengthening resilience and continuity in service delivery.

This includes environmental sustainability and climate resilient service provision, which must be costed into budgets both for construction as well as for operation and maintenance. When planning for cost recovery, the human rights standard of affordability must be applied to ensure users' ability to pay for water and sanitation services as well as for other human rights, such as housing, healthcare, education, food. This may mean that financial planning must consider sources of funding beyond the household to ensure a sustainable service,¹³ given the levels of poverty that many people are living with. Particular emphasis must be placed on the regular and long-term costs of operation and maintenance, which can often be more significant than initial construction costs.

The principle of Transparency and access to information ensures that financial stakeholders disclose their performance – both successes and shortcomings. This enables individuals and organisations to hold financial institutions or decision-makers accountable. Moreover, it serves as crucial safeguards against corruption and mismanagement, including in decision-making around the types of infrastructure to be constructed. Further, Transparency in finance requires civil society engagement at a time when civic space is increasingly restricted and receives limited funding.¹⁴ Funding directly to community-based organisations has shifted the needle on environmental justice movement building in many countries in Latin America and in South Africa.¹⁵

The principle of Equality and non-discrimination can be applied to all actors involved in financing water and sanitation services. Budgets must be allocated to provide water and sanitation services to all, regardless of background or circumstances. This includes prioritising finance for underserved areas and populations, as well as providing subsidies where needed.



Examining the building block of Regulation in the same way provides the following questions.

With respect to Participation, the regulatory framework must grapple with the existing situation rather than creating a framework based on an ideal. This means that regulators must engage with all stakeholders, including formal service providers, and the communities that they serve, the marginalised communities that do not have access to safe services and the informal service providers working in these areas. Participation involves regulators learning from the experience of service providers and communities and understanding their social, economic and normative motives. This participation is likely to also require regulators to face their own prejudices and perceptions, particularly around the handling of faecal sludge. This understanding will increase the likelihood of establishing effective rules, standards and incentives that can improve access to services rather than either blocking or criminalising service providers and communities that provide their own services. Individuals and communities can articulate their concerns and can hold relevant authorities accountable for their actions. Participation and mutual accountability help build trust between stakeholders, increasing voluntary compliance. Consequently, integrating the principle of participation bolsters the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of regulatory initiatives.

Accountability requires that regulatory frameworks provide clarity of the roles and responsibilities of different institutions and stakeholders to improve access to water and sanitation services. This regulatory framework must reflect the human rights standards of availability, accessibility, quality, affordability and provide mechanisms for people who are receiving substandard services to lodge complaints, and to receive remedies. However, the obligation to comply with these standards may not be used as a tool to criminalise either individuals or service providers that may be providing substandard services, but should rather be used to elicit useful and challenging conversations that will ultimately lead to improved service provision,

By integrating Sustainability into regulatory frameworks, actions and policies will not only be effective in the short term but also contribute to the enduring well-being of communities and ecosystems. Given the point mentioned above that for effective regulation, institutions and communities must start from where they are and work towards improvements, the principle of sustainability can provide useful guidance. How will it be possible to provide a better regulatory service that leads to immediate incremental improvements, and which continue to incentivize and support governments, service providers and people to scale safe services? Is compliance with regulatory frameworks feasible for all formal and informal service providers? How can service providers be supported to have the knowledge and capacity to comply? How could compliance be made easier? How is compliance currently valued, by service providers and communities? What could build its visibility and value? Considering sustainability in the face of environmental degradation and climate crises, regulatory frameworks must contribute to ensuring preparedness and resilience and to protect the environment and resources from pollution and overextraction. Sustainability, alongside the principle of Equality and non-discrimination – also frames the consideration of public finances.

The human rights principle of Transparency, incorporating the right to information is foundational in shaping regulatory frameworks within the water and sanitation sectors. Transparency is a prerequisite for the ability of individuals and groups to engage in the regulatory process and to hold decision-makers accountable. Regulatory actors must enable a culture

of transparency by providing relevant, objective, comprehensible, clear and consistent information that is available and accessible to all stakeholders in different formats and in the appropriate language and using appropriate images. Transparency and the proactive sharing and publicizing of information, can also be an important regulatory tool. For example, sharing standards with community groups enables them to act as surrogate regulators, holding service providers to account for the service that they provide.

Equality and non-discrimination requires that the regulatory framework enables safe services that can respond to the needs of all people, regardless of where they live and who they are. This will need to be considered in the tariff setting process, including the consideration of how mandated authorities are facilitated to apply cross subsidies between user groups and services, how affordability is determined, and the approach to tariff setting, specifically where social tariffs are required. In some locations this also entails the regulator providing additional protection for customers, for example by preventing disconnections for non- or late payment. This will also demand the adaptation of existing models of regulation that are designed to regulate formal service provision. The regulatory framework therefore has an important role to play in eliminating differences in access, especially for those in at-risk or marginalized groups. These can include specific measures for people in informal settlements, and affordability measures. Questions to ask include whether the regulatory framework fosters the development of inclusive infrastructure for vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities and whether coverage to areas that are currently under-served are prioritised.

This process of applying human rights principles should be applied to all building blocks. For example, using this PASTE process on a building block focusing on accountability requires governments to rethink, among other things, punitive approaches to behaviour such as open defecation, and how to regulate informal or community-based solutions that do not reach the required standards or by-laws, and to avoid further deepening inequalities. A rights-based approach encourages working collaboratively with all actors to address service gaps in a way that respects dignity and fosters long-term improvement.

How can different stakeholders engage in integrating human rights into systems approaches

The section considers the roles of different stakeholder groups in integrating human rights into any work that they may be engaged in on systems strengthening to ensure that everyone has access to water and sanitation. Considering systems strengthening with this human rights focus may demand changes in how stakeholders interact with one another. This is outlined below.

1. Governments

The State, encompassing national, regional, or local governments as well as the courts and justice system, serves as the primary duty-bearer for the realization of human rights and plays a pivotal role within all system-strengthening approaches. In this regard, governments should take the lead in organising and facilitating multi-stakeholder analyses and planning efforts, ensuring that these processes are institutionalized within existing governance structures at all levels, particularly at the local government level, which is responsible for guaranteeing access to water and sanitation services.

Much has been documented on this subject, including the UN Special Rapporteur's Handbook on the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation, which outlines essential government actions to establish an enabling environment aligned with human rights principles, such as planning, legislation, financing, service provision, regulation, and accountability mechanisms. SWA's work on the [🔗 Heads of State Initiatives](#) further underscores the critical and political role of governments in prioritizing and promoting water and sanitation services in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.

Considering the broader systems beyond the water and sanitation sector, governments are well-positioned to engage across ministries and various levels of governance that are responsible for water and sanitation, as well as for the protection and promotion of human rights. This engagement must, necessarily, involve exploring ways to

increase the budget allocated for essential services while ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders. The existing debt burden faced by many countries often limits the availability of funding for water and sanitation to the levels required. Effectively examining this finance system will necessitate collaboration between governments and pertinent financial institutions to achieve meaningful progress on water and specific systems, as previously mentioned. This constitutes significant human rights work, as it impacts not only the funding available for water and sanitation but also other vital human rights, including education, housing, and health.

2. Civil society

Rights holders can play various essential roles in the integration of human rights into systems strengthening through their active engagement. Civil society can be represented by residents' associations, social movements, unions, religious groups, women's organisations, community based organizations (CBOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs), all of which can serve as vital stakeholders in matters of planning, participation, access to information, complaints procedures, and other avenues for asserting their rights and holding government accountable. It is crucial to recognise that individuals do not need to possess citizenship or residency status to claim their human rights, which are universally accessible to everyone without discrimination.

Consequently, an understanding of human rights and the principles they encompass is essential for the meaningful involvement of civil society organisations when governments and other entities embrace a systems-strengthening approach. Moreover, mechanisms must be established to ensure that governments and other stakeholders are receptive to receiving feedback and complaints from rights holders. Any of the civil society actors can actively participate in the processes of systems strengthening.

3. External support agencies, including international donors, development banks and international NGOs

External actors, including bilateral donors and international UN bodies, play a crucial role in assisting governments to enhance systems at regional, national, or local levels. To ensure that these processes align with government obligations, it is vital for advisory and donor bodies to understand the human rights to water and sanitation that governments are obligated to uphold. This is especially pertinent for donor governments, which have human rights responsibilities toward recipient countries¹⁶.

These external actors must embed human rights principles into all facets of systems strengthening to guarantee that their efforts do not unintentionally exclude specific individuals or groups. Additionally, they must strive to dismantle systems that are likely to perpetuate exclusion.

NGOs and other domestic or external stakeholders frequently design initiatives aimed at local implementation. For this to be effective, NGOs must ensure that local governments are at the forefront of the systems strengthening process and actively engaged in integrating human rights principles into their work.¹⁷

4. Private sector actors – investors and businesses

The private sector plays various roles in both the delivery of water and sanitation services and in facilitating private investment.

When providing water and sanitation services, private sector providers are obligated to adhere to human rights standards, especially when operating under government mandates¹⁸. To ensure these obligations are met, governments must establish regulatory and accountability frameworks that align with human rights principles.

In evaluating potential investments in these services, several critical factors arise that determine the viability of a utility or service provider as an investment opportunity. Notably, not all segments of water and sanitation services are deemed investable or 'bankable.' Moreover, government intervention through legislation and policy often dictates pricing structures and the geographical areas designated for service delivery, which may incur significant costs.

These challenges necessitate careful consideration by the private sector when assessing a utility's creditworthiness and evaluating potential returns on investment.

Currently, conditions are placed on governments to 'de-risk' investments, making them more attractive to the private sector. However, for services such as sanitation, which have both high investment and high operation and maintenance costs, this can be a considerable risk if the end users are expected to pay the full cost. From a human rights perspective, this is problematic and may lead either to a risk of taking on an investment at the expense of relinquishing its own control or its budget, as well as passing the cost of the risk onto the poorer households who cannot afford to pay. Investors should be aware of these issues when providing the investment and setting the conditions for the finance.

5. Utilities and regulators

Utilities and regulators play a pivotal role in water and sanitation systems, serving as the primary implementers of these essential services and overseeing the accountability processes that ensure alignment with service standards and targets. It is crucial that human rights obligations, including the relevant principles and standards associated with the human rights to water and sanitation, are seamlessly integrated into contracts and operational processes, irrespective of whether the utilities and regulatory bodies are publicly or privately managed. These institutions are frequently mentioned under each of the building blocks within any systems-strengthening approach.

Regardless of whether utilities obtain public or private financing to fulfil their duties, they remain accountable for ensuring that these funds are utilised appropriately in line with human rights principles, as well as for guaranteeing that services are universally accessible to all.

This responsibility is particularly demanding in situations where financing is constrained, whether from government sources, household contributions, or others necessitating difficult discussions about the prioritisation of existing funds and the identification of additional resources.

Moreover, regulators must create an enabling environment that encourages innovation while simultaneously safeguarding consumer protections.

6. Others including researchers, academics etc.

There is already considerable research being conducted into the necessary conditions for enhancing water and sanitation service delivery, whether through system strengthening or various other approaches. Some of this research has already been referenced in this briefing note, and scholars continue to deepen their understanding of where, how, and why the sector is falling short in delivering water and sanitation services and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals targets. While the volume of research examining these failures is on the rise, a notable challenge is that these failures can often be obscured by the imperative to secure donor or alternative funding, which frequently necessitates demonstrating success before a project or program can be financed. Another concern is the manner in which this research is promoted and integrated into systems strengthening approaches, so as to leverage this valuable knowledge effectively.

7. The Sanitation and Water for All partnership

The section above has highlighted how different partners, depending on their constituency, can engage with the work of incorporating human rights principles into their strategies for addressing gaps in building blocks and strengthening systems.

However, the most significant action may lie in the collective, collaborative, and often complex endeavor of multistakeholder engagement and action, as represented by the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership.

Looking more broadly at the SWA partnership's multistakeholder efforts, discussions tied to the Heads of State Initiatives and high-level ministerial meetings (Finance Ministers' Meetings or Sector Ministers' Meetings) also present opportunities to address human rights in the context of system strengthening.

In the multistakeholder dialogues that countries are hosting to develop compacts for the Head of State Initiatives, conversations about institutional arrangements, financing, and infrastructure priorities are already taking place.

These discussions can be further enriched by considering participation, accountability, sustainability, transparency, equality, and non-discrimination for each focal area, which is essential for truly "leaving no one behind."

Similarly, SWA's high-level meetings, whether Finance Ministers' Meetings or Sector Ministers' Meetings, feature conversations surrounding building blocks and systems strengthening, tailored to the specific themes of the gatherings. These meetings frequently include Ministerial Dialogues, which provide an opportunity for candid discussions regarding the challenges faced by governments that prioritize water and sanitation in their policies, planning, and budgeting. Integrating a critical conversation on how human rights principles inform these plans is vital for realizing the human rights to water and sanitation.

Making the shift transformative

This briefing note has presented the case that achieving universal access to water and sanitation necessitates addressing issues of exclusion, corruption, and discriminatory power structures. Human rights principles must be at the core of strengthening these systems.

By considering factors such as participation, accountability, sustainability, transparency, equality, and non-discrimination in every building block, we can catalyse lasting improvements and tackle the fundamental drivers of exclusion.

Water and sanitation serve as crucial drivers of development; however, their potential is often undermined by systemic poverty and inequalities that permeate and persist within and between countries, issues that water and sanitation cannot rectify independently. By integrating human rights principles into our approaches to system strengthening, we can make a transformative shift towards a world where every individual can realise not only their rights to water and sanitation but also their rights to health, housing, education, and overall development.

References

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