



PALAIS DES NATIONS – 1211, GENEVA 10, SWITZERLAND

17 March 2023

**Open letter from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on
priorities for human rights-based water governance at the UN 2023 Water
Conference**

Excellency,

I have the honour to address you ahead of the commemoration of World Water Day and the start of the UN 2023 Water Conference.

Currently two billion people are without guaranteed access to safe drinking water and more than four billion are without basic sanitation. The Conference is a once in a lifetime opportunity to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and Sustainable Development Goal 6 in particular, to address the root causes of this water and sanitation crisis. I call for your support to ensure the following issues are the focus of the Conference, and beyond:

Water and sanitation are public goods, not mere commodities

Access to safe drinking water and sanitation are internationally recognized human rights ([A/RES/64/292](#)), derived from the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to health guaranteed under Articles 11(1) and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all means prioritizing the personal and domestic use of water for human beings as a public good, over industrial, commercial, or recreational uses. As all human rights are interdependent and indivisible, the promotion, protection, respect and fulfilment of the rights to water and sanitation support the achievement of all other human rights, along with the Sustainable Development Goals.

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All Permanent Representatives of
Member States and Permanent Observers of
non-Member States to the United Nations Office at
Geneva and New York

**Ensure accountability**

States are accountable to ensure that the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation are fulfilled. Their accountability also extends to ensuring that development agencies, public and private service providers, donors, and financial institutions comply with their responsibilities to protect individuals and communities from infringements on their human rights.

Pursue equality, non-discrimination and participation in water governance

People in situations of vulnerability and marginalization should not be overlooked or discriminated against in terms of access to water and sanitation. Effective water governance will ensure the needs of all segments of the population are addressed, including the most marginalized. To ensure strengthened outcomes for all, the inclusion and meaningful participation of grassroots movements, water defenders and those traditionally left out of decision-making in, and implementation of, water governance is crucial. Protection against intimidation, harassment and criminalization at the hand of public and private agents is equally important.

Echoing the theme of the World Water Day 2023 “Be the change”, I call on each one of us to play our part. As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 2023, my Office is ready to support your efforts to integrate human rights in all relevant discussions and outcomes of the UN Water Conference.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Volker Türk