

[TOPIC 4E]

Topic Concept Note

Thematic Process, 11th World Water Forum

- **Theme Number:** 4
- **Theme Title:** *Water Governance and Diplomacy*
- **Topic Number:** 4E
- **Topic Title:** *Engaging Unheard and Vulnerable Voices*
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I. Topic Overview

Rationale and Context

Access to safe drinking water and sanitation is internationally recognized as a human right. Yet those most exposed to water insecurity, particularly women and girls, youth, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, displaced populations, and communities living in fragile, conflict, and violence (FCV) contexts, remain largely absent from water-related decision-making, even where legal frameworks formally recognize their rights. This persistent exclusion reflects deep-rooted structural and power imbalances in the design and implementation of water governance systems, and is evident across diverse contexts. In the current global context, this challenge is particularly urgent in war-affected areas across West Asia and Africa, where water has, in many contexts, been instrumentalized as a tool of pressure, despite the specific protections for civilian water systems under international humanitarian law, including the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions. Attacks on water infrastructure, displacement, disrupted governance, and unequal negotiating power severely constrain access to safe water and sanitation, while often excluding affected populations, especially women, youth, and displaced communities, from decisions shaping response and recovery.

What uniquely distinguishes this topic is its emphasis on engagement as a core governance function, one that exerts sustained influence on decision-making, rather than treating engagement as a procedural requirement limited to consultations or sporadic dialogues. In this framing, unheard and vulnerable voices become integral to mechanisms of accountability, priority setting in financing, and institutional reform. This is particularly relevant across development, climate, and humanitarian sectors, where governance failures often have the most severe consequences. Evidence from community-led initiatives, including youth networks, women's organizations, Indigenous associations, and local civil society organizations, demonstrates that when engagement is initiated early, maintained continuously, and meaningfully integrated into decision-making processes, governance systems tend to align more closely with local realities. Such approaches strengthen accountability, enhance institutional responsiveness, and rebuild trust between governing authorities and affected communities.

Within this context, vulnerability, as defined by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), refers to the conditions shaped by physical, social, economic, and environmental factors that increase susceptibility to harm. While this concept is often applied to human communities, some of the most critical, unheard, and vulnerable “voices” in water governance are those of groundwater systems and ecosystems. Despite their central role in ensuring water security, climate resilience, and livelihoods, they remain largely invisible in policy debates and insufficiently considered in planning and allocation decisions. This invisibility renders them highly susceptible to overexploitation and degradation. Addressing these shortcomings requires governance frameworks that account for environmental and planetary boundaries while meeting immediate needs.

As water challenges deepen under the combined pressures of climate change and variability, environmental degradation, land-use transformation, and humanitarian crises, effective water governance and diplomacy increasingly depend on inclusive, rights-based, and context-sensitive forms of engagement. Valuing local and Indigenous knowledge, lived experience, and gendered realities alongside scientific and technical expertise is essential. Youth engagement plays a particularly critical role, not only because young people will live with the long-term consequences of today’s decisions, but because they contribute intergenerational perspectives, innovation, and leadership capacity.

By reframing meaningful engagement as a foundational governance function rather than a procedural step, Topic 4E directly advances SDG 6, particularly target 6.b, which calls to “support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management”. Moreover, it contributes to achieving other SDG 6 targets and reinforces broader sustainable development, climate, and peacebuilding objectives.

Objectives

The overarching objective is to strengthen inclusive water governance by ensuring that the knowledge, experiences, priorities, and lived realities of unheard and vulnerable groups are meaningfully reflected in water-related decision-making processes at local, regional, and global levels. Specific objectives are structured as follows:

1. Technical Objectives:

- Generate robust evidence on how water supply, water quality, sanitation, and climate-related risks affect marginalized and vulnerable groups, to inform actionable and context-appropriate solutions.
- Systematically integrate priorities identified by affected communities, including Indigenous, local, and traditional knowledge, into water management practices that ensure equitable outcomes and uphold the principle of leaving no one behind.
- Expand community-led data collection and monitoring capacities through citizen science and just participatory approaches.
- Recognize and incorporate groundwater systems and ecosystems as governance-relevant entities within water governance and diplomacy frameworks.

2. Policy and Institutional Objectives:

- Advance water governance frameworks that institutionalize equity, meaningful engagement, and rights-based principles, including the human right to water and sanitation, across development, humanitarian, and fragile contexts, in line with applicable International Humanitarian Law standards related to water access in conflict-affected settings, while ensuring transparency and accountability.
- Ensure the systematic inclusion of vulnerable groups' perspectives and priorities in water policy development, planning, and resource allocation processes, with particular attention to populations living under ongoing armed conflict in West Asia and Africa.
- Support institutional reforms that address structural power imbalances and enable grassroots actors to participate as co-creators in water governance, aligning these reforms with humanitarian WASH policies and related frameworks.
- Strengthen inclusive water governance approaches in conflict-affected and war-affected contexts, including protection-oriented, conflict-sensitive, and community-led mechanisms that ensure affected populations shape water and WASH decisions during response, recovery, and peacebuilding.
- Advocate for conflict-sensitive approaches that ensure populations affected by armed conflict can meaningfully participate in decisions on water and sanitation management and governance, while strengthening accountability for attacks on water infrastructure in line with international humanitarian law.

3. Capacity-Building and Knowledge Objectives:

- Strengthen the capacity of communities, particularly youth, through formal and non-formal education, skills development, and learning on water rights, sanitation, climate resilience, and water governance, to enable effective engagement in policy dialogue and advocacy.
- Institutionalize and embed meaningful youth engagement in accordance with UNESCO's Water Youth Strategy, by shifting from event-based participation to structured, continuous engagement across agenda-setting, co-design, implementation, and follow-up processes spanning generations and governance levels.
- Enhance mechanisms for knowledge exchange by recognizing community storytelling, responsible media and social media engagement, digital tools, mentorship, and creative approaches as legitimate policy inputs, while simultaneously building institutional capacity for continuous learning and adaptive feedback.

II. Key Issues, Opportunities, and Scope

Key Challenges

- A central challenge in water governance lies in the persistent systematic exclusion of affected communities from decision-making processes. Planning and management processes of water and sanitation systems are frequently dominated by technical experts, political actors, and private or industrial interests. In contrast, communities most affected by water insecurity, pollution, and inadequate sanitation are consulted only superficially, or not at all.
- Weak institutional mechanisms for engaging community-based organizations further constrain inclusive governance. Youth groups, women's associations, workers' collectives, Indigenous Peoples, and local civil society organizations often lack structured and accessible platforms to contribute to water-related policy design and oversight. Although these groups possess rich local knowledge and lived experience, their insights rarely translate into higher-level decision-making because of barriers such as limited access to technical language and relevant information, as well as exclusion from formal governance processes.
- Practical factors, including language barriers, travel and participation costs, digital connectivity, and uneven awareness of rights and accountability mechanisms, further limit the ability of many groups to participate meaningfully. These challenges are often amplified by low levels of trust between communities and authorities, shaped by past experiences and perceptions of inadequate service delivery within complex public-private governance contexts.
- Populations living under ongoing armed conflict face a distinct and compounded set of exclusion challenges that demand specific and urgent attention. In contexts including, but not limited to, Gaza, Lebanon (particularly South Lebanon), Sudan, Yemen, Syria, the DRC, and the Sahel, water infrastructure, and in some cases, water operators, have been attacked, damaged, or destroyed, in direct violation of International Humanitarian Law. As a result, displacement, insecurity, and the weakening or collapse of governance institutions often deprive affected populations of a meaningful role in shaping water and WASH responses. Girls and women, children, and displaced communities bear a disproportionate burden of water insecurity in these settings, yet remain among the least represented in decision-making. Emergency responses frequently bypass meaningful participation, prioritizing speed over inclusion and leaving affected communities as passive recipients rather than active agents. Restoring and protecting water access in these contexts is therefore not only a humanitarian imperative but also a prerequisite for meaningful engagement in governance.
- Institutional capacities to sustain inclusive participation remain weak, with engagement tending to be project-based, fragmented, or reactive, rather than continuous and embedded across the policy cycle.

Opportunities and Strategic Importance

When participation is early, structured, and continuous, governance outcomes improve: policies become grounded in lived realities, accountability mechanisms are reinforced, and trust between institutions and communities is rebuilt. Significant opportunities exist to institutionalize participation through formal mechanisms at local, national, regional, and global levels, supported by clear mandates, defined roles, and links to budgets and accountability frameworks. Community-based monitoring and citizen science, when supported by accessible digital tools, can connect experiential knowledge with technical data, enhancing transparency, responsiveness, and the ability to measure service delivery outcomes and equity impacts. Leveraging existing community organizations, co-designing water and sanitation initiatives, and ensuring participatory planning processes strengthen local ownership and ensure that investments reflect community priorities. Combined with targeted capacity-building, particularly for youth and women, and inclusive communication strategies that guarantee access to relevant information, the aforementioned measures can transform participation from consultation into sustained influence embedded in long-term governance, financing, and policy frameworks.

In West Asia and Africa, there is a strategic opportunity to further recognize and strengthen the role of conflict-affected communities as active contributors to governance and recovery processes, rather than solely as recipients of humanitarian assistance. In these contexts, local civil society organizations, women and youth groups, and community networks have demonstrated significant resilience and operational capacity under challenging conditions. Supporting and formalizing their role in WASH governance, through protection measures, conflict-sensitive engagement frameworks, and dedicated funding streams, represents a key opportunity for the international water community.

Proposed Priorities of the Topic / Guiding Questions

This topic positions equity, inclusion, and accountability at the core of water governance. It seeks to strengthen the capacities of unheard and vulnerable groups to influence decisions that shape their water and sanitation futures through enhanced understanding of water-related rights, technical and governance capacity-building, and institutionalized representation at all stages of decision-making, from local to global levels. Co-design and dialogue platforms linking communities, authorities, service providers, civil society, and the private sector are essential to reducing power imbalances, rebuilding trust, and systematically integrating local and Indigenous knowledge into planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Guiding questions include:

- How can engagement be structured to ensure sustained influence rather than one-off participation?
- How can youth and vulnerable groups, including Indigenous Peoples, be recognized and supported as knowledge holders, rights holders, and governance partners?
- How can inclusion be effectively linked to accountability, service delivery, and equitable access to water and sanitation?

- How can lessons and best practices be shared across regions to support replication, scaling, and long-term impact?

Proposed Sessions of the Topic

All sessions under this topic are highly recommended to adhere to the principles of meaningful participation. This will prioritize, wherever feasible, the direct, in-person involvement of unheard and vulnerable voices themselves, ensure linguistic accessibility, and enable hybrid participation to overcome logistical barriers. Sessions will be organized as power-aware and safe spaces, supported by skilled facilitation that prevents tokenistic engagement.

The following session directions were identified through participatory discussions and contributions from topic coordination group members (see Appendix A for reference of all raw ideas suggested by the group members):

- **Making the Unheard Heard - Policy and Institutional Frameworks:** High-level dialogue on human rights, institutional reform, and accountability mechanisms to embed the meaningful engagement of unheard and vulnerable voices in water governance.
- **Making the Unheard Heard - Evidence, Practice, and Innovation:** Research- and practice-oriented session examining how participatory, qualitative, and community-based approaches translate inclusion into better outcomes, including documented evidence from conflict-affected contexts in West Asia and Africa.
- **Hearing the Unheard:** a storytelling and dialogue space centered on lived experience from grassroots communities, civil society actors, and local champions, particularly those living under ongoing armed conflict in West Asia and Africa (Gaza, South Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, the DRC, and the Sahel), as well as the broader fragile, conflict, and violence (FCV) contexts. This session will explicitly create space for the voices most systematically excluded from global water governance forums.

III. Expected Outcomes and Deliverables

Policy and Strategic Outcomes

- Institutional recognition of vulnerable groups as governance partners, supported by commitments to inclusive participation, transparency, accountability, and clear mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, and follow-up.
- Actionable principles and policy recommendations to institutionalize equity, rights-based approaches, and meaningful participation of unheard and vulnerable voices in water governance across development, humanitarian, and fragile contexts.
- Concrete opportunities for engagement of marginalized communities and organizations, including through the acknowledgment and endorsement of existing initiatives such as the Humanitarian WASH Roadmap Call to Action, to strengthen inclusive and effective WASH responses in humanitarian and FCV contexts.

- Specific policy recommendations recognizing the distinct governance needs of populations living under armed conflict, including the protection of water access and WASH services, accountability for attacks on water infrastructure and operators, and the integration of conflict-sensitive community participation frameworks that enable affected communities to shape water and WASH decisions even in highly constrained environments.
- Youth engagement recommendations, endorsed by the Forum and aligned with UNESCO's Water Youth Strategy, defining minimum standards for meaningful youth participation in water governance, including roles, safeguards, and implementation mechanisms.
- Policy guidance to consolidate the participation of girls and women, including Indigenous girls and women and those living in fragile and conflict-affected settings, in water governance, and to safeguard progress against regression.

Technical and Knowledge Deliverables

- Development of practical tools and guidance for inclusive water governance, including community action plans, training modules, and toolkits on rights awareness and advocacy, and community-based monitoring frameworks.
- Production and dissemination of knowledge products (case studies, participatory maps, testimonies, and lessons learned) that document effective approaches to engaging unheard and vulnerable voices in policy and practice.

Partnerships and Financing Outcomes

- Strengthened multi-actor partnerships linking communities, youth and women's networks, Indigenous organizations, authorities, researchers, and private sector actors to advance inclusive governance and implementation.
- Increased alignment of financing with locally identified priorities, catalyzing donor and institutional support for long-term, community-led engagement beyond short project cycles, with emphasis on humanitarian contexts.
- Qualitative, and where relevant, quantitative, outcome-level indicators, including institutional commitments to formalize community participation, adoption of participatory monitoring tools, and creation or strengthened partnerships led by marginalized groups.

Actions and Initiatives for Implementation

- Launch of capacity-building and pilot initiatives that demonstrate co-design, participatory planning, qualitative and participatory research, and monitoring of water and sanitation solutions with vulnerable groups.
- Establishment of follow-up and accountability mechanisms to ensure Forum outcomes translate into sustained action, partnerships, learning processes, and tangible improvements in water governance systems.

Communication and Visibility

- Development of strategic communication outputs highlighting lived experience, community solutions, and inclusive practices using non-tokenistic, accessible, and multilingual formats.
- Widespread dissemination of outcomes through Forum platforms and partner networks, linking inclusive governance to improved service delivery, trust-building, and long-term water security.

IV. Monitoring and Post-Forum Action

The outcomes of this topic will collectively form a legacy of actionable frameworks, evidence, and institutional commitments on inclusive water governance. These contributions will be consolidated into a set of knowledge products, such as policy recommendations, frameworks, and case studies, for use by governments, humanitarian actors, civil society, and communities. By embedding principles of equity, participation, and accountability, the topic aims to reinforce the Forum's role as a lasting catalyst for systemic change. In line with UNESCO's Water Youth Strategy, post-Forum follow-up mechanisms will include youth-led monitoring, constituency feedback sessions, and the tracking of a selected set of indicators assessing youth participation and influence across governance levels. These outcomes will also feed into preparations for the 12th World Water Forum, shaping future thematic priorities, participation models, and session design related to inclusion, youth engagement, and governance. At global, regional, and basin levels, follow-up activities will support ongoing UN and regional processes related to water, climate adaptation, SDG 6, and humanitarian WASH, aligned with established international standards and roadmaps. Sustainability will be further supported through partnerships that enable pilot initiatives, joint research, monitoring of WASH funding allocation, and policy dialogue.

V. Proposed Cross-Process Dialogue Areas

Dialogue ideas that could be developed jointly with other topics and themes:

- Inclusive Governance for Climate and Crisis Contexts (jointly with topics 1B and 3A): embedding community participation, accountability, and local knowledge into climate resilience, humanitarian WASH, and emergency water governance.
- Equity, Gender, and Youth in Water Investment and Innovation (jointly with themes 2 and 5): aligning water financing, project design, and technological innovation with gender equity and youth inclusion.
- Basin-Level Governance and Community Knowledge Integration (jointly with topics 1C and 3C): incorporating community and Indigenous knowledge into basin-level resource planning, allocation, pollution control, and ecosystem protection.

Dialogue ideas that could be developed jointly with other processes:

- Ministerial-Parliamentarian-Community Dialogue on Institutionalizing Inclusion (Political-Thematic Processes): a high-level dialogue on embedding equity, meaningful participation, and accountability into national water laws, policies, and investment frameworks, with concrete commitments beyond the Forum.
- Multi-Level Governance Dialogue with Local, Regional, and Basin Authorities (regional-Thematic Processes): a dialogue on practical mechanisms to integrate marginalized voices into water service delivery, sanitation, and climate adaptation, linking local experience to national and regional decision-making.

Regions where topic 4E should be particularly discussed (in collaboration with the regional process):

While the issues addressed by Topic 4E are globally relevant, certain regions face heightened vulnerabilities that demand focused attention:

- Fragile, Conflict-Affected, and Post-Conflict Contexts (Global): including humanitarian and displacement-affected settings where access to safe water and sanitation is constrained, and water resources management is often shaped by disrupted governance and unequal negotiating power. In such contexts, meaningful participation of affected populations is essential for effective and dignified WASH responses. These contexts are particularly prevalent in Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, the DRC, and the Sahel.
- West Asia and North Africa: characterized by acute water scarcity, high dependence on non-conventional water resources, demographic pressure, and socio-political sensitivities, where marginalized communities, migrant populations, and youth often have limited voice in water governance.
- Sub-Saharan Africa: including rapidly growing cities, informal settlements, rural and peri-urban areas, and fragile contexts where water scarcity, inadequate sanitation, pollution, and limited institutional inclusion disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, particularly women and youth.
- South and Southeast Asia: high population density regions facing recurrent floods, droughts, pollution, and rapid urbanization, especially in coastal cities, riverine settlements, and informal urban fringes, where community adaptive knowledge is critical for resilience.
- Small Island Developing States (SIDS): highly exposed to climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and extreme events, with limited adaptive capacity and strong dependence on inclusive governance to ensure water security.
- Transboundary River Basins and Aquifers (Global): shared water resources where upstream-downstream dynamics and asymmetric influence in decision-making often marginalize local and Indigenous communities, highlighting the need for inclusive, multi-level governance mechanisms.

- Indigenous Territories (Global): areas in the Americas, Pacific, Africa, and Asia, where Indigenous communities face increasing water quality degradation, extractive pressures, and limited recognition of customary rights, despite holding deep ecological knowledge essential to sustainable water governance and ecosystem protection.

Appendix A

Below is the raw list of sessions suggested by various group members and organizations:

- Community Voices in Action: Youth-Led Monitoring and Advocacy for Clean Water and Safe Sewage Systems in Informal and Light-Industrial Areas.
- Beyond Concrete and Pipes: Excavating Social Infrastructure for Water Resilience in Future Megacities (Reflections from Nusantara).
- Social Connections: How to engage the vulnerable in providing service delivery.
- From Consultation to Shared Decision Making (this session could aim at bringing together community representatives, policymakers, and practitioners to discuss practical ways to embed unheard and vulnerable voices into water governance processes and translate participation into concrete policy and investment outcomes).
- Women and water: a women-led approach to water management and water solutions. A case study of the Blue (Zarka) Initiative as a model for women's empowerment in the water sector in Saudi Arabia
- From lived experience to policy action: using photovoice to amplify WASH needs and accountability in humanitarian settings
- Rethinking Youth Engagement in Global Water Governance.
- Youth and Innovation.
- Turning Commitments into Action: Youth-Led Pathways for the UNESCO Water Youth Strategy
- Youth Shaping Water Futures in Conflict and Fragile Contexts.
- Voices Unheard: Co-Designing Water Solutions with Marginalized Communities.
- Hearing the Unheard: Local Realities on a Global Stage.