

Topic Concept Note Template

Thematic Process, 11th World Water Forum

- **Theme Number:** 4
- **Theme Title:** *Water Governance and Diplomacy*
- **Topic Number:** 4D
- **Topic Title:** *Towards Holistic Water Advocacy and Public Awareness Programs*
- **Topic Coordinator:** *Water Mediation Institute (Sophie Bhalla)*

I. Topic Overview

Water governance is increasingly challenged by competing demands on finite water resources, and climate-induced disasters, requiring societies to navigate difficult trade-offs between environmental sustainability, food security, livelihoods, and equitable access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Agriculture, the largest global water user, illustrates this dilemma: In many regions, irrigation practices are environmentally unsustainable, yet they remain essential for rural livelihoods and national food security. At the same time, millions of communities (particularly in rural and peri-urban areas) still lack reliable access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, placing disproportionate burdens on women and girls, who often bear responsibility for water collection, hygiene, and household water management. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires more than technical solutions. It demands inclusive, evidence-based dialogue and public engagement that acknowledges trade-offs, economic realities, and social impacts.

At the global level, climate change is intensifying floods, droughts, and water scarcity, amplifying risks in shared river basins and aquifers. Regionally, fragmented governance frameworks, mismatches between administrative boundaries and hydrological systems, and limited data-sharing continue to undermine cooperation among sectors and across borders. Locally, communities experience differentiated impacts shaped by socio-economic conditions, gender inequalities, and access to decision-making processes. Examples from across the globe show that basin-level platforms, participatory policy instruments, and strong science-policy-society interfaces can help address contested issues (such as water allocation between irrigation, ecosystems, and drinking water, and conflicts of priorities between water uses, river basin environment and flood control) when supported by transparent data, inclusive processes, and sustained public awareness. The 11th World Water Forum provides a unique global platform to consolidate these experiences, move beyond fragmented advocacy efforts, and translate dialogue into coordinated, scalable, and action-oriented pathways for inclusive water governance and diplomacy.

This topic directly supports SDG 6, particularly targets on integrated water resources management, equitable access to safe drinking water, and transboundary cooperation, while

contributing to SDG 2 (water-smart food systems), SDG 11 (inclusive and resilient cities), SDG 13 (climate adaptation and mitigation), SDGs 14 and 15 (ecosystem protection), and SDG 17 (partnerships). It integrates key cross-cutting dimensions by embedding climate resilience into basin-scale decision-making; promoting gender and youth inclusion, with particular attention to the needs of women and girls; leveraging digital innovation and open data for transparency and trust-building; strengthening partnerships across sectors and scales; and aligning financing mechanisms to support cooperative and long-term water sustainability. Through holistic water advocacy and public awareness programs, this topic elevates water as a shared societal priority and a foundation for inclusive water governance and diplomacy.

Objectives of the Topic

The objective of this topic is to advance action-oriented and initiative-driven outcomes that strengthen water governance by elevating water through education, civic engagement, inclusive dialogue, and broad public awareness platforms. The topic aims to improve how water challenges, risks, and trade-offs are communicated and understood across society, supporting informed participation and trust-building among stakeholders with diverse interests. At the policy and institutional level, it seeks to promote and institutionalize inclusive consensus-building processes that connect local voices with national and transboundary decision-making, particularly in contexts of competing water demands and low institutional trust. From a capacity-building and knowledge perspective, the topic aims to strengthen water literacy across generations, empower women, youth, and marginalized groups as active water stewards, and facilitate peer learning and exchange of practical approaches that translate awareness into collective action and more resilient water governance outcomes.

II. Key Issues, Opportunities, and Scope

Key Challenges

- **Low institutional trust and fragmented governance**, limiting meaningful dialogue and cooperation across sectors, administrative levels, and borders.
- **Limited water literacy and public awareness**, including weak understanding of water risks, trade-offs, and the links between daily practices, ecosystems, and long-term water security. This includes declining awareness as issues are resolved.
- **Inadequate public awareness tools**, which are not inclusive, poorly adapted, or not fit for the social, cultural, and educational contexts of communities.
- **Insufficient inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups** in water advocacy, education, and decision-making processes, despite their central roles in water use and management.
- **Competing demands and difficult trade-offs** among water uses (e.g. drinking water, agriculture, ecosystems, energy, flood control) and users, often shaped by economic dependencies, food security concerns, and climate pressures.

- **Weak coordination** and duplication of initiatives, resulting in fragmented awareness campaigns, short-lived engagement, and limited policy impact.

Opportunities and Strategic Importance

- **Rising global and regional momentum** for integrated, basin-based water governance and inclusive decision-making within water, climate, and development agendas.
- Growing demand for **participatory governance** models that address competing water demands, rebuild trust, and incorporate social, economic, and gender dimensions into water policy.
- Expanding use of **digital platforms, media, and social networks** to amplify water advocacy, facilitate dialogue, and connect local experiences with national and global processes.
- Strong potential to scale successful **education and awareness** initiatives through schools, universities, community networks, and civil society organizations.
- Alignment with **gender equality and youth empowerment** agendas, creating opportunities to strengthen leadership and stewardship roles for women and young people in water governance.
- Availability of **climate, sustainability, and development finance** that can support coordinated advocacy, capacity-building, and long-term public engagement for water resilience.

Proposed Priorities of the Topic / Guiding Questions

1. How can water advocacy and public awareness programs effectively mobilize society to take action on water sustainability?
2. What strategies best bridge science, policy, and society, ensuring that complex water challenges are understood and addressed collectively?
3. How can education and youth engagement be strengthened to build long-term water literacy and stewardship?
4. What mechanisms foster inclusive stakeholder dialogue across sectors and administrative levels, particularly in contexts of low institutional trust and competing water demands?
5. How can women, youth, and marginalized groups be meaningfully included in water decision-making and advocacy initiatives?
6. What role can digital platforms and social media play in raising awareness, facilitating dialogue, and amplifying local voices?
7. How can awareness and advocacy efforts be coordinated and scaled, avoiding duplication while linking local, national, and transboundary initiatives?
8. How can public engagement and advocacy translate into actionable policy proposals, collective action, and improved water governance outcomes?

Proposed Sessions of the Topic

Session 1: From Awareness to Action - Media, Civic Engagement, and Water Stewardship

This session explores how media, storytelling, and broad public awareness platforms can elevate water as a shared societal concern and mobilize collective action. It will examine how to bridge gaps between science, policy, and society by translating complex water challenges into accessible and compelling narratives. The session will highlight the role of traditional and social media in shaping public understanding, amplifying grassroots voices, and empowering women and youth as active water stewards. Comparative case studies will showcase how coordinated advocacy efforts can move beyond fragmented campaigns to influence policy processes at local, national, and global levels. Case studies will include among others citizen science initiatives and community engagement research projects to demonstrate impact and scalability.

Session 2: Building Water Literacy for the Future - Education, Youth, and the Blue Curricula

This session focuses on strengthening water literacy through education systems, with particular emphasis on schools, universities, and youth-led initiatives. It will explore how “blue curricula” can integrate physical, technical, social, and political dimensions of water, while addressing persistent knowledge gaps. The session will also examine the opportunities and risks of social media as an educational tool and discuss experiential and hybrid learning approaches that connect scientific knowledge with everyday water practices. Special attention will be given to gender-sensitive education and the role of water advocacy in improving access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene, particularly for girls.

Session 3: Navigating Trade-offs and Rebuilding Trust - Facilitating Dialogue on Contested Water Issues in Agriculture

This session addresses how to foster dialogue, participation, and consensus in contexts of competing water demands in agriculture. Using examples such as irrigation livelihoods versus long-term ecosystem protection, the session will explore how to acknowledge economic dependencies, low institutional trust, food security concerns, and historical legacies while working toward sustainable water allocation. It will highlight participatory approaches, multi-stakeholder platforms, water mediation tools, and basin-level dialogues that enable actors from different sectors and scales to co-create solutions, rebuild trust, and translate dialogue into collective action.

Synthesis: Aligning Efforts, Scaling Impact - Coordinating Water Advocacy Beyond the Forum

This synthesis session will consolidate insights from the topic’s discussions to identify how education, civic engagement, and stakeholder dialogue initiatives can be better coordinated and aligned rather than duplicated. It will focus on creating synergies across sectors, governance levels, and regions, linking local and grassroots initiatives with national, regional, and global water processes. Particular emphasis will be placed on post-Forum outcomes, including the identification of priority actions, partnerships, mapping outcomes against existing global initiatives, and follow-up mechanisms to sustain momentum beyond the World Water Forum.

The session aims to support the transition from dialogue to implementation by fostering coherent advocacy pathways that translate awareness into durable policy influence and improved water governance.

III. Expected Outcomes and Deliverables

Policy and Strategic Outcomes

The topic will produce concrete, action-oriented policy recommendations on strengthening water advocacy, education, and inclusive stakeholder dialogue as core components of water governance. These recommendations will be consolidated and elaborated during the synthesis session, drawing on insights from all topic sessions and cross-sectoral discussions. A dedicated note-taker will systematically capture key messages, points of convergence, and proposed actions, ensuring that diverse perspectives are reflected. Following the Forum, these insights will be synthesized into policy memos and strategic briefs to be shared with policymakers, basin organizations, and relevant stakeholders.

Technical and Knowledge Deliverables

The sessions will generate knowledge products such as synthesis notes, methodological guidance, and learning materials on effective water advocacy, public awareness, and inclusive stakeholder dialogue. Deliverables may include toolkits or methodologies for water literacy, community engagement, and hybrid learning approaches that blend scientific knowledge with local experience. Where relevant, existing digital platforms and visualization tools will be documented to support transparent communication and shared understanding of water challenges. In addition, the topic will feature comparative case studies from different regions showcasing successful water advocacy and public awareness approaches, including examples of education initiatives, media engagement, and participatory dialogue that have contributed to improved water governance outcomes.

Partnerships and Financing Outcomes

The topic will facilitate new and strengthened partnerships among governments, civil society, academia, media organizations, and international institutions to support coordinated water advocacy and education efforts. Opportunities will be explored for collaboration with development banks, climate funds, and philanthropic actors to align financing with inclusive, basin-scale water governance and long-term public engagement. The discussions will highlight financing models that incentivize cooperation, capacity-building, and just transitions in water-dependent sectors.

Actions and Initiatives for Implementation

Concrete follow-up actions and initiatives will be identified, such as pilot water advocacy programs, basin-level dialogue platforms, education initiatives, or youth- and women-led networks. The topic will encourage the development of joint roadmaps, memoranda of

understanding, or coalitions to sustain collaboration beyond the Forum. These initiatives will aim to translate awareness and dialogue into measurable governance improvements and collective action on the ground. An example will be a coalition of water conflict resolution specialists led and initiated by the Water Mediation Institute.

Communication and Visibility

The topic will contribute clear, accessible key messages on water stewardship, trade-offs, and shared responsibility for use in public communication and media engagement during and after the Forum. Outcomes and insights will feed into Forum declarations, summaries, and outreach materials, helping elevate water governance and advocacy within broader policy and public debates.

The topic will promote innovative, youth-driven communication approaches to increase the visibility of the World Water Forum and its key messages. A short social media video competition will be launched and showcased during the Forum, linked to Session 1 (Media, Civic Engagement, and Water Stewardship) and Session 2 (Education, Youth, and Blue Curricula). The competition will invite youth, students, and young professionals to create short, creative videos that capture Forum discussions, events, and initiatives. This initiative will enhance public engagement, extend the reach of Forum outcomes beyond official sessions, and demonstrate how digital platforms can be leveraged to communicate water action and collaboration in dynamic and accessible ways.

IV. Monitoring and Post-Forum Action

Outcomes from the sessions will be captured, synthesized, and shared as policy briefs, toolkits, case studies, and digital knowledge platforms to support evidence-based water governance. Follow-up initiatives will include pilot water advocacy programs in schools and communities (session 2), multi-stakeholder dialogues on contested water issues (session 3), youth- and women-led networks for water stewardship, and collaborative roadmaps linking local action with national and transboundary policy processes (session 1). Progress should be tracked using measurable indicators such as improvements in water literacy, participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in governance processes, and adoption of participatory tools or dialogue mechanisms by local or basin authorities. Results will be shared at the 12th World Water Forum and contribute to global agendas, including SDG reporting and climate negotiations. These efforts will strengthen the Forum's long-term legacy, inform preparations for the 12th World Water Forum, contribute to global agendas including UN SDG reporting and climate negotiations, and sustain multi-stakeholder partnerships, knowledge-sharing, and monitoring mechanisms for adaptive, inclusive water governance.

V. Proposed Cross-Process Dialogue Areas

- Link Session 1 & 2 to **5D Engaging Citizen Science and Community-Based Knowledge & 4E Engaging Unheard and Vulnerable Voices:**
A joint dialogue exploring how citizen-led data collection, traditional knowledge, and participatory digital tools can be integrated with education and media campaigns to strengthen water literacy, amplify marginalized voices, and support locally-driven water stewardship. The discussion could feature case studies where youth, women, and Indigenous communities co-designed monitoring tools or community water dashboards, highlighting how their insights inform both local decision-making and global water governance agendas. Nora Fayssal is a group member of 5D and can facilitate connections.
- Link Session 3 to **1E Securing Water for Food Security:** A dialogue connecting participatory decision-making on contested water uses (drinking water, irrigation, ecosystem protection) with sustainable agricultural practices. Sophie Bhalla, who is both the 4D topic coordinator and a member of the 1E coordination group representing the MG360 Groundwater Research Institute, will facilitate cooperation between sessions. Session 3 can explore how multi-stakeholder platforms reconcile food security needs with climate-resilient water governance, using case studies and interactive simulations to examine trade-offs and collective decision-making strategies.
- Link to **Basin Authorities:** A joint dialogue designed to equip basin authorities with practical tools and methodologies for mediating water governance conflicts. The session would focus on strategies to engage diverse stakeholders (including local communities, agriculture, industry, and environmental actors) where priorities may conflict, fostering inclusive decision-making, trust-building, and collaborative trade-off solutions. Case studies could showcase successful basin-level dialogue platforms and highlight the role of citizen science, digital tools, and participatory monitoring to support transparent, evidence-based decision-making.
- Link to **Local and Regional Authorities:** A dialogue with municipal, regional, and parliamentary representatives on how water literacy campaigns, media engagement, and participatory education can strengthen public awareness and advocacy at the local level. This could include sharing experiences from successful “blue curricula,” youth-led initiatives, and digital storytelling to engage citizens in water stewardship while connecting local action with national and basin-level policies.

- **Regional Focus for Collaboration:**

India: The topic should focus on media and curricula for water literacy, building on existing youth engagement, school programs, and digital platforms. India presents an opportunity to showcase how large-scale awareness campaigns can be integrated into formal education, civic engagement programs, and community-driven advocacy, with lessons applicable across South and Southeast Asia. Optional Second Region: Sub-Saharan Africa could be targeted for dialogue on basin-level advocacy and inclusive water governance, particularly in transboundary basins where trade-offs between agriculture, drinking water, and ecosystem needs are pressing.