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Water Politics: Empowering Youth, Women, and Indigenous and Local Communities

WORKING DOCUMENT

Section for External Relations

Water Politics: Empowering Youth, Women, and Indigenous and Local Communities
(own-initiative opinion)

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For the attention of the study group members

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1 ...

2. **General comments**

- 2.1 This own-initiative opinion is a follow-up to the EESC opinion on blue diplomacy¹ – a central part of the EESC’s initiative to call on the EU to focus more efforts on water and to create a Blue Deal to increase water-related security, resilience and sustainability, both within the EU and globally². As the European Commission has postponed the publication of its water resilience initiative³ without committing to a new date, this opinion also continues to build on the momentum that is sounding the alarm for the urgent need of thorough and comprehensive action for water resilience.
- 2.2 As highlighted in the blue diplomacy opinion, protecting rivers, lakes, wetlands and aquifers, and securing adequate, accessible and affordable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services are imperative for public health and human development. Water is crucial to human life, with the UN recognising access to water and sanitation as a fundamental human right. However, global water problems and risks are increasing due to both the unsustainable management of water resources and the climate crisis. Soaring population increases (the result of high birth rates or migration from other countries) also increases water stress in some areas. In view of these developments, water has emerged as a key strategic asset.
- 2.3 Water politics cannot be considered in isolation, given that water is an intrinsic part of food, energy and industrial production, and is interlinked with health, climate and environmental issues. Moreover, it has prominent gender, intergenerational and intercultural dimensions. Water is an indispensable component of all the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Agenda 2030.
- 2.4 While there are significant water stress hotspots within EU borders, the wideness and seriousness of global water stress requires global action and solutions implemented through international cooperation. Water-related problems in foreign countries also affect the EU (at least indirectly), and give the EU a strong incentive to actively and systematically address water issues through its external relations and international partnerships.
- 2.5 It is therefore obvious that intensive blue diplomacy in the EU is essential for promoting global sustainability and security. This calls for strengthened measures to prevent and resolve water-related problems, tensions and conflicts. Cooperation aimed at sustainable water management is the main approach to prevention. This is particularly important in the case of transboundary

¹ OJ C, C/2023/862, 8.12.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/862/oj>.

² OJ C, C/2024/878, 6.2.2024, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/878/oj>.

³ Initially due on 12.3.2024.

water bodies and shared water resources. In this way, water can become an instrument of peace rather than conflict.

3. Scope and framework

- 3.1 Young people, women, and indigenous and local communities are among the most vulnerable and often suffer the most in water stress hotspots. From this perspective, they must receive greater attention as targets of new water strategies and policies and international cooperation. The aim is to provide them with adequate, accessible and affordable WASH services and a healthy living environment, which are essential for their social development. The same applies to people with disabilities.
- 3.2 These groups also have a huge potential to contribute to sustainable water management and water-related conflict prevention and resolution. They can serve as crucial actors and agents, and should be recognised at both the decision-making and grassroots levels.
- 3.3 The means and measures for protecting these groups, improving their living conditions in water-stress areas, and further unleashing their potential to act and influence are primarily the same for all groups. First and foremost, proper access to WASH services provides more opportunities for a better life without the need to struggle with water scarcity, poor hygiene or other water-related problems. This applies to women in particular.
- 3.4 Education and skills development are also essential for enhancing economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development. This applies particularly to youth but also to women and indigenous and local communities. While proper access to water frees up their time for education, education increases their ability to contribute to water management. A wide set of education and training opportunities must be available to respond to the wide range of water-related skills needs, from basic skills to high-level professional competences, depending on the circumstances and ambition.
- 3.5 Young people, women, indigenous and local communities and people with disabilities are not, however, mere targets of education and training efforts. These groups have specific skills, knowledge and experience that can help improve water management and policy-making. This amplifies the importance of involving them in policy planning and implementation processes. To this end, decision-making structures need to enable true interaction and involvement, beyond mere top-down information or one-sided bottom-up consultation.
- 3.6 Young people, women, indigenous and local communities and people with disabilities can be involved in blue diplomacy in two ways: I) through participation in ‘formal’ diplomacy between government actors, and II) through connections among civil society actors. Until now, their participation has mainly come from the latter. It is important to further strengthen this kind of ‘informal’ blue diplomacy, but at the same time connect it with government-level diplomacy. This can ensure that the voices of organised civil society are actually being heard, and its views taken on board.

- 3.7 New technologies provide useful tools for both improving water management and empowering underprivileged groups. Innovative blue technologies offer new means to prevent water scarcity and pollution and prepare for water-related risks, be they climate-change-induced extreme weather conditions or intentional damage. Digital technologies are an increasingly essential part of these solutions. Moreover, digitalisation provides more inclusive approaches to education, communication and participation, and thus contributes to empowering youth, women and local communities.
- 3.8 While improved living conditions and the empowerment of these groups enhance sustainable development and stability in water-stress areas, they also contribute to the EU's strategic position. Furthermore, they provide the EU with growing opportunities for new partnerships in the fields of education, infrastructure, technology and business.
- 3.9 As conditions and challenges vary across regions, cooperation must always be tailored to individual circumstances. In some areas the problem is drought, while in other areas it may be flooding or pollution. Local conditions regarding levels of development must also be taken into consideration. The needs and possibilities of people living in mountainous areas, islands and small and isolated villages without proper access to water are highly different from those in more developed areas.
- 3.10 In this opinion, specific attention is given to the severe water scarcity in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as this is an alarming situation that well reflects global challenges.
- 3.10.1 Besides being a continent with severe water problems, including transboundary tensions, Africa deserves particular consideration as it is the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, and as such, the challenges and problems Africa faces will sooner or later affect the EU. For example, water scarcity and related conflicts are likely to generate massive migration flows from Africa to the EU. In addition, migration flows also target water-stress areas and thus amplify the pressure on them. This highlights the complexity of climate- and water-induced migration, and requires the EU to address it proactively. On the other hand, Africa provides many opportunities for the EU in terms of economic partnerships. Given that other global powers, notably China, are actively taking a foothold in Africa, cooperation with Africa is undoubtedly a matter of utmost importance for the EU's economic and geopolitical security.
- 3.10.2 However, the EESC underlines that water challenges are of a wide, diverse and complex nature. While drought is also a growing problem on other continents, many countries in Asia and Latin America, as well as certain island countries, are exposed to frequent floods of a life-changing scale. Finding sustainable solutions to help those affected receive early warnings and be equipped with urgent response practices is vital not only for saving lives, but also for contributing to helping exposed communities survive and pull through, while still being able to thrive.
- 3.10.3 The deteriorating quality of water is another important problem, as it endangers the source of living for local communities in many areas. Transboundary rivers often carry pollutants from one country or region to another, which not only affects numerous people's living conditions but also causes tensions between countries.

4. Recognising the needs and potential of youth, women, indigenous and local communities and people with disabilities

4.1 Unleashing the potential of youth

4.1.1 Of today's global population of 8 billion people, around 1.8 billion are between the ages of 10 and 24, and this number is increasing⁴. Given that the vast majority of this group lives in developing countries, making up a large proportion of their populations, young people are of crucial importance as both targets and actors in water politics.

4.1.2 An increase in population means an increase in the pressure on water resources. This highlights the need to improve access to water, and consequently the importance of sustainable water management. While young people expect proper living conditions and an outlook for a positive future in terms of professions and jobs, they are also willing to contribute to the positive development and resilience of their communities and countries. They are often agents for change and drivers of economic, social and environmental progress.

4.1.3 With respect to policy-making, young people have the potential to challenge existing structures and procedures and bring novel ideas. They can also help suggest innovative solutions for WASH services, water management and access. Moreover, they are able and willing to network across borders, and thus strengthen international cooperation.

4.1.4 However, there are several obstacles to the active engagement of young people in water-related activities and governance, such as the following.

- Hierarchical and non-representative structures – young people are often excluded from the decision-making processes on water issues that have profound effects on their lives.
- Formalism – whenever young people are included in the decision-making process, their opinions are often disregarded.
- Technocratic barriers – as water issues often require specific knowledge and technical expertise, those who lack them may have difficulties participating in water governance discussions.
- Language barriers in international cooperation – as the documents and consultations often require knowledge of EU procedural languages (mostly English, but also French and German).
- Limited opportunities for capacity building.
- Fragmentation between youth initiatives and movement.

4.1.5 To overcome these and other obstacles, young people need, first and foremost, possibilities for education and training. This requires sufficient resources in terms of teachers available in local communities. It also requires possibilities for young people to access higher education. On top of formal education, networking deepens learning by enabling the exchange of knowledge and experience.

⁴ <https://www.un.references/sustainabledevelopment/youth/>.

- 4.1.6 Besides water-related competences, young people should be provided with general citizenship skills to be better able to influence and effectively participate in water management and policy-making. This is also necessary from the point of view of preparing for the future, considering that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. In addition, they should be provided with entrepreneurial skills and encouraged and supported to establish enterprises, thus contributing to employment.
- 4.1.7 Case 1: Help Uganda's young people and women become educated, skilled, fed, watered and safe, in order to secure a new generation inspired by faith, hope and love, and transforming their communities⁵. With its population expected to double in the next 20 years, Uganda has 22 million children under 14 years old (49% of the population). This is increasing the demand for employment, food and livelihoods, pushing more and more young people into poverty. However, only 1 in 3 children are making it to secondary school, and 1 in 10 to higher education. 34% of girls in Uganda are married before they are 18 years old, even though it is illegal to marry before 18 years of age. Teenage pregnancy rates are extremely high, and are driven by poverty and lack of education.

4.2 Empowering women

- 4.2.1 Exposure to water stress around the world mostly affects women and girls, as they traditionally bear the main burden of collecting water. Figures show that:
- as those responsible for 72% of daily household water supplies⁶, women spend 200 million hours collecting water every day⁷;
 - the average water load amounts to 30 kg of water carried every day – often in multiple trips to the source and back⁸;
 - young girls (under 15 years old) are twice as likely to be responsible for supplying water for the household than boys, exposing them to attacks and preventing them from attending school⁹;
 - while walking many kilometres and waiting in long lines, women are likely to experience harassment when searching for water across long distances from isolated spots.
- 4.2.2 There is scientific evidence that empowering women in this field allows them to take greater control over their lives at personal, household and community levels, which in turn uplifts communities, because:

5 <https://fieldsoflife.org/why-east-africa/>.

6 UN Women.

7 [Collecting water is often a colossal waste of time for women and girls](#), UNICEF.

8 FAO.

9 UNICEF.

- improved access to water for irrigation allows women to grow crops and provide more food for themselves and for their families;
- better access to water frees women from the obligation to invest time and efforts in supplying water and enables them to engage in other activities, e.g. education, entrepreneurship, jobs, culture, personal development and leadership, which subsequently increases their potential to increase their income;
- better access to water and sanitation improves reproductive health and childcare.

4.2.3 To free women and girls from focusing solely on fulfilling the basic needs of their families in water-stress areas, more advanced means for access to water are of fundamental importance. Depending on individual circumstances, this may involve drilling wells for common use, or more advanced water and wastewater infrastructure systems. Access to education and various learning opportunities are another pillar for empowering women. This is part of ensuring better gender equality in general, which is often the most difficult challenge, as it is related to culture and community attitudes.

4.2.4 While gender equality is a human rights issue, it is also essential for unleashing the full potential of populations to enhance economic, social and environmental progress. As women are often responsible for ensuring that everyday activities run smoothly and that different needs and resources are compatible with each other, they have good starting points for the sustainable management of water resources and blue diplomacy. This applies to both practical-level water management and political-level decision-making and diplomacy. More women should therefore be encouraged and supported to seek a career in this field.

4.2.5 Women and girls should also be encouraged to acquire entrepreneurial and leadership skills to unleash their potential to lead in politics, businesses, the third sector and any other organisation that contributes to sustainable water management and water diplomacy. In addition, it is important to support women to network in these fields at all levels, from local to international.

4.2.6 Case 2: The Women in Water Diplomacy network in the Nile¹⁰, and Women in Water Management in Central Asia and Afghanistan¹¹. The overarching goal of the former network is women's empowerment and leadership in high-level decision-making in transboundary basins. The work is based on five pillars: gender and youth empowerment in transboundary water decision-making; peer-to-peer learning capacity development and experience exchanges; research cooperation; linkages to basin, regional and global processes; and the cross-cutting pillar of process support. The latter network promotes the participation of female professionals in water in decision-making in the water sector and gender mainstreaming in water governance.

¹⁰ [The Women in Water Diplomacy network in the Nile | SIWI – Leading expert in water governance.](#)

¹¹ [Women in Water Management in Central Asia and Afghanistan | SIWI – Leading expert in water governance.](#)

4.3 Engaging indigenous and local communities

- 4.3.1 Indigenous people account for 5% of the world’s population, and they occupy, own or manage approximately 20-25% of the earth’s land surface¹². Indigenous people are among the first to face water-related problems due to their wide-ranging reliance on natural resources and ecosystems. They are especially vulnerable to the effects of water risks in food security, such as the effects on fisheries, hunting or grazing opportunities for livestock. These problems are often related to droughts or floods, while in the Arctic area, the climate-change-induced melting of ice prevents the ability to move on ice, and thus limits possibilities for hunting.
- 4.3.2 Indigenous people usually have a long-lasting and deep relationship with water and wetlands, and unique knowledge on how to preserve, protect and use them in a sustainable way. This knowledge, which they transfer across generations, must also be seen as a source of inspiration to be explored and used in many other contexts.
- 4.3.3 While water stress increases insecurity and conflict risks, indigenous people have conflict-resolution mechanisms that are rooted in their collective responsibility to protect water resources for future generations. Through their knowledge and experience on both water and conflict management, indigenous people have significant potential to contribute to decisions and solutions regarding sustainable water management and water diplomacy.
- 4.3.4 Despite advances, there is a lack of concrete platforms for meaningful engagement between indigenous groups and national or local governments, and decisions at the international level do not often consider indigenous peoples’ perspectives, knowledge or solutions. There is therefore an obvious need for dialogue in order to build long-term relations, deeper trust and mutual respect between governments and indigenous communities, including women, young people and those of all age groups.
- 4.3.5 Systematically involving indigenous people is the best way to ensure that their human rights are respected, and that the potential of these groups is fully exploited.
- 4.3.6 Case 3: Turning trees into water¹³. In the Peruvian Andes, indigenous communities are reviving ancient knowledge and water practices to protect their way of life and restore vulnerable mountain ecosystems. During the Quenua Ryami Festival, indigenous communities in the Cusco region of Peru plant tens of thousands of quenua seedlings a day on the steep slopes of the Andes. Quenua trees are fast-growing, resistant to cold winters and can survive altitudes of up to 4 500 m above sea level. In addition to regulating the climate and preventing erosion, what makes these trees so invaluable is their ability to store and filter the water that feeds springs and wetlands downstream. As climate change disrupts rainfall patterns in the Andes, the trees are helping residents and ecosystems to become more resilient.

12 <https://siwi.org/publications/indigenous-people-water-and-climate-change/>.

13 https://library.panos.co.uk/features/stories/seeds-of-water.html#0_00337302.

5. Partnership opportunities for the EU

- 5.1 The EU plays a central role in addressing global water stress through its external relations and international partnerships. Based on its advanced legal framework, technological capacity and major role as a donor in this field, the EU can contribute widely to the sustainable management of water resources, access to water and sanitation, education and training, water governance and conflict resolution. In this context, the EU can also make use of its experience in enhancing gender equality and participatory policy-making, including youth engagement.
- 5.2 Sub-Saharan Africa has emerged as a focal point for blue diplomacy due to its special demographic, geographic and political conditions. As Africa's destabilisation due to water stress is likely to spill over to the MENA region and the EU, and lead to food and migration crises, Europe's proactive stance is a *sine qua non*. It is imperative that the EU develop a comprehensive Africa strategy, of which blue diplomacy will be an indispensable part.
- 5.3 Lake Victoria, Lake Chad, and the basins of the Nile, Niger and Congo rivers are water-stress hotspots, requiring urgent attention in order to protect the environment and prevent climate and water disasters that could trigger new conflicts and migration waves towards Europe.
- 5.4 In light of the challenges in water-stress areas, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, and the risks and opportunities they entail for the EU, the EESC recommends a **lighthouse partnership programme** to be established for at least one case area in Africa, to cover the various elements of empowerment in an integrated way. The EESC recommends the following.
- Cooperating and supporting the development of water and wastewater **infrastructure** and related services, in order to improve access to WASH services. Due attention should also be paid to environmental impacts in this context.
 - Supporting local education capacities and facilitating student exchanges with the EU, in order to promote **competences and skills** needed in sustainable water management and blue diplomacy. Specific efforts should be focused on education for girls and women.
 - Cooperating in **blue technologies**, in order to contribute to the sustainable management of water resources, with the aim of improving the quality of WASH services, water efficiency, pollution control and the security of water supply. Local conditions should be properly considered in technology choices.
 - Enhancing conditions and capacities for creating local business, in order to promote **entrepreneurship** and employment. Specific support should be targeted towards young and female entrepreneurs.
 - Establishing cooperation with local policymakers and various groups, in order to enhance **participatory policy-making and blue diplomacy**. This multi-stakeholder interaction should aim to empower young people, women and indigenous people to prevent and solve water problems and conflicts.
 - Cooperating in developing digital infrastructure and connections, in order to make use of the opportunities provided by **digitalisation** in water management, education and communication. This should be accompanied by efforts to develop local communities' digital skills.

- Involving the **EU's civil society organisations** in the programme, in order to enhance grassroots-level knowledge and experience-sharing. Full use should be made of current cooperation structures.
 - Allocating sufficient **funding** to the programme, including for the development of infrastructure, education, multi-stakeholder dialogue and business, in order to ensure the implementation of the above measures.
 - **Monitoring and assessing** its implementation and impacts, with a view to upscaling the programme in the future. The main focus should be on the results regarding youth, women, and local and regional communities as both targets and actors in water management and politics.
-