




# All Systems Connect

Uniting experts and activists to  
address the challenges of  
social justice



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This briefing note provides key insights and calls to action emerging from the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023 . The social justice theme shared lessons and strategies for advocating human rights from civil society and academic activists in Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

The note sets out why we need to understand WASH through a social justice lens; it summarises the outcomes and actions from the symposium's social justice track and concludes with actions to underpin the work of international WASH sector actors, and steps ahead for IRC, Water For People and Water For Good through our One For All alliance.

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# All Systems Connect

## Uniting experts and activists to address the challenges of social justice

### **WASH challenges from a social justice perspective**

The distribution of power and resources (wealth, opportunity, capability) is fundamentally unequal at the local, national and global levels. All our work happens in a systemically unjust world in which access to power and resources – and to water security and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services – remains divided by race, class, gender, disability, nationality, and geography, both within and between countries. Injustice is built into the global economic systems, with a profound absence of monetary, fiscal and political sovereignty throughout the Global South.

Water security and water and sanitation services are essential to combat poverty and inequality, and to restore human dignity and safeguard human health and wellbeing. Water, sanitation and hygiene is core to the social justice agenda. Because access to water security and WASH services is stacked in favour of wealthier, more powerful actors, special measures are needed to foreground (and safeguard) the rights of people and groups who

are marginalised from access, and from meaningful participation and decision making.

Social justice actions seek to dismantle systems that perpetuate injustice and to address inequalities and discrimination based on race, gender, disability, socio-economic status and other grounds. WASH social justice means taking action to improve water security and WASH services and to do that in a way that takes account of and strengthens human dignity, and tackles the systemic roots of inequality, poverty and marginalisation.

We are barely at the foothills of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attainment. Injustices prevail despite justiciable (founded in law) human rights, because it is the poorest and most marginalised who are least able to claim or realise their rights or hold duty bearers accountable, often because they are not seen or treated as legitimate participants by public or private actors. They are excluded from formal participation and accountability processes in the countries where they live, and from global decision-making processes and engagements.

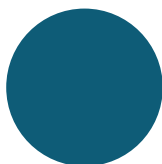
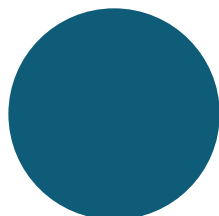
Even where they are invited, marginalised groups seldom have the resources or capacity to engage in public consultation processes, which are often opaque, technical, and not in their home language. Additionally, civic space is increasingly repressed, and human rights defenders face criminalisation, victimisation, surveillance, and assassinations when they oppose states or state-sanctioned private actors.

Justiciable human rights are only the beginning. While communities often lack the resources or opportunities to participate in governance, their persistent efforts to hold states accountable are crucial. It is the **agency and actions** of communities that activate legal and policy frameworks and political promises.

Rather than “leave no one behind”, we must put rights-holders in front.

“Communities are constantly speaking out their demands, but they are just not being heard”

– Kelebogile Khunou  
Socio-Economic Rights  
Institute of South Africa (SERI)





“For citizens to engage, we need safety, resources and more transparency and accountability”.

**Gabriel Gustavo Belloni Rocha**

Organising Coordinator

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Project  
(ProDESC), Mexico

# All Systems Connect International Symposium

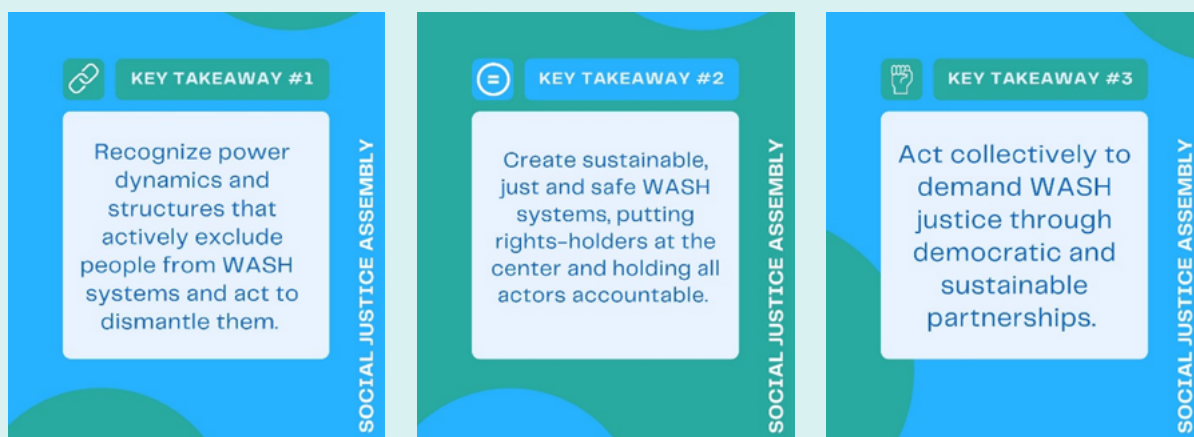
In May 2023, the All Systems Connect International Symposium brought together experts, activists, and decision makers to think and act differently in our pursuit of delivering safe and sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene services. Despite the relationship between social justice and sustainable, inclusive WASH provision, there is currently inadequate connectivity between social justice movements and defining WASH systems strengthening from a social justice lens.

## Connect Social Justice

**End Water Poverty** convened a thematic programme around social justice<sup>1</sup>, during which civil society actors and experts from across the world highlighted the need to dismantle the power structures that exclude rights-holders and to emphasise the empowerment of those most affected by a lack of safe water and sanitation.

As former UN Special Rapporteur on rights to water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, stated in her opening plenary address read by Muyatwa Sitali, Head of Country and Partner Engagement at Sanitation and Water for All: "Systems built on inequality such as race and patriarchy must be constantly dismantled and challenged. That is why we are here."

The social justice thematic programme shared strong examples and lessons from communities claiming their economic, social, and cultural rights (to WASH, housing and a safe environment); their civil and political rights (voice); their rights to work and to make a living, and gender justice, all of which strengthen WASH systems. These were all brought together in an Action Assembly, which agreed on three key takeaways:



<sup>1</sup> This section adapts a summary of the Connect Social Justice highlights, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

People and groups are not marginalised accidentally, they are actively excluded by systems of power, and systems that create these exclusions must be disconnected and de-powered. All actors, especially those with global influence, need to challenge the norms, regulations and practices that keep groups of people at the margins. The way we support all communities to realise their rights to safe water and sanitation will determine whether social justice outcomes are achieved.

International NGOs and funders should recognise that civil society goes beyond registered NGOs and includes social movements organising access to housing, services and livelihoods, and frontline environmental rights activists. These groups present a profound opportunity for states to co-create housing and services provision if they engage their energy and organising constructively.

True systems leadership challenges oppressive power. It stops the silence and marginalisation. It co-creates the rights realisation agendas of all groups, building on their participation and actions to secure access to safe water, sanitation, housing, livelihoods, and an environment not harmful to their health.

More here: [CONNECT Social Justice | All Systems Connect](#).

## Highlights from the symposium

**Hearing the Unheard: Human Rights to Water and Sanitation** short film amplifies the agency and demands of grassroots groups advocating for safe water and sanitation, including contributions from water rights defenders in 18 countries across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Two key takeaways from relevant discussions at the symposium were: 1) People are not left behind accidentally, marginalisation is structural, and structural actions are needed for change. 2) To effect these changes, we need to ensure robust and safe civic space, get resources to local civil society, and strengthen accountability. Water and sanitation rights are realised through active citizenry, and there are a number of barriers to this that must be tackled.

In **Decolonising the WASH narrative**, speakers noted that people directly affected by poor water and sanitation, climate injustice and environmental degradation are best suited to design, develop and deliver rights-claiming strategies and advocacy campaigns that are uniquely adapted to their local contexts. To enable this, we must fund and support communities and movements on the frontlines of the struggle for water and sanitation directly.

In **Precarious workers claiming their rights: sanitation workers, waste pickers and informal traders and social change**, the Center for Law and Justice (CLJ), the Matabeleland Institute for Human Rights

(MIHR) and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) underscored how regulatory systems exclude or criminalise precarious and informal workers. Although street traders and waste reclaimers play a vital role in countries' economies, recycle hundreds of thousands of tons of solid waste, and provide affordable food, goods, and services, they work in hazardous and exploitative conditions and lack access to water and sanitation and protective equipment.

The WASH sector has a role to play in humanising this work, in supporting informal and precarious workers visibility, dignity, agency, and access to basic services and safety. Bringing them in to participate meaningfully will lead to better and more dignified sanitation systems.

In **Claiming the rights to housing, water, sanitation, and a safe environment**, activists and human rights defenders from four countries<sup>2</sup> focused on the diverse range of strategies and tactics to promote accountability and influence change. The key takeaway from the panel was that contextually sensitive strategies are most effective; that community activists need resources to sustain their struggles; the freedom to use strategic opportunities when they arise; and the flexibility to be innovative and responsive to dynamic environments.

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<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Seguin from FANMex and Redes del Agua, Aisha Hamis from Media for Community Engagement (MeCE), Thobeka Gumede from the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), Temple Oraeki and Amaka Nweke from the Network for Water Rights Initiative (WASH Rights Network), Siyabonga Mahlangu from the Inner City Federation (ICF), and Gabriel Gustavo Rocha Belloni from Proyecto de Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales (ProDESC).

## Priority actions:

Symposium participants agreed to prioritise the following actions:

- Increase our awareness of how gender, race, class and power influence the way we act within systems.
- Challenge discrimination and dismantle the systems that marginalise certain people, and ensure their rights are upheld by governments and others.
- Include rights organisations in multistakeholder dialogues and include marginalised people in systems strengthening processes.
- Ensure that access to safe water and sanitation is not subject to a person's legality, formality or documentation.
- Ensure we serve people's material needs (for water, housing, sanitation, a safe environment, health and education), in a way that respects them and their participation.





## Looking ahead: 2025 and beyond

### Social justice in systems strengthening praxis:

Social justice, like gender or social inclusion, is at the heart of strong systems, not an add on.

Indeed, the language of SDG 6.1 “to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all” and SDG 6.2 “access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all” is directly derived from human rights standards of accessibility, affordability, acceptability and adequacy for all rights holders.

The human rights framework is built into our sector goals, and human rights are international law, which places clear obligations on States to provide water and sanitation as part of a cluster of other socio-economic rights. The framework comprises not only these standards, but

also a set of principles, applicable across all rights. As IRC notes in ‘Social inclusion in WASH systems strengthening’, “For safe and sustainable services to become a reality for everyone, the following human rights principles should be embedded in water, sanitation and hygiene systems strengthening activities at all levels: non-discrimination and equality; participation; transparency and access to information; accountability; sustainability (non-retrogression) and to take steps, using the maximum available resources.” These principles apply to all sector actors, country governments, private actors and civil society.

We will focus on bringing social justice into our systems strengthening praxis.

## One For All alliance objectives:

By centralising human rights principles and standards in systems strengthening approaches, we can truly “support countries to build strong local and national services, underpinned by resilient systems, that transform lives and build equity, justice and opportunity for all.”<sup>3</sup>

We need to build our capacities to address wider issues of social justice, so we can engage more deeply with global structural injustices such as colonial exploitation, extractivism, monetary non-sovereignty, and climate change driven by the global north. As a thought leader on finance, climate, social justice, and political leadership, IRC working through the One For All alliance will articulate how these issues impact WASH systems.

Taking forward the official symposium priority actions, as One For All, we aim to:

- Build meaningful relationships with community groups and social movements in countries and include them in dialogues, webinars, communications products, advocacy and local actions. Bring the local to the global arena and the global to local arenas.
- Support and institutionalise social accountability actions and active citizenry in country programmes, understanding

that accountability relationships to consumers is a mainstream part of water services provision.

- Partner with other international organisations and with funders to set up a fund that directly grants communities and community-based organisations to craft contextually relevant advocacy campaigns and actions and to employ a range of rights-claiming strategies as appropriate in their civic space.
- Build intersectional coalitions across water, waste, and environmental justice.
- Support the mainstreaming of gender and social inclusion across systems and the WASH building blocks.

## References

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**Leave No One Behind: Urgent Calls for Policy Reform and Improved Implementation from Communities Advocating for their Rights to Water and Sanitation**, Michael Clark, *End Water Poverty*, 2024.

**Social justice activists unite for change at All Systems Connect 2023**, *End Water Poverty* news item, 6 June 2023.

Water rights defenders speak out in **#HearingTheUnheardHRWS** short film, *End Water Poverty* news item, 6 June 2023.

<sup>3</sup> IRC's homepage.

## About the One For All alliance and making connections with social justice

One For All is an alliance of global organisations led by IRC, Water For People and Water for Good to champion collaborative methods to support water, sanitation and hygiene justice issues across the world. Members work with local, regional and national governments to implement climate resilient system-strengthening strategies. We also partner with champions in health, climate, economic development, education and social justice to encourage sustainable economic growth and address the social justice inequities that come from a lack of access to safe water and sanitation. We hold ourselves accountable to support governments to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 6, water and sanitation for all, by 2030. The actions of one—a person, a community, an organisation—are in support of all.

Achieving and sustaining universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for all requires connecting with changemakers in sectors like health, climate, and social justice. As with many of the Sustainable Development Goals, an integrated, multi-sectoral approach will be needed to drive systems change.

In view of this, IRC is working on strengthening strategic engagement with actors beyond the water, sanitation, and hygiene space. This note provides the strategic intersections for social justice. It draws upon our experience working with stakeholders to reduce climate risk on society, as well as the many conversations sparked during the All Systems Connect International Symposium in May 2023.

We welcome others to join us in this effort, as we move towards a collective social justice agenda.



## About the author

**Alana Potter** is the Head of Research and Advocacy at the Equality Collective, a community-based law clinic in the Eastern Cape. She spent her first 10 years in the water sector at the Mvula Trust, supporting rural water and sanitation in South Africa. She then led IRC's Africa Regional programme, working with various actors in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to strengthen water, sanitation, and governance systems. As Director of Research and Advocacy at the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), she led a team to amplify socio-economic rights for marginalized groups. At End Water Poverty, hosted by WaterAid, she led a global coalition of over 150 civil society organisations in 80 countries to advocate for safe water and sanitation. Until May 2024, she led research training at Human Rights Watch, equipping researchers to hold violators of humanitarian and international law accountable.



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