



Written Submission to the UN 2023 Water Conference 22-24 March 2023

The Sisters of Mercy, their Associates, and partners around the world have experienced the impacts of water in all its manifestations, including floods, droughts, contamination, and depletion, but also daily experiences of life, beauty, prosperity and connection. We recognize and uphold the multiple values of water: biological, cultural, social, spiritual, and aesthetic, beyond its economic use in agriculture, industry and energy. To address the urgent causes of the water crisis, to build resilience to future climate risks, and to uphold the dignity of all, we call for a rights-based implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) that protects the rights of people and nature.

The enjoyment of all people to the human right to clean water has always been central to our work. Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, said “Water is a free beverage.” Her words challenge us to take action to ensure access to and protection of fresh water for all living creatures.

During the negotiations of the 2030 Agenda, we advocated strongly for language that affirms the human rights to water and sanitation. The recognition of those rights in the Declaration requires a rights-based approach to SDG 6. Accordingly, actions to implement SDG 6 must recognize that water is a common good belonging to all. As Member States recommit to their 2015 pledges, we urge them to promote commons-based water management to empower local communities to protect watersheds and ensure equitable and sustainable distribution.

In the Declaration of the 2030 Agenda, Member States also pledged to ensure “no one will be left behind” and to “endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.” While some progress has been made towards SDG 6, it has also masked profound injustices and violence suffered by marginalized groups, including women, girls, and Indigenous peoples. As governments accelerate their actions to achieve SDG 6, they must prioritize the progressive elimination of inequalities in water and sanitation.

The commodification of water and privatization of water services run counter to a rights-based and sustainable implementation of SDG 6. Where profit is the key driver, particularly where there are competing demands on a scarce resource, the rights of people and nature are invariably violated. Member States must increase public financing for water and sanitation services and environmental measures that address water quality and scarcity.

Market-based remedies that promote false solutions to water challenges only serve a model of production, distribution and consumption that damages ecosystems and violates rights. Businesses who continue to act with impunity with regard to depletion of sources and contamination of water must be held accountable for damage done to Indigenous peoples and other affected communities as well as the planet and future generations.

Transitioning to a rights-based socio-economic model requires institutional reforms at international, regional and national levels, but must be based at the local, territorial level. The grassroots are vital to sustainably managing water and other common goods, the production of

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777 UN Plaza, Suite 10G, New York, NY 10017





food, and ways of life that dignify human and non-human life. This requires the leadership and knowledge of women, Indigenous peoples and rural communities in decisions on water. We have committed in the Water Action Agenda to empower people around the Mercy World to lead action on water in their communities, and to amplify the voices of water defenders who maintain and protect the wisdom and understanding of water systems around the world. We urge governments to establish concrete mechanisms for monitoring water commitments, in which human rights subjects and holders participate fully, effectively and meaningfully.

Conversations like the ones happening at the UN 2023 Water Conference risk maintaining the status quo and upholding the modern development paradigm which has led to underachievement on SDG 6 and continued violations of rights. This is a critical opportunity for governments and stakeholders to break away from models that exploit people and nature, and to instead accelerate action to address unjust systems that limit access to, the protection of, and preservation of sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water and sanitation which enable people to maintain their well-being now, and in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Angela Reed rsm PhD
Main Representative
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas