

The International Secretariat for Water

Position paper for the 2026 UN Water Conference

Accountability, participation and the means to deliver



For more than thirty years, the International Secretariat for Water (ISW) has acted as a catalyst, facilitator and amplifier for civil society and youth in global water governance. As the convening organisation behind both the Butterfly Effect coalition of more than 160 civil society organisations and the Global Youth Movement for Water, bringing together more than 420 youth organisations, ISW bridges local action with high-level decision-making.

Civil society, in particular youth, has a fundamental role to play in ensuring that global water commitments translate into action. From the World Water Forum Dakar in 2022 to the 2023 UN Water Conference and towards Abu Dhabi 2026 and 2028, continuity and accountability are at the core of our advocacy. Civil society and youth help bring the realities of communities into global processes, remind decision-makers of past commitments, track progress and hold institutions accountable for turning promises into action.

The human rights to water and sanitation, and water as a vector of peace, are the shared foundation of our position. They call for cooperation across borders, generations and sectors; for meaningful participation of civil society, **in particular youth**, women, Indigenous Peoples and local actors; and for investment in the capacity of those who are already contributing to change.

As only the third United Nations Water Conference in history, Abu Dhabi takes place in a critical context marked by geopolitical fragmentation, escalating climate impacts and a worrying decline in international cooperation and development. Abu Dhabi must put the means of implementation at its heart: financing, capacity-building, data and partnerships.

Our main advocacy messages:



1. Institutionalise meaningful participation of civil society, in particular youth

Institutionalise the meaningful participation of civil society, **in particular youth**, alongside women, Indigenous Peoples and local actors, in international, national, local and river-basin-level water governance. Participation must go beyond consultation. Civil society and youth should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to **agenda-setting, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and follow-up**.

For young people in particular, Abu Dhabi should mark a shift from recognising youth as stakeholders to recognising them as **partners and leaders in water governance**.

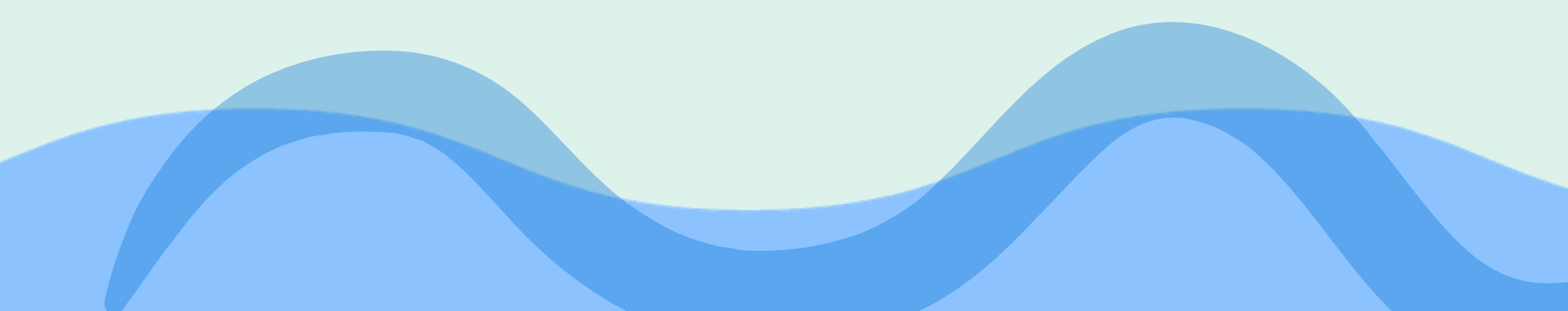
2. Invest in capacity and leadership, in particular for youth

Invest in capacity-building, professional training and leadership development, while addressing the decline in ODA by securing dedicated and accessible funding for civil society and youth-led action. Young people are not only future water leaders. They are already **agents of transformation and implementation**.

The **30×30×30 ambition** provides a concrete pathway: by 2030, 30% of people in positions responsible for water-related work should be under 30. Achieving this requires investment in leadership development, professional pathways, mentoring, intergenerational cooperation and opportunities for young people to move from participation to decision-making.

3. Establish an inclusive advisory mechanism to the UN Special Envoy on Water, with a dedicated Youth Envoy for Water

Establish an **inclusive, gender- and geographically balanced advisory board to the UN Special Envoy on Water**, bringing together civil society, **in particular youth**, alongside other major groups and relevant stakeholders. The advisory board should provide a structured and meaningful channel for civil society participation in global water diplomacy and policy, ensuring that the perspectives, expertise and priorities of communities, practitioners and younger generations inform the work of the UN Special Envoy.



Within this mechanism, establish a **Youth Envoy for Water** to strengthen the visibility, representation and continuity of youth within global water governance. The Youth Envoy should connect young water leaders and youth organisations with the UN system, Member States and other stakeholders; amplify diverse youth perspectives; and contribute to monitoring and follow-up of commitments affecting present and future generations.

Meaningful participation requires more than a seat at a conference. It requires a sustained institutional mechanism through which civil society, in particular youth, can contribute to shaping, implementing and following up global water commitments.

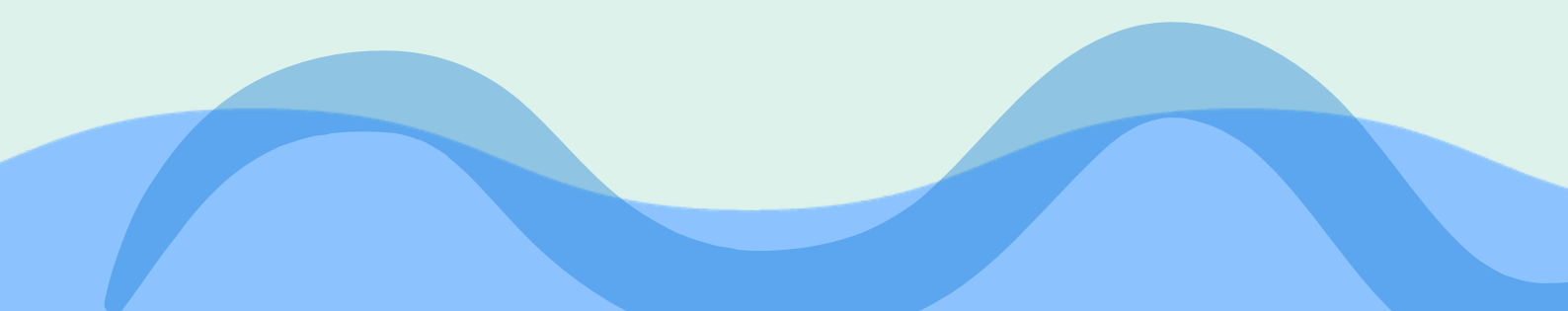
4. Strengthen global water governance and accountability

Establish stronger global governance by leveraging the 2026 official Summary of Proceedings as a political springboard towards a UN General Assembly resolution mandating regular intergovernmental meetings on water, while building on the negotiated outcome of the 2028 UN Water Conference to advocate, in the longer term, for stronger and binding commitments.

Civil society, **in particular youth**, must be able to contribute to this governance and accountability cycle. The global water architecture should provide regular opportunities not only for governments to negotiate, but also for civil society and youth to contribute, monitor progress and support implementation.

5. Prepare the UN post-2030 agenda with civil society and youth

Prepare the post-2030 agenda with clarity and accountability between 2026 and 2028 and beyond, carrying forward the ambition of SDG 6. Civil society, **in particular youth**, should be involved in shaping this transition and in ensuring that the ambition of universal access to water and sanitation remains central to the future global development agenda.



From collective advocacy to collective action



To operationalise this vision, ISW amplifies the collective advocacy and action of its two global networks.

The **Butterfly Effect**, bringing together more than 160 civil society organisations, calls in its policy paper *Water needs a permanent home at the UN* for regular meetings on water and greater system-wide coherence; an institutionalised UN civil society participation mechanism; and a clear post-2030 horizon that carries SDG 6's ambition forward.

The **Global Youth Movement for Water**, working alongside the UN Major Group for Children and Youth and the Youth Organizing Committee of the Conference, champions the **30×30×30 ambition**, calling for greater representation and leadership of young people across the water sector, alongside dedicated investment in youth capacity and meaningful participation.

Together, these priorities reinforce a common principle:

Civil society strengthens accountability. Youth brings leadership, continuity and new perspectives. Institutions must provide the space, mandate and resources to turn these contributions into meaningful influence.

