

UN Water Youth Statement

We, the youth of South Africa, inspired by the mandate of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa to propagate for the basic right to water as stipulated in section 27.(1).(b) of the Bill of Rights, recognise the need for a sustainable water action framework which ensures that the basic human right to water is realised and that the sustainable use of water across all sectors is developed. In purporting the spirit of the Bill of Rights which recognises the fundamental principles of ubuntu, equality, human dignity and freedom, this statement reflects the collective voice of the youth across the country who envision a water-resilient South Africa wherein the right to water and sanitation is accessible to all citizens regardless of their race, gender, and socio-economic status.

We stress the obligation to implement efficient and environmentally friendly water policies that take into account the nuanced circumstances of minorities who are strongly affected by the water crisis in rural and informal settlements. We applaud our government's national and international commitments in addressing the water challenges our country faces, particularly the work done through the UN Water Commission and the National Water Act. We still stress the unfortunate circumstances that many in our country are still left without equitable access to clean water and sanitation.

In continuing its commitments under the United Nations Water for Action Decade Agenda, we urge the South African government to accelerate sustainable water policies across the following thematic areas: Water For Climate, Resilience, and Environment; Water For Sustainable Development; Water For Health; and Water for Cooperation. In this respect, we recognise the pivotal role the Republic of South Africa plays in realising the right to water at a global level and in international platforms. To this end, the South African youth collective puts forth the following recommendations:

1. Water for Climate, Resilience, and Environment

Climate change is characterised by a series of irregular weather events which affect multiple sectors and industries, with water availability, management, use, and supply at the forefront. Water is gendered, structuralised, and political, with women and girls bearing the brunt of unequal access to water. Therefore, it is vital to ensure that both climate and water action are inclusive, collaborative, and equitable. In order to realise this vision, environmental sustainability principles need to be prioritised, specifically through low-carbon ecosystems, natural-habitat protection and restoration, and biodiversity conservation initiatives. We therefore recognise and emphasise the value and necessity of a strengthened and cross-sectoral policy framework with sufficient funding in enabling the success of these strategies to combat both climate change and the water crisis.

Water preservation & Biodiversity

- We stress the need of preserving natural water bodies and wetlands;
- We encourage the adoption and maintenance of land rehabilitation and reforestation as protective strategies against biodegradation.

Adaptation and Mitigation Efforts

- Call for strengthened and responsive climate mitigation and adaptation solutions that specifically address the relationship between climate change and the water crisis;
- Recommend that governments continue to incorporate an intersectional gender mainstreaming pathway in addressing climate resilience and adaptation;
- Urge the South African government to support and advance multilateral dialogues around the Blue Economy as a climate adaptation and resilience mechanism and action point for water action as endorsed in Operation Phakisa;
- Encourage the promotion and support of sustainable water catchment and conservation methods as part of the just transition towards a climate resilient economy and society;
- Call for the continued emphasis and mandating of sustainable water management as a critical element agreed upon in the Paris Agreement, Agenda 2030, and Agenda 2063;
- Support the strategic application of bottom-up early warning systems as a proactive and collaborative response to water-and climate-related disasters, and further suggest that indigenous knowledge and practices be considered when putting these systems to action.

Water in Climate Diplomacy & Financing

- We call for an integrated and coordinated intergovernmental approach to water governance as guided by domestic policy and multilateral commitments;
- Further, we urge for the mandating of multilateral dialogues around water action and its urgency on the global agenda in international processes.

2. Water for Sustainable Development

We applaud the South African government for initiating and enacting a water-energy-food nexus approach in our developmental policies that aim to build an understanding of these three sectors and their influence on socio-economic development. Noting with deep concern, they are still hindered by poor implementation due to a number of structural and systemic barriers. We propose the following to ensure a coordinated approach to implementing the water-energy-food nexus programme to meet our national development plan and the sustainable development goals targets:

Strengthening Policy Implementation

- We encourage the establishment of multi-departmental decision-making and accountability platforms for generating a responsive and sustainable approach to water, energy, and food resource management;
- Build citizenry awareness and understanding of the intersection between water, agriculture, and energy to increase support for governmental policies and interventions through:
 - a) Building appropriate channels to raise awareness and knowledge to local communities and grassroots organisations through community engagements, open forums, and media campaign approaches;
 - b) Supporting the integration of the roles of relevant stakeholders in pushing forward the implementation and incorporation of sustainable development practices in all forms of policy and civil society;
 - c) Implementing a national awareness campaign development to incentivise and integrate citizens' involvement in daily nexus-oriented activities through efficient water and energy usage, efficient irrigation technologies, green energy, and minimising waste to help improve the nexus ecosystem.

Water & Agriculture

The agricultural industry is a sector often ignored in water action dialogue and policymaking, despite its value in both the economy and as a knowledge source. It is therefore critical that government-sectoral cooperation be a course of action to ensure the development of responsive and context-sensitive interventions. Agriculture's relationship with water also trickles over into health, as waterborne diseases impact the sector's labour and productivity, citing both the renewed health burden and reduced operations on farms.

- We urge for efficient governance and service delivery to provide rainwater storage and filtration and other decentralised systems to support rural communities;
- We encourage the use of rainwater collection and storage for irrigation and agricultural practices to mitigate the effects of climate related disasters such as drought;
- We support the exploration of different irrigation technologies and mechanisms to manage the agricultural sector's efficient usage of water whilst maximising food output, including the drip system or the fog-capturing process.

Water & Energy

The energy system is a cost and water intensive activity. Additionally, there is a disconnect between multi-departmental approaches to delivering both clean water and energy. As such, in line with achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) and emphasising the relationship between water and energy, cooperation and collaboration in the process are key. Thus, the following recommendations are made:

- We express deep concern over the persistent load-shedding crisis that has resulted in water shortages in communities due to insufficient electricity supply needed to pump water from the reservoirs;
- We encourage the South African government to fully incorporate water constraints into the energy planning model and ensure more sustainable energy planning;
- We urge the government to fast-track the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) to financially capacitate local municipalities to upgrade their water infrastructure with clean energy and energy efficiency solutions to reduce energy use, costs, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and improve water service delivery.

3. Water for Health

Access to safe and clean water is a fundamental human right, essential for maintaining health and promoting socio-economic development. Despite significant progress in improving access to safe water and sanitation in recent years, many countries, including South Africa still face significant challenges in ensuring universal access to these basic services. The South African government has recognized the importance of addressing these challenges and has made a commitment to achieving SDG 6 of ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030. To achieve this goal, it is essential that the government adopt and implement effective policies and strategies to promote equitable access to safe water, collaboration and cooperation, investment in infrastructure and maintenance, and water resource governance and management.

Equitable Access to Safe Water and Sanitation

- We recognise and reaffirm that access to safe water and sanitation is a fundamental human right that is essential for promoting public health and wellbeing;
- We express deep concern over persistent inequalities in access to safe water and sanitation in South Africa, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas among vulnerable populations;
- We urge the implementation of targeted interventions to address the root causes of inequitable access, such as poverty, gender inequality, and discrimination;
- We express hope for improved health, productivity, and well-being through access to safe and reliable water services for all communities, especially vulnerable populations;

Investment in Infrastructure and Maintenance

- We recommend reinforcing existing of a monitoring and evaluation system, developing a comprehensive strategy, prioritising investment in underserved areas, and enhancing the capacity of water and health institutions and professionals;
- We commend South Africa's adoption of the UNDP's recommendation for increased investment in water infrastructure and maintenance. We fully believe in the National Water and Sanitation Master Plan and its provision for a comprehensive framework for investment in water infrastructure and services;
- South Africa needs to prioritise sustained investment in water and sanitation infrastructure and maintenance, enhance the capacity of water and health institutions and professionals, and encourage public-private partnerships and other innovative financing mechanisms;

- We urge that South Africa must develop and implement an integrated water resource management framework, enhance capacity, and promote multi-stakeholder participation to ensure water resource policies are responsive to local needs and priorities.

4. Water for Cooperation

South Africa has made great global strides in water cooperation by ratifying the SADC Revised Protocol for Shared Watercourses, and the UN Water Convention. To adhere to its international and regional obligations, we support South Africa's establishment of the three regulatory institutions which regulate our transboundary agreements with the SADC region. Furthermore, we support the progression of phase two of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. To strengthen transboundary water agreements in the global community, we hereby recommend the South African government to implement the following policy actions:

Foreign Policy

We recognise the perceived challenge that the government faces in balancing the need to protect its national interests and with fairly sharing the watercourses with other countries when entering transboundary agreements. To achieve this balance the following is recommended:

- To review current African and region-specific bilateral alliances regarding transboundary water agreements, to continue South Africa's relevance in the region and create new and improved opportunities for economic integration whilst also maintaining and reaffirming national interests in regards to the sharing of resources;
- We encourage an increase in strategic water partnerships with other African states which will lead to increase in foreign direct investment (FDI) and employment in the state;
- We call for an increase in scientific diplomacy and scientific cooperation in the water sector as it will support transboundary water resource management in South Africa through the following:
 - a. Scientific cooperation will promote capacity development and training in transboundary water management;
 - b. Implementation of long-term programmes that support academic collaboration including knowledge sharing and academic exchanges.

Good Governance:

- We call for cooperative governance with all sectors (national, provincial, local governments), the inclusion of all non-state actors (civil society, nongovernmental organisations, youth organisations) to be integrated in policy drafting and the implementation phase;
- We call for transparency and accountability with the disbursement and use of funds and resources with local and provincial governments in relation to transboundary agreements;
- We urge for the implementation of regulatory tools, focusing on monitoring and evaluation, impact analysis of the transboundary agreements to ensure that they do not prejudice affected communities especially minorities;
- We call for affected communities involved in transboundary water agreements to be included as key stakeholders throughout implementation processes, including informing communities whose areas form part of the transboundary agreement in a manner that is easily accessible and facilitating accessible stakeholder meetings within these communities.

5. Water-Related Capacity and Education

Recognising capacity-building as a critical element in improving the management of our water resources, we urge our governing systems to develop their capacity by raising awareness about water related issues. Especially as education comes into play to manage the evident skills gap within the South African economy with regards to water literacy. In this respect we call for capacity building through education by implementing the following policy recommendations:

- Ensuring that all stakeholders can access the latest scientific knowledge about water-related processes, climate change, biodiversity, and hydrology;
- Adopting training programmes and mechanisms where decision-makers in government institutions are educated and trained to prepare for the emerging and unpredictable water-related challenges;
- Fostering a paradigm shift in our leadership and civil society to bridge the gap between societal disparities in taking action. This can be done through wide-scale awareness campaigns. This will in turn ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels through enhanced and informed choices, thus ensuring ownership of measures taken;
- Creating water-related job opportunities will help in managing the crisis, and in turn promote sustainable economic and urban development;

- Increasing water-related action and awareness through increased curricular activities through primary and secondary schooling levels;
- We condemn the lack of awareness and education among youth about their water-related rights and responsibilities as a concern, along with the failure to address pollution and contamination impact on youth health in urban and industrial areas;
- Creating awareness amongst young people and the importance of water management through implementing water education in South Africa's primary and secondary curricula to cement water literacy in the youth.

6. Youth Participation and Engagement in Water Action

Youth participation is vital for the implementation of water policies across local, provincial and national sectors. This reduces tokenistic behaviour and encourages further engagement within communities to combat high unemployment rates and build on skills development. We believe that youth involvement in the water sector is crucial to achieving sustainable water management practices and ensuring that the basic human right to water is realised. We affirm that the youth bring innovative ideas, fresh perspectives, and new technologies. Involving the youth in the water sector can also create job opportunities and promote economic growth. We therefore call for the following:

- To prepare the youth for the job market in the water sector, it is essential to provide them with the necessary skills and training. This includes technical skills related to water management, such as water treatment, conservation, and distribution, as well as soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication;
- Ensuring youth representation in decision-making processes related to water management through the establishment of a Youth Water Envoy that engages with the Department of Water and Sanitation and other branches of government to ensure that youth voices are included in all water-related decision-making processes. This Youth Water Envoy should be representative of an inclusive South Africa and therefore represent people from all provinces, genders, races and socio-economic statuses, and accommodate people living with disabilities;
- Strengthen social media campaigns that are water related which will inform the youth about the specific water challenges affecting the country;
- We affirm the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration and condemn the lack of meaningful participation and representation of youth in decision-making processes related to water and health;
- Lastly, we encourage the broadening of water-related courses and programmes within the education system geared towards the current job market.

This statement was created by the youth participants of the National Youth Water Dialogue for the 2023 UN Water Conference. This process was convened by Youth@SAIIA and the Youth Policy Committee (YPC) Sustainable Communities Working Group. The statement was drafted in the lead up to the 2023 UN Water Conference taking place in New York on 22-24 March 2023. For any queries, please send your email to youth@saiia.org.za.

