

Improving Access to Safe Water: Innovative Initiatives at the Grassroots

Hybrid Side Event during the UN High Level Political Forum

July 13, 2026 at 9:30-10:45 am

In light of the theme of HLPF 2026, “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs for a sustainable future for all” and the inclusion of a focus on SDG 6, this side event, sponsored by the NGO Committee for Social Development and the NGO Mining Working Group, will focus on interventions to address safe and accessible drinking water.

Achieving SDG 6 is essential for all people and the planet and indispensable to human dignity, social justice and inclusive social development worldwide. SDG 6 calls for achieving “universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030” and achieving access to adequate sanitation and hygiene. These commitments were repeated in the Doha Declaration in its call for clean water and sanitation and cited lack of access as evidence of inequalities, stating: “We reaffirm the right to an adequate standard of living, including . . . safe and affordable drinking water, adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene.”

A WHO/UNICEF report issued in August 2025 stated that “Water and sanitation are at the very core of sustainable development. Safe drinking water and adequate sanitation and hygiene are pillars of human health and well-being.” In spite of all the widespread agreement on the importance of clean water, WHO/UNICEF concluded: “Despite progress over the last decade, billions of people around the world still lack access to essential water, sanitation, and hygiene services, putting them at risk of disease and deeper social exclusion.”

Lack of safe water can affect wealthy countries as well as those with high rates of poverty and limited resources. Extended droughts have curtailed water supply in many areas and industrial pollution affects household water safety in both high and low income countries. Overall, however, lack of access to safe water and sanitation are conditions of inequality with the 2 billion people still lacking access to safely managed drinking water concentrated in low-income countries, especially in Africa and Asia. Women and girls are particularly disadvantaged. According to the 2026 World Water Development Report issued by UNESCO, “When access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is lacking, women and girls often disproportionately bear the responsibility for providing water to households.” In “Water and Sanitation: A People’s Guide to SDG 6,” the NGO Mining Working group noted that “the global water crisis highlights that those most impacted by these systemic injustices are people living in poverty and situations of vulnerability.

Significant progress toward achieving the targets will require massive scaling up of efforts and a focus on interventions that work. Although the efforts of governments are important, civil society groups and grassroots communities are engaged in valuable projects to realize the fundamental human right to safe, clean water. Their efforts are essential, as the definition of an improved water

source requires that safe water be available at the household level. This cannot be successfully achieved without engagement in local communities and involvement of individual households.

The importance of community involvement was highlighted in a Rotary International report on sustainability of water projects. A review showed that some improvements, including wells, piping, and filters, were abandoned after a few years. The keys to sustainability were identified as expanded attention to education and even more to close collaboration with residents at the local level. Rotary learned: “We need to better engage with the community, its leaders, and professional organizations.” More importantly, we need to understand the needs of the community. We can’t assume or guess what’s in their best interest.” Sustainable projects require ownership by the community and often by the individual household. Locally based, grassroots projects are most likely to have the relationships and knowledge of culture and community to make this a reality. Grassroots projects often center the concerns of women and increase women’s participation in management of water at the local level.

The side event, organized by the Grassroots Subcommittee of the NGO Committee for Social Development and the NGO Mining Working Group, will focus on community level water projects. It will bring the voices of people from the grassroots to the HLPF and show how local groups have been able to improve access to clean water, address water scarcity and/or access to sanitation and hygiene. Based on the results of a widely-circulated survey, this side event will show how grassroots initiatives across the five continents are contributing to the implementation of SDG 6 and the human right to water. Speakers will include people from the grassroots and grassroots videos showing selected WASH projects in Asia, Africa and The Americas.

References:

Hyland, Ryan, How Rotary has changed to help people get clean water for longer than just a few years <https://www.rotary.org/en/rotary-water-programs-shift-focus-education-and-sustainability>

NGO Mining Working Group. (2016). Water and Sanitation: A People’s Guide to SDG 6 - A rights-based approach to implementation.

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United Nations (2025) Doha Political Declaration of the Second World Social Development Summit.

UNESCO (2026). UN World Water Development Report 2026: Executive Summary.

<https://www.unwater.org/publications/un-world-water-development-report-2026>

WHO and UNICEF. (2025). Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities. Geneva: World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2025. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.