



# Mercy Water Justice Coalition Task Force – Position Statement

The Mercy Water Justice Coalition (MWJC) is comprised of ‘Mercy Water Leaders’ from congregations, organisations, and networks across the Mercy World. The Coalition is Mercy Global Action’s (MGA) commitment to the United Nations Water Action Agenda, an initiative born out of the 2023 UN Water Conference. It seeks to accelerate action on Sustainable Development Goal 6, ‘Ensure access to water and sanitation for all’, by mobilising new pledges from governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities.

The inaugural MWJC Task Force, convening from May to October 2024, aims to provide direction and leadership on water justice issues, making informed recommendations and creating a blueprint for future MWJC participants. The following position statement has been developed to outline the Coalition’s approach to critical water issues globally, ensuring a cohesive and effective approach to water justice.

## The Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach

We believe that advocacy is *for everyone and needed by everyone* – we can all play a role and feel empowered to make a difference.



The Mercy Justice Advocacy Approach is a framework used by the global Mercy community to guide our advocacy efforts. It is rooted in the experiences of people and Earth and a desire to uplift the voices of those most vulnerable. It teaches us how to put pressure on decision-makers in government and industry to transform policies and practices at local, national and global levels.

We encourage Mercy Water Leaders to make use of Mercy Global Action’s advocacy guide, ‘From Sparks to Fire’, to help develop their Water Action Agendas and make change through reflection, analysis, coalition building, and considered action.

# Critical Water Justice Issues

## Water Supply & Stress



'Water Supply & Stress' refers to extremes in water availability – ranging from scarcity to oversupply and flooding – both of which can have devastating impacts on the environment and communities. These extremes are intensified by factors such as climate change and extreme weather events, population growth, mass migration, overconsumption and mismanagement of water sources, and inadequate infrastructure.

### At a glance...



About 2 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water ([UN 2022](#)) and roughly half of the global population experiences severe water scarcity for at least part of the year ([IPCC 2022](#)).



3.5 billion people still lack access to safely managed sanitation, including 419 million people who practice open defecation. ([WHO/UNICEF 2023](#))



Water insecurity is a gendered issue: women and girls worldwide spend an estimated 200 million hours hauling water every day ([UNICEF 2020](#)), often in dangerous conditions.



Since 2000, flood-related disasters have risen by 134% compared with the two previous decades. Most of the flood-related deaths and economic losses were recorded in Asia. Droughts have also increased by 29% over this period, with most drought-related deaths occurring in Africa ([WMO 2021](#)).



2023 was driest year for global rivers in 33 years, and glaciers suffered the largest mass loss in 50 years. These are symptoms of an increasingly erratic hydrological system that is threatening water supplies, ecosystems, economies and human lives ([WMO 2024](#)).

### We stand for:






The right of every human being to have access to enough *water for life*, including personal and domestic uses. The water source must be safe, secure and easily accessible.






The right of every human being to have access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, provides privacy and ensures dignity.



Sustainable and commons-based water management practices that ensure the responsible distribution of water, prioritising equitable access for all. This requires recognition of the agency of local communities to manage their own water sources.

-  Examining and addressing the links between conflict, migration and water stress, including instances of intentional weaponisation of water sources.
-  Raising awareness of and addressing the underlying causes of water-related disasters and increasing community drought and flood resilience.
-  Acknowledging and rectifying the disproportionate impacts of water stress on women and girls.

#### Action ideas:


-  Collaborate with local governments, civil society organisations and communities to co-develop water management practices that prioritise equitable access, efficient water use, and environmental conservation.
-  Help provide training and resources for local communities to develop skills in water management, including conservation techniques and sustainable agricultural practices.
-  Campaign for increased funding for community-based climate adaptation projects, particularly in regions prone to drought or flooding, and for community training programs on disaster preparedness to minimise loss of life and property.




## Industrial Impact, Pollution & Chemical Contamination



Water contamination is a critical threat to global water systems, largely driven by industrial and agricultural activities that release harmful chemicals, heavy metals, microplastics and untreated waste into water bodies. These pollutants degrade water quality, harming aquatic ecosystems and posing serious risks to human health. Furthermore, inadequate sanitation systems, open defecation and improper waste disposal introduce harmful pathogens and microorganisms into water sources, heightening the spread of waterborne diseases.

#### At a glance...

 Approximately 80% of the world's wastewater is discharged back into the environment without adequate treatment. Globally, only 42% of household wastewater and 27% of industrial wastewater is safely treated. (UN-Water 2024).

-  In 2023, only 56% of water bodies across 120 reporting countries were classified as having 'good ambient water quality' ([UN-Water 2024](#)).
-  Currently, over 3 billion people are at risk of disease because the water quality of their rivers, lakes and groundwater is unknown due to a lack of data. This number will raise to 4.8 billion if water quality monitoring is not improved ([UN-Water 2024](#)).
-  Approximately 1.7 billion people use a source of drinking water contaminated with faeces, putting them at risk of contracting cholera, dysentery, typhoid and polio. Microbiologically contaminated drinking water is estimated to cause 505,000 diarrhoea deaths annually ([WHO 2023](#)).

#### We stand for:



The right of every human being to have access to clean, acceptable drinking water.



The right of every human being to have access to accurate and transparent information about the quality of their drinking water.



Holding corporations accountable to laws and regulations that mandate responsible and ethical business practices when it comes to their impact on water sources.



Advancing public health through science, including by promoting evidence-based preventive care, innovative treatments and global health equity, and by fostering strong collaboration between researchers, governments and communities.

#### Action ideas:



Raise awareness about water contamination, including chemical contamination (due to industrial and agricultural activities) and biological contamination (from human and animal waste), and its impacts on the environment and public health.



Lobby for laws that prevent water pollution, over-extraction and mismanagement by corporations, such as stronger environmental assessments prior to project approval.



Lobby for the regular monitoring of water sources to proactively detect and address contamination, and for transparency through public access to water quality test results.



Lead or support remediation efforts to clean up polluted water sources.

## Water as a Public Good



Water is a basic need for all life on Earth, just like the oxygen we breathe. As a public good and a fundamental human right, it belongs to everyone, not to corporations, private entities, or those who can afford it. Yet, in many parts of the world, the management of water sources is now driven by the interests of big businesses seeking maximum profits, rather than human rights. The commodification of water — treating it as a product to be bought, sold or controlled for profit — threatens equitable access, especially for vulnerable populations.

### At a glance...



In developing countries, households can spend an estimated 15–20% of their monthly income on water, which is notably higher than the international benchmark of 3–5% that is deemed affordable. ([WATER.ORG 2020](#)).



In developed countries, affordability concerns are also growing. For example, in the United States, around 17% of households struggle to afford basic water services and risk water shutoff. This affects roughly 28.3 million people, many of whom spend more than one day's wages each month just to cover water and sanitation costs ([Duke University 2023](#)).



The bottled water industry has grown into a massive global market. It was valued at approximately \$303 billion USD in 2022 and is expected to reach \$509 billion USD by 2030. This increase is largely attributed to water scarcity and contamination, which forces people to turn to private vendors in the absence of reliable public sources ([Grand View Research 2024](#)).

### We stand for:



The right of all human beings to access affordable water. Water is not a commodity, but a public resource that is essential for life and therefore it belongs to all.



Community-led and publicly controlled water services that are democratically managed and prioritize the needs of citizens over profits.







Holding corporations accountable for using water according to commercial interests and endangering the function and value of water as a resource that supports life, human rights and the public interest.



Promoting innovative tools, research, funding and infrastructure to ensure affordable access to water.

### Action ideas:




-  Run a public awareness campaign that informs communities about the risks of commodifying water and how it can negatively impact access, especially for vulnerable groups.
-  Lobby local, state and federal governments to bring water back into public hands, for example through a letter-writing campaign or a digital petition.
-  Commit to phasing out the use or sale of bottled water at your organisation and put up educational signage at water stations explaining why.
-  Collaborate with local governments and civil society organisations to install or repair existing community water points.

## Indigenous Rights & Wisdom



Many Indigenous Peoples have a spiritual connection with water, recognising it as sacred. Indigenous communities have been caring for the land and waterways for millennia but their knowledge is rarely incorporated into government or corporate development plans. This often results in water scarcity and contamination from oil and gas drilling, mining and other extractive industries on or near their land. Indigenous communities also face disproportionate water insecurity due to historical dispossession and loss of access to natural water sources, as well as chronic underinvestment in water infrastructure on their land.

### At a glance...

-  39% of extractive and industrial development projects creating conflicts with Indigenous peoples globally include harms from water degradation ([Science Advances 2023](#)).
-  An estimated 54% of mining projects for minerals for the energy transition are located on or nearby Indigenous peoples' lands ([Owen et al. 2023](#)).
-  Indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted by water insecurity. For example, research found that in Australia, tap water in more than 500 remote Indigenous communities isn't regularly tested and often isn't safe to drink ([Water Services Association of Australia 2022](#)).

### We stand for:



Honoring and promoting First Nations leadership and wisdom, recognising their special relationship with water.



Acknowledging the impact of colonisation on this relationship and the importance of addressing past injustices.

### Action ideas:



Run a public awareness campaign to educate communities about the disproportionate lack of access to affordable, clean water in Indigenous communities, highlighting the historical, socio-economic, and environmental factors that contribute to this inequality.



Advocate for enshrining into law the Indigenous right to care for the land and bestowing the authority to Indigenous Peoples to lead national land management projects and initiatives.



Advocate for Indigenous peoples' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent – including the right to say “no” – around extractive industries on or near their communities.



Invest in alternative development projects led by Indigenous peoples.

## Water Library

Water is a complex issue, and we are deluged with materials on the water crisis and water issues. The 2023 MGA Water Task Force compiled articles, videos and other resources on water which align with our rights-based approach to water justice in an easy-to-navigate [Water Library](#).

The Water Library is divided into sections. The first section is for those who just want to “dip in”, including articles with a broad or high-level overview of water issues as well as resources that may be useful for schools. The next section is for those who wish to take a “deeper dive”, including academic papers on issues such as commodification of water, water and gender equality, and advocacy on water issues. The Water Library also includes a section with Mercy Global Action’s own resources on water, as well as theological materials, including prayers and reflections on the multiple values of water. We will continue to add to the Water Library and keep it updated, and encourage all Mercy Water Leaders to share their recommendations with us.

Print, fill out & scan OR submit your responses via the [Google Form](#)

# Become a Mercy Water Leader: Create Your Water Action Agenda

Prepared by:  
Mercy Org. / Network:

City & country:  
Email address:

## 1 Reflection on the Position Statement

What aspects of the position statement resonate with you and the water justice issues in your own community?

Key water issues from the position statement that align with local concerns in your community:

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Additional thoughts on water justice in your community:

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## 2 Identifying Impacted Groups

Who are the people most impacted by these issues? How can I involve them in this process?

Individuals and groups directly impacted by these water issues:

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Ways to involve these stakeholders in the process:

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### 3 Defining Desired Outcomes

What specific outcomes do you hope to achieve in your Mercy community or organisation? What does success look like to the community?

To make sure your goals are clear and reachable, each one should be:

- **Specific** – Aim for simple, sensible and significant goals. Answer the six Ws: Who, What, When, Where, Which, Why.
- **Measurable** – Identifying criteria to measure your progress will help you stay on track.
- **Achievable** – Visualise yourself achieving your goals. As you grow and develop, your goals will become more attainable.
- **Relevant** – Aim for reasonable, realistic, resourced, and results-based goals. You must be both willing and able to work towards your goals. Your goal is realistic if you truly believe it can be accomplished.
- **Time-bound** – If you have a designated time frame and can see or feel the end result, it becomes more measurable and easier to attain.

Key outcomes you wish to accomplish:

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Success indicators (how will you know you've achieved your goals?):

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## 4 Identifying Key Stakeholders and Partners

Who are the key stakeholders and partners that can support your efforts?

Internal partners within your Mercy organisation or network who can help:

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External partners who can help your cause:

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How will these partnerships strengthen your efforts?

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## 5 Action Plan

What actions or activities will help you reach these outcomes?

Key actions:

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Timeline for implementation:

**Short-term (within 1-3 months)** – *conduct an issue assessment, seek community perspectives, identify key stakeholders, establish partnerships, develop action plans...*

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**Medium-term (within 3-12 months)** – *launch your initiative, start measuring initial impact based on success indicators...*

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**Long-term (12+ months)** – *review outcomes, evaluate the success of the initiative, report progress, adapt strategies as necessary...*

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**Print, fill out, scan & send to [mga@mercyinternational.ie](mailto:mga@mercyinternational.ie)  
OR submit your responses via the [Google Form](#).**

**Please be aware your information will be collected and used as part of MGA's  
commitment to the United Nations.**