Water and sanitation

The right to water is derived from the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, as well as the right to life and dignity, outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted a General Comment No. 15 in 2002, which states that "[w]ater is a limited natural resource and a public good fundamental for life and health. The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realisation of other human rights."

In 2010, the UN General Assembly also recognised the human right to water and sanitation, since clean drinking water and sanitation are fundamental in the pursuit to realise all other human rights.

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According to General Comment No. 15, the right to water covers water for personal and domestic uses, including drinking water, personal sanitation, washing of clothes, food preparation, and personal and household hygiene. The right to sanitation means that everyone is entitled to have physically accessible and affordable access to sanitation service, in all spheres of life, that provides privacy and ensures dignity. Water for industry, agricultural purposes and other uses is not included in the human right to water (though it is part of other covenant rights).

While the rights to water and sanitation are understood as human rights, in 2015 more than 800 million people still lacked basic drinking water services and 2.3 billion people still lacked basic

sanitation services, according to WHO.

In order for the right to water to be fulfilled, there must be sufficient availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality (AAAQ). In short, this means that water must be regularly available in sufficient supply, that it needs to be within physical reach of all (including the most vulnerable and marginalised groups), physical security should not be threatened when someone is accessing water sources and the water must be affordable. Water facilities must also be culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive. Water must be of an acceptable colour, odour and taste, and the water must be safe (e.g. free from pathogenic bacteria).

Companies may have negative impacts on the human rights to water and sanitation in many ways, for example by polluting local water sources, and by depleting local water reserves because of a significant use of water for agricultural or industrial activities. The impact of companies is also indirectly mentioned in General Comment No. 15, which mentions that "States parties must prevent [third parties] from compromising equal, affordable, and physical access to sufficient, safe and acceptable water". The UN independent expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation has mentioned that this of course also "equally applies to sanitation".

Companies must ensure that they are not polluting waterways, but also that they are not depleting water reserves, even in cases where they have been granted the extraction by local governments. Companies must also ensure they provide safe drinking water and sanitation at the workplace, including access to adequate sanitation facilities when the employer is providing housing. The CEO Water Mandate is a voluntary and aspirational effort by the private sector to address some of the issues mentioned above.

▼ Links to SDGs and targets

The SDGs relate to the human right to water and sanitation through a specific goal (SDG 6). By ensuring the right to water and sanitation, companies can also contribute to SDGs related to sustainable industrialization (SDG 9), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and life below water (SDG 14).

Companies that address potentially negative impacts on water quality and availability, in their own operations or supply chain, can e.g. contribute to target 6.3 as well as to target 12.4 if the actions involve responsible management of chemicals and waste. Companies that are leading the charge in water-use efficiency can also contribute to target 6.4. Another way in which companies can increase their water-use efficiency, and thereby take action to respect the right to water and sanitation, is through investing in and adopting new technologies that make the reduction of water use possible (9.4).

These are merely examples of ways in which actions to respect the human rights to water and sanitation can contribute to certain SDGs and is not an exhaustive list of such links.

Cases on Water and sanitation

Case brief	Goals	Targets	Due diligence
Consumer goods company achieves water neutrality at factory Unilever carried out significant water reduction, efficiency and management strategies in order to combat the adverse effects of industrial dry food goods production in its factory in Durban, South Africa. The factory in Durban, inaugurated in 2011, is the second-largest industrial centre in the country. Setting up the factory involved high risks for surrounding communities due to heavy water stress in the area and the risk of depleting local water supplies and mistreatment of natural bodies of water by local industry projects. In order to address the identified risks and potential adverse impacts, Unilever started to employ practices of alternative sources of water for production and wastewater recycling in order to lessen the burden on the local water supply. The factory was developed to achieve 'water neutrality', and as such does not require any water from the municipal water system.	1 NO POVERTY 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	1.4 6.1 6.3 6.4 9.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6	Corporate commitment Assessing impacts Integrating and acting upon findings Tracking and monitoring
Brand eliminates dangerous chemicals from supply chain In 2013 Benetton announced that it would join Greenpeace's "Detox" programme. Benetton committed to "eliminate the use of any hazardous chemicals" by any of the suppliers it employs. This move sets out to ensure the elimination of hazardous chemicals from the production chain and halt the pollution of natural waterways and the risk that implies for communities living around its facilities. The announcement came after Greenpeace's Detox campaign. In 2018 Greenpeace reported that Benetton was one of the companies leading the pack when it comes to eliminating hazardous chemicals from supply chains. This was, in part, driven by its commitment, its effectiveness in eliminating the chemicals, and its transparency about its processes in doing so (including publishing wastewater data).	1 NO POVERTY 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 14 LIFE BELOW WATER	1.4 6.1 6.3 6.4 9.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6 14.1	Corporate commitment Assessing impacts Integrating and acting upon findings
Power plant recognised for its wastewater management The Essar Group manages a power plant and the fourth-largest steel facility in Gujarat, India. Both of these production facilities have adopted policies and committed to significantly reduce the pollution and mismanagement of water. By reworking its industrial practices in order to reduce consumption Essar Group was able to increase productivity, eliminate large-scale pollution into the sea, and reduce the water footprint of each respective plant. Essar's policies also target making water use by the plants more efficient and more productive through reusing wastewater, in order to ensure less impact on the local communities around Gujarat. In 2016 Essar received an award for its wastewater management work.	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 14 LIFE BELOW WATER	6.1 6.3 6.4 9.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6 14.1	Corporate commitment Assessing impacts Integrating and acting upon findings Tracking and monitoring

Case brief	Goals	Targets	Due diligence
Brand reduces harmful wastewater effects In 2013, in order to reach its own goals of sustainability and improvements in its industrial production, Nike implemented a commercial-scale, waterless dyeing technology for synthetic fabrics in its factories in Taiwan. It uses carbon dioxide instead of water in the dyeing process in order to greatly reduce the harmful and water-intensive effects of conventional textile dyeing processes. This technology has allowed factories to significantly decrease the highly polluted wastewater produced from the conventional dyeing process, improved water efficiency and management, and raised the quality of water in the areas surrounding the factories. In 2016, the company reported that it had achieved a 7.4% drop in freshwater use on the previous year.	1 NO POVERTY 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	1.4 6.1 6.3 6.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6	Integrating and acting upon findings
Apparel buyers support sustainable production practices Water PaCT Bangladesh is an organisation made up of international apparel buyers, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), Solidaridad and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association that works to bring about more sustainable practices in water efficiency and quality in the wet processing textile sector in Bangladesh. The garment and clothing buyers and Water PaCT work to help particular factories monitor and implement changes for cleaner production (CP) measures in water, as well as tackling chemical and energy resource use in the dye process for garments, the factory utilities, and in the treatment plants. PaCT factories have reportedly saved approximately 18.4 billion litres of water and 1.9 million MWh of electricity in a year. Their website features eight case studies with infographics and statistics.	1 NO POVERTY 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	1.4 6.1 6.3 6.4 6.6 9.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6	Corporate commitment Assessing impacts Integrating and acting upon findings Tracking and monitoring
Paper company improves water efficiency in its production process The Middle East Paper Company (MEPCO) produces paper in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Due to the significantly limited access to natural water resources within the city, MEPCO explored and adopted means of reducing the strain on water consumption in the water-intensive, paper producing process. MEPCO developed an on-site water recycling process and an effluent treatment plant in order to allow for greater water efficiency and reuse in the production process, allowing the factory to increase productivity without extending harmful consumption practices of the local water supply that lead to water stress in the community.	1 NO POVERTY 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	1.4 6.1 6.3 6.4 6.6 9.4 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6	Corporate commitment Integrating and acting upon findings Tracking and monitoring
Multinational investment bank makes moves to stop ocean dumping and curb pollution	1 NO POVERTY	1.4 3.9 6.1	Corporate commitment Integrating and acting

Case brief	Goals	Targets	Due diligence
Acting as a major shareholder in four mining companies around the world, Citigroup, a multinational investment bank and financial services corporation, updated its environmental and social policy framework in 2018. After the update the framework states that Citi "will not finance new mining projects [...] that utilise submarine waste disposal". In other words it sets out to terminate financing to mines that contribute to pollution and/or are dumping mine waste in the ocean or other natural bodies of water that can cause harm to marine life and ecosystems, and ultimately affect local communities. Citigroup made this move after having been in contact with the Ditch Ocean Dumping campaign.		6.3 6.4 6.6 12.2 12.4 12.5 12.6 14.1 14.2	upon findings

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