

4B	
SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE	Principle 14. Engagement of vulnerable groups
Target group / Relevant stakeholder: National Policy-Makers, Municipal Governments, Regulators, Urban Water Utilities, Medium Water Utilities, Rural Service Providers, Watershed or River Basin Organisations, User Groups, Networks or Platforms, and/or Private Sector	
DESCRIPTION	
Guarantee representation, inclusiveness and gender equality in water access, use and management (Salveti and Focacci, 2024, 24).	
EXPECTED RESULTS	
Outputs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal guarantees for consumer access to water-related information. • Mechanisms promote meaningful participation of under-represented groups in water policy design and implementation. • Financing sources ensure access to water and sanitation for vulnerable groups (e.g., homeless people and ethnic minorities). • Strategies and data systems addressing gender and social inclusiveness in water policies. 	
CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally appropriate and context-specific solutions: Water policies and interventions are adapted to respect local knowledge, traditions, and the specific needs of different vulnerable groups. • Inclusive decision-making: Participatory processes ensure vulnerable groups have a voice through meaningful consultations and co-management mechanisms like collaborative design processes (Hodson et al., 2023), and their involvement in climate risk management (Wolff et al., 2021). • Transparent and accountable institutions: Clear governance frameworks are established with accountability measures, grievance mechanisms, and accessible information to prevent discrimination and exclusion. • Capacity building and awareness: Education, training, and resources empower vulnerable groups to understand water policies, and raise awareness of water rights and legal protection. 	
BARRIERS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement opportunities do not always ensure participation of vulnerable groups, and bridging diverse interests remains challenging (Moreira et al., 2024; Escobar, 2023; Hyle et al., 2019). Water-related costs, incomes, and risks are shaped by prevailing institutions and political-economic structures, often influenced by class, religion, gender, and ethnicity (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). • Equity and justice are often treated as secondary considerations or assumed to emerge naturally alongside improvements in efficiency or sustainability (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). • Equitable and meaningful involvement face operational barriers, such as restrictive rules that hinder participation in water decision-making processes. Agent-related barriers include stakeholders' lack of capacity or power (Escobar, 2023). • Declining water availability and quality prompt reallocations that inevitably favour certain uses and users over others (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). • Floods and droughts as well as the measures taken to address them affect groups of people differently (Zwarteveen et al., 2017). • Engaging users with diverse needs or stakeholders operating within complex systems of water service provision can be difficult (Hodson et al., 2023). • Important knowledge gaps remain in identifying the specific barriers and needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups (Ezbakhe et al., 2019). 	

- Power dynamics in participatory processes with vulnerable groups (Escobar, 2023; Hodson et al., 2023): While proxies can help to bridge this gap by acting as representatives or mediators for end-users, they cannot replace the voice of vulnerable users.
- Disadvantaged communities are often seen as receivers rather than creators of their own development (Hyle et al., 2019).
- ‘Governance without government’: The state’s direct role in welfare is decreasing, with the private sector and civil society taking over responsibilities for resource allocation, public service delivery, and coordination (Zwarteveen et al., 2017).
- Institutional and technological path dependencies within broader power structures hinder efforts to redistribute voice and authority in water decision-making processes (Zwarteveen et al., 2017).

SOLUTIONS

- Assessment tools can evaluate WASH service access for vulnerable and marginalised groups, considering all aspects of the human rights to water and sanitation, including access, availability, quality, acceptability, and affordability (Ezbakhe et al., 2019).
- Evidence-based assessments of engagement processes and their impact on water governance objectives are necessary (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016).
- Targeted efforts to include vulnerable groups into decision-making (Hyle et al., 2019; Misiedjan, 2019): Design inclusion into every step of water interventions, making visible the participation levels (Hodson et al., 2023). Compare stakeholder participation to reveal power dynamics, showing who is involved, who is absent, and who makes decisions that impact primary users and the distribution of costs and benefits (Hodson et al., 2023).
- Inclusion of Participatory Action Research elements into multi-stakeholder participation can unlock barriers in water governance decision-making (Escobar, 2023).

EXAMPLES

Tax Reductions for Menstrual Hygiene Access in Macedonia

SDGs linked



Water risks



In Macedonia, menstrual poverty has led to school absenteeism among girls due to the high cost of menstrual products and inadequate sanitation facilities. Journalists for Human Rights spearheaded a campaign to challenge the 18% tax rate on menstrual products, successfully advocating for a reduction to 5%. This initiative also led to free menstrual products in all 81 universities and increased political awareness around menstrual hygiene. However, challenges remain, including inconsistent implementation of budgeted initiatives, limited access to sanitary facilities, and cultural stigma. The organisation continues to advocate for a complete tax removal, public subsidies, and better menstrual hygiene infrastructure in schools and public spaces. Through education, media engagement, and policy advocacy, this initiative has mainstreamed menstrual health as a public issue while pushing for long-term institutional change.

Linkages to Governance Principles

The initiative highlights engagement of vulnerable groups, directly supporting women and girls facing menstrual poverty through education and access to menstrual products. Stakeholder engagement was essential, with collaborations spanning ministries, media, civil society, and public health institutions. Regulatory frameworks were strengthened through tax reduction efforts and ongoing advocacy for public toilet legislation. The initiative was data-driven, leveraging public health research and national studies to inform policy recommendations. Additionally, capacity building was a priority, focusing on teacher training, school curricula, and public awareness campaigns to dismantle stigma and drive systemic change.

Preventing Water Disconnections for Households with Children in the Netherlands

SDGs linked



Water risks



In the Netherlands, thousands of households faced water disconnections due to unpaid bills, without consideration for whether children were affected. The legal framework allowed service interruptions after multiple warnings, but the emergency provision of only three litres of water per day per person fell far below WHO's recommended 50–100 litres. Defence for Children Netherlands and the Dutch Legal Committee for Human Rights (NJCM) filed a lawsuit, arguing that disconnections violated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other legal protections. In 2024, the District Court of The Hague ruled against water disconnections for households with children, ordering the government to take action. Utilities were required to reconnect affected households while maintaining the right to recover unpaid debts through non-punitive methods. This landmark ruling established children's access to water as a legal obligation, setting a precedent for safeguarding vulnerable groups.

Linkages to Governance Principles

The ruling reinforced engagement of vulnerable groups, explicitly recognising children's right to water access regardless of their families' financial situation. Policy coherence was strengthened by aligning national water governance with European human rights directives and international treaties. Clarifying roles and responsibilities ensured utilities and the government were both held accountable for preventing disconnections. The case also addressed managing trade-offs, balancing cost recovery mechanisms with the fundamental right to water, requiring utilities to seek alternative solutions to debt collection rather than denying essential services to vulnerable households.

REFERENCES

- Akhmouch, A. and Clavreul, D. (2016) "Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Governance: "Practicing What We Preach" with the OECD Water Governance Initiative." *Water* 8, 204. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-43350-9_3.pdf
- Escobar, M. (2023) *Guidelines for equitable participation in water decision-making*. SEI report, Stockholm. https://www.sei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/equitable-participation-water-decision-making-sei2023.030.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com#page=19&zoom=100,0,0
- Ezbakhe, F., Giné-Garriga, R., Pérez-Foguet, A. (2019) "Leaving no one behind: evaluating access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for vulnerable and marginalized groups". *Science of the Total Environment*, 683, 537-546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.05.207>
- Hodson, E., Svanda, A. and Dadashi, N. (2023) "Whom do we include and when? participatory design with vulnerable groups". *CoDesign*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2022.2160464>
- Hyle, M.A., Devkota, B.P. and Mustalahti, I. (2019) "From blueprints to empowerment of disadvantaged groups in natural resource governance: lessons from Nepal and Tanzania". *International Journal of the Commons*, 13(2), 1062-1078. DOI: [10.5334/ijc.951](https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.951)
- Moreira, F.D., Silva Fonseca, P.R., Machado Miranda, R., da Costa, L.O., Mejias Carpio, I.E. (2024) "Stakeholder engagement for inclusive water governance in a rural community in Brazil". *Front. Water*, Sec. Water and Human Systems, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frwa.2024.1378514>
- Salvetti, M. and Focacci, C. (2024) *Enhanced water governance assessment tool*. Deliverable D2.1., Public, EU Horizon InnWater Project, Grant agreement No. 101086512.

Zwarteveen, M., Kemerink-Seyoum, J.S., Kooy, M., Evers, J., Acevedo Guerrero, T., Batubara, B., Biza, A., Boakye-Ansah, A., Faber, S., Cabrera Flamini, A., Cuadrado-Quesada, G., Fantini, E., Gupta, J., Hasan, S., ter Horst, R., Jamali, H., Jaspers, F., Obani, F., Schwartz, K., Shubber, Z., Smit, H., Torio, P., Tutusaus, M. and Wesselink, A. (2017) "Engaging with the politics of water". *WIREs Water*, 4:e01245. <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1002/wat2.1245>