2026 United Nations Water Conference

ILO inputs to the Interactive Dialogue Concept Paper on

Water for people: the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies

Contributions may include relevant, up-to-date data, analysis, and good practices related to advancing the implementation of SDG 6 and its targets, as well as interlinkages with other SDGs and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance).

I. **Introduction** (500 words)
In the consultation for the interactive dialogues, the ILO suggested that access to WASH in workplaces, health facilities and schools be part and parcel of Theme 1. Workers in all sectors, especially those traditionally left behind and exposed to heat or waterborne occupational diseases, are entitled to protection under international labour standards.

II. **Status and trends** (1000 words)

III. **Challenges and emerging issues** (2000 words): *This section will highlight challenges and opportunities relating to the topics addressed in the interactive dialogue, particularly those that have emerged or become more urgent since the 2023 Water Conference. This section will also identify interlinkages and synergies between the relevant SDG 6 targets and other SDGs.*

IV. **Solutions** (2000 words): *This section will offer action-oriented, innovative, and pragmatic solutions to challenges. It will shine a spotlight on impactful initiatives, programs and projects from around the world that can be scaled up and/or transferred to other contexts. Potential partnerships among Member States and with other stakeholders will feature prominently.*
Since workplaces represent a major focus in the life of workers and employers, access to WASH in workplaces can contribute greatly to both occupational and general health. In an effort to advance towards both Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 6, to ensure universal access to water and sanitation, and number 8, to ensure decent work and sustainable economic growth, it is crucial to

propose effective solutions that improve working conditions, increase productivity and reach the most vulnerable communities. Actions towards these ambitious objectives require coordinated efforts by governments, workers and employers, at multiple levels.

The ILO's member States and the social partners (employer and worker organizations) have adopted a broad array of international instruments to promote occupational safety and health (OSH) through access to WASH in workplaces in different economic sectors. These include fishing, maritime and offshore activities, shipbreaking, docks, agriculture, mining, commerce and offices and construction, including in workers' housing where employers provide it. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, following up on the commitment by the G20 under its presidency to advance measures against COVID-19, ratified one of these conventions: the Hygiene in Commerce and Offices Convention, No. 120.

To face the workplace challenges posed by pandemics, the ILO's member states joined with employer and worker organizations worldwide in the International Labour Conference in June 2025 to adopt the first-ever international labour standards on biological hazards in the workplace. Under the new standards, waterborne exposure to biological hazards in the working environment in healthcare and other specifically mentioned workplaces should be addressed though preparedness and response measures, such as plans and procedures, to deal with accidents and emergencies, in collaboration between relevant public health, water and waste, occupational health and veterinary health authorities, and other partners.

Any disease, injury, incapacity or death due to occupational exposure to biological hazards in the working environment should be addressed through employment injury benefits or compensation, in accordance with national law and practice. In addition, employers have the duty to investigate occupational accidents, occupational diseases and, as appropriate, dangerous occurrences related to exposure to biological hazards in the working environment in order to identify their causes and take the necessary measures to prevent recurrence of similar events, in cooperation with occupational safety and health committees or workers' representatives.

Finally, member states should establish, implement and periodically review procedures for: (a) the reporting, recording, notification and investigation of occupational accidents, occupational diseases and, as appropriate, dangerous occurrences, that are caused by exposure to biological hazards in the working environment; (b) the production and publication of annual statistics, disaggregated by sex, on occupational accidents, occupational diseases and, as appropriate,

dangerous occurrences, that are caused by exposure to biological hazards in the working environment; (c) the holding of inquiries for cases of serious occupational accidents, occupational diseases or any other injuries to health that are caused by exposure to biological hazards in the working environment; (d) the annual publication of information on measures taken under the national occupational safety and health policy that address exposure to biological hazards in the working environment; (e) the determination of the appropriate duration for maintaining records on occupational diseases that are caused by exposure to biological hazards in the working environment, taking into account the latency periods of such diseases.

Workers, particularly those in the informal economy, who may face unsafe or unhealthy working environments due to lack of access to potable water, in particular in relation to heat stress due to climate change. An estimated 2.41 billion workers are exposed to excessive heat. [1] Every year, an estimated 22.85 million occupational injuries, 18,970 deaths and 2.09 million disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) are attributable to excessive heat alone. Workers in agriculture, environmental goods and services (natural resource management), construction, refuse collection, emergency repair work, transport, tourism and sports are particularly impacted. Primary health impacts include heat stress, heatstroke, heat exhaustion, rhabdomyolysis, heat syncope, heat cramps, heat rash, cardiovascular disease, acute kidney injury, chronic kidney disease, physical injury. Unsafe water provided at workplaces also exposes them to disease. [2] Adequate hydration and access to potable water is a key strategy for mitigating these risks. [3]

V. **Recommendations and conclusions** (2000 words)

VI. **Guiding questions** (1000 words)

[1] ILO, Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate, 2024.

[2] Biological Hazards in the Working Environment Recommendation, 2025 (No. 209).

[3] ILO, Ambient factors in the workplace, 2001.

2026 United Nations Water Conference

ILO inputs to the Interactive Dialogue Concept Paper on

Water in multilateral processes: Sustainable Development Goal 6, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and beyond, and global water initiatives

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I. **Introduction** (500 words)
As the SDGs are interconnected, multilateral processes should identify where actions to achieve one SDG will strengthen the achievement of others. Regarding SDG 6 and SDG 8, there are multiple areas where this happens in practice, and these actions should be reinforced. The ILO has identified four such areas:
- Access to WASH in workplaces
- Reduction of water fetching
- Improving the working conditions of water and sanitation workers
- Skills building for water workers

II. **Status and trends** (1000 words)
In 2016, the UN-Water campaigns leading to World Water Day and World Toilet Day were dedicated to the jobs theme. The World Water Development Report and the ILO's self-training handbook WASH@Work underscored the links between SDGs 6 and 8. These publications have been widely cited, and several international standards cite the WASH@Work as a source for implementing them. The COVID-19 pandemic further stressed the need to reinforce handwashing and access to WASH in workplaces. The ILO Convention and Recommendation on biological hazards in the workplace was the tripartite (governments, employers, workers) work to prepare for future health crises, including water-related illnesses and the water sector as a focus of attention.

III. **Challenges and emerging issues** (2000 words): *This section will highlight challenges and opportunities relating to the topics addressed in the interactive dialogue, particularly those that have emerged or become more urgent since the*

2023 Water Conference. This section will also identify interlinkages and synergies between the relevant SDG 6 targets and other SDGs.

It has been very difficult to realize the interlinkages between the different SDGs, including between SDG 6 and 8, due to the lack of a whole-of-government and systemwide UN approach. Separate ministries and custodian UN entities try to achieve their respective mandates without interacting with one another. UN-Water is a notable exception.

IV. **Solutions** (2000 words): *This section will offer action-oriented, innovative, and pragmatic solutions to challenges. It will shine a spotlight on impactful initiatives, programs and projects from around the world that can be scaled up and/or transferred to other contexts. Potential partnerships among Member States and with other stakeholders will feature prominently.*

The UN-Water synthesis report 2017 was a noteworthy attempt to identify areas of mutual reinforcement of the efforts to achieve the SDGs. In Panama, the Joint MDG Fund sponsored a joint water and sanitation programme focused on two provinces that incorporated the ILO, PAHO, the Ministries of Water and the communities to empower the communities through community contracting and provide them, especially women, the tools to address challenges related to water and decent work. In Uruguay, the SDG dialogue tables established in 2016 allowed civil society and utilities to work jointly to address all the indicators of SDG 6.

Implementation of ILO Conventions related to occupational safety and health, which is a fundamental principle and right at work, would place employers and workers in a position to advance the targets for both decent work and access to water and sanitation simultaneously. Also, recognizing the unpaid work in water fetching and the informal work carried out by sanitation workers through access to improved infrastructure, social protection, protective equipment and rights at work will improve the delivery of those services. In the formal water utilities, upskilling the workforce and recognizing their voice through social dialogue and collective bargaining will facilitate a bottom-up approach to identify gaps and improve the services.

V. **Recommendations and conclusions** (2000 words)

Member states should establish integrative approaches to water and workplace challenges, through comprehensive social dialogue.

VI. **Guiding questions** (1000 words)

2026 United Nations Water Conference

ILO inputs to the Interactive Dialogue Concept Paper on

Investments for water: financing, technology and innovation, and capacity-building

Contributions may include relevant, up-to-date data, analysis, and good practices related to advancing the implementation of SDG 6 and its targets, as well as interlinkages with other SDGs and the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework (financing, data and information, capacity development, innovation, and governance).

I. **Introduction** (500 words)

Sanitation workers are engaged in the supply of an essential public service that includes collection, transportation, treatment, and disposal of human excreta, domestic wastewater, and solid waste. They handle the entire operations related to provisioning and maintenance of the sanitation service chain. Sanitation workers are employed not only for cleaning toilets or emptying tanks/pits, but also to clean and unblock sewers and manholes, and for transportation of solid waste and work at disposal and sewerage treatment sites. These workers, especially those who manually clean and handle excreta from dry latrines, empty excrement pits and septic tanks, and unlock blocked sewers, without proper equipment and protective clothing face a higher degree of risk to health and life than those who perform such tasks with proper equipment and machines and protective clothing. Serious concern for the well-being of sanitation workers in many countries arises because of the persistence of manual sanitation work in its worst form that denigrates human dignity, poses a high health risk, and develops a situation of high economic insecurity for sanitation workers, which in the results in their poor economic well-being.

II. **Status and trends** (1000 words)

The official labour force/employment surveys do include a category of sanitation workers and provide some data on their number -although the nature of data differs across countries. However, there is a serious limitation of the data from employment/labour surveys. It does not disaggregate the sanitation work performed manually, or by machines, or by a mix of both. It does not differentiate between solid waste and faecal waste work or provide data on the number of sweepers engaged in manual cleaning of dry and wet toilets, manual cleaning of excrement pits, and sewer clearance. Thus, we do not get an idea about the exact magnitude of the

preventive aspects of manual sanitation work. Also, they do not give the number of sanitation workers engaged in various manual tasks or those who handle the work with machines. Therefore, in the end, we have an aggregate figure of sanitation workers, which is close to that of manual sanitation workers, but not completely.
In India, the National Sample Survey on employment gives the estimate for sanitation workers who include “garbage collectors and related laborers”. In other South Asian countries, the comparable category is “refuse and other elementary workers”. Thus, the garbage collectors and related workers in the Indian employment survey and refuse and other elementary workers in the labour surveys of other South Asian countries are nearly comparable. To make it closer and comparable, we made some adjustments in the data. The concept of garbage collectors includes those involved in motorized transportation of garbage as well as manual garbage collectors, and related workers such as sweepers (dry, wet, sewers), water carriers, etc., and related labourers. The comparable category in surveys of other South Asian countries is “refuse workers and other elementary workers”, which includes those involved in collecting, loading, and unloading garbage, sweeping streets, parks, and other public places, and performing other odd jobs and tasks. This brings the concept closer to the manual sanitation worker, but not completely. We use this comparable concept of a manual sanitation worker.
Sanitation work in South Asian countries operates in a particular social framework. There is a societal feature that is common to South Asian countries, that brings a unique dimension to sanitation work and workers involved in it. Traditionally, in most of the South Asian countries, particularly India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the sanitation work is mainly performed by Hindu scheduled caste (SC, formerly known as untouchable) and/or former untouchables whose ascendants converted to Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism (WaterAid 2020; Aqeel and John 2019; Hanchett 2016; Barrington 2021, Tudor Silva et al 2009; Cannie and Cannie 2020). This prevalence brings a particular character to sanitation occupation in these countries. There are linkages between caste and the stigma attached to the occupation of sanitation. The occupational stigma has roots in the institution of caste. The institution of the caste system involves the segregation of people into five social groups called castes arranged in a highly graded and unequal order. The social status and occupation of each caste are fixed by birth and are hereditary. The group at the bottom of the caste hierarchy is considered “impure and polluting” and so are the occupations they perform. According to the traditional caste code, this group is regarded as “untouchable”.
This situation is not limited to South Asia. The ILO-World Bank-WaterAid paper Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers (2019) also studied the situation in

Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Haiti, India, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda. It found that sanitation workers face challenges and risks regarding occupational and environmental health and safety, legal and institutional issues, financial insecurity, and social issues. Many countries have ratified and implemented the relevant ILO Conventions, but have not designed solutions addressing the particular issues that sanitation workers face.

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Sanitation work is at the highest level in the hierarchy of occupational impurity and pollution (Joshi and Ferron 2007). Sanitation workers suffer not only from the stigmatized identity on account of being untouchable but also for performing "polluting" work, which denigrates their social status and dignity to the worst possible level. As a result, the sanitation workers in these countries still suffer from social and physical exclusion, contempt, and stigma associated with untouchability and occupational pollution despite it being legally abolished in India. The influence of religious and social ideas which sanctify sanitation work as impure and polluting, and those engaged in this work as untouchable and unapproachable, is a common characteristic in South Asian countries, where caste traditions continue to thrive in varying degrees. It is this religious notion or idea of sanitation work being impure and polluting, which makes it difficult to eliminate. Hence, the elimination of manual sanitation work among other things would necessarily require a reform in the idea, attitude, and notion of the higher castes or privileged groups vis-à-vis the sanitation workers, especially those involved in the task of manual sanitation work.

"In India, the term faeces imply impurity and pollution both of which profanes the ritual purification which is the very basis of Hindu culture. Hindu culture require the removal of faeces as far as possible from the households environment and determines that those considered most impure and polluted—the lowest caste groups- must perform this task." (Joshi, Deepa and Ferron, Suzane. 2007). The idea, which considers sanitation work as impure and polluting and stigmatizes the dignity of sanitation workers, is the most disparaging outcome of caste and untouchability. However, there are other equally harmful outcomes of manual sanitation work. This work poses a high risk to the health, life, financial security, and well-being of those engaged in the profession, and a matter of great concern for governments in South Asian countries. Most sanitation workers perform without safe personal protective

gear exposing them to occupational and environmental health hazards, and being vulnerable to several health ailments (Water Aid 2009).

The occupational health risks of cleaning sewers and septic tanks, working in direct contact with hazardous biological and chemical agents in dangerous environments result in serious injuries, and often loss of life. In the West, much of the processes of handling sanitary waste are mechanized. Of equal concern is the problem of financial insecurity of sanitation workers. Except for some who are employed as formal permanent workers, the bulk of them in government, private sector, and homes are informal economy workers without any job, social, and health security. High level of informal employment often fails to guarantee affordable access to preventive and remedial health care, despite carrying a disproportionate burden of health risks common to many of these informal sanitation workers (Mander 2014; ILO 2013). The informality brings uncertainty in their employment leading to financial insecurity, which in turn results in low human development among them (Thorat 2009, 2010; Borooah et al 2015; Ramaiah 2015). High dependence of the community on sanitation work is also caused by reduced alternative livelihood opportunities, which are blocked by caste discrimination in formal employment and business; this prejudice persists as a legacy of the past in the present.

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Recognizing the harmful consequences of manual sanitation work in terms of dignity, the risk to health and life, financial insecurity, and low well-being of those involved in the occupation, governments in South Asian countries have developed safeguards in their respective constitutions, laws, and policies to address the problems of sanitation workers. These measures have drastically reduced the extent of the practice of manual sanitation work; nevertheless, it continues in allied forms--manual cleaning of dry latrines, sewers, manholes, and septic tanks, extraction of debris from sewerage canals, and so on (Joshi et al 2007; Cannie et al 2020; Aqeel and Gill 2019; Zaqout et al 2021; Tudor Silva et al 2009).

- In **Pakistan**, a collaboration between the ILO and the Pakistani Workers' Federation (PUWF), significant milestones have been achieved like enhanced presence and voice and visibility of the sanitation workers, capacity building, development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the sewage workers in the Water And Sanitation Authority (WASA), registration of sanitation workers

union in the Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC) and sewage workers' union in WASA. Specialized training programmes on Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) for the officials and workers of WASA and LWMC have created an awareness about OSH and have been instrumental in promoting social dialogue and meaningful engagement between the workers and employers. Similarly, the social dialogue and advocacy campaigns have also led to public awareness on these issues, highlighting the need for all stakeholders to promote decent work for the sanitation workers. The bipartite and tripartite meetings and meetings with provincial parliamentarians have also contributed to highlighting the issues of the sanitation workers. Similarly, positive steps by the LWMC of registering their 12,000 sanitation workers to social security and approving 3 months paid maternity leave for their female sanitation workers are significant results of the ILO/PRS and PWUF collaboration.

- In **South Africa**, sanitation work is mostly formalized, with public and private employers following national labor standards. Public-sector sanitation workers include those who clean sewers and private contractors manage the pit emptying. Many of the on-site sanitation systems in South Africa are dry pits with compacted dry sludge, which is difficult to empty mechanically. Therefore, these operations include manual emptying. In partnership with eThekwini utility, appropriate emptying technologies have also been developed, such as the e-Vac, a portable pump, to reduce the need for manual emptiers to enter the pits.

  All sanitation workers are made aware of the microbial and physical hazards that manual emptying present, are provided with PPE, and work in daylight. Worker conditions are regulated by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), the National Occupational Health and Safety Act (1993), and the Regulations for Hazardous Biological Agents (2001). Those who work for municipalities are union members.

  There has been a policy shift toward acknowledging on-site sanitation systems as a viable sanitation option, spearheaded by municipalities such as eThekwini and Cape Town (Blackett and Hawkins 2017). eThekwini municipality is a well-known example of strong leadership from the utility and technological innovation to achieve the national goal of providing sanitation services to everyone in a sustainable manner while respecting labor and OSH laws and mitigating occupational risks for the sanitation workers (WRC 2015).

  Sanitation work is regulated by the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997); the National Occupational Health and Safety Act (1993), which charges

employers with protecting worker health and safety; and the Regulations for Hazardous Biological Agents (2001), which mandate that any person who may be exposed to a biohazard must comply with the employer's instructions, such as wearing PPE, reporting accidents, and completing training or medical examinations. Strong trade unions have also had a great impact on such formalization and improvements of working conditions. The municipality has worked with large contractors, under large annual or multi-year contracts. The regulatory framework in South Africa protects workers' right. Contractors have a duty to provide their employees with PPE and will check compliance of workers when on-site. The health and safety inspectorate also performs spot checks of contractors.

- In **India**, manual scavenging was prohibited by the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act (1993). In 2013, the law was extended and clarified to include insanitary latrines, ditches, pits, railway tracks, sewers, and septic tanks in the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act. The ILO was highly influential in the adoption of this law. This law calls for rehabilitation of manual scavengers and provides support for alternative employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

  Progress has been made in advocating for sanitation workers' rights and identifying appropriate solutions. Many local and international organizations (for example, Safai Karmachari Andolan, Navsarjan Trust in Gujarat and so on) continue to raise awareness and empower sanitation workers through capacity building and guidance and supporting leveraging trade union mechanisms to support sanitation workers. Standard operating procedures for cleaning sewers and septic tanks have been developed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs to eliminate hazardous cleaning, prevent accidents and casualties, and limit the risk of diseases resulting from improper practice of cleaning sewers or emptying of septic tanks

- The Association of Emptiers of **Senegal** has emerged as a best-practice case of formalization and professionalization of pit emptiers. Formed over the past 15 years, it provides a mechanism for the emptiers to organize in a context where many emptiers continue to operate informally. The association provides an interface for the utility and municipalities to be able to acknowledge and engage with one another. In 2012, the National Sanitation Office of Senegal (ONAS), which is responsible for urban sanitation, launched a program to improve the

living conditions of low-income people living in peri-urban areas in the Dakar region, with activities to improve overall FSM in the city and make mechanical emptying more affordable. The program focused on professionalizing sanitation workers and included market restructuring, access to credit and parts for the mechanical emptiers, and building the capacity of public institutional actors. ONAS also delegated the management of fecal sludge treatment plants to the private sector. Employees of the largest private-sector players in the sanitation subsector benefit from regular health checkups, vaccines, and training on occupational health and safety. Manual emptying is sanctioned in Senegal by the National Code of Sanitation with a risk of criminal prosecution. Vacuum trucks are then required to transport the collected sludge to designated treatment plants. Enforcement relies on local hygiene officers with competing priorities and pressures and limited budgets (ONAS 2017). Employees of the largest private-sector players benefit from regular health checkups, vaccines, and training on occupational safety and health.

- In **Kenya**, the Up-scaling Basic Sanitation for the Urban Poor (UBSUP) initiative targets 400,000 people in small and medium towns using on-site sanitation. It aims to formulate a national fecal sludge management (FSM) approach, including new laws to prioritize on-site sanitation based on the principles of complete sanitation service delivery (Mbalo 2017). By law, fecal sludge treatment services are to be provided by water service providers (WSPs), but they have typically failed in this duty. UBSUP provides a mechanism for the WSP to grow its own FSM expertise and skills and in turn train, equip, and monitor manual emptiers and urine-diverting dry toilet container teams to perform the essential sanitation services. In Kisumu, standard operating procedures and specific guidelines to explicitly protect sanitation workers' rights, including manual emptiers, have been developed and adopted at the city level (Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor, 2018). These specify that all employees must be immunized against typhoid, hepatitis B, and cholera; have health insurance; and receive training from the county public health office. The standard operating procedures also specify personal safety and emptying equipment, best practices for transporting and disposing of waste, and customer relations guidelines.
- In **Haiti**, most sanitation work is performed by the informal manual pit emptiers known as bayakous who serve households as well as larger institutions such as schools, churches, and prisons. Vacuum truck companies service high-end customers and government offices (Hersher 2017). One social enterprise in Haiti has introduced a container-based toilet service in Port-au-Prince and Cap-

Haïtien, which covers the entire sanitation service delivery chain from collection through to treatment and reuse. Container-based systems mean there is no need for sanitation workers to enter pits, and the waste is contained and sealed in small containers at the household and then transported away by the sanitation workers for stabilization and safe disposal. The enterprise is implementing an SSP to manage risk along the sanitation chain. Sanitation workers are trained in standard operating procedures and given vaccinations and regular health checks to safeguard them while they are at work.

- In **Burkina Faso**, the Association of Manual Emptiers (ABASE) received in 2017 a ceremonial honor from the Ministry of Water and Sanitation for its work in improving living conditions of sanitation workers in Ouagadougou (Réseau de professionnels juniors 2017). The ABASE provides a mechanism to organize and advocate for manual emptiers, as well as training and capacity building, and it helps in obtaining vaccines and equipment for the emptiers (pS-Eau 2018). It is not a formal union and does not offer any legal protection to the sanitation workers. A joint NGO-municipality-utility effort in Ouagadougou sought to professionalize 25 manual emptiers there via training on health, hygiene, and safety. This initiative enabled them to dispose of the waste at the treatment plants, prepare business plans, and loan dedicated equipment for improved manual emptying from the municipality.
- In **Bolivia**, on-site sanitation solutions are meeting the sanitation need in response to an otherwise low access rate to sanitation, rapid population growth, and high investment costs for conventional sewers and wastewater treatment plants. Consequently, small and medium private vacuum truck companies have emerged to meet the demand to empty pits and septic tanks. In cities such as Santa Cruz, emptying companies have been operating for more than 30 years without any official control or regulation (World Bank 2018). The services, therefore, need to be better regulated by the relevant sectoral actors. Workers display risky and unsafe behavior and practices during handling, transport, and disposal of fecal sludge. They do not wear PPE even if it is provided. Standards related to the collection and transport of fecal sludge have to be established and enforced.

V. **Recommendations and conclusions** (2000 words)

VI. **Guiding questions** (1000 words)