
Assembly of First Nations

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Statement by Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief Cindy Woodhouse (Manitoba)

United Nations Water Conference
March 22-24, 2023

Conference Theme Water for Health: Access to WASH, including the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation (and SDG #6)

First Nations work hard to uphold our inherent responsibilities as caretakers of water. Water is a sacred part of our way of life and is central to our health and livelihoods.

First Nations' responsibilities to Water, and our rights as peoples with the right to self-determination, and sacred Treaty rights, include all aspects of water use, jurisdiction, and stewardship as well as water governance over drinking water and sanitation.

First Nations often say Water is life; and we mean that for everybody. We know there cannot be water security for anyone without a much greater global commitment and Water Action to protect all water and to realize the human right to clean drinking water and sanitation for all. (I emphasize that First Nations are not "local communities" but rather peoples with the right to self-determination.)

My primary focus at this Water Forum is what is needed to realize the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation (SDG #6) for all First Nations. In Canada, there has been considerable focus on ending long-term boil water advisories in First Nations -- as a metric of progress relevant to SDG #6. While significant progress has made in the partnership between Canada and First Nations, we have not yet met this critically important goal. As of February 2023, 32 First Nations are still under long-term boil water advisories (down from 105 in 2015). In addition, too many First Nations experience shorter term boil water advisories that are lifted and then re-instated again and again.

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While completely eliminating long-term boil water advisories is an important performance measure, it is simply one metric. We need to look at the whole picture of water security for First Nations.

From a First Nations perspective of our water security situation, additional performance measures are equally relevant; such as:

- Are First Nations laws and values about how to protect water being respected?
- What financial commitments for sustainable, predictable funding to First Nations governments are being made, and over what timeframe, to close the infrastructure gap; and to support operations and maintenance, training and capacity development?
- Is the free, prior and informed consent standard in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (and which is an element of the right to self-determination) being interpreted and operationalized correctly, when water legislative development issues are on the table?
- Is space being made for the roles and responsibilities of First Nations women to protect the water and to be a voice for water?

At this mid-point of the Water Decade, it is time for a specific and intensified call to action respecting SDG#6 and the right to safe drinking water and sanitation of Indigenous peoples. Perhaps in the next Ministerial Declaration of the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and/or drafting of the 2023 General Assembly resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we should consider wording like this:

Affirming the need to accelerate efforts, and to take measures, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples, to fully realize safe drinking water and proper sanitation for all Indigenous peoples, and all aspects of water security in keeping with their protocols, values and laws; and

Emphasizing free, prior and informed consent is a requirement throughout legislative and regulatory development initiatives impacting Indigenous peoples including on safe drinking water and sanitation issues as required by Article 19 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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From an emergency prevention and management perspective, the United Nations is asked to note that First Nations are on the front lines of climate induced flooding and climate change induced forest fires. Both lead to regular and traumatic evacuations. Climate induced crises, whether from too much water or too little water, threaten the safety and security of our people.

The fundamental human rights of all Indigenous peoples to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation and broader water security must be protected, respected and implemented fully.