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NEWAVE statement for the UN 2023 Water Conference

The [NEWAVE Network](#) is a transnational and interdisciplinary group of researchers, scholars, and practitioners, working on the “Next Water Governance”.

Twelve NEWAVE researchers participated in the sessions at the UN Water conference 22-24 March in NYC. We organized two different side events and expressed our commitments.

With this document we would like to provide our reflections and inputs to the conference.

We applaud the initiative to organise the UN Water Conference 2023 and agree that another forty-six years should not be waited to organize the next edition. It is clear that the necessity to strengthen attention on water issues is a high priority for the **United Nations**. This is a needed global governance priority, and one falling short. It is important to restate the social and environmental implications of water (governance) and the urgency to streamline water as a priority across all major UN organisations.

Supporting and encouraging the **United Nations** to accelerate on the implementation of the **UN Water Action Agenda** we here submit nine constructively critical observations and reflections as our written inputs:

1. We noticed a limited engagement of scholars, researchers, and scientist in the design of the conference, both as panellists, and in support of drafting and shaping all the official documents. Therefore, we call for more involvement of the academic and the wider scientific community.
2. Dominant approaches and paradigms in water governance such as neoliberal perspectives, commodification, efficiency and control, and technical solutions have dominated the conference; whereas the transformative potential of critical thinking such as feminist, political ecology, and post-colonial theories, as well as indigenous perspectives are subdued under these paradigms as a marginal narrative.
3. Where alternative perspectives (youth, indigenous peoples, minorities, activists, social and environmental movement representatives) have been involved outside of sessions they have organised, it has been often in the form of “tokenism”. We observed that these voices are given a platform to check a representation box, rather than the real opportunity to influence decisions. This should be recognized and addressed.
4. The private sector has dominated the conference debates, often promoting their own interests in the form of corporate social responsibility activities touted as “water stewardship”. Problematic aspects of conflict of interest should be carefully addressed.



5. Contested issues such as “water grabbing”, “water contamination”, “extractivism”, and exploitation of the Global South water resources by more powerful actors, did not receive the attention they deserve considering the extent of impact of these phenomena.
6. There is limited reflexivity and transparency on who is shaping how high-level water governance decisions are being taken, for what purpose, and serving which interests.
7. Reflection on water as a socio-political issue is limited while emphasis on innovation, technological solutions, infrastructural development, digitalisation, and investment opportunities are highly emphasized as the main solutions, with little reflection about the problematic aspects of these approaches.
8. The discussion on the “value of water” continues to be prevalently and worryingly about monetary value and pricing rather than on its multiple value dimensions (indigenous, cultural, spiritual, aesthetic, social, etc.), of which economic value is but one facet.
9. There is not enough attention to developing binding legal frameworks to protect water rights and tenure and bringing those into dialogue with the human right to water. On the contrary, a rhetoric of voluntary corporate self-regulation continues to be promoted.

Concluding, we call the **United Nations** to give more space to critical voices in the design and implementation of the **UN Water Action Agenda**. We also encourage the UN to support the rights-based, legally binding approach rather than following the path of deregulation, liberalisation, and corporate dominated interests. Water is a common good which should not be appropriated, commodified and usurped by the logic of profit. The **United Nations** have a key role in guaranteeing that the (water) rights and interests of nature and humans, current and future generations, prevail over commercial and financial speculation agendas.

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