



Special Rapporteur on the human rights  
to safe drinking water and sanitation  
Mr. Pedro Arrojo-Agudo

Headquarters Europe  
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## **Health of aquatic ecosystems & human rights of Water and Sanitation**

Honorable SR Arrojo-Agudo!

Malteser International (MI) as the relief arm of the Sovereign Order of Malta has compiled an input on MI's activities in Africa in regard to the concerned topic as requested by our UN Mission in Geneva:

### **“Fulfilling the human rights of those living in poverty and restoring the health of aquatic ecosystems: two converging challenges”**

Input by Malteser International in its capacity of implementing organization of the  
Sovereign Order of Malta

#### **Introduction:**

The human rights to water and sanitation is of particular relevance for those living in poverty. It has developed over the years through various international legal frameworks and human rights instruments. At the heart of the human rights topic related to water and sanitation is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted in 1948 to promote and protect the rights of all individuals, regardless of race, gender, religion, or social status. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 64/292, which explicitly recognized the human right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include goal number 6 to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" by 2030.

However, poverty and lack of access to basic services such as water, sanitation, and healthcare are still preventing many from fully enjoying their human rights. At the same time, human activities have had a detrimental impact on the health of aquatic ecosystems, posing a threat to the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on them. This is reflected in SDG 14, which focuses on the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. It aims to promote sustainable fisheries, reduce marine pollution, increase scientific knowledge about marine ecosystems, and protect marine biodiversity. Achieving SDG 14 is critical for the health of people and animals and the wider environment in general. Malteser International aims to fulfill the human rights of individuals living in poverty by providing them access to necessities such as water and sanitation. It supports the aim of restoring the health of aquatic ecosystems and promotes a "One Health" approach to address these challenges.

This note provides additional information on Malteser International's approaches and programs, which serve as practical examples of how the organization contributes to the goal of "fulfilling the human rights of individuals living in poverty and restoring the health of aquatic ecosystems".

**The “One Health” approach interlinks human health, animal health and the environment:**

The “One Health” approach is a holistic and collaborative framework that recognizes the interdependence of human health, animal health, and the environment. This approach recognizes that human activities can have a significant impact on the environment, which, in turn, can have an impact on the health of humans and animals. Particular attention is given to the emergence of zoonotic diseases, which are diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans (see definition at: [One health \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/onehealth))

By taking a “One Health” approach, the complex interactions between humans, animals, and the environment can be addressed better. This can lead to the development of more effective interventions for preventing and controlling diseases, improving food safety and security, and protecting the environment.



We will highlight this through two examples of such activities: the efforts to fight Schistosomiasis with improved WASH activities in Mahagi, DR Congo, at the shores of Lake Albert, and CLTS (community-Led Total Sanitation) and water supply activities in Juba, South Sudan, along the Nile river. In both contexts, it is essential to explore the link between human rights and poverty, as poverty is often one of the major obstacles to the fulfillment of human rights. In many parts of the world, including DRC and South Sudan, poverty is closely linked to lack of access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. For example, in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, many people still practice open defecation due to the lack of access to sanitation facilities. This poses a risk to public health, as it can lead to the spread of diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and diarrhea. Lack of access to clean water also puts individuals at risk of water-borne illnesses, such as Schistosomiasis.

**WASH interventions in Mahagi, DRC:**

Malteser International addresses the issue of Schistosomiasis through WASH activities and related health interventions in Mahagi, at the shores of lake Albert in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Schistosomiasis is a neglected tropical disease caused by parasitic worms that live in freshwater snails. The disease is transmitted to humans when they come into contact with contaminated water, such as when bathing, washing clothes, or fishing. Schistosomiasis is

prevalent in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including the shores of Lake Albert in Mahagi, Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Mahagi, efforts are being made to fight Schistosomiasis by improving access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. The project is implemented by a team of Malteser International DRC health and WASH professionals, in close collaboration with the local health authorities. The project includes the construction of latrines and handwashing stations in schools, health centers, and households, as well as the distribution of soap and educational materials on proper hygiene practices. The project also includes the provision of safe water through the construction of water points and the rehabilitation of existing water sources. By improving access to WASH facilities, the project aims to reduce the prevalence of Schistosomiasis and other water-borne illnesses, as well as to promote better health and well-being among the local population. The project also contributes to the fulfillment of human rights, particularly the right to health, by improving access to basic healthcare services.



### **WASH interventions in Juba, South Sudan:**

Aquatic ecosystems and human health are closely related. Aquatic ecosystems, such as rivers, lakes, and wetlands, provide a range of services to humans, including food, water, and recreation. However, human activities, such as pollution can adversely affect these aquatic ecosystems.

This is the context which Malteser International encountered while implementing its (semi)urban WASH project in Juba, South Sudan, in areas along the Nile river. In this project, the Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach was implemented to promote better hygiene and sanitation practices among local communities. This is a community-based approach that emphasizes the importance of behavioral change and community participation in achieving sustainable improvements in water and sanitation. The approach involves mobilizing communities to take collective action to eliminate open defecation, and to adopt improved

sanitation practices, such as using latrines and handwashing stations. As this concerned a challenging environment in a poor urban post-conflict context, the need was identified to support the users with the provision of some construction materials and skilled labor inputs. In addition to the CLTS approach, efforts were also being made to improve water supply in the target areas. The Nile river is a major source of water for the city, but it is also used for sanitation purposes by some and bathing and drinking water by others. This poses a risk to public health, as it can lead to the spread of water-borne illnesses.



### **Global Program on WASH and Human Rights:**

In addition to the efforts in Mahagi DRC and Juba South Sudan, Malteser International also implements a global program that links a rights-based MRR (Making Right Real) approach and the WASH Systems approach in India, Nepal and Uganda. MRR has a strong emphasis on community-led development, which recognizes the important role of decentralized authorities in promoting human rights and empowering marginalized communities. Decentralized authorities refer to local government bodies or other institutions that are responsible for delivering services and making decisions at the community level. MRR recognizes that decentralized authorities are often the first point of contact for marginalized communities when it comes to accessing services or addressing grievances related to human rights. As such, MRR works to build the capacity of decentralized authorities to effectively respond to the needs of marginalized communities and to promote greater respect for human rights.

One way that MRR supports decentralized authorities is through training and capacity-building initiatives. By building the capacity of decentralized authorities to effectively respond to the needs of marginalized communities and promoting community participation in decision-making, MRR aims to create more just and equitable societies where all individuals can enjoy their human rights. The WASH Systems approach is a holistic and sustainable way of ensuring access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services for all. It recognizes that the delivery of WASH services is not just about the provision of infrastructure but also involves a complex system of actors, institutions, and policies. It focuses on strengthening the various components of the

WASH system, including governance, water resource management, finance, institutions, service delivery, and monitoring.

One key aspect of the WASH Systems approach is its focus on **Water Resources Management**, which emphasizes the importance of creating a safe water environment and implementing pollution and contamination prevention measures. This includes ensuring that sanitation activities do not adversely impact aquatic systems. By addressing these issues through a comprehensive and integrated approach, the WASH Systems approach can help to ensure that the management of aquatic systems is sustainable and equitable.

The WASH Systems approach emphasizes the importance of planning and governance as key components of a sustainable water sector. Effective planning and governance can help to ensure that aquatic systems are managed in a way that is sustainable and equitable.



The approach focuses on strengthening service delivery systems, including water supply and sanitation systems. By ensuring that these systems are well-managed, aquatic systems can be protected from pollution and degradation, like in the above example of Juba, South Sudan. Moreover, the WASH Systems approach emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluation as key components of a sustainable water sector. Effective monitoring and evaluation can help to identify problems in the management of aquatic systems and take corrective actions.

For Malteser International, community participation is a key component of its projects. The WASH Systems approach also recognizes the importance of community participation in the planning and management of water and sanitation systems. By involving communities in the management of aquatic systems, local knowledge and resources can be used to protect and manage these systems more effectively. For this reason, communities in the above-mentioned project examples in Mahagi and Juba are strongly involved in program development and implementation. Overall, the WASH Systems approach promotes a sustainable and resilient

WASH system that can deliver services to all. It recognizes that the delivery of WASH services is complex and requires a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach.

**Conclusion:**

Fulfilling the human rights of those living in poverty and restoring the health of aquatic ecosystems are two converging challenges for which the "one health" approach can be an effective solution as it links up human and animal health and the natural environment.

By promoting sustainable water and sanitation systems, improving access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and adopting community-based approaches that emphasize behavioral change and community participation, we can address challenges related to the improvement of the health and well-being of individuals and ecosystems alike.

The efforts of the Global Program on WASH and Human Rights and the interventions in Mahagi and Juba are just three examples of how the human rights of those living in poverty can be linked to restoring the health of aquatic ecosystems. By scaling up these efforts and applying them in other contexts, we can make progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) and Goal 14 (life below water) and promote a more just and sustainable world for all.



With kind regards,

Arno Coerver  
Global WASH & Environment Advisor

Roland Hansen  
Head of Regional Group Africa