

The largest election year in history: Civil society campaigning to achieve human rights to water and sanitation

Before the close of 2024, 4.2 billion people will have headed to the polls to elect their governments. This represents half the world's population, and makes 2024 the largest election year in history. As such, this year has been a decisive year for populations to influence governments with their votes and has presented an enormous opportunity for raising the political will for water, sanitation and hygiene.

Civic participation and advocacy are crucial to ensure free, fair and peaceful elections. For Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Civil Society constituency and End Water Poverty (EWP) members, elections offer a chance to raise public awareness about human rights and drum up tangible commitments to water, sanitation and hygiene from political candidates. Reaching out to high-level political candidates, across political parties, whilst they are on the campaign trail is a key tool towards ensuring the political prioritization of water, sanitation and hygiene.

Civil society organizations implemented strategies to reach out to and sensitize political parties and candidates on critical water and sanitation issues. Strategies included the development of citizen manifestos, charters of demands and policy briefs- critical tools to demonstrate the necessity of water, sanitation and hygiene in the attainment of broader political priorities and to ask political leaders for commitments to upholding human rights to water and sanitation.

On October 24th, Sanitation and Water for All and [End Water Poverty](#) co-hosted a peer exchange with global alliance of civil society organizations, [CIVICUS](#), to highlight how civil society has engaged political candidates and highlighted the need for the achievement of human rights related to water and sanitation in various civic contexts, especially as the largest election year in history comes to an end. CIVICUS presented research on how its members operate within restricted, repressed, and narrowed civic spaces, focusing on voter education, election monitoring, and countering disinformation. In the context of a trend towards closing civic space, CIVICUS opened the session presenting a diversity of strategies implemented by civil society to create space for engagement in elections and democratic processes. Their members' strategies include calling for free and fair elections, mobilization and promoting availability of information.

Then, representatives of civil society in Ghana, Mexico, and Pakistan shared their outreach strategies aimed at bringing WASH issues to the ballot and the challenges they faced. WaterAid EU shared lessons learned from the #StandUpForWater campaign during European Union elections, emphasizing how NGOs across the EU manage discourse with political parties across the spectrum. Highlights from the session feature below:

Ghana 2024 elections- Campaigning to achieve human rights to water and sanitation

SWA partner and EWP member, [CONIWAS](#), brings NGOs, the government and other sector organizations together in Ghana to influence policies, remove barriers, and promote access to clean water, sanitation, and improved hygiene for the most marginalized. CONIWAS leveraged the key political opportunity of Ghana's 2024 Presidential election to launch a series of initiatives urging political parties to prioritize water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Collaboration with key sector actors is a critical strategy which underpins CONIWAS' work. Throughout the year, policy dialogues organized by CONIWAS conveyed key messages to highlight the critical nature of WASH to advancing economic development in Ghana. In this framework, CONIWAS co-hosted a National Dialogue with WaterAid, to address key national issues raised by political parties related to water, sanitation and hygiene. Civil society's central advocacy effort at this event focused on keeping the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources integrated as one Ministry, contrary to a proposed division. Submissions from civil society organizations led to a consensus at the time among all participating political parties that water, sanitation, and hygiene should indeed remain integrated- a key outcome for civil society advocacy.

To further their advocacy and ensure water, sanitation and hygiene remained high on political agendas, with support from SWA, [CONIWAS created a WASH Manifesto](#) with commitments for the improvement of the WASH sector in Ghana. CONIWAS secured the signatures of the two main political parties, key advocacy targets, ahead of Presidential elections in December 2024. Engaging the media on the manifesto was an important strategy implemented by CONIWAS, which led to the creation of a media action plan. The action plan will monitor the implementation of manifesto commitments with the winning party into 2025, supporting the monitoring of election promises and accountability.

The signed Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Manifesto will be used to engage the incoming political party in 2025 when they take office- from the Parliamentary Select Committee for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene to the highest levels of government. The initiative also aims to ensure that incoming government takes forward the commitments outlined in the 2024 [presidential compact signed by President Nana Addo Nakwa Akufo-Addo in August](#), especially remedying the funding gap to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6.

Mexico Presidential elections- Adding water, sanitation and hygiene to the ballot box with climate messaging

Since the winter season of 2022, Mexico has experienced severe ongoing droughts that have impacted the country's water supplies. Moving into 2024's Presidential election, these issues were at the forefront of national discourse leading up to the Presidential elections in June. To maximize the possibility of prioritizing water, sanitation and hygiene issues in this context, SWA Civil Society partners in Mexico incorporated water and sanitation issues into the agendas of political candidates at a time where climate effects were being felt through a lack of water.

Ahead of the elections, SWA Civil Society Focal Point in Mexico, SENDAS A.C., with support from SWA, created a policy brief outlining essential measures for water, sanitation, and hygiene- emphasizing their relevance in the context of environmental challenges and the climate crisis. From this brief, strategic lines of action for good water management were proposed to the incoming government via key messaging, including guaranteeing the human rights to water and sanitation within state policies; prioritizing investment focused on closing access gaps; guaranteeing water quality for the health of all and investment and regulation for reuse and circular management of water.

SENDAS A.C. worked with national chapter of Pan-Latin American civil society network for water and sanitation, [Redes del Agua](#), to promote the network's combined civil society water, sanitation and hygiene agenda to Presidential (and State) candidates. Their efforts resulted in the theme of water featuring on candidates' agendas for the first time in 20 years.

SENDAS A.C. mobilized additional support for the initiative by hosting a press conference to communicate their five key messages to the now-President, Her Excellency Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, and the Secretary of Environment. They also highlighted their positioning to Pedro Arrojo, Special Rapporteur on the rights to water and sanitation, at an official visit he made to Mexico. Additionally, the positioning was supported by a

host of grassroots organizations, ensuring consistency in messaging across civil society. As a result of their work, various elements of the civil society agenda for water and sanitation are featured in the new government's plan. Collaborative efforts continue to keep water in the government agenda, including constructing and positioning the themes from the civil society agenda which weren't reflected in the government priorities.

Influencing European Union Parliament Elections

In June 2024, voters in the 27 countries of the European Union elected candidates for the European Parliament. Ahead of these elections, WaterAid worked with local NGOs to develop advocacy plans for promoting water and sanitation policies, and developing a manifesto seeking candidates support to water, sanitation and hygiene in their mandate if they were to be elected. The main goals of this advocacy were awareness-raising, giving visibility to key issues and forging relationships with candidates.

Civil Society groups were supported by WaterAid EU to distribute manifestoes to candidates across all political parties, targeting those most likely to get elected. The core message and objective of the Manifesto centered on water, sanitation and hygiene. However, as a strategy, groups were intentional in their framing of the key element of the manifesto to candidates. When addressing parties whose priorities were domestic issues, for example, the messages spoke to those domestic issues and highlighted the importance of water security, water scarcity, and the return on investment of investing in WASH.

Out of the 100 candidates who signed on to the Manifesto, 33 were elected. Through these signatories, civil society's advocacy efforts achieved the initiative's primary objective of building candidates' understanding of water, sanitation and hygiene, and resulted in new and deepened relationships with members of the European Parliament. The entry-points created with candidates through the manifesto will be leveraged for ongoing relationships with elected representatives. Additionally, the messaging used to approach candidates in this outreach will be developed to strengthen their engagement on water, sanitation and hygiene.

Pakistan- Mobilizing marginalized communities to 'Vote for Water'

In Pakistan, End Water Poverty member Center for Law and Justice (CLJ), initiated a 'Vote for Water' campaign to take key research to election candidates. CLJ presented research focused on demonstrating social barriers to accessing water, sanitation and hygiene experienced in a Christian minority community in Lahore. The research highlighted inequalities experienced by minorities in access to quality water, sanitation and hygiene due to religion and caste. During Pakistan's delayed elections earlier this year, CLJ hosted a program open to the public with one of the candidates for an upcoming election, who is now the Federal Information Minister. The next steps of the campaign focuses on reaching out to those who made promises during the election campaign, including the Federal Information Minister, to work with them to achieve water as a human right.

Democratic Republic of the Congo- Campaigning for water rights and an end to freshwater contamination

The Executive Secretary of End Water Poverty's member Green Ark Committee shared insights on advocating for water rights and addressing freshwater contamination during DRC's general election in December 2023.

The campaign by the Green Ark Committee aimed to reach out to political candidates to enhance water services in marginalized areas of the city of Uvira and to combat the contamination of the Mulongwe, Kalimabenge, Kamvinvira, Ruzozi rivers, and Lake Tanganyika. The committee translated these goals into action through community meetings, peaceful protests, and petitions to state authorities. Despite navigating longstanding conflict and electoral security challenges, the Green Ark Committee's efforts yielded positive

results—most notably, raising awareness of the right to water and recently establishing a 'Water Office' at Uvira City Hall. Read their full story [here](#).

This peer exchange was organized as part of an ongoing collaboration between CIVICUS and End Water Poverty since 2023, wherein an initial peer exchange identified [Six Ways to Expand Civil Space in the Water and Sanitation Sector](#). The initial session resulted in the creation of an [Accountability & Activism community of practice](#) focused on civil society advocacy on human rights to water and sanitation.

These experiences have provided useful insights and initiatives which will continue to be used in public civic engagement, especially in the coming years as SWA's Heads of State Initiatives and 2025 Sector Ministers' Meeting take center stage in ongoing partnership priorities.