Simavi’s role in the development of the human rights to water and sanitation (HRWS) has been twofold: supporting developments at international level, and through programme implementation in the countries where we work.

Internationally, Simavi joins and supports civil society organisations (CSOs) movements to highlight issues on the HRWS that in our view should be raised in international political and human rights mechanisms.

For example, as a member of End Water Poverty (EWP), Simavi participated in campaigns with international institutions and governments, and was actively involved in the strategic development of EWP as a member of its international steering committee.
Through these campaigns, we advocated for the rights to water and sanitation to be recognized as standalone rights, and for the inclusion of the right to water in the post-2015 development agenda.

More recently, in 2019, we supported the CSO statement on the 2019 UNGA resolution on the human rights to water and sanitation, calling for the States to accelerate their efforts to implement their obligations under international law.

As opposed to a traditional focus on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, Simavi works with local authorities to help them align with their human rights obligations, and with rights-holders to help them raise their voices through the right channels. To achieve this, we work with in-country local partners.

Our support on the HRWS, gender and social inclusion in WASH and menstrual health among others helps local CSOs translate recognised standards and concepts into their work by making them accessible.

For example, through the Making Rights Real consortium, the principles and normative content of the HRWS are explained in easier terms, brought closer to local authorities, and translated in the local languages where the approach is used.
The normative content of the human rights to water and sanitation are important, but so are human rights principles. What work does Simavi do in this regard?

Simavi also focuses strongly on the principles of non-discrimination and public participation, through gender and social inclusion. For example, we supported the Development Organisation of the Rural Poor with the realisation of a budget monitoring tool containing indicators on gender and social inclusion.

The tool helps citizens participate in budgetary discussions with authorities to increase WASH budget allocations for excluded people. Such initiatives help develop the local understanding of human rights principles, while at the same time, help identify the bottlenecks to their practical articulation.

Is there other work that Simavi has undertaken that is related to the human rights to water and sanitation?

Through our combined sector expertise on WASH and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), we address the interrelation between different human rights issues, such as on WASH and maternal health, or gender-based violence and the right to sanitation. The research done through the implementation of our programme sheds lights on issues that need to be addressed further.
Can you share how you have collaborated with the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to water and sanitation in the past 6 years?

We contributed to the public consultations of the Special Rapporteur on different themes, by making more visible the local issues we see in our programmes.

If you had to highlight only one activity, what would it be?

Simavi joined the expert consultations on gender equality in the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation, that took place in 2016 ahead of the preparation of the gender equality thematic report. As an organisation working through a women-centred and human rights-based approach, we particularly valued this opportunity to contribute with our expertise to the public consultations, and interview Mr. Leo Heller on this occasion.

Léo Heller

Léo Heller is UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. In May 2016, he invited a group of experts, including one of Simavi’s Programme Officers, to...
Looking forward to the next decade, what could be the role of the Special Rapporteur to further promote and protect the human rights to water and sanitation?

In light of our experience, we see a need for the Special Rapporteur to continue linking practitioners with human rights experts, developing materials that are user-friendly and accessible, and continuing to promote the linkages between the HRWS and other human rights.

Is there a specific reason for this need?

We have observed that many practitioners and CSOs do not necessarily know how to engage with human rights mechanisms, nor do they see the benefits of such engagements. Although the awareness on HRWS has dramatically increased among the partners we work with, the work done by the Special Rapporteur is not sufficiently known at local level to be used by CSOs.

What could the Special Rapporteur do to address this need?

Collaboration between NGOs and the Special Rapporteur offers the possibility to connect the different initiatives on HRWS and support the dissemination of existing tools to reach a larger scale.

This is the case for example with the translation of user-friendly materials that are currently available only in official languages of the United Nations. For local CSOs to use the knowledge, these materials are needed in their local languages.

CSOs, the Special Rapporteur’s mandate, but also academia offer the opportunity to reach out to other sectors through their networks.
What could the role of State and non-State entities be?

There remains a division between supporting the realization of the HRWS through WASH programmes and the protection and respect of human rights in interventions that may impact them negatively. Whereas this is tackled for example by discussions on “business and human rights”, the water sector can even more strongly contribute thanks to the advancements made in the past 10 years on the HRWS.

In terms of promotion of the HRWS, sustainability remains an issue where States can play an important role through campaigns on citizens responsibilities with respect to water and sanitation (use of water, or pollution).

How is Simavi fulfilling the human rights to water and sanitation by working towards reducing inequalities in the access to water and sanitation?

Simavi raises awareness in the Netherlands on inequalities in access to water and sanitation through our engagement with the Dutch government, political parties and the Dutch public. For example, through our annual Walking for Water event, with other organisations and the Rotary Netherlands, we raise awareness amongst pupils in the upper secondary school on the shortage of water in the Netherlands and globally, and they then raise money for water projects in developing countries in a fun and sporting way. In 2019, as part of the Watershed – Empowering Citizens consortium, we also developed guidelines on gender and social inclusion in the 2016-2030 WASH Strategy for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Finally, we work with private sector companies that aim to work more sustainably.