

World water day 2025

Why we need to fight right-wing populism to save our glaciers!

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Bonn, 19 March 2025. 'Glacier Preservation' is the theme of World Water Day 2025, emphasising its importance as a survival strategy for humanity and the planet. Glacier melting worsens the global water crisis, forcing people to find new ways to access and manage water for long-term well-being and development. Protecting glaciers is not just about water security, it relates to broader climate change action. Sustainable water management must be central to climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. However, the neglect of this issue by populist governments—often prioritising short-term political and economic gains over sustainability—threatens the multilevel collaboration needed to tackle both glacier loss and the wider climate crisis.

Glaciers play a crucial role in regulating water cycles by releasing meltwater. Rising temperatures are causing

them to shrink alarmingly, leading to unpredictable water flows, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels. Initially, runoff increases as melting accelerates, but after reaching 'peak meltwater,' it declines, reducing a key freshwater source. Therefore, it affects over 1.9 billion people relying on seasonal meltwater for drinking purposes in regions like the Himalayas, Karakoram, Andes, Alps, Arctic, Rockies, and Africa's highlands. Glacier loss disrupts ecosystems, food production, and forces displacement, while Arctic and Greenland ice melt accelerates sea-level rise and climate instability. Absent urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, rising water demand and worsening inequality in access to water will leave billions—including us—facing chronic shortages, ecosystem collapse, and escalating humanitarian crises.

Reducing CO₂ emissions is the most effective way to slow glacier melting, as little can be done locally beyond adaptation. Yet, political action remains sluggish and inadequate. At COP29 in Baku, world leaders pledged \$300 billion annually by 2035 to help low-income nations mitigate climate change and adapt—far short of the estimated \$1.3 trillion needed each year. Without greater financial support, the escalating climate-water crisis will push societies into water shortages, agricultural disruptions, and intensified resource conflicts, jeopardising key global goals like SDG6 on water.

“Ending harmful subsidies could free billions to cut emissions, improve public health, and strengthen social services. To ensure fair compensation for all affected groups by subsidy cuts, the new government should approach the reform as a renegotiation of the existing social contract.”

The heavy emphasis on carbon markets—despite concerns over their ineffectiveness—raises red flags. Their rushed approval, lack of transparency, and disregard for environmental justice and human rights issues risk turning carbon offsets into loopholes for major polluters, undermining real emissions reductions. Beyond flawed market mechanisms, political shifts also pose serious threats. Trump's return to the presidency threatens to accelerate the crisis. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the dismantling of climate policies combined with the expansion of fossil fuel production in that country will fuel global warming impacts and fracture international cooperation. Meanwhile, populist and nation-

alist leaders worldwide are exploiting economic anxieties—amplified by social media—to cut renewable energy funding and prioritise short-term profits for the ultra-rich over sustainability. This trend makes meaningful global collaboration on climate action even harder at a time when it is more urgent than ever.

Sustainable water management must be central to climate strategies, not just as an environmental necessity but as a safeguard for communities, jobs, and economic stability—issues that resonate across political divides. International agreements must consider water's multiple values, harmonise incentives and regulations, and acknowledge its cross-sectoral nature. As glaciers vanish, policies must prioritise sustainable human consumption over corporate profit and ensure fair water distribution. Populist rhetoric often downplays or distorts these realities, framing climate action as an elite-driven agenda. However, the worsening water crisis will affect everyone—leading to higher food prices, job losses in agriculture and industry, and increased geopolitical tensions over scarce resources. To reach those sceptical of climate policies, it is crucial to emphasise that investing in sustainable water management is not just about protecting the planet—it's about securing livelihoods, preventing economic shocks, and ensuring that working families and communities aren't the ones paying the price for inaction. Investments in adaptation strategies for water supply are no longer optional; they are a necessity for long-term stability.

Countries must take bold science-based action to protect freshwater sources via rights-based conservation, support autonomous adaptation action, ensure fair access to water, and invest in real climate solutions—not just empty promises. Wealthier nations have a responsibility to support vulnerable regions facing glacial loss and worsening droughts, making water security a right, not a privilege. Yet, populist leaders dismiss these issues as unnecessary or too expensive. In reality, failing to act will cost far more—through food shortages, economic instability, and worsening water conflicts.

Preserving glaciers isn't just about saving ice—it's about securing our future. Without immediate climate action, billions will face a water crisis with no return. This World Water Day, we must face the truth: climate affects water, water is life, and time is running out.