

WATER, HEALTH, AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN AFRICA



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ABOUT VOICES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Voices of Sustainability is a thought leadership platform launched by the Zayed Sustainability Prize to explore the challenges and opportunities of the global transition to an inclusive and

prosperous future. Each month, the series hosts the world's thought leaders to discuss the latest trends and themes in the sustainability agenda.



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INTRODUCTION

On 31 July, the Zayed Sustainability Prize aired its 50th episode of the virtual fireside chat series 'Voices of Sustainability.' This episode featured two newly appointed Zayed Sustainability Prize Selection Committee members in the Water

category. The panel explored how government, business and civil society can come together to build resilient and secure water systems that are essential to a healthier and more equitable in Africa.



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SUMMARY

The 50th episode of Voices of Sustainability, titled Water, Health, and Human Dignity in Africa, brought together leading voices to explore the foundational role of water security in shaping Africa's future. Moderated by environmental journalist Tom Freyberg, the discussion engaged Natasha Ramkirpal, Board Member of the Manufacturing Circle, and Sareen Malik, Vice Chair of Sanitation and Water for All, both recently appointed to the Zayed Sustainability Prize Selection Committee.

Freyberg opened the conversation by highlighting the far-reaching impact of water access on human dignity, health, and economic progress, emphasising the Zayed Sustainability Prize's commitment to recognising scalable, innovative solutions across the continent and beyond.

Malik provided context on the scale and urgency of Africa's water challenges, citing that over 400 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa lack access to safe water and sanitation. She underscored that water is the backbone of Africa's economy, intersecting with every Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), and pointed to governance, inequitable resource distribution, and policy gaps as barriers that go beyond infrastructure alone.

Ramkirpal urged listeners to move beyond the "convenient narrative" of infrastructure deficits,



"For Africa to move from scarcity to security, we need more than pipes and pumps. We need platforms for transparent governance, equitable allocation, and participatory decision-making that recognises water as a public good, not just a utility input."

Natasha Ramkirpal

Board Member
Manufacturing Circle



instead identifying institutional incoherence, fragmented governance, and the political economy of water as root causes of structural inequity. She stressed that water allocation frameworks often neglect both economic and cultural values, sidelining marginalised communities even where physical infrastructure exists. Ramkirpal further highlighted the importance of integrating land and water governance, cautioning against technocratic solutions that overlook local realities and lived experience.

The discussion then turned to the pivotal role of community agency and behavioural change in successful interventions. Malik pointed to Africa's progress in regulatory frameworks and regional cooperation but noted the challenge of ensuring meaningful

community participation within broader democratic and constitutional frameworks. She differentiated between state representation and civil society's role in "making the invisible visible"—ensuring that every voice, especially of those most affected, is heard and considered in water policy and practice.

Ramkirpal and Malik explored the potential for cross-sector alliances and learning.

Ramkirpal discussed the need for shared risk, responsibility, and measurement among businesses, communities, and governments to ensure sustainable water use and responsible manufacturing.

Malik stressed the necessity for context-specific, "homegrown" innovations rather than one-size-fits-all imports. She shared a case study of female entrepreneurs designing backpacks equipped with sanitation products and solar lights—a locally-driven solution that addressed girls' safety, hygiene, and educational needs in remote communities.

The conversation concluded with consensus that sustainable water solutions in Africa require moving beyond simplistic infrastructure fixes toward holistic, community-centered, and partnership-driven approaches. Innovations must be grounded in local realities, and the metrics for success should reflect true on-the-ground impact—particularly for vulnerable groups such as girls and women. Freyberg closed by reiterating the centrality of water to Africa's sustainable development and the importance of cross-sector collaboration and indigenous entrepreneurship in driving lasting change on the continent.



"The backbone of Africa's economy is actually water. Because we have a rain-fed agriculture, our industries, you name it, ... water is generally at the centre."

Sareen Malik

Vice Chair
Sanitation and Water for All



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BIOGRAPHIES



Natasha Ramkirpal

Board Member
Manufacturing Circle

Natasha Ramkirpal is a leading voice on water security and sustainable industrial transformation in Africa. A chemical engineer and strategist, her work spans 11 countries, advancing climate resilience and inclusive development. She sits on South Africa's Manufacturing Circle board and contributes to the Women in Water Diplomacy Network. With over 15 years' experience, she brings technical and policy expertise to global forums.



Sareen Malik

Vice Chair
Sanitation and Water for All

Sareen leads ANEW, Africa's umbrella body for water and sanitation NGOs in over 50 countries, and serves as Vice Chair of the global SWA partnership. A lawyer by training with 15+ years of experience, she champions good governance as key to advancing WASH performance, dignity, and gender equality. Sareen works across NGOs, governments, and the private sector, and has published widely while helping develop governance tools for state and non-state actors in the global WASH sector.

The conversation was moderated by:



Tom Freyberg

Environmental Journalist

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OUTCOMES



Water access drives dignity, health, and economic growth across Africa.



Systemic governance gaps outweigh infrastructure in water equity challenges.



Community agency is key to inclusive and effective water solutions.



Local innovations and cross-sector partnerships enable sustainable impact.



Holistic, context-driven approaches must prioritize vulnerable communities

Watch the full episode on the Zayed Sustainability Prize's YouTube channel

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