



OVERCOMING THE WATER AND SANITATION CRISIS



In 2023, 2.2 billion people worldwide lacked access to safely managed drinking water, and 3.5 billion were deprived of safe sanitation systems. This alarming reality occurs amidst a backdrop where over half of the global population (52%) is projected to live under water stress conditions by 2050, and the risk of conflicts over water sharing is conspicuous. We are facing a major water crisis.

Although states have recognized at the United Nations access to water and sanitation as human rights and have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aimed at achieving sustainable water management and universal access to WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) by 2030, progress remains insufficient. UN-Water warns of the need to "quadruple the pace of efforts." States must expedite action to implement strong policies, at all levels, and provide financial resources commensurate with the goals set at the international level.

1 / Report of the Joint Monitoring Program 2023, WHO/UNICEF

2 / UN-Water, United Nations World Water Development Report 2020: Water and climate change, 2020



SIF Recommendations

1 States must fulfill their obligations regarding the principles and criteria of human rights to water and sanitation³ .

◆ Human rights, particularly the right to adequate food and the right to safe drinking water and sanitation, must be at the core of policies and interventions aimed at ensuring equitable access to water and nutritious food. The concrete realization of the principles and criteria of human rights to water and sanitation (HRWS) on the ground remains a challenge. Development programming and sectoral policies still tend to focus excessively on service provision. This approach reveals its hindrance in terms of sustainable impact on human development, especially considering that current investments in the sector are insufficient and would need to be quadrupled to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The human rights-based approach (HRBA), which addresses the root causes of inequalities, must be integrated into water and sanitation policies and operational strategies.

◆ States, UN agencies, and donors must support their partners countries in developing legal and regulatory frameworks in line with HRBA and compliant with HRWS principles and criterias. Development and humanitarian aid policies and programs, as well as public development assistance resources in the sector, should be directed towards the least developed and developing countries and towards the most vulnerable and marginalized populations.

2 States and relevant stakeholders must promote sustainable agricultural practices and protect, restore, and conserve water resources.

◆ It is crucial for states and stakeholders to encourage sustainable agricultural practices while preserving, restoring, and conserving water resources. This entails adopting measures for the conservation and protection of water resources, such as watershed preservation, combating water pollution, and sustainable management of aquifers⁴. This approach aims to ensure the sustainability of agricultural practices, guarantee access to water for future generations, and preserve crucial aquatic ecosystems for global food security. It is imperative to address water resource preservation and improved access to its services in an integrated manner, recognizing the vital importance of protecting ecosystem balances and considering water as a common good accessible to all users, including non-human living beings.

3 / To find out more about the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in the water and sanitation sector, click here to consult our expertise note.

4 / Aquifers are porous rocks that contain water and allow its circulation.

- ◆ States must also prioritize climate change adaptation through agricultural issues. This entails transitioning from intensive agriculture to more sustainable practices and environmentally friendly agro-ecological systems. To address challenges of food insecurity, climate change adaptation, and water stress, it is necessary to adopt integrated approaches. These include promoting agroecology, rational irrigation techniques, sustainable watershed management, crop rotation, integrated pest management, and ecosystem restoration. Community engagement and participatory governance are essential to ensure equitable and sustainable management of water resources and food systems.

3 Water resources must be regarded as a common good by states and managed equitably and sustainably in the face of resource pressures.

- ◆ Climate change, pollution, overexploitation, waste, increasing demand, population growth, and intensive agriculture are exerting growing pressures on water resources, impacting their quality and availability. The effective implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) plans is now an urgent necessity. Water, as a human right, is also a common good. It must be managed democratically, equitably, and sustainably, with coordinated allocation among water users, while respecting the environment. These management plans must integrate strong measures for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

- ◆ States must urgently fulfill the commitments they made under the Paris Agreement (2015) by integrating adaptation and mitigation measures into the WASH sector, as well as addressing WASH issues in climate policies, action plans, and other sectors such as agriculture or energy. Without this, pressures on water resources may exacerbate inequalities in access to water and food, leading to conflicts and forced population displacement.

- ◆ Future major water and climate events provide an opportunity for the international community to recognize water as a common good, promote the sharing of scientific data on the state of water resources, accelerate progress towards SDG 6, and protect water resources.

4 States must ensure the participation of communities and civil society in decision-making processes within the WASH sector, at all levels.

- ◆ Participation is a central principle of human rights. Individuals and civil society organizations (CSOs) must have the opportunity to participate actively, freely, and meaningfully in decision-making processes at the local, national, and international levels.

- ◆ People and CSOs should be able to engage in selecting the type of service and the management model for water and sanitation services. Development actors must strengthen the justiciability of HRWS by supporting complaint mechanisms and referrals for rights violations, particularly at the office of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on HRWS or at the national level with human rights defender institutions.
- ◆ The 2026 Water Conference must ensure the effective participation of CSOs in the Conference, as well as in its preparatory meetings.





5 States must prevent and provide an appropriate and coordinated response to crises affecting WASH services.

In 2023, humanitarian crises affected 173 million people (including nearly 110 million children) in 155 countries, according to UNICEF. This number of affected individuals continues to increase. According to OCHA, it is expected to surpass 300 million in 2024 . In deteriorating contexts, which often involve conflicts, forced displacement, and structural vulnerabilities, access to water rapidly deteriorates, and the needs of host populations and displaced persons are scarcely met. Increased mobilization is demanded from humanitarian actors in the WASH sector. However, an unprecedented shrinking of the humanitarian space is observed: obstacles to the deployment of operations multiply, insecurity for humanitarian personnel grows, and risks for civilian populations to access relief and protection guaranteed by international humanitarian law increase. States must guarantee continuity of access to services for affected individuals and mobilize to protect the humanitarian space against any attack.

To put an end to all obstacles to the realization of human rights to water and sanitation and food security, it is imperative to immediately cease targeting and destroying infrastructure and ensure the security of distribution sites, provide technical and financial support for rehabilitation and reconstruction, and refrain from hindering the circulation of materials and energy sources needed.

Meanwhile, as repeatedly warned by the Global Wash Cluster, the humanitarian WASH sector lacks the capacities and sufficient funding to meet all needs. The key challenge lies in strengthening the quality of WASH interventions in emergency phases and building resilience in systems over the long term. Authorities must ensure the efficient use of water resources during crises to prevent water stress, mitigate sanitary risks by improving sanitation devices, and continuously empower local authorities to prevent crises and maintain services in crisis-affected and fragile areas. SIF urgently recommends that states support the implementation of the 2020-2025 humanitarian roadmap of the Global WASH Cluster.





6 Public funding directed towards WASH must be significantly increased and targeted towards the most vulnerable populations.

- ◆ Current levels of funding for WASH services are alarmingly below the capital costs required to even meet basic WASH needs by 2030. Annual investments would need to be quadrupled by 2030 to achieve universal coverage in safe drinking water and sanitation. The global cost of achieving SDG 6 is estimated at \$1 trillion, which is 1.21% of the global GDP⁶. These resource requirement estimates do not even include the costs of operation and maintenance of services, making the actual financing needs even higher.
- ◆ Internationally, despite inadequate progress towards SDG 6 and increasing demand for Official Development Assistance (ODA), ODA commitments to the water sector decreased by 12% between 2015 and 2021, and actual disbursements decreased by 15% over the same period, despite the increased funding needed to achieve the SDG targets⁷! The sector faces a significant funding gap. The capital financing required to expand WASH services to all, as defined in SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2, amounts to \$114 billion per year between 2015 and 2030, which is three times more than current annual investments⁸. And these funds do not sufficiently target countries with the lowest coverage rates or populations with the greatest needs, due to imbalances between loans and grants. Globally, there has been a tendency towards shifting from grants to loans in ODA; loans accounted for 44% of ODA in the sector in 2022, compared to 61% in 2018⁹.

6 / Strong et al, 2020 in Financing tomorrow's water security, OECD, 2022

7 / Blueprint for Acceleration Agenda: SDG 6 - Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation, 2023, UnWater

8 / World Bank, The Costs of Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene, 2016

9 / Financing a Water Secure Future, OECD, 2022

◆ States must notably increase their funding for the WASH sector, whether at the national level (national budgets) or in terms of ODA in the form of grants. They must rebalance financing between the drinking water and sanitation sectors. Basic sanitation in rural areas and the eradication of open defecation must become priorities. Funding should target the most vulnerable populations, and states must establish mechanisms for social pricing to ensure access to services under affordable conditions for everyone. Financing for the water sector in humanitarian contexts is vastly inadequate: only 37.3% of the required funding was received in 2023¹⁰. Faced with this observation, several organizations formed the Wash Road Map¹¹ collective and issued a Call-to-Action¹² during the March 2023 United Nations Water Conference, urging states to commit to concrete measures to strengthen the WASH sector in fragile, conflict, and violence-prone environments (FCV). France is one of the signatory countries.

◆ The lack of access to WASH services remains a major obstacle to development, particularly in the least developed countries, developing countries, rural areas, and for vulnerable populations. Achieving the sanitation targets of SDG 6 by 2030 appears compromised without massive financing for the sector and a heightened awareness of this issue in political agendas, as well as effective implementation of these policies. The inclusion of everyone, especially the most vulnerable, in decision-making mechanisms through participatory approaches will be substantial to the success of this utmost challenge.

10 / Service de tracking d'OCHA 2023 <https://fts.unocha.org/global-sectors/11/summary/2023>

11 / CARTE ROUTIÈRE WASH - WASH Home (washroadmap.org)

12 / Appel à l'action - FEUILLE DE ROUTE WASH (washroadmap.org)





The multilateral system on water and sanitation must be strengthened by establishing an intergovernmental body integrated into the United Nations system.

- ◆ Unlike other domains, international water governance suffers from a lack of binding policies, except for two conventions on transboundary waters ratified by only one-third of states. Although around 30 UN agencies work on water issues, coordinated by UN-Water, there is no high-level political body to accelerate actions for Sustainable Development Goal 6. This institutional vacuum hampers the emergence of genuine international political leadership on water issues.
- ◆ The United Nations Conference in March 2023 marked the first intergovernmental gathering on water after 46 years of silence. Although a new UN conference is announced for 2026, no negotiated political agreement is planned. It is necessary to capitalize on the results of the 2023 conference by ensuring the implementation of its action plans and conclusions. This includes the appointment of a UN Special Envoy for Water and Sanitation, as well as the establishment of a global scientific mechanism on water. It is also crucial to mobilize state support for future UN water conferences to be held regularly (every 2 or 3 years) and to lead to the adoption of negotiated multilateral decisions.
- ◆ Advocating for the systematic integration of water segments into the agendas of international conferences on related fields such as health, food, climate change, oceans, and the environment is essential to enhance synergies between these sectors and promote a cross-cutting approach to global challenges.





8 States and development actors must intensify efforts for rural sanitation, which remains inadequately targeted in terms of policy and budgetary allocations.

UN-Water warns that current coverage progress rates for sanitation must be quintupled globally, multiplied by 15 in the least developed countries, and multiplied by 9 in fragile contexts if states want to achieve universal and equitable access to sanitation by 2030¹³. Coverage rates are particularly low in rural areas, especially for the most vulnerable populations. Despite evidence showing that sanitation has significant positive effects on human development and is essential for public health, public and external expenditures dedicated to this sector globally are generally half as much as those allocated to drinking water, hindering the implementation of policies on the ground .

Sanitation must swiftly become a priority for states at the national level, both in terms of policy and budget, and at the international level: states must place this issue on the agenda of relevant political processes addressing water (United Nations Conferences of 2026, 2028, and subsequent ones), as well as related areas of major events.

¹³ /Report of the Joint Monitoring Program 2023, WHO/UNICEF.



POUR EN SAVOIR PLUS



Our report « **Accelerating action for rural sanitation: challenges and recommendations** » can be consulted by **following this link**, or by flashing the QR code above.

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