



# OVERCOMING THE WATER AND SANITATION CRISIS



In 2021, 2 billion people were without access to safely managed water supply and 3.6 billion were living without access to safely managed sanitation<sup>1</sup>. An alarming situation, particularly given that more than half of the world's population (52%) will be living under water stress by 2050<sup>2</sup> and there is a very real risk of conflicts over water sharing. We are facing a major water crisis.

Although United Nations Member States have recognised water and sanitation as human rights and have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of ensuring the sustainable management of water and universal access to WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) by 2030, progress is too slow.

Since March 2021, UN-Water has been warning of the need to “quadruple the current rate of progress”. States need to accelerate their efforts to introduce strong policies, at all levels, and provide sufficient financial resources to meet the international goals.



<sup>1</sup>OMS, UNICEF, Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020 : five years into the SDGs, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>UN-Water, Rapport mondial des Nations unies sur la mise en valeur des ressources en eau 2020 : l'eau et les changements climatiques, faits et chiffres, 2020.



# SIF's recommendations

## 1 The multi-lateral system for water and sanitation needs to be reinforced by creating an inter-governmental body that is integrated into the United Nations system.

There are currently around 30 United Nations agencies working on water-related issues with UN-Water, who provides technical coordination. However, there is no high-level political body to promote the acceleration of efforts to achieve SDG 6. This institutional vacuum is hampering the development of real political leadership on water issues at the international level. The 2023 UN Conference on the Midterm Review of the Water Action Decade, the first of its kind since 1977, will provide an ideal opportunity to stimulate political momentum.

States must commit to creating an inter-governmental body on water and sanitation, as recommended by the High Level Panel on Water in 2018. The mandate of this inter-governmental body would be to ensure member states meet on a regular basis, i.e. at least once every two years, as is currently the case for food systems. This would ensure that international goals are regularly monitored and that the corrective measures required to achieve the SDG 6 targets are put in place. States made a similar recommendation at the Water Dialogues for Results held in Bonn in July 2021 (a preparatory conference for the conference to be held in 2023) by recommending to «ensure the coherence of UN efforts in the water sector through early stage coordination in programming of all UN-Water members; [...] by providing regular opportunities for Member States to discuss global water challenges at a high-level». The Secretariat for this body could be assigned to a strengthened UN-Water.

SIF recommends that the Conference's preparatory meetings scheduled for 2022 (Portugal, Japan, Tajikistan) facilitate the creation of this inter-governmental body. Civil society must be able to take part in the 2023 Conference and its preparatory meetings in order to provide recommendations.

## 2 States must fulfil their obligations with regard to the human rights to water and sanitation principles and criteria.

Actual implementation of the human rights to water and sanitation (HRWS) principles and criteria in the field remains an issue. Development programming and sector policy remain too heavily geared towards a service provision-based approach. However, the sustainable impact of this approach on human development has proven to be limited, not least because current investment in the sector is insufficient and will need to be quadrupled if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030. The human rights-based approach (HRBA), which addresses the root causes of inequalities, needs to be applied to water and sanitation policies and operational strategies.

States, UN agencies and donors should support their partner countries with developing legal and regulatory frameworks that are compliant both with the HRBA and with HRWS principles and criteria. Development and humanitarian aid policy and programmes, and official development assistance funding for the WASH sector, should target the least developed and developing countries and the most vulnerable and marginalised people.

[Find our study «Accelerating action for rural sanitation, challenges & recommendations»:](#)



### 3 States must guarantee community and civil society participation in WASH sector decision-making.

Participation is a key human rights principle. Steps must be taken to ensure that people and civil society organisations (CSOs) are able to actively, freely and meaningfully participate in decision-making processes at the local, national and international levels.

People and CSOs should be able to have an input into decisions on the type of service and the water and sanitation services management model selected. Development stakeholders need to strengthen the justiciability of the HRWS by supporting the mechanisms used to register complaints and record human rights violations, particularly those used by the UN HRWS rapporteurs and at the national level by institutions working to defend human rights.

The 2023 Conference must guarantee the effective participation of CSOs, not only in the conference itself, but also in its preparatory meetings.

### 4 States and development stakeholders must step up efforts to improve rural sanitation, which suffers from a lack of targeted policies and budgets.

UN-Water has drawn attention to the fact that the current sanitation coverage growth rate needs to increase fourfold worldwide, fifteen-fold in the Least Developed Countries and nine-fold in fragile countries if universal and equitable access to sanitation is to be achieved by 2030<sup>3</sup>. Coverage is particularly poor in rural areas and thus for the most vulnerable. Although sanitation has been proven to have positive effects on human development and to be vital to public health, at global level, public spending and external expenditure on sanitation generally amount to half of the sum allocated to drinking water, thereby hampering the implementation of policies on the ground<sup>4</sup>.

States must ensure that sanitation is made a national priority in terms of both policy and budget and, at the global level, Member States must ensure that rural sanitation is placed firmly on the agenda of the 2023 United Nations Conference.

Find our study brief «The Human Rights-Based Approach within the Water and Sanitation Sector»:



<sup>3</sup> OMS/UNICEF, state of the world's sanitation: an urgent call to transform sanitation for better health, environments, economies and societies, 2020.  
<sup>4</sup> Un-Water, OMS, Rapport GLAAS, National systems to support drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: global status report 2019.



**5** Given the pressure on water resources, States must consider water resources to be a common good that must be equitably and sustainably managed.

Climate change, pollution, over-exploitation, wastage, population growth, increasing urbanisation, intensive farming: water resources are being placed under increasing pressure that affect their quality and availability. Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) must now be effectively implemented as a matter of urgency. Water, a human right, is also a common good. It must be managed democratically, equitably and sustainably, and shared collaboratively among water users, in an environmentally friendly manner. Management plans must include strong climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.

States must urgently fulfil the commitments made under the Paris Agreement by integrating mitigation and adaptation measures into the WASH sector, and by incorporating WASH issues into climate-related policies and action plans, as well as the policies and action plans of other sectors such as agriculture and energy. Without this, the pressures placed on water resources risk exacerbating inequalities in access not only to water but also to food, and could give rise to conflicts and forced population displacement. People have already adopted migration as an adaptation strategy, particularly from rural to urban areas, and this strategy is set to become increasingly common. States must reinforce risk prevention and preparation measures, including for the WASH sector, in order to prevent, minimise and address any forced displacement.



## **6 States must prevent and provide an appropriate and coordinated response to crises affecting WASH services.**

The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance continues to grow. According to OCHA, there will be more than 270 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022. In hostile environments, in which conflict, forced displacement and structural vulnerabilities often combine, conditions for accessing water deteriorate very rapidly and it becomes difficult to cover the needs of both the host and displaced populations. WASH humanitarian actors are increasingly being called upon to provide a response.

However, there has been an unprecedented shrinking of the humanitarian space due to the multiplication of barriers to providing assistance, growing insecurity for humanitarian workers, and an increase in the risks faced by civilians seeking the safety and protection guaranteed to them under international humanitarian law. States must ensure the people affected can continue to access services and must take steps to protect the humanitarian space from attack.

At the same time, and as the Global Wash Cluster has continually stressed, the humanitarian WASH sector has neither the capacities nor the funding required to meet all needs. The challenge is to improve the quality of WASH interventions during the emergency phase and enhance the resilience of systems over the long-term. Authorities must notably: ensure the efficient use of water resources during crises to prevent water stress; prevent risks to health by improving systems along the sanitation chain; and work continuously to improve local authorities' ability to prevent crises and maintain services in crisis-hit and fragile areas. SIF urgently recommends that States support the implementation of the Global WASH Cluster's humanitarian roadmap for 2020-2025.

## **7 Public spending on WASH must be substantially increased and target the most vulnerable.**

Current WASH service funding levels are much lower than the capital costs required to meet even basic WASH needs by 2030. Three times the current annual investment levels, i.e. US\$ 114 billion per year of investment, will be required to achieve safely managed services<sup>5</sup>. These investment needs estimates do not include service operations and maintenance costs, meaning that actual funding needs are even higher. According to the 2018/2019 GLAAS survey, more than 80% of countries reported having insufficient funding to reach either their own national WASH targets or the targets set for healthcare facilities and schools. Annual investment needs to increase six-fold for the seriously under-funded rural sanitation sector.

Internationally, despite insufficient progress towards SDG 6 and a growing demand for official development assistance (ODA), the share of total ODA disbursements allocated to WASH stagnated at around 4% between 2010 and 2019<sup>6</sup>. The sector suffers from a large funding shortfall. For instance, only US\$9 billion of the total ODA commitments of US\$196 billion were allocated to the water and sanitation sector in 2017<sup>7</sup>, whereas US\$114 billion per year is required to achieve safely managed and universal access to WASH services. Furthermore, due to the imbalance between grants and loans, these funds do not sufficiently target the countries with the lowest coverage, nor the people with the greatest needs.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank Group; UNICEF. 2017. Sanitation and Water for All: How Can the Financing Gap Be Filled?

<sup>6</sup> Coalition Eau, ONGAWA, Open consultants, WaterAid, Panorama financier du secteur de l'eau et de l'assainissement : Opportunités pour améliorer l'APD Eau et Assainissement de l'Union européenne, de la France, de l'Allemagne et de l'Espagne, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> UN-Water/WHO, GLAAS Report, National Systems to Support Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Status Report 2019.



States must significantly increase their funding for the WASH sector, both at the national level (domestic budgets) and in terms of ODA grants. They must redress the imbalance in funding between the water and sanitation sectors. Priority must be given to basic rural sanitation and eradicating open defecation. Funding must target the most vulnerable and States must put social tariff arrangements in place to ensure access to services is affordable for all.

**Lack of access to WASH services remains a major barrier to development, particularly in the least developed and developing countries, in rural areas, and for people living in vulnerable conditions. Achieving the sanitation-related SDG 6 targets by 2030 appears unlikely without substantial sector funding and unless this issue is moved up the political agenda and policies are effectively implemented. To ensure this major challenge can be successfully addressed, participatory approaches are required so that everybody, including the most vulnerable, is involved in the decision-making process.**





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