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Interactive dialogue A: Water for People

Summary

The present paper was prepared pursuant to paragraph 9(e) of UN General Assembly resolution 78/327, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General of the 2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all to prepare concept papers on each of the themes of the interactive dialogues. The present paper concerns interactive dialogue (a) on "Water for people: the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies". This paper presents status, challenges and emerging trends, solutions and recommendations on the theme "water for people".

I. Introduction

1. Safe drinking water and sanitation are not only foundational to all dimensions of sustainable development, but also human rights that are essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights.

2. The positive benefits of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and water quality are lifesaving and contribute to an upward spiral of prosperity through healthier societies, economies and ecosystems. Access to WASH services is essential to reduce inequalities – especially for women and girls and offers a route out of poverty for individuals and communities. Resilient WASH services are increasingly

recognized as a key element of climate adaptation and mitigation and disaster risk reduction (DRR). Treatment of wastewater and good ambient water quality are vital to conserving biodiversity, protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems, and reducing marine pollution.

3. Conversely, the consequences of poor access to WASH, degraded water quality and overextraction of groundwater have a cumulative negative impact on health, nutrition, education, gender equality, workforce productivity, economic growth and social cohesion, disproportionately affecting those in vulnerable situations, in particular women and children, people with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples.

4. In July 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly recognized that the human right to safe drinking water entitles everyone, without discrimination, to have access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use, and that the human right to sanitation entitles everyone, without discrimination, to have physical and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity.[1]

5. In September 2015, the General Assembly unanimously adopted the *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*[2] (2030 Agenda) that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 6 is more comprehensive than previous water-and sanitation-related goals by striving for universal access, establishing higher service-levels for water and sanitation services, including dimensions of the human rights to water and sanitation, comprising the full sanitation management chain, adding access to hygiene and addressing pollution of freshwater ecosystems. Additionally, in adopting the 2030 Agenda, Member States resolved to "combat inequalities within and among countries" and "pledged that no one will be left behind".

6. Significant progress has been achieved since 2015. Billions of people have gained access to safe WASH services and important strides have been made to move from basic to higher service levels. However, despite ambitious commitments and steady progress, billions still lack access and water quality is declining in some regions and countries. Improvements in access to WASH services have been uneven between and within countries, and inequalities persist. Additionally, WASH services, face increased pressure from the impacts of climate change, disasters, conflicts, economic crises, urbanization, migration, and pollution.

7. With the end-point of the 2030 Agenda approaching, the achievement of SDG 6 global targets is increasingly out of reach, with the risk of leaving billions of people behind. Accelerating the pace of progress is possible, but will require increasing political action, leadership and partnership to deliver measurable outcomes, embedding human rights principles in WASH systems and strengthening resilient systems to deliver sustainable and equitable WASH services and water quality for all, particularly those in vulnerable situations.

8. This concept paper addresses the theme for interactive dialogue (a)[3], "water for people: the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies". In accordance with the Conference Secretary-General's Background Note, this paper focuses on SDG targets 6.1 (drinking water), 6.2 (sanitation and hygiene), and 6.3 (wastewater and water quality) and builds on the connections with SDGs 2, 3, 5, and 10.[4] It also covers interlinkages with other SDGs: 1, 4 13, 15 and the means of implementation targets 6.a and 6.b. This paper is to be read in conjunction with the other five concept papers prepared for the interactive dialogues of the 2026 UN Water Conference.

II. Status and trends

[1] A/RES/70/169
[2] A/RES/70/1
[3] A/RES/79/L.101
[4] UN DESA (2026). Background Note for the Preparatory Process of the 2026 UN Water Conference.

A. Drinking water, sanitation and hygiene

9. SDG target 6.1 aims for universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all. The introduction of the "safely managed" drinking water service level incorporates criteria derived from the human right to water: improved source on premises, available when needed and free from contamination. Target 6.2 seeks adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene access for all and an end to open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations, and implying progress toward universal access. Universal access implies all settings, including households, schools, health care facilities (HCF), workplaces and public spaces.

10. Since 2015, 961 million people have gained safely managed drinking water.[5] Coverage has increased from 68% to 74%, rising from 50% to 60% in rural areas and remaining level at 83% in urban areas. In 2024, 2.1 billion people still lacked access to safely managed drinking water, including 106 million drinking untreated surface water.[6] At current rate of progress, the world will only reach 77% coverage by 2030, leaving around 2 billion people without safely managed drinking water services. An eightfold increase in the rate of progress is required to meet target 6.1.

11. Between 2015 and 2024, 1.2 billion people gained safely managed sanitation. Coverage has increased from 48% to 58%, rising from 36% to 49% in rural areas and from 59% to 66% in urban areas. The number of people practising open defecation has decreased by 429 million since 2015.[7] In 2024, 3.4 billion people still lacked safely managed sanitation services, and 354 million practising open defecation. At current rates of progress, the world will only reach 65% coverage by 2030, leaving an estimated 3 billion people without safely managed sanitation services. A sixfold increase in the current rate of progress is required to meet target 6.2a.

12. Since 2015, 1.5 billion people have gained access to basic hygiene services. Coverage has increased from 66% to 80%, rising from 52% to 71% in rural areas but remaining largely unchanged, at 86% in urban areas. In 2024, 1.7 billion people still lacked basic hygiene services, including 611 million with no handwashing facility.[8] At current rates of progress, basic hygiene services will only reach 89% by 2030, leaving nearly 1 billion people without basic hygiene services. The overall rate of progress will need to double to meet target 6.2b.

13. WASH in HCF is essential for achieving access to quality health care services for all in line with SDG target 3.8 and resolutions 78/130 and 80/L.71. In 2023, 742 million people (9% of the global population) had no water service at their HCF. In addition, 660 million people had no sanitation service at their HCF (no toilets or only unimproved sanitation facilities), and 722 million people had no hygiene service (no functional hand hygiene facilities at points of care or at toilets).[9]

14. WASH services in schools are a key component of a safe, inclusive and effective learning environment, in line with SDG target 4.a. In 2023, 77% of schools had a basic drinking water service, with 447 million children lacking a basic drinking water service. Seventy-eight per cent of schools had a basic sanitation service, with 427 million children lacking a basic sanitation service and 67% of schools had a basic hygiene service, with 646 million children lacking a basic hygiene service. Based on emerging national data, around 2 out of 5 schools provide menstrual health education and 1 in 3 have bins for menstrual waste in girls' toilets.[10]

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[5] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities*. Geneva.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] WHO and UNICEF (2024), *Water, sanitation, hygiene, environmental cleaning and waste management in health care facilities: 2023 data update and special focus on primary health care*. Geneva.

[10] UNICEF and WHO (2024). *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015–2023: Special focus on menstrual health*. New York.

B. Wastewater and water quality

15. SDG target 6.3 aims to improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally. While significant data gaps remain, this target has elevated issues related to ambient water quality, wastewater treatment, recycling and safe reuse on the international agenda.[11]

16. Globally, 56% of household wastewater flows (indicator 6.3.1d) were safely treated in 2024. A global estimate of industrial wastewater flows (indicator 6.3.1i) is not feasible due to under-reporting. In 2023, 17 countries, covering 5% of the global population, reported 3 billion m^3 of safely treated industrial wastewater. Lack of data on total wastewater generated for all sources and how much is safely treated hinders informed decision and policymaking.[12]

17. In 2023, 56% of monitored water bodies in 120 countries were classified as having "good ambient water quality" (indicator 6.3.2).[13] Global monitoring of SDG indicator 6.3.2 has led to the creation of an international standard methodology for assessing ambient water quality. Many countries, especially low-income countries, lack the capacity to operate monitoring programmes that can reliably track water quality trends. Of the 2 million data records used for reporting in 2023, only around 60,000 came from the lowest-income half of the world. For the first time, citizen science data have been used for national SDG 6 reporting, with Earth observations helping to fill data gaps.[14]

C. WASH systems

18. Progress towards universal access to WASH services is underpinned by the systems[15] that deliver and sustain them. Since 2015, countries have made significant progress in localizing SDG 6 into national systems and putting in place the enabling environment of policies, plans, institutional arrangements and regulations. Most countries have incorporated safely managed service levels into WASH policies, plans and national targets.[16] Regulatory authorities are largely in place for urban and rural drinking water and sewered sanitation, but less so for on-site sanitation.

19. Institutional roles and responsibilities for government and national institutions in the WASH sector are often not clearly defined. Although governance systems vary across countries, the absence of a lead agency or the presence of too many lead agencies create obstacles for institutional coordination, advocacy and communication, ultimately undermining effective implementation. GLAAS 2025 results show that 64% of countries reported overlapping roles and responsibilities for WASH among national ministries and institutions.

20. Lack of sufficient human and financial resources remains a major obstacle to achieve national targets (cf. Concept paper for interactive dialogue (f)). It is estimated that countries need to increase their spending in drinking water and sanitation by US$131.4–140.8 billion annually – almost tripling expenditure levels, to meet these targets.[17] Most budget allocations target urban areas and drinking water investments, perpetuating

[11] UN (2026). *Ten Years of SDG 6 and the Path to 2030+: UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2026*. New York.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] "WASH systems" refers to the laws, policies, plans, institutions, institutional arrangements, regulations, finance, human resources, monitoring and review processes that combine to deliver WASH services.
[16] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025*. Geneva.
[17] Joseph, George, and others (2024). *Funding a Water-Secure Future: An Assessment of Global Public Spending*. World Bank Group, Washington, DC.

inequalities.[18] Financial viability remains a challenge for many countries due to poor budget execution and inefficiencies.[19]

21. Human resources capacity is foundational to translating commitments, policies and plans into action. Few countries have standards, regulations, and certifications in place to protect the safety of workers, particularly those who work in sanitation.[20] Overall, women are underrepresented in the WASH workforce, notably in leadership positions and in low-income countries.[21]

22. The human rights to water and sanitation and the core principle of "leaving no one behind" are widely recognized in national constitutions, legislation and policies. GLAAS 2025 results show that a majority of countries have measures in policies and plans to extend services to people in vulnerable situations; but fewer track and report progress, and less than a third of countries consistently apply these measures, except in emergencies and disasters. Around two-thirds of countries have financial schemes that contribute to making WASH services affordable for households.

23. National monitoring systems are central to collecting and providing data and information to assess performance and inform policy and decision-making. Indicators to track service coverage and infrastructure are more common than for governance, finance and human resources. Less than one third of countries have national indicators for affordability and equity. Many countries undertake government-led joint sector reviews (JSR) with partners, but regularity varies. There are strong positive trends in the use of data for decision-making; however large data gaps remain, particularly for sub-national inequalities, treatment of industrial wastewater and ambient water quality.

*D. **Benefits for healthy societies and economies***

24. WASH is a major determinant of health and well-being (SDG 3). Insufficient WASH causes at least 1.4 million deaths annually.[22] In 2019, children under-5 represented a quarter of WASH-related deaths, causing an estimated 395,000 deaths and representing 7.6% of all deaths in this age group.[23] Poor WASH is a major contributor to the 260,000 maternal deaths that occur each year.[24] Better sanitation and hygiene in HCF could contribute to preventing maternal and newborn sepsis. Most cholera cases occur in countries with low water and sanitation coverage.[25]

25. Wastewater that has been inadequately collected and treated poses a variety of risks to human health. Addressing the discharge of inadequately treated urban and industrial effluents through improved wastewater management can significantly protect coastal ocean biodiversity and ecosystem health (SDGs 14 and 15) and increase opportunities for tourism and other economic activities.

26. Investments in scaling up WASH globally have been estimated to not only be cost saving but also produce substantive economic value. In 2019, WHO estimated that each Int$ 1 invested in integrated WASH

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[18] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025*. Geneva.
[19] Joseph, George, and others (2024). *Funding a Water-Secure Future: An Assessment of Global Public Spending*. World Bank Group, Washington, DC.
[20] World Bank, ILO, WaterAid, and WHO (2019). *Health, Safety and Dignity of Sanitation Workers: An Initial Assessment*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development /World Bank, Washington, DC.
[21] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025*. Geneva.
[22] WHO (2023). *Burden of Disease Attributable to Unsafe Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, 2019 Update*. Geneva.
[23] Ibid. Estimates are based on four health outcomes - diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, soil-transmitted helminthiases, and undernutrition.
[24] WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and UN DESA Population Division (2025)*, Trends in maternal mortality estimates 2000 to 2023*.
[25] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities.* Geneva.

services over the years 2019–23 would generate Int$ 3.9 in returns.[26] Poor WASH can reduce gross domestic product by 2–7 % in low- and middle-income countries.[27] The World Bank estimates that water-dependant economic sectors support 1.7 billion jobs worldwide.[28]

III. Challenges and emerging issues

A. Persistent and growing inequalities

27. Under current conditions, there is a significant risk that inequalities will be further exacerbated within and among countries and that efforts underway are unlikely to reach those at greatest risk of being left behind without specific targeted measures to close equity gaps.

28. In 2024, people living in least developed countries (LDCs) were more than twice as likely to lack access to safely managed drinking water, nearly twice as likely to lack safely managed sanitation services, and more than three times more likely to lack access to basic hygiene services than in non-LDC countries.[29] Among SDG regions, large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania and Central and Southern Asia continue to face significant gaps in reaching basic access to drinking water and sanitation and ending open defecation. More than three quarters of HCF in sub-Saharan Africa region lack basic WASH services.[30]

29. Within countries, coverage of safely managed drinking water services was significantly higher in urban areas (83%) than in rural areas (60%), which account for nine out of 10 people with no drinking water service.[31] Coverage of safely managed sanitation services was higher in urban areas (66%) than in rural areas (49%), where nine out of ten people still practise open defecation.[32] Four out of five of the 265 million children whose school had no sanitation service lived in rural areas.[33] Disparities in access to piped water on premises between wealth quintiles tend to be greater in rural areas and in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. Shared sanitation rates tend to be highest among the urban poor. Wealth inequalities in basic hygiene services are more significant in urban than in rural areas.[34]

30. Seven out of 10 households lacking a water supply on premises rely on women and girls aged 15 and older to fetch water, increasing risks of gender-based violence, disrupted education, reduced economic participation, and ill-health or injury.[35] Globally, 380 million women and girls live with high or critical water stress, a number projected to increase to 674 million by 2050.[36] Women are chronically underrepresented in

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[26] WHO (2018). *A healthier humanity: the WHO investment case*. Geneva. (WHO/DGO/CRM/18.2). In late 2026, WHO plans to publish updated global projections of the benefits and costs of WASH across 132 countries.
[27] Hutton G, Chase C. The Knowledge Base for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2016 May 27;13(6):536.
[28] World Bank Group (2026). *Water Forward: Investing in water for people, food, and planet*.
[29] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities.* Geneva.
[30] WHO and UNICEF (2024), *Water, sanitation, hygiene, environmental cleaning and waste management in health care facilities: 2023 data update and special focus on primary health care*. Geneva.
[31] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities*. Geneva.
[32] Ibid.
[33] UNICEF and WHO (2024). *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools 2015–2023: Special focus on menstrual health*. New York.
[34] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities*. Geneva.
[35] UNICEF and WHO (2023). *Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2022: Special focus on gender*. New York.
[36] UNEP-DHI, GWP and UN Women, 2025. *Mainstreaming gender equality in water resources management: Global status and 7 pathways to progress*.

water governance, increasing the likelihood decisions may overlook gender-specific priorities and perpetuate inequalities.[37]

31. Emerging data show WASH service levels also vary between communities with and without access to roads, between different types of households, between minority ethnic and indigenous groups and the general population, and between individuals with and without functional disabilities.[38] While the human rights implications of pollution and deteriorating water quality are felt by individuals and groups around the world, the consequences are felt most acutely by the population that are already in vulnerable situations.[39]

B. Increasing impacts of climate change, disasters and pollution

32. "Water for people" depends upon "water for planet", including protecting water at the source for multiple uses and guarding against growing environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. (cf. Concept paper for interactive dialogue (c)).

33. Climate change is accelerating, amplifying and intensifying the global water cycle, leading to more intense wet and dry extremes.[40] In 2024, widespread ice loss was recorded across all glaciated regions for the third consecutive year,[41] affecting billions of people who rely directly on water originating from mountains for their drinking water, sanitation and livelihoods. Disaster- and climate-related displacement continues to increase, with 45.8 million internal disaster displacements recorded in 2024, primarily triggered by storms and floods.[42]

34. WASH infrastructure and behaviours are at risk from floods harming infrastructure and contaminating land and water resources, droughts reducing water supply, and rising temperatures influencing water usage. Climate change is also increasing the reliance on groundwater as a 'buffer resource' during droughts, making rigorous management imperative to prevent overexploitation and ensure long-term water availability. Floods and droughts impact water quality by transporting or concentrating pollutants into rivers and lakes, contaminating ecosystems and sources of drinking water, while polluted water bodies release greater quantities of methane into the atmosphere.[43]

35. Climate change is driving increased spread of vector-borne and communicable diseases, including diarrhoeal diseases and cholera. Flooding can increase pathogen mobility and exposure, while changing temperatures create risk of disease vectors like mosquitoes moving to new geographies; when these migrations intersect with conditions like unsafe water storage, poor wastewater treatment and inadequate sanitation that create breeding grounds, the public health impacts could be severe.[44]

36. Water and sanitation are increasingly being recognized and taken into consideration in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience contains a water-related target to guide the achievement of the global goal on adaptation.[45] The adoption of the

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[37] UN (2026). *UN World Water Development Report 2026 – Water for All People: Equal Rights and Opportunities*. UNESCO, Paris.
[38] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities*. Geneva.
[39] UN-Water (2026). *UN-Water Policy Brief: Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action.*
[40] Allan, Richard P., and others (2020). Advances in understanding large-scale responses of the water cycle to climate change. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 1472, pp. 49–75.
[41] World Meteorological Organization (WMO) (2025). *State of Global Water Resources 2024*. WMO-No. 1380. Geneva.
[42] IDMC (2025) *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025.* Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.
[43] Rosentreter, J.A. and others (2021). Half of global methane emissions come from highly variable aquatic ecosystem sources. *Nat. Geosci*. 14, 225–230.
[44] Klepac et al. Climate change, malaria and neglected tropical diseases: a scoping review, *Transactions of The Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, Volume 118, Issue 9, September 2024, Pages 561–579.
[45] FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/16/Add.1, Decision 2/CMA.5, paragraph 9(a).

Belém Adaptation Indicators represents an important milestone in integrating water and sanitation and climate resilience into global monitoring frameworks.

37. Global recognition of water, sanitation and climate interlinkages has fully not systematically translated into targets and financing. While 61% of National Adaptation Plans (NAP) prioritize water supply and 37% integrate sanitation and hygiene, integration remains more limited in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), where only 5% prioritize water supply and 16% sanitation.[46] Climate finance has grown but remains challenging to access. Between 2016 and 2020, only 3% of climate finance supported water and sanitation.[47]

C. Fragility, conflict, and humanitarian emergencies

38. Billions of people live in situations affected by fragility, conflict and humanitarian emergencies. In 2025 there were 41.6 million refugees globally and an additional 68.7 million people displaced within their own country due to conflict or violence,[48] including close to 50 million children.[49] In 2026, an estimated 137.5 million people need WASH humanitarian assistance.[50]

39. Home to two billion people and 72% of the world's extreme poor, fragile settings face a combination of economic, environmental, political, security, societal and human risks, including barriers to access basic services.[51] In fragile contexts[52] the coverage of safely managed drinking water is 38 percentage points lower, safely managed sanitation is 33 percentage points lower, and basic hygiene 37 percentage points lower than in non-fragile countries.[53]

40. In protracted crises and armed conflict settings, water and sanitation systems are often damaged or deliberately targeted. Nearly all the conflict-related emergencies where UNICEF responded in recent years involved some form of action hindering access to water, whether directed against water infrastructure or through incidental harm.[54] Lack of protection for civilian water infrastructure, disruptions in service provision and supply chains, alongside weak linkages between emergency interventions and sustainable solutions can worsen the WASH situation in these settings.

41. Public health emergencies can exacerbate humanitarian emergencies and be driven by them. Children under the age of 15 who are living in conflict areas are, on average, nearly three times more likely to die from diseases linked to unsafe water and sanitation than from direct violence.[55]

42. The long-term provision of humanitarian responses in protracted crisis settings can result in unsustainable service delivery models that are more costly over time. Host communities may experience challenges accessing services due to increased demand. In response, there is an increased focus on bridging the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.[56] However, a lack of consistent joint planning and shared outcomes across development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors continues to be a barrier.

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[46] UNECE (2025). Action-oriented document on mainstreaming water supply, sanitation, transboundary water management and cooperation into nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans.
[47] Buchner, Barbara and others (2023). Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2023, Climate Policy Initiative.
[48] UNHCR (2026). *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2025*. Copenhagen.
[49] https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/
[50] GWC (2026). Global WASH Cluster Monthly Newsletter 2026 – Fourth Edition, 23 June 2026. The Global WASH Cluster is the humanitarian response coordination mechanisms under the Interagency Standing Committee and led globally by UNICEF.
[51] OECD (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. OECD Publishing, Paris.
[52] Fragile contexts from OECD: https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragilityfa5a6770-en.htm
[53] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024: special focus on inequalities.* Geneva.
[54] UNICEF (2021), *Water Under Fire Volume 3: Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children*, New York.
[55] UNICEF (2019), Water Under Fire: For every child, water and sanitation in complex emergencies, Advocacy alert.
[56] GWC (2025), Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus and Collective Outcomes Guidance Note.

D. Changes in the multilateral landscape

43. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, significant shifts in the global context are reshaping international cooperation. Official development assistance (ODA) has been on a downward trajectory, and in 2025 dropped by 23%.[57] These trends have prompted UN reforms, including the UN80 initiative, while the ripple effects have disrupted the traditional ecosystem of local, national and global partners and external funding sources.

44. ODA trends for water and sanitation are tracked by SDG indicator 6a.1. ODA disbursements to the water sector reached $9.6 billion in 2024, slightly up from $8.9 billion in 2023 despite recent declines, mainly driven by higher commitments for agricultural water resources and hydroelectric power.[58] In contrast, commitments for water supply and sanitation declined by 6.7% from 2023 to 2024.

45. GLAAS 2025 results estimate that external aid comprises less than 18% of total funding for WASH, in the form of grants (3%) and repayable finance (14%).[59] While external aid flows may comprise a low proportion of global WASH expenditure, nearly half of countries reported that at least one government ministry or institution received a significant share (greater than 25%) of its WASH budget from donors.

46. Bilateral aid is shifting away from grants to prioritize repayable finance, with implications for high debt-burden countries. In this context, grants and concessional finance increasingly function as catalytic capital rather than primary financing sources to mobilize additional domestic, climate and commercial capital through blended finance structures, guarantees, project preparation support and risk-sharing mechanisms.[60]

IV. Solutions

A. Increase effective high-level political action, leadership and partnership at all levels to improve measurable outcomes for people

47. Achieving national targets for SDG 6 and realizing the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation demands leadership at the highest political level to translate rights and commitments into action.

Action at national and sub-national level

48. Political leaders can elevate water and sanitation as a national and sub-national government-wide development priority by incorporating it in policies and targets, providing clear roles and mandates for institutions, including for intersectoral and multistakeholder coordination, mobilizing the necessary means of implementation and establishing effective accountability mechanisms.

49. WASH and water quality-related issues can be more systematically integrated into other sectoral commitments and national plans including those related intergovernmental processes such as NAPs, NDCs, national biodiversity strategy and action plans, agrifood plans, and DRR plans.

50. Heads of State and Government can prioritize WASH through government-led national plans and implementation campaigns that mobilize whole-of-government and whole-of-society engagement. Some countries have accelerated efforts and leveraged international cooperation by developing national water and sanitation compacts, for example through the Heads of State Initiatives,[61] Water Forward coalition,[62] and Just

[57] OECD (2026). A historic decline in foreign aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA data.
[58] OECD-Creditor Reporting System (2026). OECD Data Explorer, Credit reporting system (flows). Sector-specific data on ODA are not yet available for 2025, when many large reductions in aid came into force.
[59] WHO and UNICEF (2025). *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025*. Geneva.
[60] UN (2026). *Ten Years of SDG 6 and the Path to 2030+: UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2026*. New York.
[61] https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/head-states-v2
[62] https://www.worldbank.org/ext/en/water

Water Partnerships.[63] To succeed, national compacts or similar political declarations require costed plans, a strong national platform and monitoring mechanism, and resources and partnerships that are aligned.

51. To be impactful, political commitments and associated national plans and compacts must be translated from national level to the sub-national and local levels for implementation. This requires empowering local authorities and service providers, local private sector and communities to lead WASH solutions, while ensuring that local or municipal governments have sufficient budget and decision-making authority. In humanitarian settings, the WASH needs of affected populations should be prioritized within humanitarian response plans and funding appeals.

Action at the global and regional level

52. Global and regional political action is central to elevate WASH as a priority within the broader sustainable development agenda and to highlight the importance of continued multilateral cooperation (cf. Concept paper for interactive dialogue (e)). Member States and stakeholders can implement existing commitments, mobilize political leadership and mainstream water and sanitation in intergovernmental and multilateral processes, such as health, food systems and nutrition, climate, DRR, biodiversity, land degradation and desertification.

53. Multistakeholder partnerships, coalitions and groups can galvanize political commitment, mobilize financial and technical resources, increase public awareness and build societal support. The Sanitation and Water for All partnership (SWA) has created the Mutual Accountability Mechanism as a tool for partners to make commitments and hold each other to account for progress as well as to collaborate, learn and catalyse collective action.[64]

54. Water and sanitation can also be elevated by Member States as a political priority through regional-level multilateral bodies and processes. The African Union endorsed the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy, the European Union adopted a Water Resilience Strategy and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean convenes annual Regional Water Dialogues. The UNECE/WHO Europe Protocol for Water and Health supports countries to strengthen regulation and offers an accountable pathway to link national targets to local action plans and local actors.[65]

B. Embed human rights principles in WASH systems

55. Advancing the human rights to water and sanitation requires that duty bearers place people, as rights-holders, at the centre of policies and services. States, as the primary duty-bearers, have the responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfil the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

56. Member States can operationalize their commitment to the human rights to water and sanitation by embedding into WASH systems the principles of non-discrimination and equality, access to information, participation, accountability and sustainability,[66] as well as the legal content of the human rights to water and sanitation that encompass the dimensions of availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability and quality.[67] The interrelated nature of the human rights to water and sanitation and to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment[68] necessitate addressing water pollution and contamination that undermine health, dignity, and livelihoods.[69]

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[63] https://www.iwmi.org/blogs/from-principles-to-practice-advancing-just-water-partnerships/

[64] https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/our-work/mutual-accountability-mechanism

[65] Tajikistan, (2026). *Co-Chairs' Summary of the 4th Dushanbe Water Action Decade Conference*, Thematic Session A: Water for People.

[66] Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, General Comment No. 15 (E/C.12/2002/11)

[67] Ibid.

[68] A/RES/76/300

[69] UN-Water (2026). *UN-Water Policy Brief: Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action*.

57. States can create a favourable enabling environment and foster accountability for operationalising the human rights to water and sanitation and other interrelated rights by:

a. incorporating human rights principles in legal, policy and regulatory frameworks, strategies, and plans;

b. setting targets to close equity gaps, including for availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability and quality;

c. prioritizing equity in decision-making;

d. targeting financing (budget allocations and spending) to reach underserved populations and those in humanitarian settings and vulnerable situations;

e. providing effective accountability mechanisms for all service providers; and

f. regularly monitoring and analysing progress through national monitoring systems, with an emphasis on sub-national inequalities.

58. Affordability is also expressed within the UN recognition of the human rights to water and sanitation and is an integral element of SDG target 6.1. Financial schemes such as fee exemptions, subsidies and reduced tariffs are social protection measures that contribute to making WASH services affordable for households, especially for rural populations or populations living in vulnerable situations.

59. Policies and procedures to engage women, youth, local communities and those in vulnerable situations should be established and operationalized in water and sanitation management, consistent with both human rights and SDG target 6.b. Participation across different levels of governance, planning, investment, monitoring, evaluation, reporting, and financing should be complemented by access to information, justice and effective remedy through judicial, administrative, legislative or other appropriate means.[70] Budgets should be allocated and executed to support participation.

C. Strengthen resilient systems to deliver sustainable and equitable services

60. The WASH sector has evolved from an emphasis on construction and infrastructure towards safely managed services sustained over time. This has promoted the shift towards a WASH systems strengthening approach that reinforces the transition from basic coverage to safely managed services to realize the full benefits of WASH.[71] Strong WASH systems create an accountable enabling environment for resilience, inclusion, financial viability, and capacity to serve even the hardest-to-reach populations.

61. Resilient WASH systems are critical in the face of increasing impacts of climate change, disasters, pollution and conflict. Various definitions of resilience and of climate-resilient WASH emphasize the ability of systems and communities to anticipate, withstand, respond to, cope with, and recover from shocks and stressors. Resilience is strongest where marginalized groups and those in vulnerable situations, who are most exposed to these threats, remain at the forefront of efforts.

62. WASH policies and plans should focus on systems strengthening, including to expand and improve service coverage for the unserved and underserved. Expansion and sustainability of services require risk-informed planning and risk-based management, such as through climate-resilient water and sanitation safety plans and multi-hazard early warning systems in line with the Early Warnings for All Initiative and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

63. Strengthening technical standards, regulation, data-sharing, and compliance monitoring and enforcement can positively impact on the entire WASH system, service delivery network, and value chain.

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[70] UN-Water (2026). *UN-Water Policy Brief: Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach to Water, Sanitation and Environmental Action*.

[71] WHO and UNICEF in collaboration with the World Bank (2025), Align to Accelerate: Concept note: Strengthening water, sanitation and hygiene systems – towards a core set of indicators and common framework.

Regulations can safeguard water resources, prevent pollution and overextraction, build accountability for resilience and human rights standards, and enforce quality of infrastructure and services in all settings.[72]

64. National and municipal budgets should have equity-focused targets, including ringfenced measures to close equity gaps, with associated accountability mechanisms. Sufficient resources should be budgeted for appropriate sub-national authorities and partners, particularly where rural and small-town WASH access is lagging. While loans can be mobilized to invest in infrastructure and sustainable business models, public allocations, grants and subsidies should be primarily targeted to expand service access and quality for vulnerable users.

65. Investments in the full array of water technologies and circular economy approaches, such as wastewater recycling, water reuse, aquifer recharge, desalination, nutrient recovery, energy generation can reduce water stress and pollution (cf. Concept paper for interactive dialogue (b)). Innovative technologies and digital transformation, the business environment for WASH-related markets, and subsidies for small, local service providers to reach poor and underserved areas can also build resilience across water and sanitation systems and value chains. Investment in public outreach and community-focused social and behaviour change can increase the use and sustainability of services.

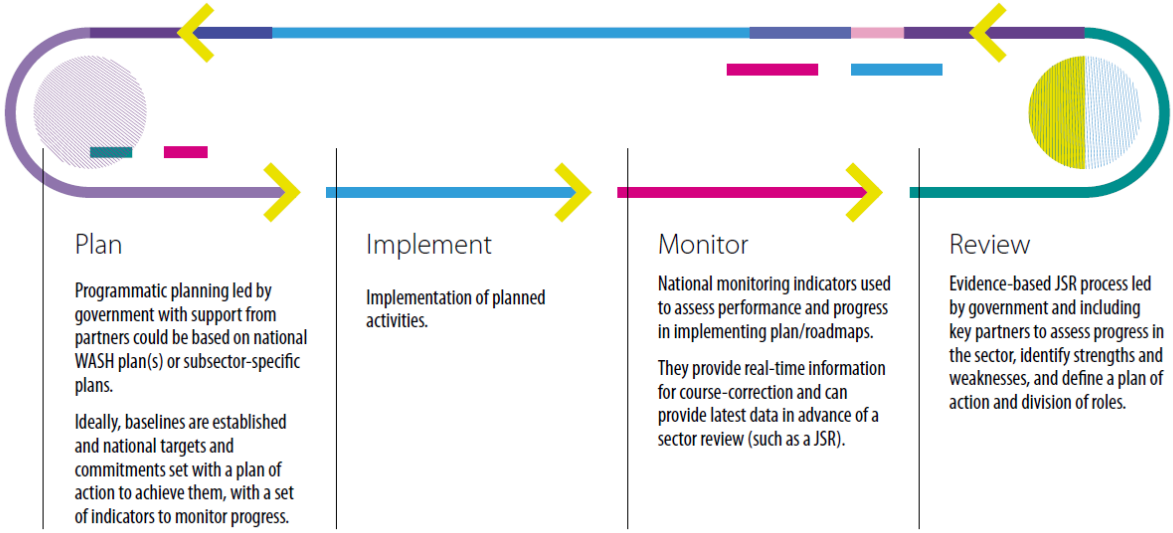
66. Strong WASH workforce capacity is essential for sustainable service delivery. This includes assessments to ensure that relevant and appropriate skills are represented at all levels of the WASH system and in all types of jobs. Professional competency frameworks and certifications help maintain high levels of performance. Core WASH positions in ministries and sub-national authorities should also be included in budgets and filled in a timely manner.

67. Governments, academia and the private sector can support equitable initiatives to recruit, retain and promote a more diverse workforce. This may include formal or informal education and training that enables under-employed groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities to enter the WASH workforce. WASH jobs must be more appealing and safer, and workers' rights must be protected. This is especially important for sanitation workers who face specific health and safety risks and social stigma.

68. Strong national monitoring and review systems are a vital part of the WASH system (see figure). Countries need timely and reliable data to assess performance and track progress towards national targets across the results chain – from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes – to drive effective decision-making. While there has been an improvement in the availability of disaggregated data, special efforts are required to improve disaggregation of WASH data by sex, age, geography, income, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and other characteristics relevant to equity in national context.[73] This requires human resources capacity for data collection and statistical analysis, data transparency and publicly available reports that can be used in sector review processes.

[72] https://www.iwa-network.org/call-to-action-on-strengthening-water-and-sanitation-regulatory-systems
[73] A/RES/71/313

Figure. National planning, monitoring and review cycle of a WASH system



Source: WHO and UNICEF (2025). *State of Systems for Drinking-Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: Global Update 2025*. Geneva.

69. Countries and stakeholders can advance progress towards resilient, equitable WASH systems through four interrelated initiatives: Align to Accelerate to develop a set of core indicators and common review framework to monitor the strength of WASH system, WASH accounts to track financing flows, JMP/GLAAS review of indicators for global monitoring of climate-resilient WASH, and the WASH Insecurity Analysis to understand WASH needs and risks across the humanitarian–development continuum.

70. National monitoring systems are an essential data source and pipeline for global SDG 6 reporting. Global monitoring programmes such as JMP, GLAAS, wastewater questionnaires by WHO (domestic) and UN Statistics Division, UNEP, and OECD and UNEP's Global Freshwater Quality Database (GEMStat) coordinated through the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 can provide technical assistance to build country-level capacity and strengthen monitoring and reporting systems. These global data sets help countries benchmark national progress with regional and global progress to inform decision- and policymaking.

71. Increasing interoperability between the monitoring processes for SDG 6 and the Belém Adaptation Indicators provide a coherent and efficient approach to incorporate water supply and sanitation-related issues into UNFCCC processes.[74] Similarly, water quality data collected for SDG indicator 6.3.2 are also used to track progress within the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.[75] Efforts to define climate-resilient WASH indicators are advanced and should be incorporated into relevant global and national monitoring initiatives for both WASH and climate issues.

V. Recommendations

72. Seven recommendations are proposed to operationalize the three solutions, address challenges and meet the demands of the future (see table).

[74] UN (2026). *Ten Years of SDG 6 and the Path to 2030+: UN SDG 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2026*. New York.
[75] CBD/COP/DEC/15/4

Table. Summary of solutions and recommendations

A. Increase effective political action, leadership and partnership at all levels to deliver measurable outcomes for people			**B. Embed human rights principles in WASH systems**			
C. Strengthen resilient systems to deliver sustainable and equitable services						
1. Strengthen political prioritization, coordination and alignment of efforts to drive results	2. Enhance resilience and human rights-based approaches in planning, standards, regulation and implementation	3. Ensure access, protection and service continuity, especially in vulnerable situations	4. Improve financial targeting to close equity gaps and strengthen resilient systems	5. Reinforce, diversify, and protect the WASH workforce	6. Strengthen data, monitoring and review processes for accountability and evidence-based decisions	7. Promote decentralized capacity, resources and accountability for local delivery

73. **Recommendation 1. Strengthen political prioritization, coordination and alignment of efforts to drive results, especially for those in vulnerable situations.**

a. Member States can elevate access to WASH and the human rights to water and sanitation as a global development priority towards 2030 and beyond.

b. Heads of State and Government, parliaments, governors, mayors and other leaders can incorporate universal WASH access and water quality into national and sub-national development priorities, policies, plans, budgets and financing strategies.

c. National and sub-national WASH plans should be endorsed and owned at the highest political levels to translate policy objectives for water and sanitation into practical, time-bound actions with equity-targeted measures, including through government-led compacts to coordinate and align efforts.

d. Governments can establish cross-sectoral coordination and accountability mechanisms to enable operational interlinkages between sectors to achieve outcomes that contribute towards multiple SDGs and promote whole-of-government and whole-society-approaches.

e. Stakeholders[76] can align efforts in support of national plans, strategies, and compacts, providing technical, human and financial resources towards their implementation.

f. The UN system can scale-up implementation of the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation to improve coordinated delivery of priorities in accordance with their mandates and across levels, including at country-level, in alignment with national priorities and plans and supported by commensurate funding support.

g. Possible indicators to track progress: Proportion of countries that (a) include WASH in national development plans/strategies and (b) have government-led compacts.

74. **Recommendation 2. Enhance resilience and human rights-based approaches in planning, technical standards, regulation and implementation.**

a. National and sub-national authorities and development partners should undertake and consistently use assessments of climate risk, groundwater resources, conflict, and equity and social inclusion to mitigate risk and address equity needs in policy- and decision-making.

b. Member States can integrate WASH, wastewater treatment and water quality into their NDCs, NAPs and climate finance proposals.

[76] Stakeholders include governments, UN entities, bilateral and multilateral donors, private foundations, civil society, academia and research institutions, trade associations, and the private sector.

c. Governments can adopt and enforce risk-based, climate-resilient regulatory frameworks that set and monitor standards that contain the dimensions of the human rights to water and sanitation[77] for service levels, infrastructure design and operations, abstraction limits, wastewater discharge and water quality.

d. Governments can establish robust certification, licensing and market surveillance systems for WASH-related products and services, including for menstrual health and hygiene, to protect consumers, deter substandard goods and professionalize service delivery across formal and informal markets.

e. Service providers should ensure that implementation, operations and delivery of services comply with relevant technical, performance, safety, human rights and environmental standards.

f. States and other actors can support technical capacity-building efforts and financial support to ensure meaningful and informed participation in the planning, design, financing, operations, maintenance, and compliance of water and sanitation systems.

g. Possible indicators to track progress: Proportion of countries with equity and resilience measures in national policies, plans, and standards/regulations.

75. **Recommendation 3. Ensure access, protection and service continuity, especially in vulnerable situations**

a. Governments can strengthen preparedness by pre-positioning local response capacities, putting in place multi-hazard early warning systems, establishing clear governance arrangements for emergency decision-making and strengthening adaptive supply chains.

b. National and local authorities; humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors; as well as multilateral development banks, philanthropies, multilateral and bilateral donors can promote integrated approaches such as the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and the water-climate-peace nexus to ensure more coherent, accountable, participatory, and transparent joint planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring before, during, and after a crisis.

c. National and local authorities can also develop shared WASH and social cohesion outcomes against which humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors can contribute, to mitigate risks to systems across contexts.

d. Governments can apply whole-of-government responses to WASH services for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced populations and their host communities, including by reflecting their needs in national systems and targeted measures.

e. The international community should ensure that WASH Clusters have sufficient human resources and capacities to effectively fulfil their mandate to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical coordination capacity to respond predictably to humanitarian emergencies.

f. Governments and non-state actors should respect international humanitarian law and protect civilian water infrastructure, with independent monitoring of violations.

g. Responsible authorities and actors should prevent contamination and environmental health risks within and nearby humanitarian and other vulnerable situations by establishing and implementing plans for health and hygiene promotion and environmental management.

h. Possible indicator to track progress: Proportion of countries that have measures to target resources to reduce inequalities in access to WASH among (a) refugees and/or internally displaced persons and (b) persons affected by emergencies and disasters.

76. **Recommendation 4. Improve financial targeting to close equity gaps and strengthen resilient systems**

[77] These dimensions encompass: availability, accessibility, acceptability, affordability, quality.

a. Governments should mandate specific equity-focused targets and performance incentives in financial decision-making; ringfence budget allocations targeted for equity measures; and fund increased monitoring of sub-national inequalities.

b. International financing institutions, bilateral, multilateral and philanthropic donors and other development partners should align support with government-led financing strategies and spending plans, including through government-led compacts.

c. Governments should invest in resilient WASH systems by allocating adequate funding to reinforce institutional capacities, monitoring, coordination, regulation, and accountability frameworks at both national and decentralized levels.

d. Governments and development partners can prioritize water and sanitation in climate finance proposals and plans, and vice-versa.

e. Governments should decentralize budget allocations to local governments and agencies in charge of implementation according to responsibilities and mandates.

f. Governments should strengthen regulation and work with stakeholders to mobilize diverse funding sources to reduce water pollution from all sources, including source control for industrial pollution, preventative measures for agricultural pollution, increased municipal wastewater and sludge collection, treatment and beneficial reuse as well as ambient water quality monitoring.

g. Possible indicator to track progress: Proportion of countries with measures to target and regularly track resources budgeted, allocated and spent to address inequalities in access to WASH services.

77. **Recommendation 5. Reinforce, diversify and protect the WASH workforce**

a. Governments should conduct and use the results of WASH human resources needs assessments in planning and budgeting to understand and close human resources gaps, including in the health and education sectors.

b. Employers can support and offer incentives for workers to enhance their professional competencies and certification levels.

c. Governments, academia and the private sector should support equitable initiatives to recruit, retain and promote a more diverse WASH workforce.

d. Governments and employers must ensure safe working conditions and protect the rights of water and sanitation workers.

e. Possible indicator to track progress: Percentage of countries reporting overall sufficient (at least 75% of needs met) human resources for WASH.

78. **Recommendation 6. Strengthen data, monitoring, and accountability for evidence-based decisions.**

a. Governments can clearly define roles and responsibilities for monitoring across institutions and at national and sub-national levels.

b. Governments can strengthen monitoring and review frameworks by incorporating WASH systems indicators that track policies, planning, human resources, finance flows, and equity into monitoring systems and publicly available reports.

c. Governments can build data collection and statistical capacity to increase availability, quality and use of disaggregated data for resilience- and equity-based decision-making and in sector review processes such as JSRs.

d. Governments can close data gaps for ambient water quality by using innovative approaches such as citizen science and Earth Observation.

e. Governments can track financial flows, utilization and efficiency of spending, and finance gaps by using WASH accounts and ensuring transparent access to sector-level spending data and public expenditure tracking surveys.

f. Governments can establish regular coordination and review mechanisms such as JSRs that foster the inclusion of stakeholders and serve as multistakeholder and cross-sectoral accountability mechanisms.

g. Stakeholders can develop and agree upon a set of standardized core indicators for strengthening systems that incorporate elements to track resilience and equity across the WASH system from inputs to outcomes.

h. Member States and the international community can design a more robust and integrated approach to address the means of implementation in global monitoring frameworks towards 2030 and beyond to close equity gaps and ensure resilience.

i. Possible indicators to track progress: Proportion of countries with baselines and regularly tracking indicators for governance, finance, human resources, equity measures and affordability.

79. **Recommendation 7. Promote decentralized capacity, resources, and accountability for local delivery of water, sanitation, wastewater, and water quality services**

a. National policy, institutional and regulatory frameworks can empower local governments and authorities, service providers, and community actors to deliver and sustain inclusive and resilient water, sanitation, wastewater, and water quality services.

b. Governments should align institutional arrangements and intergovernmental financing frameworks to allocate sufficient financial resources for local delivery, in accordance with national and sub-national plans and budgets.

c. Governments and educational institutions can strengthen local technical and institutional capacity through structured training, partnerships, peer-to-peer exchanges and twinning programmes for on-the-job training.

d. Local authorities can reinforce participation to strengthen accountability by increasing availability of public information and outreach, engaging stakeholders in planning and decision-making, monitoring customer satisfaction and operationalizing complaint response mechanisms.

e. Possible indicators to track progress: Proportion of countries with (a) procedures in national laws and policies for local participation, and (b) level of participation of WASH service users and communities (c) level of participation of women and (d) access to opportunities for participation.

VI. Guiding questions

1. How can States more effectively translate the human rights to water and sanitation into laws, policies, strategies, budgets and accountability mechanisms that can reduce inequalities by 2030?

2. How can national commitments, government-led plans, strategies and compacts be more effective in aligning financing, cooperation and partnerships to accelerate implementation of SDG 6, including specific targeting for those in vulnerable situations? How can partners improve alignment and coordination around country-led priorities?

3. What incentives lead to resilient systems, reducing the focus on infrastructure as the outcome and instead improving equity, quality, sustainability and community resilience?

4. How can cities and local authorities translate commitments into equitable, sustainable water and sanitation outcomes through effective financing, institutional capacity, and accountability, prioritizing health, resilience, and reaching the most vulnerable populations?

5. What practical actions can be taken to link high-level policy objectives on equity and resilience with the means to implement them? How can national monitoring systems be used to track progress on equity and resilience for decision-making and strengthen accountability?