SDG-STYIP Impact Labs Issue Paper for SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

1. Introduction

This Issue Paper identifies emerging issues, systemic challenges, and barriers to progress on the achievement of SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

2. Landscapes of Issues under SDG 6

Lack of access to safe and reliable water access

- Across Africa, women and girls are responsible for water collection in approximately 7 out of 10 households without water on premises,[1] a responsibility that intensifies in rural and peri-urban areas.[2]
- Lack of access to safe and reliable water significantly increases women's and girls' unpaid care work by consuming large amounts of their time in collecting water, increasing health and protection risks, and limiting their education and economic participation.
- Gender disparities extend to water for livelihoods and health. In relation to agriculture, evidence from the Gender Analysis of Water Insecurity in East Africa in Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan shows that women farmers experience systematic water insecurity for crop and livestock production due to (i) limited access to irrigation infrastructure, (ii) weak land tenure security, (iii) exclusion from water governance bodies.[3]

Inadequate last-mile service delivery models for rural and peri-urban water and sanitation

- Public water and sanitation utilities remain concentrated in urban centres and struggle to extend services to rural and peri-urban areas, lacking private sector involvement in water distribution and undermining progress on health, education, and gender equality outcomes linked to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH).
- Rural safely managed drinking water coverage remains critically low (around 25%), with minimal improvement over the past decade.
- Existing infrastructure expansion has not been matched by sustainable operation and arrangements at the local level.
- Fragmented institutional responsibilities at local levels often result in unclear mandates for rural water service provision, weak accountability, and limited technical support to community-based management systems.

Low adoption of sanitation and hygiene practices and insufficient access to basic sanitation facilities

- Access to safely managed sanitation remains critically low across Africa (about 30% of the population), while open defecation still affects over 200 million people.
- The number of people with adequate access to basic hygiene remains low (about 38% in 2024).

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[1] https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/07/1138407

[2] WHO/UNICEF, 2023, Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

[3] https://africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/04/gender-and-water-insecurity-in-agricultural-production-in-east-africa

- Access to basic handwashing facilities with soap and water remains far below global levels (27% in 2024) and is uneven across subregions.
- Outside major cities, hygiene promotion and behaviour change efforts are not scaled consistently, contributing to persistent gaps in everyday hand hygiene practice.
- Low and unequal access to basic hygiene and sanitation undermines infection prevention, increases vulnerability during outbreaks, and constrains progress on child health and learning outcomes.
- More than half a billion people in Africa rely on shared sanitation facilities, which disproportionately compromises women's and girls' privacy, dignity, and safety, particularly at night. Women and girls are more likely than men to report fear, harassment, or violence when accessing toilets outside the home, especially in informal settlements and displacement settings.[4]

Insufficient monitoring and persistent data gaps

- Weak evidence systems undermine regulatory accountability and evidence-based decision-making.
- Investment in data systems, monitoring, research, digital tools and innovation to enable evidence-based decision-making are not prioritized.
- Monitoring methodologies and reporting systems remain fragmented and non-harmonised across countries.
- Major data gaps reduce the ability of communities and regulators to detect hotspots, attribute sources of pollution, and enforce discharge standards.

Deteriorating water quality & wastewater treatment

- The proportion of safely treated domestic wastewater has declined sharply since 2020, particularly in Southern, Central, East and West Africa.
- Inadequate infrastructure development, rehabilitation, and maintenance constrain treatment capacity.
- Untreated or poorly treated effluents continue to contaminate surface and groundwater systems.
- Declining wastewater treatment and limited local accountability increase risks to public health, ecosystem integrity and economic activity dependent on clean water.

Low water-use efficiency in water-stressed regions

- The lowest efficiency levels are concentrated in the most water-stressed settings, such as North Africa and East Africa, indicated by low economic output per cubic metre of water.
- Extreme water stress, especially in agriculture, signals structural over-extraction of freshwater resources alongside inefficient use.
- Rising industrial water stress indicates growing pressure from production systems without sufficient efficiency improvements, recycling, or reuse.
- This issue heightens risks to household water security, food systems, and economic activity, and increases vulnerability to climate shocks as demand rises and available freshwater becomes more constrained.

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[4] on-household-drinking-water--sanitation-and-hygiene-2000-2022---special-focus-on-gender"WHO/UNICEF, 2023, Progress on Household Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Insufficient and Inefficient financing mechanisms

- Chronic underinvestment in the water sector creates a persistent financing gap that delays the development, rehabilitation, and maintenance of water infrastructure.
- Limited private sector engagement in the water agenda restricts innovation, investment, and efficiency gains in the sector.
- Weak cost-recovery and financial sustainability frameworks undermine utility performance.
- Water infrastructure is not consistently treated as productive capital within macroeconomic planning.
- Insufficient gender-responsive financing has weakened gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation frameworks and widened gender gaps in access to services. Achieving sustainable water resources management between 2015 and 2030 requires an estimated annual investment of $1.04 trillion. Yet in 2022, over 75%of 121 countries and territories reported insufficient funding for water, sanitation, and hygiene, including menstrual hygiene management, strategies.[5]

Weak transboundary cooperation for managing shared water resources as strategic assets

- Africa has 63 international transboundary river basins that cover 62% of its land area, yet these are not leveraged or financed as strategic continental assets.
- Fragmented cross-border governance and limited basin-level coordination constrain equitable use, data sharing, joint planning, and collective investment in water security, climate resilience, and disaster risk reduction.
- Many river basin organisations lack the technical, financial, and institutional capacity to operationalise cooperative frameworks, enforce agreed-upstream/downstream water allocations and resolve conflicts over water resources.
- The absence of coordinated valuation and investment across shared basins increases inefficiencies, heightens political and economic risks, and limits Africa's ability to finance sustainable management of water as a strategic economic, ecological, and geopolitical asset.

Declining ecosystem health undermining water security and climate resilience

- More than 60% of countries in Africa had degraded freshwater ecosystems which is reducing natural water storage capacity and increasing vulnerability to droughts and floods.
- Pollution from untreated wastewater, agricultural runoff and urban growth is accelerating biodiversity loss and compromising water quality.
- Weak monitoring systems and limited investment in ecosystem protection obscure the scale of degradation and hinder evidence-based action.
- Declining ecosystem health reduces the effectiveness of nature-based solutions critical for climate adaptation, water purification and community resilience

[5] https://www.unwomen.org/en/resources/gender-snapshot/sdg-6

Insufficient UN system coordination and country-level leadership to use water as an entry point for SDG acceleration

- Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams lack structured guidance to integrate water holistically across health, education, climate, food security and urban development priorities.
- Water is still approached in sectoral silos, limiting its potential as a “superconnector” for SDGs and Agenda 2063 acceleration.
- Coordination gaps hinder effective alignment with Africa’s 2026 water agenda, UN support for implementation of the Africa Water Vision 2063 and policy and major global events, reducing opportunities for unified advocacy and action.
- Limited platforms exist for RCs to share experiences, jointly address systemic barriers, and mobilize coherent UN support on water and sanitation.