

WASH United Briefing Paper



1. Water and sanitation: building blocks of life and human dignity

Today, approximately 884 million individuals around the world lack access to even minimum supplies of safe water for basic personal and domestic needs. The picture is even more dire with regard to sanitation, where more than 2.5 billion - approximately 40% of the world population - are without access to improved sanitation services. These individuals are left with no choice but to consume water fetched from unsafe sources such as unprotected wells, ditches, rivers or lakes also frequented by animals. For want of a toilet or latrine people defecate in buckets, plastic bags and public places in and around their communities. Preventable diseases (e.g diarrhoea) caused by dirty water and poor sanitation kill more than 4000 children under five every day. At any given time, almost half the populations in developing countries suffer from one or more of the health conditions caused by unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation, sustaining vicious circles of poverty, ill-health and lost life opportunities.

With almost 330 million people without access to safe drinking water, and 550 million without improved sanitation, Sub-Saharan Africa is at the frontline of the water and sanitation crisis. While the world as a whole is on track to reach the Millennium Development Goal target for water, at current rates of progress Sub-Saharan Africa will miss the water target by 25 years and the sanitation target will not be met until 2076.

2. Economic and social benefits of investing in water and sanitation

Lack of water and sanitation mostly affects those struggling to mobilise the means for basic survival, diverting scarce resources from critical areas such as nutrition, health and education. Access to water and sanitation supports other efforts to assist people find a path out of poverty, particularly by reducing the cost of healthcare and reducing the number of working hours lost due to ill-health. Easy access to water and sanitation also frees time for other activities, including for work and education, or improved care of children or the elderly.

Lack of water and sanitation services also reinforces existing gender inequalities. In rural areas of Africa, millions of women and young girls face walks of several hours every day to collect water from distant sources, depriving them of educational or other productive opportunities and exposing them to physical harm. Lack of adequate sanitary facilities is a major cause for girls dropping out of school, particularly after puberty.



Apart from the direct human cost, the current crisis in water and sanitation seriously undermines efforts towards overall economic development. The global economic damage caused by diseases and productivity losses related to unclean water and poor sanitation is estimated at a staggering \$170 billion per year - with developing countries' economies bearing the brunt of this burden.¹ Sub-Saharan Africa alone loses 5% of GDP or \$28.4 billion per year, a figure that exceeded total aid flow and debt relief into the region in 2003.² The World Health Organisation estimates that a \$1 investment in water and sanitation services provides economic returns of between \$3 and \$34, depending on the type of intervention and region. On average, every US dollar invested into water and sanitation generates an economic return of USD 8 in costs averted and productivity gained.³

At any given time, approximately 50% of all hospital beds in the developing world are occupied with patients suffering from diseases related to lack of access to safe, affordable water and sanitation services, straining resources from already fragile health systems. Recent research shows that hand-washing with soap (or ash, sand or mud) at critical times (before preparing food and eating; after using the toilet and handling a baby) can reduce the occurrence of diarrhoea by up to 47%. Handwashing with soap is by far the most cost-effective intervention to significantly reduce morbidity and mortality resulting from water and sanitation related diseases. The consequent promotion of hand-washing with soap at all levels can help governments to avert billions of USD in health costs every year.

The greatest economic benefits to improving water and sanitation coverage would accrue to those regions, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, where the problem is at its worst.

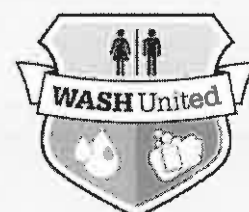
3. Survey of the recognition of the right to water and sanitation by African States:

The human right to water and sanitation has been widely endorsed by African States at the international and regional level. In fact, virtually every African State has acknowledged the human right to water and sanitation in at least one political declaration.

¹ Hutton, G., Haller, L. and J. Bartram. Economic and health effects of increasing coverage of low cost household drinking-water supply and sanitation interventions to countries off-track to meet MDG target 10. World Health Organization, 2007.

² UNDP, Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis, Human Development Report 2006., pp. 6, 42.

³ Hutton G and Haller L , Evaluation of the Costs and Benefits of Water and Sanitation Improvements at the Global Level, WHO 2004.



In 1994, 51 African States⁴ signed the Programme of Action adopted at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development, which recognises in Principle 2 that the right to an adequate standard of living includes both water and sanitation. At the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) held in Istanbul in 1996, again 51 African States⁵ signed on to the Habitat Agenda, which reaffirms this interpretation.

In 2002, Mali, Mauretania, and Senegal concluded the Senegal River Water Charter, which in article 4 addresses the “the fundamental human right to healthful water”.

In 2006, 53 African States⁶ signed the Abuja Declaration adopted in the framework of the 1st Africa - South America Summit, in which States commit to “promote the right of our citizens to have access to clean and safe water and sanitation”.

In 2008, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria concluded the Niger Basin Water Charter, which recognises “the fundamental right to sufficient supply, physically accessible and at an affordable cost, of water that is healthful and of an acceptable quality for everyone's personal and domestic uses”.

At the 5th World Water Forum in March 2009, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Morocco, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa, among others, signed a separate government declaration in which they acknowledged “that access to water and sanitation is a human right” and committed to take all necessary actions for the progressive implementation of this right.

In June 2009, the 53 African Member States⁷ of the Non-Aligned Movement signed the Final Document of XV Summit of Heads of State and Government, which acknowledged the right to water for all.

⁴ Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

⁵ Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zaire, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

⁶ Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, SADR, Sao Tomo & Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swasiland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

⁷ Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, D.R. Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon,



In addition, numerous African countries have enshrined the right to water and sanitation into domestic laws and policies, including Angola, Burkina Faso, DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, and South Africa.

4. The right to water and sanitation

The right to water and sanitation is an entitlement held by all human beings anchored in international human rights law. The right can help generate the political will required to make the necessary reforms to policies, to raise resources, to utilise such resources in a manner that focuses on the needs and aspirations of the poor, and marginalised and vulnerable individuals and groups and to monitor performance. The right to water and sanitation is particularly compelling since a variety of technical and institutional solutions for expanding access through cost-effective measures exist and are generally known, but are not being implemented consistently or with a sense of urgency.

The key features of the right to water and sanitation that can make a significant contribution to current development efforts to improve universal access to water and sanitation are:

Improved accountability:

The right to water and sanitation underlines that access to these basic services is a legal entitlement, not charity, and provides a basis for individuals, civil society and the judiciary to hold governments to account.

Priority for basic access to water and sanitation services:

National and local governments must give priority to achieving basic access for all and use resources sustainably.

Prevent discrimination and neglect of vulnerable and marginalised communities:

Exclusion and neglect is recognised as a central cause of lack of access. The right to water and sanitation obliges governments to make special efforts to address

discrimination and expand services to marginalised and vulnerable individuals or groups/communities.

Participation and access to information:

The right to water and sanitation requires the possibility for active, free and meaningful participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes related to water and sanitation issues and full access to information.

Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.





Individual and community empowerment:

Beyond participation in decision-making processes, the right to water and sanitation can empower and help to organise individuals and communities who do not have access to water and sanitation.

5. Misconceptions of the right to water and sanitation

Does the right to water and sanitation entail that water and sanitation services must be available for free? The right to water and sanitation requires that water and sanitation services be affordable for all, but not that they are to be made available for free.

Are States required to provide services, or can the private sector be involved?

States hold the obligation of ensuring that all residents have access to clean, safe, affordable water and sanitation services, and that an effective system of regulation and monitoring is in place. The right to water and sanitation does not demand a particular model of service provision.

Is it financially feasible to provide water and sanitation for all? As has been shown above, the question is rather whether individual States - and the international community as a whole - can afford to allow the crisis in access to water and sanitation to continue as the costs associated to lack of services are far greater than the costs of providing services.

Does the right to water and sanitation require that everyone – including people living in remote areas – is entitled to piped water and a toilet connected to a sewerage system? No. States have to ensure that everyone has access to services that comply with certain standards (availability, acceptability, accessibility, affordability, quality), but different settings require different and flexible water and sanitation solutions. States have a margin of appreciation to take the steps and adopt measures most suited to the specific circumstances

Is a State in violation of the right to water and sanitation if not all people in the country have access to these services? States are obliged to take steps, using the maximum available resources, to ensure universal access. The full realisation of the right can be achieved progressively. States have an immediate obligation to adopt a national strategy and plan of action, to address discrimination in the provision of basic services, and to ensure minimum essential levels of the right for everyone.

