



Water, sanitation and hygiene: UNICEF's work in Eastern and Southern Africa

UNICEF Position Paper

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UNICEF advocates and works so that children have rights, their basic needs and opportunities to reach their full potential in life. This includes ensuring access to water, sanitation and hygiene services as well as adequate nutrition and education, and in often vulnerable contexts, increasing the resilience of families to extreme events, disasters, conflicts and crises (see Box 1).

Box 1. UNICEF's work on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

As the lead UN agency for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), UNICEF's work is overseen by an executive board representing member states. It works towards the vision that all children everywhere live in a safe and clean environment including in humanitarian crises and in fragile contexts.

Goal Area 4 of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, is aimed at ensuring that every child, including adolescents, has access to and uses safe WASH services, lives in a resilient community and in a safe climate and environment. Under this goal, UNICEF pursues outcomes within three results areas: (1) to provide WASH services for 50 million people over four years through direct support, (2) to support government partners to strengthen national WASH systems and (3) to address climate change, disaster risks and environmental degradation, with a focus on the most vulnerable children.

Source: UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025

This position paper summarises how the WASH outcomes targeted under Goal Area 4 by UNICEF are being pursued in the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESAR) region, and how UNICEF seeks to make a difference in WASH for children, families and communities in its 21 countries, which in total, are home to 40 per cent of the African population.

Strategic context

As is also the case globally, ESAR countries are not on track to achieve universal access to WASH services^{1,2}. A regional review³, published in 2021, found no country in the region was on track except for Botswana with respect to water only. Some countries were then on track, before the pandemic, to achieve parts of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) by 2050 (20 years after the target date) while other countries have declining levels of access to services. Household access to at least basic WASH services in line with JMP standards varies widely in the region. Access to safe water ranges from as high as 94 per cent in South Africa to 41 per cent in South Sudan, safe sanitation from 81 per cent in Botswana to 9 per cent in Ethiopia and basic hygiene services from 45 per cent in Namibia to 6 per cent in Burundi, Lesotho and South Sudan⁴.

There are wider critical challenges in the region that hugely impact on progress, and which reinforce, the need for improved WASH services (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Right: UNICEF's East and Southern Africa context



1 UN Water, 2021, [Summary Progress: Update 2021: SDG 6- water and sanitation for all](#)

2 UN Water, 2023, [Blueprint for Acceleration: Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report on Water and Sanitation 2023](#)

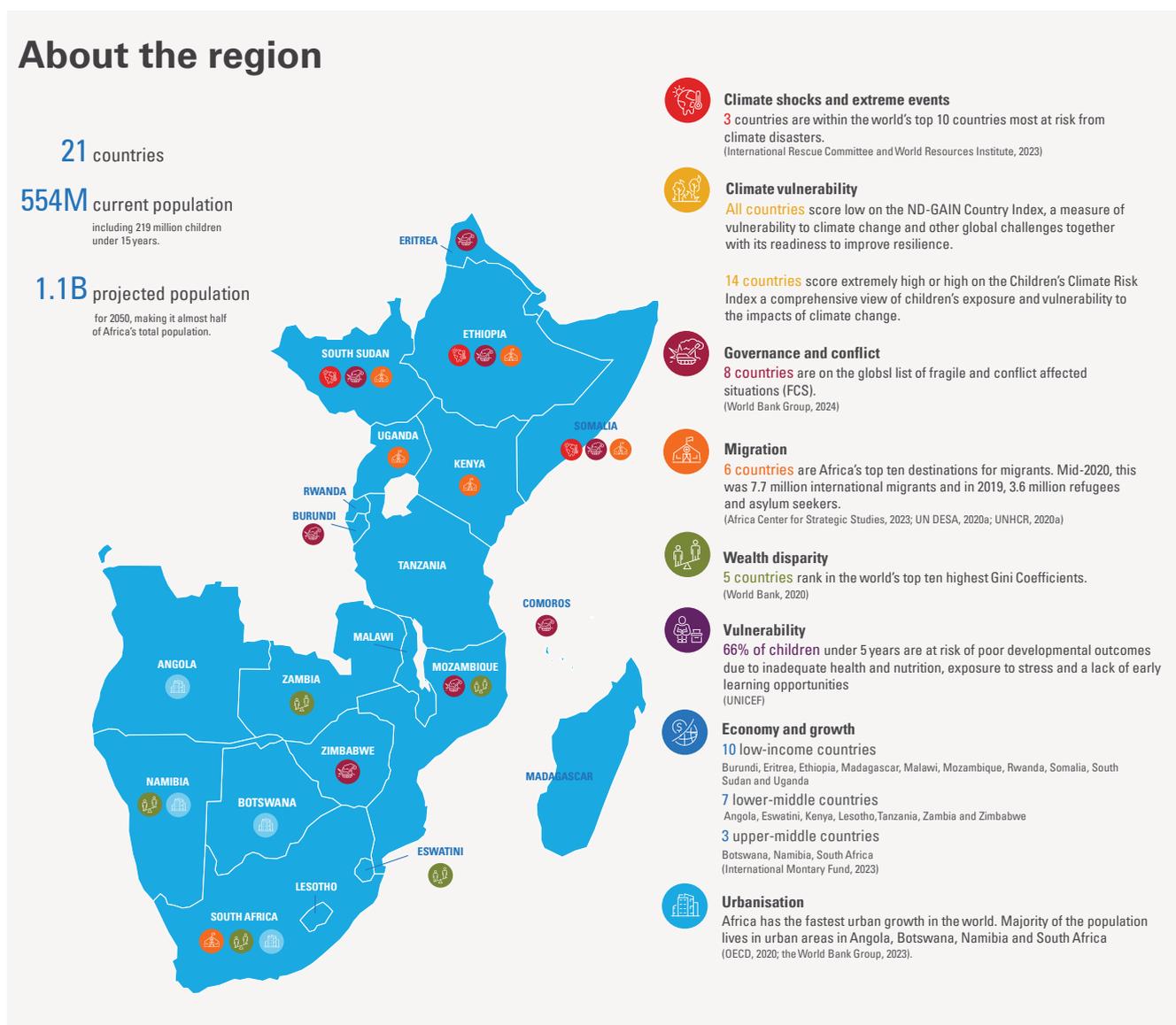
3 UNICEF, 2021, [Understanding Monitoring for SDG 6 Across Eastern and Southern Africa: An Executive Brief](#)

4 UNICEF and WHO JMP, 2023, WASH Data Dashboard

The numbers of Forcibly Displaced People in the Eastern and Southern African region (refugees that cross international borders, and internally displaced people) linked to conflicts and climate stress including drought, reached 18 million in 2021 and 2022⁵. Conflict in some areas within the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya) has led to already displaced people having to move several times again.

The region is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the impacts of climate change. Climate change has a disproportionate impact on children in Africa, a region that has contributed minimally to global carbon emissions⁶. In the Horn of Africa, over 20 million people and at least 10 million children faced severe drought conditions from 2021 to May 2023. The Horn has suffered an unprecedented drought, the worst

in 40 years, with five successive failed rainy seasons which have destroyed the livelihoods of millions of people through the loss of livestock and crops, displaced populations, increased the risk of disease and malnutrition, and pushed children and families to the brink of destitution and death. Early 2023 heavy rains offered temporary relief but at the same time led to floods in historically parched areas, causing displacement and heightened risk of waterborne diseases. There has been an increase in storms linked to higher energy levels in the Indian ocean, with severe cyclones leading to increased damage across East and Southern Africa and increasing levels of mortality due to flooding. High rainfall also led to the worst locust outbreak in over 25 years in the region.



5 UNHCR, 2023, Refugee Data Finder

6 UNICEF, 2023 Time to Act: African Children in the Climate Change Spotlight

Water, sanitation and hygiene services and practices

In 2022 alone, UNICEF programmes across the region supported 14.3 million people with water services. This included reaching five million people with emergency solutions, while durable, lasting services could be developed for a further 9.3 million people⁷. The distance between Cape Town and Asmara is 8,000 km - the challenges and needs vary enormously. UNICEF country programmes work on systems strengthening activities to support water, sanitation and hygiene services in each country according to local contexts working with national governments and other partners.

Lifesaving and humanitarian interventions in water, sanitation and hygiene are a key priority for UNICEF, and UNICEF serves as the WASH cluster lead in all countries when emergencies occur. Wars and civil conflicts in Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan, and insurgencies that have affected parts of Kenya, Mozambique, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda have demanded extensive emergency WASH interventions to support communities. Two thirds of the emergency support was in the Horn of Africa in 2022 responding to major disease outbreaks, and the effects of extreme climate events (Box 2).

Box 2: Responding to drought and climate change in the Horn of Africa

The 2022 emergency response in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia included restoring services from existing water facilities as well as drilling new boreholes in strategic locations. In Somalia and Ethiopia, this sought to reduce demands for costly water trucking. Hygiene promotion accompanied the targeted distribution of hygiene kits, water purification tablets and jerrycans to displaced populations and the most at risk groups. Another key intervention was to ensure safe water supply at health and education facilities. Medium to long-term climate resilient WASH strategies are followed in the region by UNICEF working towards water security and safety for all, at all times of the year.

Source: [UNICEF Regional Call To Action: Horn of Africa Drought Crisis, July 2022](#)

Unfortunately, many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) do not quickly return to their homes. The long-term crises and conflicts in the region mean that some refugees stay for decades. While short-term emergency focused water supply and sanitation is effective and lifesaving, it is costly and difficult to sustain. New approaches are needed to sustain, improve and reduce the costs of water supply and sanitation in such contexts (Box 3).

Box 3: Utility models to serve long-term refugee and host communities in Ethiopia

Under different phases of water supply in Itang (Gambella Region, Ethiopia) it has been possible to both improve service levels and reduce costs through a mix of infrastructure and system strengthening interventions. This has involved a shift over time from trucking water to pumping powered by diesel and more recently the electric grid and solar power, while strengthening the capacity of the local utility to supply refugee camps and host communities. Under its R-WASH programme (Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan) UNICEF and UNHCR work on models for increasing efficiencies in water service provision, strengthening social justice through integrated service provision for refugee and host community populations. The programme aims to build institutional capacity of utilities, strengthen utility financial performance, support changes in tariff setting and billing systems, improve efficiencies through developing best practice on operation and maintenance, reduce non-revenue water, and ensure equitable distribution of water to reach the most vulnerable groups.

The region is also home to countries that are stable and developing rapidly. UNICEF country WASH programmes seek to adapt and help countries work towards safely managed services demanded by the Sustainable Development Goals. In Tanzania for example, taking advantage of such a context, UNICEF has been able to switch its programming to implement through government structures rather than NGOs (Box 4).

⁷ UNICEF Regional Call To Action: Horn of Africa Drought Crisis, July 2022



Box 4: Learning and going faster in Tanzania towards sanitation and hygiene targets

UNICEF's recent work in Tanzania on sanitation and hygiene started in four regions in southern Tanzania where stunting was high and there were high levels of HIV/AIDS prevalence. WASH indicators were also poor. Activities were implemented via partners and often got good results while covering relatively small populations. Getting to scale was the challenge. An internal review reflected on the support UNICEF provided to government and further possible strategies and activities to strengthen their capacity and capabilities. This led to a transition in UNICEF's programming focused on working with the government on rapid achievement of their S&H targets, with UNICEF taking on a supporting role involving activities like technical assistance (TA) and supporting convening of partners. In Iringa, a regional compact was developed with political buy-in as well as administrative engagement from government across all levels. Accountabilities were set out and followed up by regions. Leadership and ownership are firmly with government.

Source: Frank Odhiambo, Chief WASH, UNICEF Tanzania

People and businesses need water for multiple uses. It is important to meet demand and help cost recovery and sustainability, for infrastructure and management models to do more than supply a limited volume of safe drinking water for domestic use. In pastoral

areas, water supply for livestock is a critical priority for households. Small-scale gardening as well as livestock can be important uses of water from household and community water supplies, supporting local production, nutrition, and incomes. At the same time, waste collected and processed in sanitation systems are increasingly recognised as a potential productive resource. The importance of nutrition to UNICEF, and the fact that water is central to food systems that influence the diets of children, drives a wider interest in agriculture, production, and water security at the basin scale (Box 5).

Box 5: Scaling up nutrition in Zambia

UNICEF's Scaling Up Nutrition (Sun) programme in Zambia has focused on providing safe water, with key benefits as time savings that enable women to focus on gardening and productivity, rather than collecting water from distant wells.

Source: Kawanu, M. [Safe water to scale up nutrition in Zambia](#), 2021, UNICEF

In all contexts, UNICEF seeks to ensure universal access to WASH services which means identifying and targeting the most marginalised groups within societies. Although high levels of urbanisation are often associated with economic growth and development, this is one example where UNICEF works to ensure that services are inclusive (Box 6). Sub-Saharan Africa is the most rapidly urbanising part of the world, with most children and youth expected to live in urban rather than rural areas by 2050. A review of deprivation within secondary cities in sub-Saharan cities showed

poor WASH services as one of the four key concerns alongside unemployment, health and housing⁸. Services are often way below the norms that are expected⁹.

Box 6: Building urban resilience in Zimbabwe

Under the Partnership for Building Urban Resilience in Zimbabwe programme UNDP and UNICEF are developing an urban resilience model in selected towns as well as generating evidence and knowledge to strengthen urban resilience in the country. Recent highlights have included expanding the Solar for Health initiative to more health facilities as well as improving access to safe water at hospitals by drilling new boreholes.

Source: [UNDP in Zimbabwe, 2022 in Review](#)

The root causes of underlying problems in water supply or sanitation may lie a long way away from a tap or toilet and its user. Global climate change is one example. But its effects are felt locally and can be severe. Making water and sanitation services more climate resilient demands new technologies such as solar pumping which helps ensure that water and sanitation interventions help mitigate climate change, but adaptation is often the necessary focus. One way in which UNICEF has been supporting governments in the Horn of Africa to adapt to climate change is through better understanding of the groundwater resources that lie beneath the region (Box 7). Groundwater is naturally buffered from some climate variation and is an incredibly precious resource if it can be found and sustainably utilised. But depths to water can be great and development is both costly and risky.

Box 7: Mapping water under the ground

In Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya UNICEF has been deploying the latest scientific technologies and developing local capacities for the sustainable development of groundwater resources. Better groundwater maps mean fewer dry boreholes and more high performing and climate-resilient water facilities for communities. More than 100 woredas (districts) in Ethiopia have been mapped, with deep well drilling success rates rising from 40-50 per cent to over 90 per cent in drought-prone lowland parts of the country.

Source: [Groundwater management systems in the Horn of Africa \(HoA\) Factsheet \(forthcoming\)](#).

UNICEF identifies changing behaviour and social norms to end open defecation, improve hygiene practices and promote drinking water safety, as essential to making and sustaining progress ([UNICEF, 2015](#)). Behaviour change is not, however, the end point. Of equal importance are robust local markets with adequate supply chains to ensure that newly demanded goods and services are available and incremental improvements are sustained (Box 8). UNICEF initiated a first of its kind hand hygiene market assessment study in Eswatini and Lesotho to accelerate access to hand hygiene in the two countries.

Box 8: Hand hygiene markets in Lesotho and Eswatini

An assessment of hand hygiene markets in Lesotho and Eswatini showed that a key issue that holds everything together for both consumers and producers is quality standards. Lack of local standards is identified as a key constraint for local producers and innovators. Coordination by government agencies and ministries is also an essential part of building policies that will accelerate private sector activities in hand hygiene products. It has become clear from the study that private sector collaborations will be key to unlocking many opportunities, such as value chain creation and collection bargaining with foreign suppliers of raw materials.

Source: [UNICEF, 2022, An Assessment of Hand Hygiene Markets in Lesotho and Eswatini](#).



⁸ UNICEF and UN Habitat, 2020, [Analysis of Multiple Deprivations in Secondary Cities](#)

⁹ Adank, M. 2016, [Looking beyond headline indicators: Water and sanitation services in small towns in Ethiopia](#)

WASH systems strengthening

UNICEF's work in strengthening systems is increasing. This is important as it emphasises scale and sustainability, and it is a necessary complement to programming that is more directly focused on rapid gains in service delivery. It is vital to supporting national governments and their partners and long-term progress. Five key areas are highlighted in the enabling environment framework that UNICEF uses as a guide for planning systems strengthening activities.

Policy and strategy

Supporting the evolution of national policies and strategies is a key activity in most countries across the region. Working closely with governments, UNICEF can draw upon their experience across countries in the region to provide support that is informed from similar contexts. A new challenge is to adjust water, sanitation and hygiene work in the face of the climate crisis. Development of a climate rationale for WASH is a key priority in nearly all contexts. Within this it is impossible for the sector to effectively engage and influence the wider domains where climate policy and strategies are being developed.

The highest level of political commitment to prioritise WASH is also likely to be vital for a step change in effort, following examples as countries like India and Nigeria. Tanzania, Malawi, Uganda and Ethiopia are four of the countries that have recently made commitments to promote WASH at the highest levels of government. These countries are all working to develop compacts under the Heads of State Initiatives with the Sanitation and Water for All partnership, a multi-stakeholder partnership that is hosted by UNICEF¹⁰.

Institutional arrangements

Strengthening water and sanitation service providers, and the service authorities that provide the enabling environment at local to national levels is vital for sustainable services, even in fragile settings (Box 9). UNICEF uses an established suite of tools and approaches from the WASH Bottleneck Analysis Tool (WASH BAT) to Sector-Wide Sustainability Checks (SWSCs) to guide their institutional support in the region. The One WASH National Program (OWNP) in Ethiopia is a good example of what can be achieved when national ministries align with the coordinated support of development partners. Here UNICEF has contributed to a national consolidated WASH account while supporting the development of new and improved

institutional arrangements. These include steps towards development of a national regulator (including through South-South learning) and the development of new rural water supply utilities. Working across institutional boundaries is always important in WASH where many actors are critical, and support to coordination and multi-stakeholder platforms under government is supported in many countries in the region.

Box 9: Systems strengthening in fragile contexts: there is always a system

In fragile contexts, systems strengthening approaches need to be adapted. The WASH Triple Nexus (Humanitarian, Development, Peace) approach provides one framework that UNICEF applies in fragile settings, including recently in Ethiopia. By 2022, there were 2.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 18.7 million people in nutritional need across the country. UNICEF worked with government and 70 partners organised through eight regional coordination hubs. A systems approach in this context means covering the whole spectrum from prevention to peace building. There is a particular gap identified for response mechanisms and funding facilities that bridge the nexus between emergency and development.

Source: Verstraete, L., 2022. System building in fragile contexts across the WASH, humanitarian development, and peace triple nexus. Presentation to All Systems Go Africa symposium, 19-21 Oct 2022

Sector financing

One of the key priorities highlighted by the UN Secretary General to accelerate the Water Action Agenda was massively investing in water and sanitation systems. Globally, WASH spending must increase threefold to meet SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2 by 2030, the cost of which is estimated at US\$114 billion per year in developing countries. Rapidly scaling up investment in the sector starts with using existing resources well. In the region, UNICEF has pioneered a new generation of national financing strategies that use the latest best practice to support countries to develop strategies in finance¹¹. Strategies have been developed already by governments in Malawi¹², Rwanda (Box 10) and Zimbabwe with UNICEF support and are underway in other countries. UNICEF is working with the

¹⁰ Government of the Netherlands, IRC WASH, SWA and UNICEF, 2022, Heads of State Initiatives | Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)

¹¹ UNICEF, How to Develop a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Finance Strategy

¹² Government of Malawi, 2022, Malawi Climate Resilient WASH Finance Strategy 2022-2032

Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) on the development of a Climate Finance Facility for Children through blended finance that will combine private and public finance including accessing Green Climate Fund funding (Box 10).

Box 10: Identifying and working to fill finance gaps in Rwanda

In Rwanda, The Ministry of Infrastructure developed a finance strategy for WASH that now integrates action to address climate change. The sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) finance strategy aims to support the Government of Rwanda (GoR) and all the stakeholders working in the WASH sector to set out approaches on how the WASH sector will finance its overall programmes and operations to meet the sector's objectives in the short- and medium-term. Specifically, options are set out to meet the financial gaps of reaching key targets in the National Strategy for Transformation (NTS1) 2017-2024; the Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) 2030; and the Rwanda Vision 2050 targets. The strategy highlights financial targets and the climate sensitive and strategic policy actions to be taken by the Government and other sector stakeholders including private sector, development partners, consumers, etc., to increase resources allocated to the WASH sector and maximise the efficient and effective use of public and private investments.

Planning, monitoring and review

UNICEF and WHO are jointly responsible for the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP)¹³ of SDG 6.1 and 6.2 which provides a global database of WASH services for all countries. The platform measures trends and progress towards achievement of the SDG targets and uses data from national sources. The JMP feeds into the ongoing development of the WASH Severity Classification, which aims to strengthen emergency preparedness and response. At country level, UNICEF country offices use their local presence and relationships to support a range of vital surveys and monitoring processes, working closely with national governments including their statistical offices, and on regional monitoring with AMCOW (see Box 11 for an example from Mozambique). This work often includes supporting Joint Sector Reviews which provide a critical moment for learning by all the water, sanitation and hygiene stakeholders in a country (Box 11).

Box 11: Strengthening national monitoring in Mozambique

The SINAS national monitoring initiative in Mozambique, led by the National Directorate of Water (DNA) provides a good example for the region under clear leadership and with strong ownership from government. A deep dive review revealed that many aspects are in place for enabling monitoring in the sector. There is a clear recognition of the need and the responsibilities, indicators are set and defined, standard surveys are present, reliable software and databases have been set up and staff throughout the government have been trained. In addition, there are ongoing investments in making data better available and enhancing capacity. UNICEF is continuing to support DNA and its partners to further strengthen the system.

Source: UNICEF, 2022, [Deep dive assessment and review of routine monitoring in the WASH Sector in Mozambique: Key challenges and opportunities](#)

Capacity building and knowledge management

Knowledge is the foundation of all UNICEF's programmes and advocacy work. It is therefore critical how knowledge is developed, managed and utilised in pursuit of the survival, development, and protection of the world's most vulnerable children (UNICEF, 2022).

A Knowledge Management (KM) mapping in 19 UNICEF African programme countries found that for KM to be prioritised, it is key that national governments and stakeholders realise that documentation, sharing and learning are critical to inform planning and decision-making around WASH programming at all levels (Box 12). This requires a broader understanding of KM as a crucial driver of systems change among national advocates of WASH systems (UNICEF, 2023). UNICEF also works with the Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance (GWOPA) on utility capacity building support in Ethiopia and plan to expand this work to other countries in the region.

13 UNICEF and WHO JMP, WASH Data Dashboard

Box 12: Knowledge management and training practices related to national WASH systems strengthening

In 2021-2022, a mapping exercise was undertaken to understand knowledge management and training practices related to national WASH systems strengthening in 19 UNICEF programme country offices and a limited number of sector partner operations in Africa. The assessment showed a lack of documentation and evidence was noted around the key building blocks of WASH systems, covering planning, monitoring and learning, and sector financing. Other gaps were noted around sustainability of WASH services, climate resilience and linkages between WASH and nutrition.

Source: UNICEF, 2023, [WASH Systems Strengthening in Africa: Knowledge and Capacity Mapping](#)

Summary

Building and maintaining effective partnerships is key to strengthening UNICEF's leadership role in the generation and exchange of WASH knowledge both nationally and globally (UNICEF, 2022).

In the ESARO region, UNICEF has a robust KM process through field notes and technical briefs that follow standard guidelines. Regular capacity building support is given to counterparts through work planning cycles, including participation to global events such as the Stockholm World Water Week and high-level meetings such as the Sanitation and Water for All Ministers meeting, sector conferences such as AfricaSan and symposia. Thematic webinars are also offered for staff and partners, for example around safely managed sanitation or online learning opportunities via the UNICEF Agora portal that offers free tailored learning solutions to UNICEF's staff, partners and supporters.

- **Learning and adaptation is vital** given the need to accelerate progress in building the national systems that can sustainably deliver water, sanitation and hygiene services.
- **All countries in the region are off-track** to achieve SDG 6 targets (except Botswana in water). It is critical to do more, with an urgent need to establish functional national WASH MIS systems for quality data and to track progress.
- **Risks are increasing** with climate change adding to already high levels of vulnerability

The diversity of contexts across the 21 countries in the Eastern and Southern African region provide great opportunities for learning on how to do better and go faster in supporting countries and their governments in delivering water, sanitation and hygiene. The contexts are very different and sub-regions face different challenges.

Further information

Some key global documents on UNICEF's work in WASH

Progress on Sanitation and Hygiene in Africa 2000-2022 provides a regional snapshot from the WHO/ UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) and the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS)

UNICEF Sustainability and Climate Change Action Plan 2023-2030 outlines UNICEF's response and focus areas for action and partnerships

UNICEF Strategy for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene 2016-2030 is designed to inform and support UNICEF's core planning and strategy processes, and to guide implementation of programmes.

UNICEF Game Plan to Reach Safely Managed Sanitation 2022-2030 aims to help governments achieve safely managed sanitation for their populations, and meet the sanitation target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

WASH in the new UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 sets out the global, concrete results that UNICEF aims to achieve for children.

UNICEF WASH Annual Publication Catalogue 2022 lists and summarises the main purposes of the reports and publications carried out by UNICEF between January and December 2022.

Introducing finance for sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene systems is a free online course by UNICEF, IRC and Water For People as part of the Partnership for WASH Systems in Africa

Contact

For further information on UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene work in the East and Southern Africa region please contact UNICEF country offices, or the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional office in Nairobi.

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