



2026 United Nations Water Conference

Switzerland's Input to the Concept Paper for Interactive Dialogue (a):

“Water for people: the human rights to water and sanitation, including for those in vulnerable situations, for healthy societies and economies”

Introduction

Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is universally recognized as a **fundamental human right and a cornerstone of public health, peace, and sustainable development**. Delivering on the targets of SDG 6 is essential for individual well-being and for building resilient, inclusive, and prosperous societies. As highlighted in the 2018 and 2023 UN-Water Synthesis Reports, SDG 6 serves as a “**blue thread**” that runs through all other SDGs, underscoring its foundational role in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

Integrating WASH into broader development agendas is increasingly seen as vital, given its strong linkages with education, gender equality, climate resilience, food security, peacebuilding, and poverty reduction. **Applied research and innovation**, driven by academic institutions, development actors, and local stakeholders, play a key role in shaping effective policies and practices across all levels.

To meet current and future challenges, WASH must evolve beyond basic service delivery toward **systemic transformation**. Scalable, **inclusive, and climate-resilient solutions** are needed, with **youth engagement** emerging as a powerful force in driving innovation and sustainability.

Ensuring **access for marginalized populations, including those in humanitarian settings**, remains a central priority. Inclusive, cross-sectoral approaches that connect water, health, agriculture, peace, and environmental sustainability are essential to leaving no one behind.

Accelerating progress toward SDG 6 requires **strong political commitment, institutional capacity, and increased financing**. A collective push for collaboration, innovation, and accountability is needed to close persistent gaps and ensure universal access to safe water and sanitation.

Status and Trends

Challenges

Persistent Access Gaps: Globally, 2.2 billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and 3.5 billion lack safely managed sanitation. In fragile contexts, access is significantly lower. Recent research suggests these figures may underestimate the true scale of the challenge, particularly regarding water quality and safety standards.

Urbanization and Climate Pressures: Rapid urbanization is straining WASH systems, especially in informal settlements. By 2030, 39% of urban areas will face high-frequency flooding, and 27% will be in drylands, highlighting the need for climate-resilient WASH solutions. Glacial melt and erratic water cycles are intensifying water insecurity, with disproportionate impacts on marginalized populations.

Hygiene and Menstrual Health: Hygiene, particularly menstrual health, remains critically underrepresented in global WASH discourse and programming. This neglect perpetuates gender-based disparities and limits the ability of women and girls to participate fully in education, work, and community life.

Water Under Fire: In conflict zones, water systems are increasingly targeted. Children in armed conflicts are 20 times more likely to die from water-borne diseases than from bullets, highlighting the devastating consequences of disrupted WASH services. Yet, the humanitarian WASH sector receives only one-third of the funding it requires, with further reductions anticipated, threatening the survival and dignity of millions.

Trends and Opportunities

Innovation and Circular WASH Systems: Meeting future WASH challenges requires a shift from conventional service delivery to innovative, circular approaches. Water reuse, nutrient recovery, and decentralized wastewater treatment are essential for climate resilience and resource efficiency. These solutions reduce environmental impact while creating opportunities for local value chains and sustainable livelihoods.

Digital Innovation and Market-Driven Solutions: Digital technologies and market-based approaches are transforming WASH. AI, smart sensors, and mobile platforms enable real-time monitoring, predictive maintenance, and targeted hygiene education, improving service reliability. Meanwhile, innovative service models and private sector engagement are delivering scalable, locally adapted solutions that go beyond short-term aid. These approaches foster accountability and empower communities to co-create resilient systems.

Catalyzing Funding for WASH Transformation: Achieving SDG 6 requires tripling current investment levels, yet financing remains a major bottleneck. Innovative mechanisms, including blended finance, and catalytic funding through multistakeholder platforms and MDB trust funds offer promising pathways. But efficient resource allocation, transparent budget execution, and results-based financing are equally vital to ensure sustainable impact. Strengthening national systems to manage and absorb funding is essential to scale WASH services and close equity gaps.

Challenges and Emerging Issues

Urbanization and Informal Settlements: Rapid urban growth is placing immense pressure on WASH systems, particularly in informal settlements where infrastructure is often inadequate or absent. Integrated urban planning is essential to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation in underserved areas. At the same time, rural communities face unique challenges such as limited infrastructure, technical capacity, and financing that deepen the rural–urban divide and hinder universal WASH access.

Institutional Capacity and Limitations: Local authorities and utilities frequently lack the technical expertise, financial resources, and operational capacity to deliver and sustain effective WASH services. This results in uneven coverage, poor service quality, and limited resilience.

Financing Shortfalls: Many countries struggle to secure reliable, long-term funding for WASH infrastructure. Limited household affordability and insufficient public investment continue to hinder progress, especially in low-income and fragile contexts.

Sustainability Challenges: Maintaining water and sanitation services beyond initial implementation remains difficult, particularly in remote and conflict-affected areas. Weak operation and maintenance systems, lack of monitoring, and limited supply chains and repair capacity undermine long-term functionality.

Climate and Conflict Pressures: Increasingly erratic weather patterns such as floods, droughts, and glacial melt are disrupting water access and damaging infrastructure. Armed conflict further exacerbates vulnerabilities, with deliberate attacks on water systems deepening humanitarian crises.

Persistent Inequities: Disadvantaged populations, including those in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), rural and indigenous communities, women, girls, and people with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers to accessing safe water and sanitation. These inequities are deepened by geographic, economic, and social exclusion, with rural communities often experiencing wider service gaps and lower investment than urban areas, reinforcing the rural–urban divide.

Fragmented Integration: WASH remains insufficiently integrated with key sectors such as solid waste management, health, energy, agriculture, and urban planning. For example, electricity access is essential for WASH services in healthcare facilities yet planning and investment often occur in silos.

Fragmented Health Integration: Despite WASH's critical role in public health, its integration with health systems, such as maternal care, nutrition, and disease surveillance remains limited. Strengthening these linkages is vital for improving health outcomes and service efficiency.

Water Quality Challenges: Persistent pollutants, including PFAS, agricultural runoff, and industrial effluents, combined with aging infrastructure and weak regulatory enforcement, threaten water safety. Climate-driven contamination and limited access to treatment systems further complicate efforts to ensure safe water.

Fragmented Groundwater Governance: Although groundwater and surface water are inherently connected, governance structures often treat them separately. This fragmentation leads to unreliable data on water availability and consumption, undermining effective resource management and planning.

Solutions

Strengthen Local Systems and Ensure Sustainability: Transitioning from aid dependency to sustainable service delivery requires robust, government-led strategies. Building local capacity, through training of technicians, operators, and administrators, is essential for long-term functionality. Fit-for-purpose solutions, combined with inclusive tariff systems, can balance affordability with financial sustainability. Local monitoring and maintenance structures must be reinforced to ensure continuity, especially in remote and fragile areas.

Improve Financing Models and Resource Efficiency: Achieving universal WASH access demands innovative financing approaches. Blended finance, results-based funding, and catalytic instruments can mobilize diverse capital sources. Tying financial support to measurable outcomes like coverage, functionality, and equity enhances accountability. Efficient resource allocation and transparent budget execution are critical to maximizing impact.

Leverage Technology and Promote Innovation: Digital tools, including mobile apps, remote sensors, and AI, enable real-time monitoring of water quality, infrastructure health, and service performance. Frugal innovations such as low-cost chlorination and decentralized sludge treatment offer scalable, resource-efficient solutions. Sustainable treatment technologies, like green chemicals, biological systems, and zero-liquid discharge, can reduce environmental impact and improve water safety. Desalination, especially when integrated with renewable energy sources, represents a scalable innovation for regions facing freshwater scarcity.

Promote Climate-Resilient and Circular WASH Systems: Nature-based infrastructure, such as wetlands and rainwater harvesting, combined with reuse systems, can reduce demand and enhance resilience. Climate-adaptive designs, like flood-resilient latrines and decentralized treatment, support circularity and help communities withstand extreme weather events.

Advance Equity, Inclusion, and Community Leadership: WASH services must be tailored to meet diverse needs, particularly for women, girls, and people with disabilities. Empowering communities to lead planning, oversight, and decision-making fosters ownership and drives more equitable outcomes. Inclusive design and participatory governance are key to leaving no one behind. Indigenous communities must be recognized as key partners, with their traditional knowledge and rights respected in WASH planning and governance.

Youth at the Forefront of Accelerating Progress: Young professionals are uniquely positioned to drive transformative change in the WASH sector. Their digital fluency, disruptive thinking, and impetus for action can accelerate progress toward SDG 6 at the local level, while influencing regional and global movements. Investments in youth-led initiatives, capacity building, and training for local technicians and operators will ensure a resilient, skilled next generation of WASH professionals and innovators. These efforts must go hand-in-hand with talent retention, meaningful employment opportunities, and long-term career pathways in the WASH sector.

Promote Evidence-Based Approaches and Integrated Planning: Data-driven decision-making and applied research are essential for improving WASH services and outcomes. WASH must also be embedded within broader urban development strategies, including housing, solid waste management, and environmental protection. Integrated planning ensures coherence across sectors and enhances the sustainability of urban WASH services.

Examples of Impactful Initiatives

Sanitation and Hygiene Fund (SHF): Global financing platform that accelerates access to sanitation, hygiene, and menstrual health through blended finance, results-based funding, and inclusive partnerships, targeting underserved populations and strengthening scalable national systems.

WASH Agenda for Change: Global coalition of organizations committed to strengthening WASH systems through district-wide, government-led approaches. It promotes long-term, sustainable service delivery by aligning efforts with national policies, building local capacity, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

UNICEF Sustainable WASH Innovation Hub: Platform and programmatic initiative that accelerates climate-resilient water and sanitation solutions by scaling technologies like Managed Aquifer Recharge and satellite-based groundwater mapping in drought-prone and fragile regions.

Global Youth Movement for Water: A youth-led initiative that was launched at the 9th World Water Forum in Dakar and actively contributed to the UN 2023 Water Conference. It unites 250+ global and local organizations to amplify youth voices, influence decision-making, and drive grassroots action through capacity building, seed funding, and mentorship for scalable youth-led WASH innovations.

Water, Behaviour Change, and Environmental Sanitation (WABES): This transdisciplinary research initiative aims to generate and validate new knowledge that can be directly applied to improve WASH and solid waste management outcomes in underserved settings. By combining evidence-based approaches, community engagement, knowledge brokerage and cross-sectoral collaboration, WABES strengthens service provision, equity, and sustainability.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Integrate Climate Resilience: Embed adaptive infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and risk assessments into WASH planning to ensure systems can withstand climate shocks. Post-SDG strategies must prioritize climate-resilient WASH measures that protect vulnerable communities and safeguard long-term service continuity.

Mobilize Inclusive and Innovative Financing: Blend public, private, and philanthropic capital while ensuring affordability and accessibility for marginalized populations. Financing frameworks should include dedicated funding streams for youth-led startups and community-based climate-resilient WASH initiatives, enabling early-stage innovation and local ownership.

Promote Policy Coherence and Future-Oriented Planning: Align WASH policies with national development plans, regional frameworks, and post-SDG agendas to ensure consistency, sustainability, and long-term impact. Youth must be actively involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these frameworks to ensure accountability and relevance for future generations.

Foster Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: Strengthen collaboration across sectors, including research institutions, youth networks, civil society, and local governments to co-create solutions and scale impact. Partnerships should be inclusive and action-oriented, leveraging diverse expertise and community engagement.

Advance Conflict-Sensitive and Inclusive Governance: Address water-related conflicts through shared governance models, peacebuilding efforts, and inclusive decision-making. Special attention must be given to fragile and conflict-affected settings, where equitable access and protection of water infrastructure are critical to survival and stability.

Guiding Questions

- What strategies best address equity, sustainability, and scalability in the water sector?
- What is needed at policy, institutional, and operational levels to integrate WASH with other sectors (health, education, energy, agriculture, urban planning)?
- How can affected communities effectively be engaged in water-related service chains, governance, and decision-making?
- What financing models and innovations are most effective for resilient, inclusive WASH services?
- How can WASH responses in emergencies be linked to long-term development and peacebuilding?