



39<sup>th</sup> African Union Heads of State and Government Summit  
14-15 February 2026 – Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

# **Africa's Year of Water and Sanitation 'Turning commitments into action for the hundreds of millions still without water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)'**

## **Introduction**

Africa has made some progress towards achieving the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene targets of the continent. African Union Member States have demonstrated growing political commitment to water and sanitation through several continental declarations, national reforms, the recent one being the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy (AWVP63) aligned to the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063.

The endorsement of the Heads of State Initiative (HOSI) by several AU Member States further underscores recognition of WASH as a strategic priority for health security, climate resilience, and economic transformation. The declaration of 2026 as Africa's Year of Water and Sanitation provides a timely opportunity to consolidate this momentum and accelerate implementation.

Despite these commitments, progress remains slow and uneven, with hundreds of millions of Africans still lacking access to basic WASH services. This Call to Action urges the AU Commission and African Heads of State and Governments to translate the political commitments into sustained financing and measurable results, positioning WASH as a core driver of Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 6.



**Rihanata, 13,  
collecting drinking  
water with a cup  
at the school tap.  
Burkina Faso,  
March 2025.**

WaterAid/Basile Ouedraogo

# Why WASH matters now

- ➔ **418 million** people in sub-Saharan Africa lack basic drinking water.<sup>i</sup>
- ➔ **779 million** lack basic sanitation.<sup>i</sup>
- ➔ **839 million** lack basic hygiene services.<sup>i</sup>

These gaps are especially most severe in healthcare facilities and schools, directly affecting patient safety, learning outcomes, and long-term human capital development.

The declaration of the year 2026 as the AU Year of Water and Sanitation creates a time-bound window for Member States to elevate WASH to the highest political level, mobilise domestic and blended financing at scale, and integrate WASH into health, climate, and economic development strategies.

This moment coincides with escalating climate shocks, recurrent cholera outbreaks, rising antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and persistent maternal and newborn mortality linked to poor WASH. Without decisive action, Africa risks entering the next decade with structural WASH deficits that will undermine health security, climate resilience, human capital and economic growth.

# Key issues slowing WASH progress

## A persistent financing gap

WASH remains chronically underfunded and underfinanced. To achieve SDG 6, Africa requires spending of at least US\$78 billion annually by 2030, yet current spending is estimated at only US\$4.6 billion per year, requiring a 17-fold increase from current levels.<sup>ii</sup> National budget allocations are often insufficient and unpredictable, donor financing remains short-term, and private finance has yet to reach scale. In many countries, growing debt service burdens are constraining fiscal room still further.

## WASH not treated as a core health system investment

Underinvestment in WASH is directly costing lives and straining health systems. Over one million women and newborns die each year from preventable infections linked to poor WASH, while healthcare-associated infections account for an estimated 22% of in-hospital deaths in Africa.<sup>iii</sup>

WASH is foundational to infection prevention and control (IPC), AMR containment, maternal and newborn health, and pandemic preparedness. Improving hand hygiene in health care settings represents an excellent return on investment. According to WHO report, every 1 USD invested to improve hand hygiene can generate 24.6 USD in economic gain.<sup>iv</sup> Without reliable WASH services, gains in universal health coverage and health security cannot be sustained.

## WASH as a strategic investment in climate and economic resilience

Climate change is intensifying droughts, floods and disease outbreaks across Africa, and the first impacts are human disproportionately impacting low-income and marginalised communities. These impacts include higher rates of mortality, interrupted schooling, increased care burdens on women and girls, and loss of safety and dignity when services fail. High climate vulnerable countries already experience disaster mortality up to fifteen times higher than low vulnerability countries, underscoring the scale of risk to lives and livelihoods.<sup>v</sup>

These human costs are compounded and exacerbated by economic costs. Repeated damage to water and sanitation

infrastructure, service disruptions and surges in diseases like cholera drive up healthcare spending and reduce productivity, diverting scarce public funds to emergency response rather than prevention.

Investing in climate resilient WASH delivery strong returns: every US\$1 invested generates at least US\$7 in economic benefits with major gains for women, children.<sup>vi</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa alone, sufficient investment could unlock returns over 5% of GDP, equivalent to US\$200 billion annually.<sup>vii</sup> Prioritising climate resilient WASH now is essential to safeguard lives, protect human rights and support long-term stability and growth across the continent.

## What we seek from the AU Year of Water

From the 2026 AU Heads of State Summit and the Year of Water, we seek clear political signals that WASH is a top-tier development, health, and climate priority; concrete financing commitments reflected in national budgets; presidential leadership through HOSI; time-bound national roadmaps, particularly for healthcare facilities; and institutionalised accountability through National WASH Accounts.

# Key recommendations to the African Union and Heads of State

Africa has made strong political commitments through the 2008 Sharm El Sheikh AU Heads of States declaration for accelerating the achievement of water and sanitation goals, the 2015 Ngor declaration on sanitation and hygiene, and the 2016 Dar es Salaam Roadmap for Achieving the N'gor Commitments on Water Security and Sanitation in Africa, commits to establishing and tracking sanitation and hygiene budget lines that consistently increase to reach a minimum of 0.5% GDP by 2020.

This requires allocating at least a 5% of national budgets to water, sanitation and hygiene. The core challenge now is **action on implementation, financing and accountability**. The Year of Water must therefore **prioritise presidential leadership, domestic resource mobilisation, and institutionalised accountability**.

As the Heads of States and Governments convene for the 39th Ordinary Session of the African Union from 14-15 February 2026, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,

**Devota Byukusenge, 28, mid-wife, opening a non-functioning water tap in the labour ward to show the water scarcity conditions in the maternity and labour ward, Mwogo Health Centre, Rwanda, October 2022..**

## We call on the African Union Commission to:

- To endorse the new Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy (AWVP63) to elevate WASH as a Head-of-State priority, explicitly positioning it as a whole-of-government issue linked to health, climate resilience, and economic development, including in the AU common position for the UN Water Conference.
- Drive WASH in healthcare facilities at scale by supporting Member States to develop costed, Cabinet-endorsed national roadmaps, with ring-fenced health budget allocations and inclusion of WASH in external financing proposals.



## We further call on the African Heads of State to:

- Increase domestic WASH financing by progressively allocating at least 5% of national budgets to water, sanitation and hygiene.
- As committed in previous AU declarations Similarly, track sanitation and hygiene budget lines and increase them to reach at least 0.5% of GDP.
- Treat WASH in healthcare facilities as a core health system investment, fully aligned with national health plans and Africa Centre for Disease Control (Africa-CDC) strategies.
- Champion leadership through the Heads of State Initiative (HOSI) by adopting presidential WASH compacts to unlock financing and accelerate SDG 6 achievements.
- Institutionalise accountability through National WASH Accounts, with clear budget lines, public tracking, and transparent reporting.
- Strengthen the WASH components of NDCs and NAPs and accelerate the financing and implementation of the priority WASH-adaptation actions they contain.
- Commit to high-level attendance and active participating in the process leading up to the United Nations Water Conference December 2026.

(L-R) Rachel, 12, and Merifa, 15, wash their hands with clean water from a tap at their school. Malawi. June 2024.



## Conclusion

The AU Year of Water 2026 must be a turning point. Africa has the evidence, policy frameworks, and solutions needed to achieve universal WASH access. What is required now is decisive leadership and sustained financing.

By converting political commitments into action, African Heads of State can protect public health, strengthen climate resilience, accelerate economic growth, and deliver on the African Water Vision 2063 and Policy, the AU Agenda 2063 and SDG 6.

WaterAid Pan-Africa stands ready to support AU institutions and Member States to operationalise these commitments and deliver equitable, sustainable WASH services for all.

### References

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- vii. Economist Impact (2023), *Harnessing the economic benefits of investment in water, sanitation and hygiene in Africa*.

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