

Reducing inequalities through universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene

Clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene are human rights, to which millions of people have their access denied. Lacking access stops people having an equal chance to be healthy, educated and financially secure. This violation both leads to and stems from growing inequalities that are holding back lives, nations and the entire development agenda. And leaders are doing too little, too slowly, to fix it.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can change this for everyone. Integrating efforts to address SDG 6 (on clean water and sanitation) and SDG 10 (on inequalities) can tackle the roots of people's inclusion in – or exclusion from – life-changing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.

By identifying and intervening in barriers to access resulting from income, location, gender, disability and other markers of discrimination, governments and partners can implement informed and inclusive WASH interventions. This is crucial to improve the health, education and economic opportunities of people living in poverty and facing discrimination.

As governments gather at the United Nations for the 2019 High Level Political Forum and the first-ever SDGs Summit, we urge governments and development actors to:



Prioritise 'reaching the furthest behind first'



Provide more equitable and inclusive financing for the 2030 Agenda



"It was very tough for me. It took me more than two hours to get a small bucket of water as I had to take a little break every few metres. For me, having taps in Antanetikelily village is the biggest change I have seen in my whole life for a rural village like ours."

Rafarasoia, 84, Madagascar



Reaching everyone, everywhere with WASH is critical to reduce inequalities and achieving the 2030 Agenda

Billions of people live and die in water and sanitation poverty – a direct result of decisions taken, or not taken, by those in power. People disadvantaged by discrimination and poverty are often the most likely to be affected by lack of access to WASH, which deepens the challenges they face to being healthy, educated and financially secure.

When public services are restricted or underfunded, the most marginalised people with the fewest resources are affected most; they are denied access to the services and interventions that are essential to transforming their lives. This locks in structural inequalities as the gaps between the richest and poorest groups grow.

Access to WASH is a marker of inequalities – among and within countries

The differences in access to WASH between the global North and global South are stark.

Of the 673 million people still practising open defecation, over half (382 million) live in Central and South Asia, and one third (204 million) in sub-Saharan Africa.¹ And 59% of the 144 million people still collecting drinking water from surface sources live in sub-Saharan Africa.

Constraints to public service provision in developing countries stem from governance and resource challenges, themselves often rooted in historical trajectories of colonisation, structural adjustment programmes and debt. Climate change compounds these problems, disproportionately affecting developing countries and the most vulnerable in those countries, who did little to cause it. Addressing the resulting inequalities (of economic and non-economic loss and damage, and decreased ability to recover³) requires a significant increase in international public finance and the transformation of international economic structures, to enable national governments to generate and spend greater domestic revenue.

Within countries, people are still excluded from WASH services or decision-making processes because of their ethnicity, race, nationality, language, religion, caste or location (such as remote village or urban slum). And within populations grouped along these lines, in communities and even households, inequalities in access to services and representation in WASH decision making are often greater for women and girls, people with disabilities, older people, LGBTQI people and people living with HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses. The effects of these deprivations are also more severe for these groups than others.



785 million people don't have clean water close to home.¹



2 billion people don't have a decent toilet of their own.¹



3 billion people lack good hygiene at home.²

1. WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2019). *Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2017 update and SDG Baselines*. Available at: <https://washdata.org/>.

2. United Nations Economic and Social Council (2018). *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General*. Available at: undocs.org/E/2018/64 (Accessed 13 May 2019).

3. Nazrul Islam S and Winkel J (2017). United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Climate Change and Social Inequality (DESA Working Paper No. 152)*. Available at: un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf (Accessed 13 May 2019).

For instance, threats to women from inadequate water and sanitation facilities – including the danger of attack while relieving themselves at night, sepsis in childbirth and increased risk of vaginal infections – tend to be worse than for men.

Income, both national and household, is the single most accurate predictor of access to services and decision-making power. Poverty and inequalities overlap and contribute to each other – people discriminated against on the basis of, for example, disability status, age or gender are more likely to also live in poverty. Governments and development actors must identify and address barriers to access and to the broader social, economic and political constraints that trap people in poverty and inequality. Resources and political priority should then be targeted to excluded groups, as part of efforts to achieve SDG 6, SDG 10 and the whole 2030 Agenda.

Case study: Madagascar

People with disabilities in Madagascar have disproportionately low access to WASH. Although the Government has developed a National Plan of Inclusion for People with Disabilities, which specifically references WASH access, its implementation has been limited.

We partnered with the Platform of the Federations of People with Disabilities in Madagascar (PFPH), a group of more than 300 associations working towards the inclusion and full participation of people with disabilities. Since 2012, together we have worked with excluded groups and local authorities to unblock challenges to implementing the accessibility standards.

We created a plan for capacity building, working with groups to encourage them to claim their rights, and supported local authorities to apply the standards. This grassroots, partnership approach addressed barriers to access and engaged a range of stakeholders to create spaces for people with disabilities to voice their perspectives.

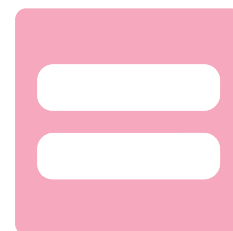
Increased access to WASH improves equality of opportunity and outcome

Access to WASH services improves lives, and can decrease the economic and social gaps between individuals and societal groups. With equitable, inclusive, affordable access to clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene:

- Women and girls are freed from collecting water and can spend more time in education, working or at leisure.
- Children can stay healthy, avoiding illnesses that damage their education and wellbeing in the long term.
- Communities are healthier, reducing the burden on women and girls (typically caregivers) to tend to sick relatives.
- Communities no longer have to pay a premium for privately run facilities, giving them a better chance to avoid debt and prosper.
- Older people and people with disabilities can be more independent and safer, no longer taking treacherous paths to reach water or a place to defecate.
- Workers in the informal sector, many of them women, can have their rights protected while earning a living. Increased service provision in public places throughout company supply chains means formal workers also have greater safety and dignity in the workplace.

Ensuring clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene for all is achievable. Strong leadership from national governments, in partnership with development actors, can fulfil the human rights denied to the billions of people left behind in poverty and marginalisation. As the final decade of the 2030 Agenda approaches, we must see concerted and integrated efforts to implement the SDGs for everyone, everywhere. If we do not, inequalities will persist and deepen along lines of income, geography, disability, gender and social group, and we will fail to reach SDG 6, SDG 10 and the whole 2030 Agenda.

Prioritising reaching the furthest behind first, through equitable and inclusive service provision and adequate financing, is fundamental to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Ambitious and wide-reaching efforts now can ensure the SDGs serve as a roadmap to improve the lives and wellbeing of everyone, everywhere – reducing inequalities, guaranteeing human rights and ending extreme poverty.



As governments gather at the UN for the 2019 High Level Political Forum and the first SDGs Summit, we urge governments and development partners to:

Prioritise reaching the furthest behind first by:

1. Increasing collection and dissemination of disaggregated data (by income, ethnicity, location, gender, disability, etc.), to better understand who lacks access and why.
2. Strengthening systems to deliver services and creating mechanisms for community feedback to design policies, technology and financing that fulfil the rights of excluded people.
3. Integrating policies and programmes related to SDG 6 and SDG 10, both among government ministries and through partnerships with multilateral agencies, civil society and the private sector.

Provide more equitable and inclusive financing for the 2030 Agenda by:

1. Substantially increasing international public assistance grants, at a minimum meeting agreed targets for official development assistance.
2. Strengthening domestic resource mobilisation through progressive taxation and increasing governments' share of gross domestic product (e.g. of profits from extractive industries), supporting this with capacity building and regulation at global level.
3. Prioritising funding for universal access to essential services, working with partners to ensure resources are effectively invested to guarantee affordable and sustainable services for people living in poverty and facing discrimination.

Find out more about WaterAid's contributions to the SDGs – and messaging for the High Level Political Forum – at washmatters.wateraid.org/HLPF

 @wateraid

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WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.

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