

United Nations World Water Development Report 2019

‘Leaving no one behind’

Main Messages

Improved water resources management and access to safe water and sanitation for all is essential for eradicating poverty, building peaceful and prosperous societies, and ensuring that ‘no one is left behind’ on the path towards sustainable development.

These goals are entirely achievable, provided exclusion and inequality are addressed in both policy and practice. Otherwise, water interventions will fail to reach those most in need and who are likely to benefit most.

Billions are being left behind

Access to safe, affordable and reliable drinking water and sanitation services are basic human rights.

Billions still lack safe water and sanitation facilities, and people are being left behind for reasons related to their gender, ethnicity, culture and/or socioeconomic status, among others. Exclusion, discrimination, entrenched power asymmetries, poverty and material inequalities are among the main obstacles to fulfilling the human rights to water and sanitation and achieving the water-related goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The wealthy generally receive high levels of service at very low price, while the poor often pay a much higher price for services of similar or lesser quality.

Rapid urbanization means that pockets of slum areas will continue to emerge. People living in informal settlements (‘slums’) with no formal physical address are regularly excluded from reticulated water and sanitation networks and therefore must rely on (usually more costly) alternatives, such as water vendors. While larger centralized water and sanitation systems provide opportunities for resource-sharing and economies of scale in high-density urban communities, less costly decentralized systems have been shown to be successful in smaller urban settlements. The basic principle in terms of selecting the most appropriate technologies is not one of ‘best practice’, but rather one of ‘best fit’.

Equitable access to water for agricultural production, even if only for supplemental watering of crops, can make the difference between farming as a mere means of survival and farming as a reliable source of livelihoods.

Three-quarters of people living in extreme poverty live in rural areas. The vast majority of the rural poor are smallholder family farmers. While they constitute the backbone of national food supplies – contributing to more than half of the agricultural production in many countries – they themselves often suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition.

Refugees and internally displaced people often face barriers in accessing water supply and sanitation services.

By the end of the year 2017, an unprecedented 68.5 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes as a result of conflict, persecution, or human rights violations. Another 18.8 million people were displaced by sudden-onset disasters – a situation that is likely to worsen because of climate change. Mass displacement places strain upon natural resources and water-related services at transition and destination points for both existing populations and new arrivals, creating potential inequalities and a source of conflicts among them.

Overcoming exclusion and inequality

International human rights law obliges states to work towards achieving universal access to water and sanitation for all, without discrimination, while prioritizing those most in need.

Human rights define individuals as rights-holders entitled to water and sanitation, and states as duty-bearers that have to guarantee access to WASH for all, using the maximum of their available resources. Fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation requires that the services be safe, available, physically accessible, equitably affordable and culturally acceptable. A human rights-based approach advocates for the fundamental standards, principles and criteria of human rights frameworks.

Investing in water supply and sanitation in general, and for the vulnerable and disadvantaged in particular, makes good economic sense.

Evidence suggests that the return on investment in water supply and sanitation services can be considerably high, especially when broader macroeconomic benefits are taken into account. Although the support of the international donor community will remain critical in the developing world, it will remain incumbent upon national governments to dramatically increase investments. States and utilities are obligated to regulate payments mechanisms to ensure that services are affordable for all. Well-functioning accountability mechanisms help institutions with sufficient capacity fulfil their mandates to monitor and enforce the obligations of service providers. Accountability and improved financial performance can help attract additional external sources of financing and facilitate private sector involvement.

Accountability, integrity, transparency, legitimacy, public participation, justice and efficiency are all essential features of 'good governance'.

States have the obligation to facilitate public participation and protect peoples' rights to participate in decisions that affect them. Good governance rises above vested interests and exclusionary practices by moving away from hierarchical power structures and guaranteeing a fair and equitable allocation of water resources to all. Subsidies that promote greater community participation empower vulnerable groups to allocate resources based on their own priorities.

Responses that are tailored to specific target groups help ensure that affordable water supply and sanitation services are available to all.

As poor and vulnerable groups are not homogeneous, policies regarding water supply and sanitation need to distinguish between different populations and design specific actions to address each of them. Disaggregated data (with respect to gender, age, income groups, ethnicity, culture, geography, etc.) and social inclusion analyses are key tools in determining which groups are at greatest risk of being 'left behind', and why. When resources are limited, it makes sense to target areas where populations have the least access to services.

For more information and to download the report, please visit en.unesco.org/water-security/wwap/wwdr