



Unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene are key drivers of epidemics in the African Region

Rationale

Achieving universal coverage by 2030 may require a quadrupling of current rates of progress in safely managed drinking-water, improved sanitation, and basic hygiene (WASH) services. Billions of people have gained access to basic drinking-water and sanitation services since 2000, but these services do not necessarily provide safe water and sanitation. Meanwhile, many homes, health care facilities and schools still lack soap and water for handwashing. This puts the health of all people – but especially that of young children – at risk of diseases such as cholera. Safe water, sanitation and hygiene at home should not be a privilege of only the wealthy or urban dwellers. These are some of the most basic requirements for human health and rights, and all countries have a responsibility to ensure that everyone can access them.

Key messages

- In 2019, 510 000 deaths could have been prevented with safe WASH in the Region
- In 2020, 363 million people (32.4% of the Region's population) had access to safely managed drinking-water services and 253 million (22.6%) to safely managed sanitation services
- In 2019, 26 million DALYs (disability-adjusted life years, the total number of years "lost" to illness, disability or early death), could have been prevented with safe WASH in 2019
- In 2019, 73.3% of all diarrhoeal deaths were attributed to unsafe WASH services and 377 000 people died from diarrhoea due to unsafe WASH (with 45% aged under 5 years)
- 130 000 people died from acute respiratory infections due to unsafe hand hygiene practices in 2020
- Between November 2022 and January 2023, the Region reported 95 763 cases of cholera and 2317 deaths (case fatality ratio =2.4%)
- Availability of water and sanitation services in health care facilities of the Region in 2021 was about 32% of overall needs.

1. Clean water, sanitation and hygiene objectives at a glance

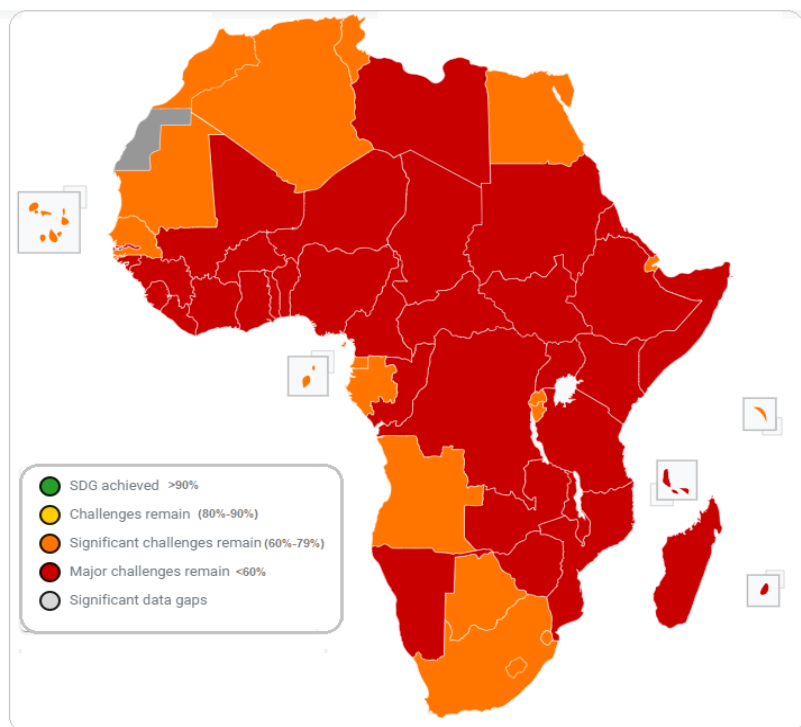
The Region has made progress since 2000. Indeed, the index (the geometric mean between the percentages of basic water services and basic sanitation services) rose from 17.88% in 2000 to 27.06% in 2020, representing a growth rate of 51%. However, it is not enough to meet the 2030 targets.



Table 1: Summary of SDG indicators related to water and sanitation in the African Region (source: WHO, 2022)

	Indicator	Baseline (2015)	Target	Reach (2022)	Colour
Goal 3	Substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination				
	Mortality rate attributed to exposure to unsafe WASH services (per 100 000 population)	38.9		45.8	
Goal 6	Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all				
	Population using at least basic drinking-water services (%)	29%	80%	32.4%	
	Achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations				
	Population using at least basic sanitation services (%)	21.1%	80%	22.6%	

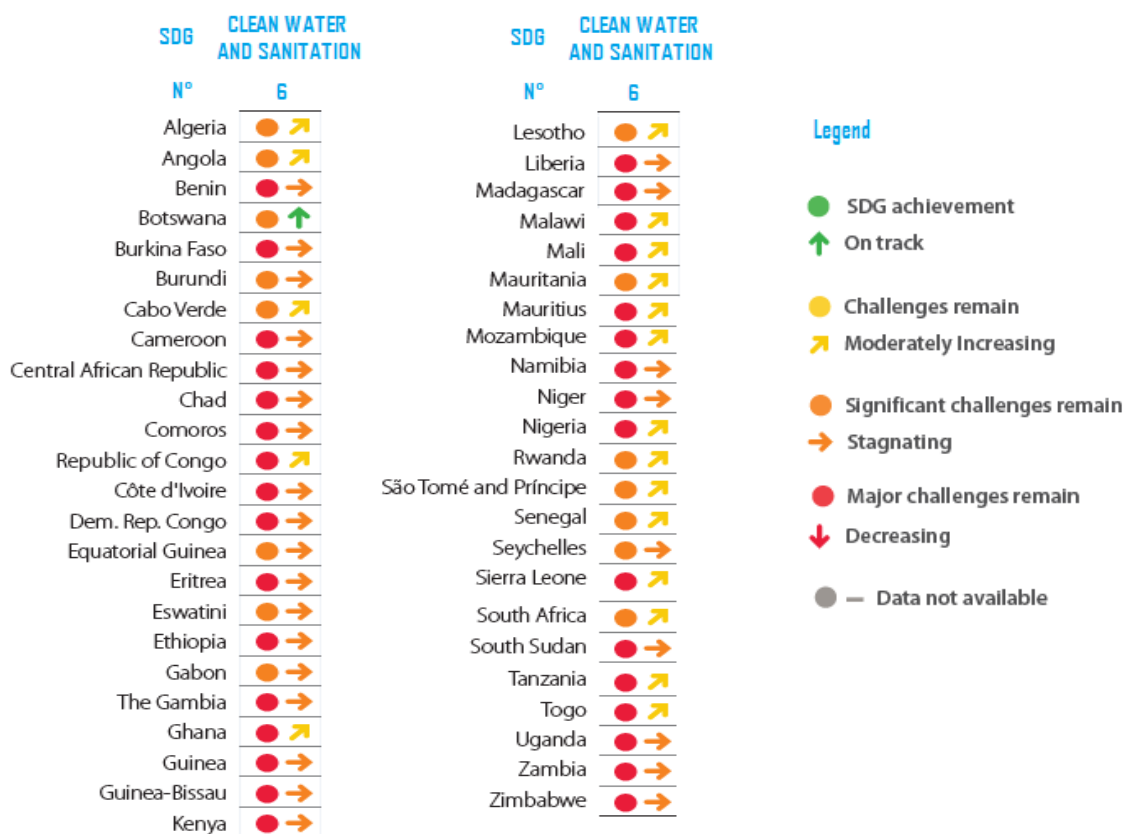
Figure 1: Clean water and sanitation index (%) in the African Region (source: African Union, 2021)



- Washing hands frequently with soap under running water is the main advice against the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, ensuring the availability of clean water for all is evidently crucial to sustaining and pursuing the fight against the spread of COVID-19.
- Inadequate basic services and access to clean water have been a great challenge for the continent. In The African Region, about 63% of people face difficulties in accessing basic water services, which hinders them from implementing the most basic and effective prevention measures against the virus. Therefore, there are deepening inequalities around this Goal.

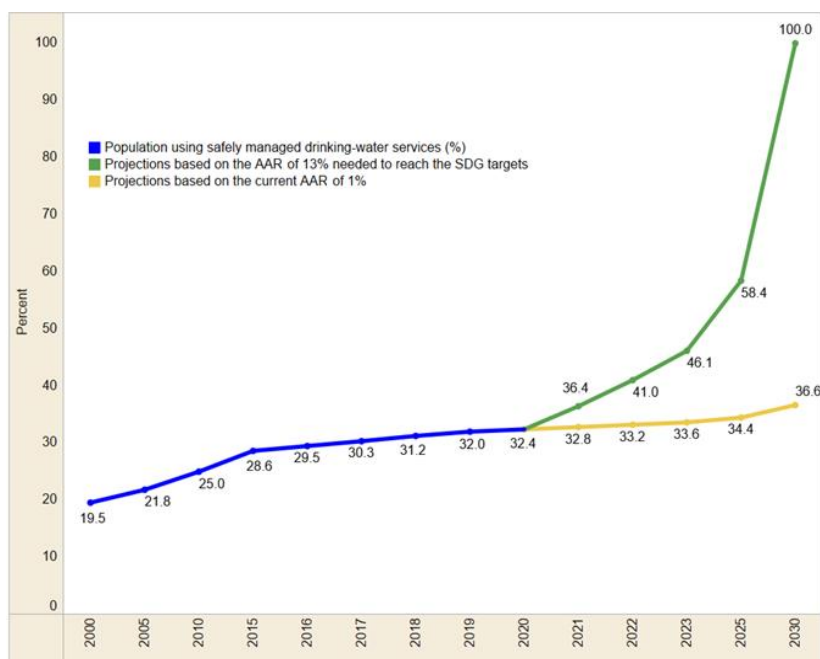


Figure 2: Africa SDG 6 Dashboard and Trends (source: Sustainable development report, 2020)



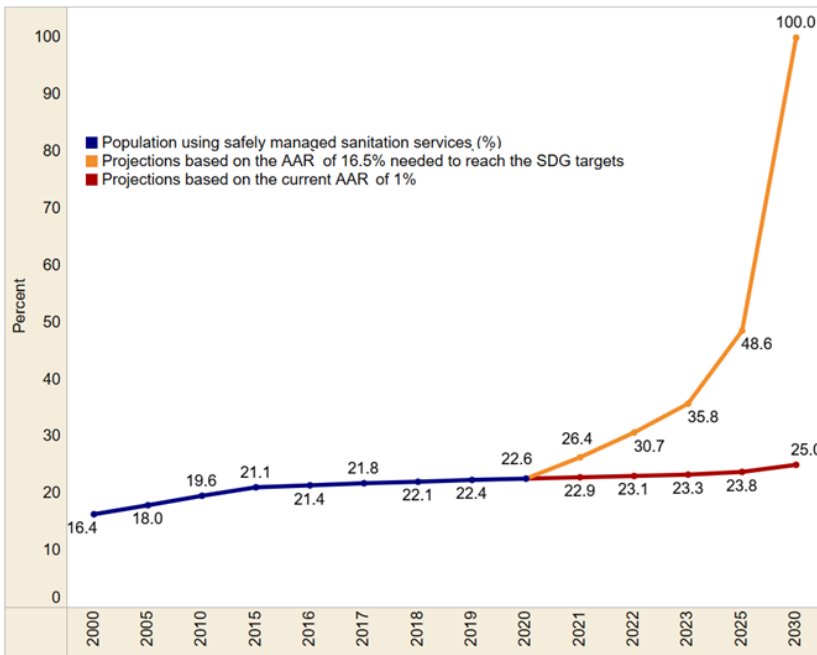
In 2020 in the WHO African Region, 20 countries had made moderate progress in the provision of clean water and sanitation (including Botswana which was on track). Even though the Region is not on track to meet the SDG target, the good news is that across the Region, no country has reported a regression.

Figure 3: Population using safely managed drinking-water services (%) in the African Region (source: WHO, 2020)



- With the current annual average rate (AAR) of 1% of the population using safely managed drinking-water services, the African Region is not on track to meet the SDG target, with 36.6% coverage expected in 2030
- About 363 million people (32.4%) had access to safely managed drinking-water services in the Region in 2020, with the rate rising to 80% in urban areas
- The highest service coverage rate was recorded in Algeria (73%) and the lowest in Chad (5.6%) and the Central African Republic (6.2%).

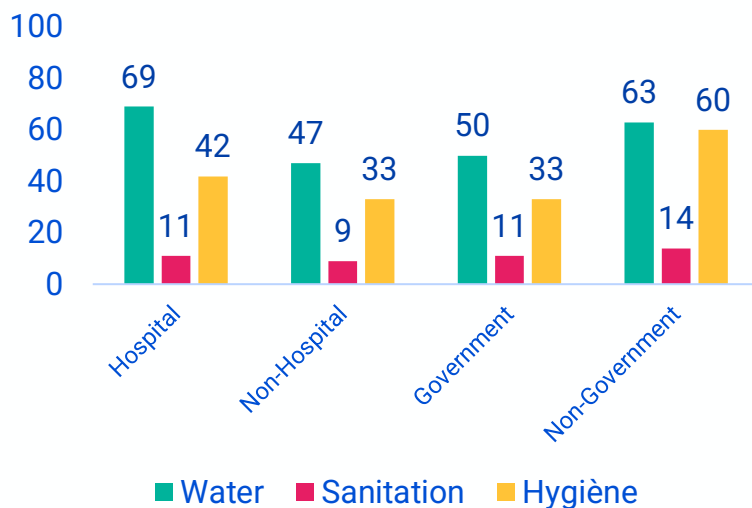
Figure 4: Population using safely managed sanitation services (%) in the African Region (source: WHO, 2020)



- With the current annual average rate (AAR) of 1% of the population using safely managed sanitation services, the African Region is not on track to meet the SDG target, with 25% coverage projected by 2030
- About 253 million (22.6%) people had access to safely managed sanitation services in the Region in 2020, with the rate at 57% in urban areas
- The highest service coverage was recorded in Lesotho (47.62%) and the lowest in Ethiopia (6.68%).



Figure 5: Regional WASH estimates (source: WHO-UNICEF 2021)



Water services are the most available in the Region, especially in hospitals. Efforts are also under way to improve hygiene. On the other hand, a lot of work remains to be done in terms of safely managed sanitation services.

2. Mortality and morbidity attributable to unsafe WASH

Millions of people globally do not have access to basic drinking-water, sanitation, and hygiene services since 2000, but these services do not necessarily provide safe water and sanitation. Many homes, health care facilities and schools are still facing this reality, and are thus exposed to a multitude of preventable illnesses. Unsafe WASH is associated with infectious diseases, health risks from exposure to chemicals and other contaminants in drinking-water, as well as impacts on well-being. WHO provides estimates for the burden of disease attributable to unsafe WASH for key health outcomes and reports on SDG indicator 3.9.2.

2.1 Mortality

- 510 000 deaths could have been prevented with safe WASH in 2020 in the Region
- The mortality rate attributed to exposure to unsafe WASH (SDG 3.9.2) in the Region was 47 per 100 000 population
- 377 000 is the number of diarrhoeal deaths from inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene (with 45% aged under 5 years). Nigeria, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, United Republic of Tanzania, Niger, Chad, Kenya, Angola, Mali, Mozambique and South Africa account for 71% of the total deaths.
- 123 000 people died from acute respiratory infections due to unsafe hand hygiene practices in 2019 (including 52.5% aged under 5 years). 73% of all diarrhoeal deaths in 2019 were attributed to unsafe WASH services.

2.2 Morbidity

- 26 million DALYs could have been prevented with safe WASH in 2020 (including 60% DALYs among under-fives)
- 41 million people were living with acute respiratory infections due to unsafe hand hygiene practices in 2019 (with 76% aged under 5 years).

Table 2: Regional cholera cases and deaths (*source: WHO, 2023*)

Countries	Localities	Number of cases	Number of deaths	Case fatality ratio (CFR)
Burundi	5 districts	105	1	1%
Cameroon	8 provinces	15 175	302	2.0%
DR Congo	26 provinces	18 403	302	1.6%
Ethiopia	2 regions	1 036	28	2.7%
Kenya	15 counties	4 391	82	1.87%
Malawi	29 districts	33 608	1093	3.3%
Mozambique	5 provinces	2 256	19	0.8%
Nigeria	29 districts	20 768	489	2.4%
Zambia	1 district	10	1	0.1%

Between November 2022 and January 2023, the Region reported 95 763 cases of cholera and 2317 deaths (case fatality rate =2.4%,) in the African Region.

3. WHO response

As the international authority on public health and water quality, WHO leads global efforts to prevent water and sanitation-related diseases, advising governments on the development of health-based targets and regulations. WHO works closely with UNICEF in several areas concerning water and health, including water, sanitation, and hygiene in health care facilities. In 2015, the two agencies jointly developed WASH FIT (Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool), an adaptation of the water safety plan approach. WASH FIT aims to guide small, primary health care facilities in low- and middle-income settings through a continuous cycle of improvement by means of assessments, prioritization of risks, and definition of specific, targeted actions.

Drinking-water

WHO produces a series of water quality guidelines, including on drinking-water, safe use of wastewater, and recreational water quality. The water quality guidelines are based on managing risks, and since 2004 the *Guidelines for drinking-water quality* promote the Framework for safe drinking-water. The Framework recommends the establishment of health-based targets, the development and implementation of water safety plans by water suppliers to identify and manage risks from catchment to consumer, and independent surveillance to ensure that water safety plans are effective and health-based targets are being met most effectively. WHO:

- Provides guidelines for drinking-water quality
- Water safety plan resources
- Develops drinking-water quality regulations and standards
- Supports publications to the Guidelines for drinking-water quality.

Sanitation

WHO monitors the global burden of disease and analyses the level of sanitation access and what helps and hinders progress. Such monitoring gives Member States and donors global data to inform investment decisions in terms of providing toilets and ensuring safe management of wastewater and faeces.

WHO works with partners on promoting effective risk assessment and management practices for sanitation in communities and health facilities through the WHO Guidelines on sanitation and health, safe use of wastewater, recreational water quality and promotion of sanitation safety planning and sanitary inspections. WHO also supports collaboration between WASH and health programmes such as neglected tropical diseases, cholera, polio and antimicrobial resistance. Aspects of climate resilience are incorporated in all WHO sanitation guidance documents.

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Sources

Data are from WHO: [The Global Health Observatory](#) and [integrated African Health Observatory](#)

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