

RECOMMENDATION 8 OF 20

CONTINENTAL

Act within 100 days · by the Water Conference, 8 to 10 December 2026

Bring one costed African plan for school water and toilets to Abu Dhabi

Related briefings: [Water](#), [Education](#)

IN BRIEF

- Only 46% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa have basic drinking water, and progress must be four to five times faster to reach every school by 2030.
- African water ministers should bring one costed plan to the UN Water Conference in Abu Dhabi, backed by national budget lines that pay for upkeep as well as building.
- Senegal should lead, because it co-hosts the conference.

Why this matters

The report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, the UN children's agency, came out on 22 September. It found that in sub-Saharan Africa, 43% of schools have basic toilets and 39% have basic handwashing. About 250 million children in the region have no basic water at school.

Money is the limit. Africa invests \$10 billion to \$19 billion a year in water, against a need of at least \$30 billion, and private investors provide 9%. Conferences end with voluntary plans unless governments arrive with money.

The political moment exists, since on 14 February African Union heads of state chose water and sanitation as their theme for 2026. The Abu Dhabi conference has sessions on water for people and on investment.

Building toilets is the easy part. In India's drive to build them in schools, 72% of the toilets that auditors sampled had no running water. A plan that pays for toilets without water and upkeep will fail in the same way.

Sources for this section (9)

- [UN News: the WHO and UNICEF report on water, sanitation and hygiene in schools](#)
- [WHO and UNICEF data service: what counts as basic water, sanitation and hygiene at school](#)
- [Africa Water Investment Programme: the water investment gap](#)
- [African Union: water and sanitation as the theme for 2026](#)
- [UN DESA: the sessions of the 2026 UN Water Conference](#)
- [Comptroller and Auditor General of India: audit of the school toilet drive](#)
- [AMCOW: the African Ministers' Council on Water](#)
- [Amani Africa: countries in political transition and African Union bodies](#)
- [WHO and UNICEF: school water, sanitation and hygiene figures by country, 2025](#)

Four levels of action

1 What Africa asks of the world

Development banks and bilateral water funders co-finance school water through contracts that pay only for facilities checked and found working. WHO and UNICEF report on the schools named in the plan.

WHO	The World Bank, the African Development Bank, bilateral water funders, WHO and UNICEF
WHEN	UN Water Conference, Abu Dhabi, 8 to 10 December 2026

2 What the African Union does

The African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) acts for the African Union on water and sanitation. With the AU Commission, it prepares one African plan under the 2026 theme. It sets one way of costing the work. Countries report their budget lines through AMCOW's monitoring platform.

WHO	AMCOW and the AU Commission
WHEN	Costing method by 31 October 2026; plan presented on 8 December 2026

3 What regional groups do

ECOWAS, the East African Community, SADC and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) buy and maintain school water points together across neighbouring countries. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are suspended from African Union bodies. They can join the plan directly at the conference, as UN member states.

WHO ECOWAS, the East African Community, SADC and IGAD

WHEN At least five governments name a 2027 budget line by 20 November 2026

4 Which country goes first, and why

Senegal goes first, because it co-hosts the conference with the United Arab Emirates. WHO and UNICEF estimate that 72.8% of its schools had basic water and 85.9% had basic toilets in 2025. With coverage that high, Senegal can show the model for upkeep that other countries will need.

WHO Senegal's water ministry

WHEN Presents the plan in Abu Dhabi on 8 December 2026

Before another country can do this

- ☒ A list of schools and the state of their facilities, at least by district
- ☒ A budget line held by one ministry
- ☒ A water utility or local firm able to maintain school water points
- ☒ At least five years of upkeep in the costing

What does not carry over from the first country

- Senegal's role as co-host of the conference.
- Its high coverage. Senegal's task is upkeep and reaching the last schools, while countries with low coverage must build on a far larger scale.

Who else is ready

COUNTRY	WHY	SOURCE
Ethiopia	In 2025, 34.4% of its schools had basic water and 14.9% basic toilets, for 49 million school-age children.	Source
Nigeria	In 2025, 35.6% of its schools had basic water and 23.6% basic handwashing, for 79 million school-age children.	Source
Uganda	In 2025, 74.7% of its schools had basic toilets but only 54.6% basic water, so its gap is water supply.	Source
Ghana	In 2025, 78.4% of its schools had basic water, close enough to test a plan that puts upkeep first.	Source

Has this worked before?

In 2014 India promised separate toilets for girls and boys in every government school within a year. State-owned companies built 140,997 toilets. The national auditor checked 2,695 of them in 15 states. It found 11% missing or unfinished, and 30% of the rest out of use. No money had been set aside for water supply or upkeep. [Source](#)

Comptroller and Auditor General of India: construction of toilets in schools

First steps

- 1** **AFRICAN UNION** AMCOW and Senegal's water ministry send all African governments one costing method by 31 October 2026. It covers water supply, toilets, handwashing and five years of upkeep.
- 2** **REGIONAL GROUPS** ECOWAS, the East African Community and SADC secure at least five governments that name a 2027 budget line, with a figure and a list of target schools, by 20 November 2026.
- 3** **SENEGAL** it presents the plan in Abu Dhabi on 8 December 2026 and asks WHO and UNICEF to report on the named schools.

Who acts, and with what

WHO LEADS	AMCOW with the AU Commission; Senegal's water ministry goes first
INSTRUMENT	An African commitment in the conference's final outcome, backed by published national budget lines
HOW PROGRESS IS CHECKED	Named budget lines in at least five countries, each with a figure and a list of target schools
SIGNAL TO CHANGE COURSE	A voluntary plan with no money, or budget lines that pay for building with nothing for water supply and upkeep
WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY	Finance ministries are cutting spending under debt pressure. Water, education and health ministries each claim part of the task. Many countries have no current list of which facilities work.
COST AND MONEY	Nobody yet knows the cost of bringing all of Africa's schools to basic service. Working it out is the first task of the costing method. Africa's total gap in water investment is \$11 billion to \$20 billion a year.

Who else contributes

WHO	CONTRIBUTION
Volunteer governments	Commit budget lines for building and upkeep
Finance ministries	Protect the lines from cuts during the year
Water utilities and local firms	Maintain the services under contract
Development banks	Co-finance through contracts that pay for results
Parents' and teachers' associations	Check each term that facilities work

What each audience can do

Governments

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Commit a budget line that includes upkeep

WHAT YOU GAIN

Better attendance and health in schools

AU and regional bodies

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Bring AMCOW members behind one plan

WHAT YOU GAIN

One African voice at the conference

Philanthropy

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Pay for each facility checked and found working

WHAT YOU GAIN

Results that can be checked

Social entrepreneurs

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Offer upkeep services for school water

WHAT YOU GAIN

A steady public market

Young people and citizens

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Report the state of school toilets and taps

WHAT YOU GAIN

A say in what gets fixed

The briefings behind this

Sector · Observed

Water

Most schools in sub-Saharan Africa lack basic water and toilets, a failure of national budgets that nothing agreed in New York will fix.

[Open the briefing](#)

Sector · Observed

Education

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa spend 3.6 times more on debt payments than on schools, so budgets now decide how far African children learn.

[Open the briefing](#)

Words used on this page

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Clean water, toilets and handwashing. At a school, basic water means drinking water from a safe source on site, basic sanitation means usable toilets separate for girls and boys, and basic hygiene means a place to wash hands with water and soap. [Water briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: washdata.org](#)

UN Water Conference

A UN meeting on the global goal of clean water and sanitation for all. The 2026 conference meets in Abu Dhabi from 8 to 10 December, co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal. [Water briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: sdgs.un.org](#)

World Health Organization (WHO)

The UN's health agency. It sets health standards and coordinates responses to outbreaks. The United States left it in January 2026. [Health briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: who.int](#)

UNICEF

The UN's agency for children. It works on child health, nutrition, schooling, water and protection, and is funded by voluntary donations. [Education briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: unicef.org](#)

African Union (AU)

The organisation of 55 African states, based in Addis Ababa. Its heads of state meet each February. It can suspend members after a coup. [Glossary](#) · [Source: au.int](#)

Bilateral and multilateral

Bilateral means between two governments only. Multilateral means through a shared body such as the UN, the World Bank or a global fund, where many countries decide together. [Glossary](#)

Co-financing

The share of a programme that the receiving government must pay itself. [Health briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

AMCOW

The African Ministers' Council on Water, formed in Abuja in 2002. It brings Africa's water ministers together to cooperate on managing the continent's water and on sanitation. [Water briefing](#) · [Glossary](#) · [Source: amcow-online.org](#)

African Union Commission

The African Union's secretariat. It prepares decisions for heads of state and carries them out. [Glossary](#)

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger left it in January 2025. [Politics and governance briefing](#) · [Glossary](#)

East African Community

A bloc of eastern and central African states, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [Glossary](#)

SADC

The Southern African Development Community, 16 states from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Africa. [Glossary](#) · [Source: sadc.int](#)

IGAD

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development, a bloc of eight states in the Horn of Africa and East Africa. [Glossary](#) · [Source: igad.int](#)