

SECTOR 10 OF 12

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

8 min read

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.

IN BRIEF

- At the UN in September, governments adopted a declaration on rising seas with no money attached, and Egypt said the Nile decides its survival.
- The same week, a UN report found that fewer than half of the schools in sub-Saharan Africa have basic drinking water.
- African governments should bring costed plans for school water, paid from their own budgets, to the UN Water Conference in Abu Dhabi in December, which Senegal co-hosts.



Goats drinking at an Oxfam-funded borehole in East Africa.

Photo: Oxfam East Africa, [CC BY 2.0](#), via [source page](#).

46%

Schools in sub-Saharan Africa with basic drinking water in 2025

[Source: news.un.org](https://news.un.org)

250m

School-age children in the region with no basic water at school

[Source: news.un.org](https://news.un.org)

37%

People in sub-Saharan Africa with basic sanitation at home in 2024, against 82% worldwide

[Source: data.worldbank.org](https://data.worldbank.org)

\$30bn

Water investment Africa needs each year, against \$10bn to \$19bn invested now

[Source: aipwater.org](https://aipwater.org)

770m

People who live less than five metres above the high-tide line

[Source: wmo.int](https://wmo.int)

5.6 mm

Yearly sea-level rise on Africa's Red Sea coast since 1999, against 3.6 mm worldwide

[Source: wmo.int](https://wmo.int)

01

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

What happened at the UN

On 24 September the General Assembly adopted a declaration on sea-level rise without a vote. It says the "cumulative, severe and irreversible risks demand stronger international cooperation". It stresses early warning, data and planning, and it commits no money. Only 40% of African countries have warning systems that cover several hazards at once. African coastal states will have to find the money for warnings and sea defences elsewhere.

Egypt's Prime Minister, Mostafa Madbouly, told the Assembly on 25 September that the Nile is "a lifeline". He said shared rivers should not be managed "through unilateral measures". Egypt has 472 cubic metres of renewable water per person each year, and 98% of it flows in from outside its borders. During President Xi Jinping's visit to Cairo in September, China recognised Egypt's "legitimate right to safeguard water and food security". Egypt is now seeking support for its Nile position from powers outside Africa.

The high-seas treaty, which protects sea life in waters beyond any country's control, passed 100 member countries during the week. Germany, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea, Canada, Australia,

Brunei and Lebanon joined between 22 and 24 September, bringing the total to 101. Its first meeting of members takes place in New York from 11 to 22 January 2027. Only countries that have ratified the treaty take the decisions there, so African states that delay will have no vote on how it starts.

Sources for this section (6)

- [WMO: the General Assembly adopts the sea-level rise declaration](#)
- [WMO: early warning coverage and sea-level rise in Africa, 2025](#)
- [Egyptian Streets: Egypt's statement to the General Assembly](#)
- [The National: Egypt's water per person and China's statement in Cairo](#)
- [UN Treaty Collection: members of the high-seas treaty](#)
- [UN: the treaty's first meeting of members](#)

02

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

What is really going on

A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, the UN children's agency, came out on 22 September. Worldwide, the share of schools with basic drinking water rose from 67% to 78% between 2015 and 2025. In sub-Saharan Africa, 46% of schools have basic water and 43% have basic toilets, meaning usable toilets separate for girls and boys. Only 39% have a place to wash hands with soap and water. About 250 million children in the region have no basic water at school, and 264 million have no basic toilets. To reach every school by 2030, progress would need to be four times faster for water and five times faster for toilets. At today's pace, Africa will miss the 2030 goal by a wide margin.

Homes are improving slowly. In sub-Saharan Africa, the share of people with basic drinking water at home rose from 59% in 2015 to 68% in 2024, against 92% worldwide. Basic sanitation at home rose from 31% to 37%, against 82% worldwide. Africa invests \$10 billion to \$19 billion a year in water, while it needs at least \$30 billion. Private investors provide only 9% of water investment, against 87% in telecommunications. The Africa Water Investment Programme estimates that poor water and sanitation cost sub-Saharan Africa about 5% of its economic output each year. The shortfall in water spending already costs African economies every year.

On the Nile, Ethiopia opened its 5,000-megawatt dam in September 2025. It cost about \$5 billion. Ethiopia paid through its central bank and by selling bonds, after Egypt blocked outside funding. Weeks later, the Nile flooded villages south of Khartoum. Sudan's irrigation ministry blamed heavy rain and water released from the dam. Ethiopia replied that the dam had cut the river's highest flows. Before the dam, they passed 800 million cubic metres a day, and in September 2025 they reached 472 million. No agreement requires the three countries to share data on river flows, so each side can blame the other.

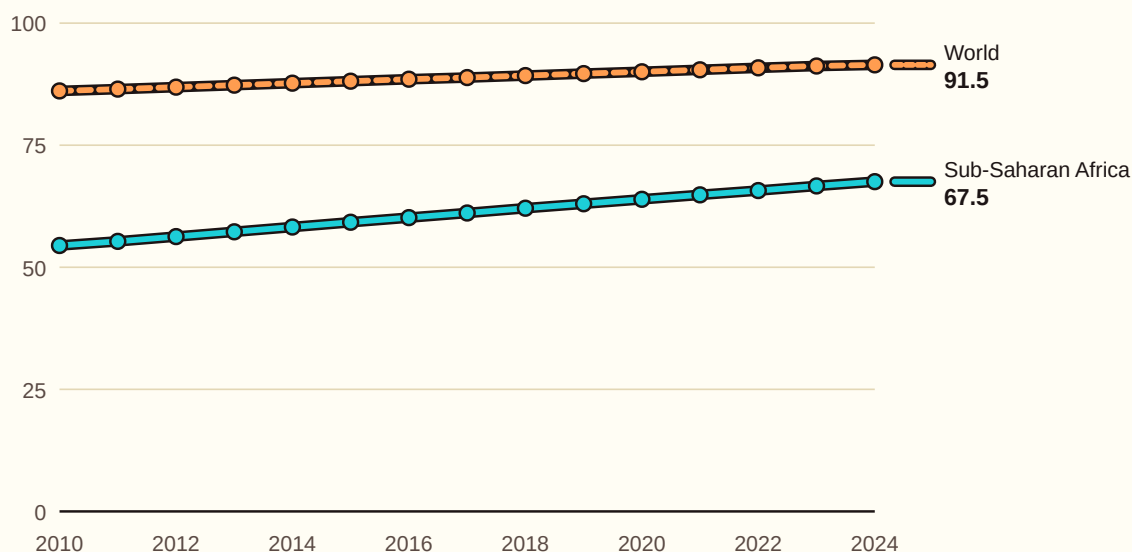
A treaty among upstream countries, the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement, came into force on 13 October 2024. It sets up a commission to manage the river together. Egypt and Sudan reject it, so the two countries furthest downstream stand outside the only shared rules for the river.

The common story of a disappearing Lake Chad is out of date. A 2020 study found the lake's size stable over twenty years, with groundwater behind about 70% of changes in the water it holds. The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) found that open water grew from about 3,600 square kilometres in 2012 to over 8,300 in 2025. Less than 6% of the land around it that could be irrigated is irrigated. The crisis there is one of insecurity and weak government. In June 2025, 2.9 million people had fled their homes, 1,827 schools were closed and only 19% of humanitarian needs were funded. More water does not help people who cannot farm safely.

At sea, West Africa accounted for over 40% of recorded illegal fishing by industrial ships between 2010 and 2022. The region loses about \$9.4 billion a year to it. A World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement that bans subsidies for illegal fishing came into force on 15 September 2025. The sea is also rising faster on African coasts than the world average. Between 1999 and 2025 it rose by 5.2 millimetres a year on Africa's Indian Ocean coast and 5.6 millimetres on the Red Sea coast. Africa's coastal states lose fish to foreign fleets while the sea moves closer to their towns.

Two in three people in sub-Saharan Africa now have basic drinking water, against nine in ten worldwide

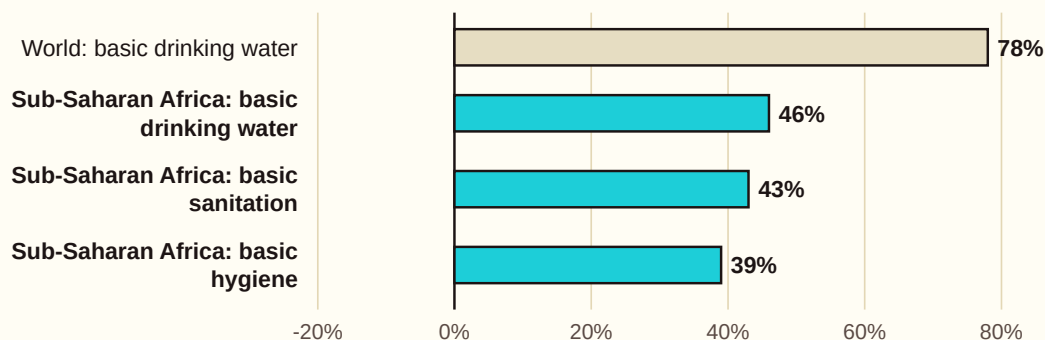
People using at least basic drinking water, % of population



Source: [World Bank, from WHO/UNICEF JMP \(SH.H2O.BASW.ZS\)](#)

Fewer than half of sub-Saharan schools have basic water, sanitation or hygiene

% of schools, 2025



Source: [WHO/UNICEF JMP, WASH in schools 2026, via UN News](#)

Sources for this section (15)

- [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](#)
- [World Bank: basic sanitation at home in sub-Saharan Africa and the world](#)
- [World Bank: basic drinking water at home](#)
- [Africa Water Investment Programme: the water investment gap and its cost](#)
- [NPR: Ethiopia's dam, its cost and how it was paid for](#)
- [Ahram Online: Sudan's account of the 2025 floods](#)
- [Ethiopia Ministry of Water and Energy: Ethiopia's flow data](#)
- [Anadolu: the Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement enters into force](#)
- [Scientific Reports: Lake Chad storage and groundwater](#)
- [IWMI: Lake Chad is gaining water](#)
- [Amani Africa: displacement, school closures and funding in the Lake Chad basin](#)
- [OCCRP: West Africa and illegal fishing](#)
- [IISD: the WTO agreement on fishing subsidies enters into force](#)
- [WMO: sea-level rise on African coasts](#)

03

HOW SURE WE ARE: OBSERVED

Country by country

Senegal co-hosts the UN Water Conference with a strong record at home. In 2024, 88% of its people had basic drinking water at home and 62.5% had basic sanitation. Senegal signed the high-seas treaty in June 2025 but has not ratified it, although its waters lie in the region worst hit by illegal

fishing. Its record at home gives it standing to ask other governments to do more. Ratifying before January would give Senegal a vote in the treaty's first decisions.

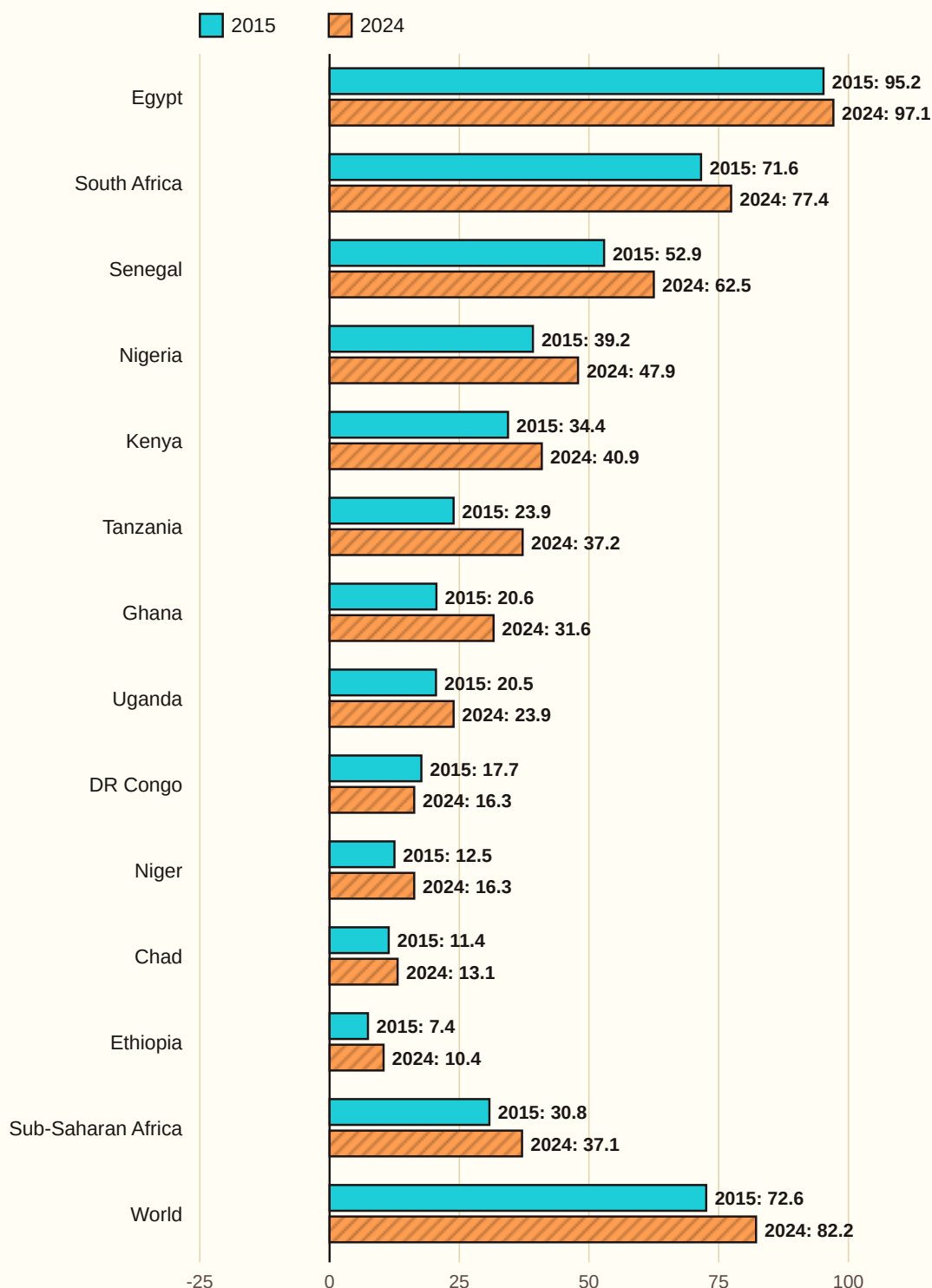
The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) went backwards. The share of its people with basic drinking water fell from 36.3% in 2015 to 35.7% in 2024. Basic sanitation fell from 17.7% to 16.3%. Ethiopia raised water access from 42% to 56%, while only one Ethiopian in ten has basic sanitation. Nigeria raised water access from 68% to 82%. These gains show that an African government can make fast progress on water within ten years.

Kenya ratified the high-seas treaty in September 2025 and helped bring the WTO fishing agreement into force. At home, only 40.9% of Kenyans have basic sanitation. Twenty African countries have ratified the high-seas treaty, among them Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Mauritania. Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt and Tanzania have signed but not ratified it. Kenya shows that a country can lead on oceans abroad while still falling short on toilets at home.

Around Lake Chad, basic sanitation reaches 13.1% of people in Chad and 16.3% in Niger. Niger left the regional military force fighting armed groups in March 2025, after donors suspended money for its programme to restore order. Water and sanitation cannot improve where the state and its partners have pulled back.

Sanitation at home has barely moved in much of Africa, and fell in DR Congo

People using at least basic sanitation, % of population

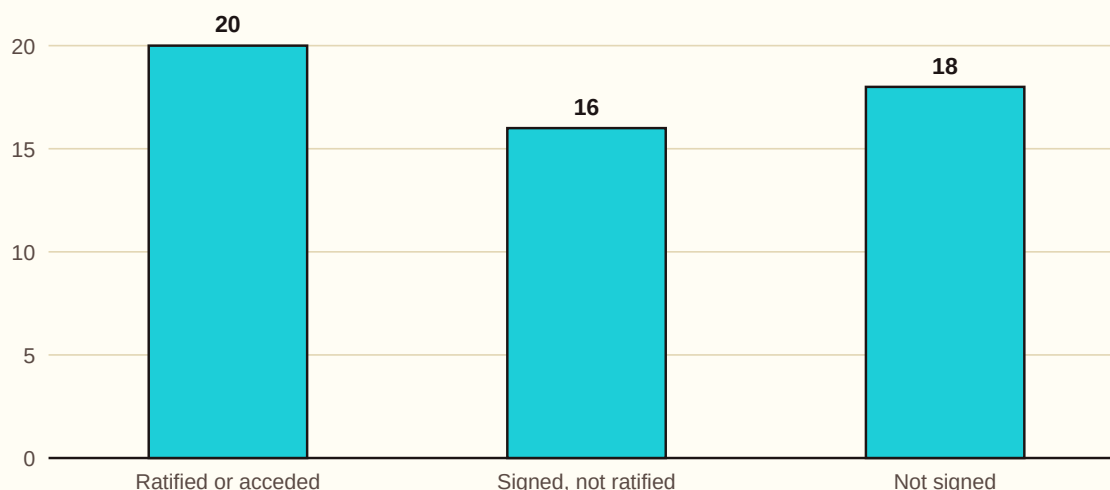


Covers household sanitation only; school figures are on the chart above. Values rounded to one decimal place. 2024 is the latest year in the series.

Source: [World Bank WDI](#), from [WHO/UNICEF JMP \(SH.STA.BASS.ZS\)](#)

Twenty African states have ratified the high-seas treaty; eighteen have not signed it

number of African UN member states, as at 30 September 2026



Ratified: Botswana, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe. Signed only: Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Lesotho, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Tanzania, Zambia. Several states not signed are landlocked. Total parties worldwide: 101.

Source: [UN Treaty Collection, Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction, status table](#)

Sources for this section (7)

- [World Bank: basic sanitation in Senegal](#)
- [UN Treaty Collection: signatures and ratifications of the high-seas treaty](#)
- [World Bank: basic drinking water in the DRC, Ethiopia and Nigeria](#)
- [World Bank: basic sanitation by country, from WHO and UNICEF data](#)
- [IISD: Kenya's role in the WTO fishing agreement](#)
- [World Bank: basic sanitation in Chad and Niger](#)
- [Amani Africa: Niger's exit from the regional force](#)

Why this matters

Water and toilets at school decide whether girls stay in school and whether disease spreads through classrooms. They are budget lines that governments control. The Water Conference in Abu Dhabi will hold one session on water for people and one on investment. Senegal can use its role as co-host to present a costed plan for schools, backed by national budgets. Such a plan could be checked a year later, school by school. Parents would then know which promises reached their own children's classrooms.

The Nile dispute is moving towards outside patrons. The 2025 floods showed the cost of running the largest dam in Africa without flow data that all three countries can see. Shared rules for floods and droughts, built on shared data, would let the three countries manage the risk together. Without them, every flood will start a new diplomatic quarrel.

Water data is weakest where the stakes are highest. The three Nile countries keep no shared record of river flows. The recovery of Lake Chad was shown by satellites and foreign researchers. Governments that pay for their own river gauges and school surveys will negotiate from their own evidence.

Most African states lack full early warning, and their coasts face faster sea-level rise than the world average. The declaration brought no money, so money to adapt will be fought over at COP31, the UN climate summit in Antalya in November. Countries that ratify the high-seas treaty before January will help write its first rules.

Sources for this section (2)

- [IISD: the six themes of the 2026 UN Water Conference](#)
- [UN: dates and hosts of the 2026 UN Water Conference](#)

The case against this view

Egypt's water shortage is real, and a country downstream has a fair claim to protect its supply. Water at home is improving in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania, and schools may follow as budgets recover. Lake Chad shows that many water crises come from insecurity and weak government, which money for pipes and taps will not solve. School budgets also compete with debt service, the interest and repayments on government debt. A finance ministry under pressure may decide it cannot afford a new line for school water.

What you can do

Governments

DO THIS

Put a named, costed line for school water and toilets in the 2027 budget, and announce it in Abu Dhabi.

WHY

Parliaments and parents can check a promise that is tied to a named budget line.

Governments

DO THIS

Senegal, Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt and Tanzania should ratify the high-seas treaty before 11 January 2027.

WHY

Only countries that have ratified take the first meeting's decisions on how the treaty works.

AU and regional bodies

DO THIS

The Nile Basin states should agree to share dam releases and river flows as they happen, before the 2027 flood season.

WHY

The 2025 floods led to accusations that shared data would have settled.

AU and regional bodies

DO THIS

The African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) should bring African ministers behind one schools-first plan for the Water Conference.

WHY

One African proposal carries more weight than 54 separate statements.

NGOs and civil society

DO THIS

Check a sample of schools each term and publish which taps and toilets work.

WHY

In India, a national audit of a drive to build school toilets found 11% of sampled toilets missing or unfinished, and 30% of the rest out of use.

Business and investors

DO THIS

Offer contracts to maintain water systems in schools and clinics, paid from public budgets.

WHY

Private investors provide only 9% of water investment in Africa, and steady public contracts lower their risk.

Philanthropy

DO THIS

Pay into a fund that pays for each school facility checked and found working.

WHY

Paying for results rewards upkeep as well as building.

Young people and citizens

DO THIS

Survey the state of school toilets and taps through student clubs, and report what you find.

WHY

Students see every day whether the facilities work.

OCTOBER 2026 TO DECEMBER 2027

Dates to watch

9 TO 20 NOVEMBER 2026

COP31, the UN climate summit, in Antalya, Türkiye

Money to help coasts and water systems adapt will be decided here, since the sea-level declaration carried none. [Source](#)

8 TO 10 DECEMBER 2026

UN Water Conference in Abu Dhabi, co-hosted by the United Arab Emirates and Senegal

It is the first chance to present a costed plan for schools with national budget lines.

[Source](#)

11 TO 22 JANUARY 2027

First meeting of the members of the high-seas treaty, New York

The treaty's bodies and working rules will be set by the countries that have ratified it.

[Source](#)

APRIL 2027

The 11th World Water Forum in Riyadh

It will show whether pledges made in Abu Dhabi have reached national budgets. [Source](#)

Recommendations

100 DAYS · BY THE WATER CONFERENCE, 8 TO 10 DECEMBER 2026

CONTINENTAL

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

Leads: AMCOW with the AU Commission; Senegal's water ministry goes first

Dig deeper

[WASH in schools: global and regional figures](#)

UN News

The WHO and UNICEF findings on school water, sanitation and hygiene, released 22 September 2026.

[2026 UN Water Conference](#)

United Nations

Dates, venue and co-hosts of the December conference in Abu Dhabi.

[General Assembly adopts declaration on sea-level rise](#)

WMO

What the declaration says and the science behind it.

Extreme weather and climate events impact millions in Africa in 2025

WMO

Sea-level rise along African coasts and the state of early warning.

Egypt's Nile water security is an existential issue, Madbouly says

Egyptian Streets

Egypt's statement to the General Assembly on 25 September 2026.

Press release on Egyptian accusation, October 2025

Ethiopia Ministry of Water and Energy

Ethiopia's flow data and its case on the 2025 floods.

Lake Chad is gaining water, and that reshapes the irrigation agenda

International Water Management Institute

Satellite evidence on Lake Chad's recovery and its irrigation potential.

BBNJ Agreement status

UN Treaty Collection

Which states have signed and ratified the high-seas treaty.

Mind the Gap: Invest in Water

Africa Water Investment Programme

Africa's water investment gap and the target of \$30bn a year by 2030.

West Africa is the global epicentre of illegal fishing

OCCRP

Report on illegal fishing losses and the companies behind them.

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. Our recommendation on this · 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. Our recommendation on this · Glossary · Source: sdgs.un.org

UN General Assembly

The meeting of all 193 UN member states, each with one vote. It meets every year from September. It can make statements, elect members of other bodies and approve the UN budget, but most of what it says does not bind governments. Glossary · Source: un.org

The high-seas treaty

A UN treaty that came into force in January 2026 to protect marine life in waters beyond any country's control. Glossary · Source: 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

Nile Basin Cooperative Framework Agreement

A treaty among Nile countries that came into force on 13 October 2024. It sets up a Nile River Basin Commission to manage the river together. Upstream states such as Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania back it, and Egypt and Sudan reject it. Glossary · Source: aa.com.tr

World Trade Organization (WTO)

The international body that sets and enforces the rules of trade between countries. A member can complain that another has broken the rules, and a panel of the WTO decides. Our recommendation on this · Climate and energy briefing · Glossary · Source: wto.org

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Africa's second-largest country by area, in central Africa. Its east has seen armed conflict for three decades, and it holds much of the world's cobalt. Security and conflict briefing · Glossary

COP climate summits

The yearly UN climate conference. COP31 meets in Antalya, Turkey, from 9 to 20 November 2026. Climate and energy briefing · Glossary · Source: unfccc.int

Debt service

The interest and repayments a government must pay on its debts each year. Development cooperation 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. Our recommendation on this · Glossary · Source: amcow-online.org