POLICY BRIEF

IMPROVING WATER AND SANITATION SERVICE DELIVERY IN CAMEROON, ETHIOPIA, KENYA, AND ZIMBABWE: WHAT IS WORKING, WHAT ISN'T, AND WHY?

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Ensuring sustainable water availability and safe sanitation systems across Africa presents both progress and persistent challenges. While strong policy frameworks and development partnerships in countries like Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe have created opportunities for improved WASH outcomes, a critical question remains: how can governments, civil society organisations, and development partners in these countries translate policy ambition into resilient, equitable, and community-sustained services that reach the most underserved populations?

Key Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings

1. Most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are not short of water and sanitation policies; the challenge lies in weak implementation, limited coverage, and insufficient oversight.

2. Aging infrastructure, financing gaps, and fragmented governance have stalled WASH service delivery, causing unreliable urban supply in Zimbabwe.

3. While East African countries like Kenya and Ethiopia have made progress through Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) and the One WASH National Programme (OWNP), respectively, limited rural coverage and weak follow-up systems continue to undermine long-term results.

4. In Central Africa, Cameroon faces unreliable water services, as insecurity and weak institutional capacity hinder progress, despite the existence of decentralized WASH models.

Recommendations

1. In conflict-affected states like Cameroon, municipal authorities such as those at the Menji council in Lebialem and relevant government departments attached to the Ministry of Water Resources and Energy must develop and adopt clear and measurable monitoring indicators, including water point functionality, community participation in management structures, and levels of access to safe water and sanitation. Strong monitoring systems can provide early warning signals for rapid decision-making and timely interventions, ultimately improving WASH outcomes across remote communities and in both rural and urban contexts.

2 It is important to strengthen cross-ministerial coordination to address ageing WASH infrastructure in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe should enhance institutional collaboration between the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water, and Rural Development, and the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. Robust collaboration among these ministries in planning, budgeting, and shared rehabilitation and monitoring systems is needed to ensure accountability and address the widespread deterioration of water and sanitation infrastructure.

3 To address WASH service inequalities in Ethiopia, the national government should prioritise addressing existing socio-economic disparities between urban and rural communities. Attention towards strengthening local WASH systems is needed in Ethiopia to improve access to underserved communities. This could be done through targeted funding for rural programs and improved coordination between national and rural authorities. Local civil society organisations could also play key roles in strengthening this collaboration.

4 There is a high need for Kenyan civil society organisations to scale up awareness campaigns on Community-Led Total Sanitation using methods that resonate with local communities, particularly the nomadic population. The government can support civil society by financing these campaigns and evaluating its overall effectiveness, particularly in communities with low CLTS awareness rates. This will improve the overall success in sanitation efforts and the sustainability of CLTS interventions.

Problem, Context & Background

The global water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) crisis remains a pressing concern, with over 2 billion people worldwide lacking access to safely managed drinking water and more than 3.6 billion people without safely managed sanitation.[1]

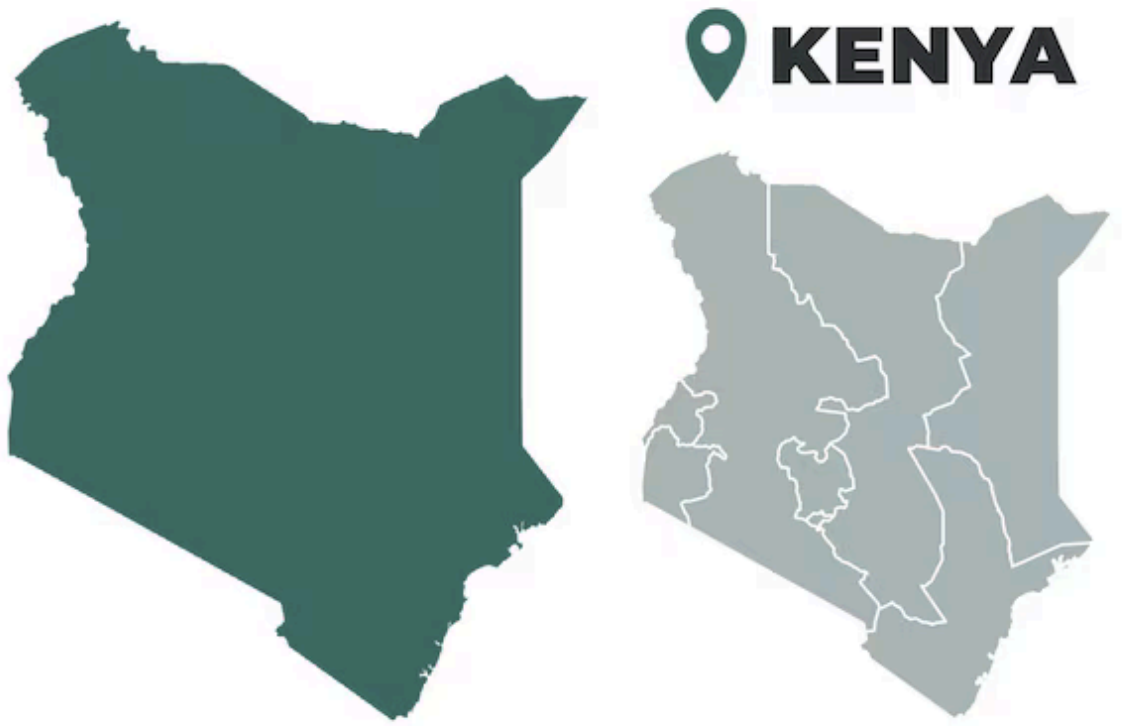
This situation remains severe in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where millions of people lack access to safe water and sanitation, a basic human right. This has resulted in widespread diseases, high child mortality, and persistent poverty.[2]

Progress towards access to safe and reliable water and sanitation systems in the region remains uneven despite global commitments under SDGs (6)[3] and continental recognition through the African Union's Agenda 2063.[4]

The African Union's February 2026 summit[5] anchored under the theme "Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063", underscores the urgency of translating commitments into tangible outcomes for communities across the continent. This policy brief focuses on four African countries: Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Ethiopia, to highlight key challenges, successes, and lessons learned in water and sanitation governance.

According to UNICEF, the WASH context in Cameroon is characterized by a growing population, urbanization, and the impacts of climate change, with significant disparities in basic access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services between urban and rural areas.[6] The same pattern of limited access and stark rural-urban disparities has been reported in Ethiopia.[7] In Kenya, community-led sanitation initiatives have demonstrated the potential of local engagement to improve access,[8] while in Zimbabwe, aging infrastructure and limited financing continue to undermine equitable water provision.[9] These cases illustrate both the opportunities and persistent barriers that African countries face, providing a strong foundation to examine what is working, what is not, and why in each context.

What Is Working and What Isn't in Kenya's Community-Led Sanitation Efforts



One of the persistent barriers to safe sanitation in Kenya is the continued practice of Open Defecation (OD). OD is the practice of defecating in open spaces.[10] This poses serious risks to child nutrition and public health, thus its elimination is a global priority explicitly articulated in SDG target 6.2.[11] An estimated 0.8 million households in Kenya still practice open defecation.[12] Faced with these challenges, Kenya adopted Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) as a core strategy to address persistent open defecation.[13] Originating in Bangladesh in the late 1990s, Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) emerged from Kamal Kar's evaluation of WaterAid Bangladesh and its local partner, the Village Education Resource Centre (VERC).[14] The approach was designed to shift sanitation interventions away from toilet construction and subsidies toward collective community action by directly confronting the social norms that sustain open defecation. In Kenya, research conducted in Kilifi and Marsabit indicates high CLTS awareness and a 42% increase in household sanitation facility ownership.[8]

Although CLTS has proven effective, its sustainability is challenged by sociocultural and institutional barriers. For example, a 2015 UNICEF Kenya study found that collapsed latrine pits were common and significantly contributed to households reverting to open defecation.[15] Among pastoral communities, the CLTS process may not always cause disgust, as long-term interaction with animal faecal matter makes the pastoralists less concerned about leaving human faecal matter in the open.[16]

Further, due to a lack of toilets along the way, open defecation is common among pastoralists moving with their animals.[16] Socio-cultural factors, such as taboos around same-toilet use by different family members, also hinder toilet utilization and CLTS adaptation.[16] While CLTS impacts are notable in Kenya, awareness raising, targeted solutions, and follow-ups are necessary for broader, more sustainable effects.[17]

Community members collecting water from a borehole in a rural area, Kenya, 2026 (location approximate) Photo credit: ITV News (original source), retrieved via secondary platform.

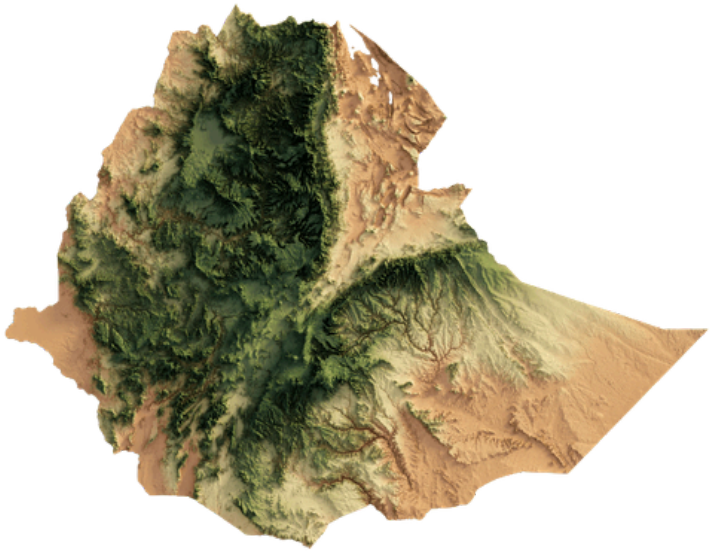
Ethiopia's One WASH National Programme (OWNP): Gains, and Persistent Gaps

Ethiopia has made important policy and institutional progress in strengthening water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) governance over the past decade. The One WASH National Programme (OWNP), launched in 2013 and reinforced under Phase II, established a coordinated, multi-sector framework linking the ministries responsible for water, health, education, and finance.[18] The programme aligns national WASH priorities with Sustainable Development Goals (#SDG 6) and continental commitments under Agenda 2063, reinforcing Ethiopia's commitment to universal and equitable access.[19]

With support from development partners, including the World Bank, Ethiopia has expanded rural water supply systems and climate-resilient WASH infrastructure. Between 2014 and 2021, more than 10 million people gained access to improved water and sanitation services through World Bank-supported initiatives.[18] These reforms reflect strengthened coordination, improved financing mechanisms, and growing attention to climate resilience.

Despite these gains, service delivery outcomes remain limited and unequal. According to UN-Water, only 14% of Ethiopia's population has access to water, while just 8% has access to safely managed sanitation.[20] Hygiene access remains critically low, with only 3% of households having basic handwashing facilities with soap and water.[20] Rural and peri-urban communities face the greatest disparities, reflecting structural inequalities in service provision.

In many areas, rural water systems experience frequent breakdowns due to limited spare-parts supply chains, weak technical capacity, and insufficient financing for long-term operation and maintenance.[21] These persistent gaps are driven by systemic and structural constraints. Rapid population growth, urbanization, climate variability, and recurrent droughts place increasing pressure on already stressed water resources.[22] The One WASH–Consolidated Account appraisal shows that while some utilities cover basic operating costs, they lack the revenue needed for rehabilitation and expansion, undermining sustainability.[21] Weak local capacity and uneven regional investment further limit equitable implementation. Thus, delivering on SDG 6 and advancing Agenda 2063 will require more financial investments and coordination at the national level in Ethiopia.



Infrastructure Decay Threatens Zimbabwe's WASH Delivery Despite Strong National Water Policy

Zimbabwe has established a relatively strong policy environment for water and sanitation. The National Water Policy and alignment with regional and continental commitments, including the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6), provide a clear strategic direction.[23]

The country has made some progress in water and sanitation over the past decade, particularly through policy frameworks and targeted community interventions. For example, UNICEF support has helped expand basic water services to over 574,000 people and 156 schools in 2024, through the construction of community boreholes.[24]

Despite these efforts, water and sanitation service delivery remains uneven and unreliable.[25] National access to basic drinking water remains around 64 percent, while access to basic sanitation is approximately 36 per cent.[24]

Hygiene coverage (handwashing with soap and water) is also low at 42 per cent, with strong disparities between urban (56 per cent) and rural (36 per cent) areas.[24] These figures lag well behind the targets set in national and international frameworks aimed at reducing inequalities and promoting health.[24] In cities such as Harare and Bulawayo, residents experience prolonged water rationing and increasing reliance on unsafe alternative water sources.[26] Even piped municipal water is frequently contaminated due to sewage pollution and failing treatment systems, making it unsafe for drinking and forcing many households to rely on boreholes or purchased water.[27] Chronic infrastructure decay and limited financing continue to undermine service delivery by the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA).[28] Decades of under-investment and deferred maintenance have left many urban and rural systems dysfunctional, with frequent breakdowns, intermittent supply, and significant water losses.[28]

Sanitation systems are particularly neglected, with aging sewer networks contributing to environmental pollution and recurrent outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.[28] The persistence of these challenges is largely driven by structural and systemic factors.[28] Chronic underinvestment in WASH infrastructure, compounded by economic instability, is affecting service delivery in many ways. This has been compounded by limited coordination across ministries and inadequate planning within the WASH sector in Zimbabwe.

The ongoing challenges of aging infrastructure, limited financing, and governance constraints mean that Zimbabwe's WASH sector remains fragile and inequitable, with service delivery often reactive rather than sustainable.[29] This situation increases public health risks, deepens inter-urban inequality in informal settlements, and slows progress toward universal access to safe water and sanitation. For WASH to become truly sustainable, Zimbabwe must prioritize long-term infrastructure rehabilitation, strengthened institutional coordination, and inclusive financing mechanisms that ensure reliable, equitable, and preventative service delivery rather than crisis-driven responses.

Conflict-Aggravated Water Service Failures in Remote Cameroon

Like most African countries, the issue of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) remains a critical development and public health priority in Cameroon. Cameroon recently adopted a new National Water Policy to strengthen its water and sanitation governance architecture and align delivery with SDG 6 targets on safe water and equitable access.[30] This policy direction is timely, but service realities remain uneven, especially in conflict-affected and remote municipalities such as Befua Menji and Nchenalleh in Lebialem Division, where the MBENDA communities continue to rely on fragile sources such as the Mbeboh spring.[31] Dry taps, damaged systems, and unsafe collection points illustrate the urgency of translating national policy commitments into functioning rural water services.[32]

Some progress is evident in what is working. Decentralised WASH programming in Cameroon, supported by development partners, has expanded access through borehole construction, rehabilitation of water points, and solar-powered systems in some areas.[33] Between 2022 and 2025, UNICEF-supported interventions provided improved drinking water access to more than 200,000 people, including projects in the conflict-ridden North-West and South-West regions of the country.[34] These models emphasize community-level systems, renewable energy pumping, and local management structures approaches well-suited to dispersed rural settlements such as those in Lebialem. National policy reforms now formally recognize decentralized service delivery and assign operational roles to municipal councils, creating an institutional entry point for scaling such models.[35] Community and Civil society initiatives have also piloted water governance structures in some parts of Cameroon, demonstrating local willingness to co-manage and maintain water points when technical and financial backing exists.

Despite recent policy frameworks and support from agencies such as UNICEF, water and sanitation service delivery remains inadequate across multiple communities. This is driven by deep-rooted structural and systemic factors, including prolonged conflict-related disruption in many communities, combined with the chronic under-investment in rural water infrastructure and limited capacity within municipal technical units.[36] Rebuilding resilient, protected, and locally managed water systems around priority sources in many parts of Cameroon, particularly in areas like Mbeboh in Befua and the GBHS Fontem source in Lebialem, for students is therefore both a recovery and a prevention imperative.

Furthermore, water supply in Cameroon continues to fall short due to widespread microbial contamination, inadequate protection of water points, and poor enforcement of basic safety standards, with over 90% of sources in some regions testing positive for coliforms.[37] These challenges are also compounded by weak infrastructure, unsafe proximity of latrines to water sources, and limited routine monitoring.[38] The above conditions have left many communities vulnerable to recurrent diarrheal and waterborne diseases. Addressing these gaps will require building more reliable and resilient rural water systems supported by strong community engagement and continuous oversight. While civil society organisations like the Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF) initiated promising community-led water management efforts as early as 2016 in some of the above remote areas, these gains were largely obstructed by the onset of violence in these communities.[39] The gradual return of residents in some of these conflict-affected communities underscores the need to rebuild and strengthen community water management systems in Cameroon.[40]

Conclusion

Sustainable WASH progress in Africa depends not only on strong policies but on effective implementation, resilient infrastructure, and community-driven solutions. Bridging urban–rural disparities, strengthening local systems, and investing in conflict-sensitive approaches are critical to translating SDG 6 and Agenda 2063 commitments into lasting impact. To achieve safe, equitable, and sustainable water and sanitation services, WASH stakeholders must shift from short-term interventions to resilient systems that communities can sustain over the long term.

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About the authors

This policy brief was prepared by researchers from the Real Life Research Institute – Africa Program.

Contact
info-africa@reallifeinstitute.org

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