

Climate-resilient WASH:

essential for
global stability



A Position Paper of the German WASH Network

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Abbreviations

BMZ	Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development
GFFO	German Federal Foreign Office
COP	Conference of the Parties
CVF	Climate Vulnerable Forum
EbA	Ecosystem-based Adaptation
ECT WASH	Environmentally Sound and Climate Resilient Transformation of Humanitarian WASH
GGA	Global Goal on Adaptation
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
IKI	International Climate Initiative
LDCs	Least Developed Countries
MHM	Menstrual Health Management
NAPs	National Adaptation Plans
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
NEAT+	Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Executive Summary

Rapidly intensifying climate change is accelerating the global water crisis, triggering far-reaching geopolitical impacts, public health risks and economic disruption. Against a backdrop of tightening finance, shrinking civic space and chronic underfunding of critical infrastructure, this new climate reality leaves vulnerable communities without the necessary resources and institutional support to withstand escalating impacts. Existing inequalities are exposed as the least resilient populations in low-income, fragile or humanitarian emergency settings – those who have contributed least to global emissions – are disproportionately affected. Rising climate-related water insecurity and the persistent failure to provide adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for billions of people are undermining global stability. Two-thirds of the world's population already live under conditions of recurring water scarcity. Competition over scarce water resources is increasingly driving social tensions, conflict, and displacement.

Integrating climate resilience into WASH programming and funding is necessary and achievable. Practical insights and field evidence from the German-funded *Environmentally Sound and Climate Resilient Transformation of Humanitarian WASH* project demonstrate effective, locally anchored strategies that are backed by the collective experience of the German WASH Network. Its members and partners are combining hands-on pragmatism with innovative solutions in some of the world's most challenging contexts. Vulnerabilities are turned into long-term collective resilience through inclusive and climate-sensitive WASH services.

Project design is enriched through participatory environmental screening via the Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) that raises vital community awareness of the water-climate connection. Infrastructure upgrades

are complemented with nature-based solutions, such as watershed or forest restoration. Beyond deploying cost-effective tools, interventions centre on systems strengthening. Water governance is transformed through previously underrepresented actors, such as women and youth, whose involvement enhances accountability, disaster preparedness and social cohesion.

Importantly, WASH is integrated across adjacent sectors to harness synergies. Investing in climate-resilient water systems for schools and healthcare facilities yields high returns. Food security is impossible without water security: reliable water access sustains agricultural production, while safe WASH supports food preparation and effective nutrition. In fragile contexts, projects are successfully operationalising the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to combine emergency response with sustainable infrastructure and resource management. Although often focusing on climate adaptation, interventions deliver significant co-benefits by adopting decarbonisation (e.g. solar pumping) and circular economy principles (e.g. nutrient recovery from treated wastewater and faecal sludge).

With the case for climate-resilient planning in the WASH sector clearly made, and compelling economic arguments for integrating water security into international climate policy, attention must now shift towards policy and financing frameworks. Current funding flows need recalibrating to prioritise the largest access gaps, channelling scarce financial resources to where they can be most effectively deployed for long-term, holistic benefit. Germany, like other countries, is reducing ODA, and contributions to international climate finance are declining. Funding conditionalities present hurdles for developing countries as well as local and civil society implementing partners looking to access climate finance. With the Agenda 2030 approaching, backing locally-led, climate-resilient WASH is essential to counter global water risks and ensure stability. Decisive and coordinated action is needed to secure universal access and climate-proof our shared future.

Policy Recommendations

The German WASH Network calls on the German Government and decision-makers in politics and finance to halt the downward trend in funding for development cooperation and humanitarian aid and to provide greater support for climate-resilient, inclusive and sustainably funded WASH service systems. As a champion of universal basic services and the human rights to water and sanitation, Germany should leverage its role as an influential donor in international climate policy and finance to ensure water and sanitation are understood and supported as vital adaptation measures and to prioritise *leaving no one behind*.

Actively use the UN Water Conference and multilateral processes to embed water across all policy areas and global frameworks

Firmly integrate water into all climate processes and Rio Conventions by embedding water security as a crosscutting theme in the Joint Liaison Group and related workstreams. Participation should include all stakeholders and ensure representation of marginalised groups to reflect the interconnected nature of the crisis.

Accelerate implementation of the Global Goal on Adaptation for Water and its robust indicator framework through the systematic incorporation and dedicated financing of climate-resilient WASH.

Use the Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action to ensure continuous cooperation between COPs and sustained high-level political accountability.

Provide targeted support to governments through technical cooperation and concessional financing instruments for the integration of climate-resilient water and sanitation services in National Adaptation Plans and Nationally Determined Contributions, with a particular focus on the most marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Anchor WASH in climate policy, financing and programme design

Adopt a cross-ministerial implementation framework for climate-resilient WASH to align climate, development and humanitarian policies and funding mechanisms. This should clearly integrate anticipatory action, humanitarian assistance, recovery and long-term service systems strengthening as well as water resources management and ecosystem restoration. Introducing resilience standards would activate the adaptation and mitigation potential of WASH services.

Recognise WASH as an operational pillar of integrated German foreign, development and security policy, especially in fragile and climate-vulnerable contexts.

Substantially increase the budgets for development cooperation and humanitarian aid to return the share of WASH funding in German overseas development assistance to 10%, with greater emphasis on civil society projects.

Improve least developed countries' access to climate finance to scale low-emission WASH solutions, while expanding adaptation funding for countries with limited mitigation potential.

Establish 'leave no one behind' as a guiding principle for climate resilience projects

Prioritise achieving universal basic services, inclusion and the progressive elimination of inequalities by aligning strategies, focus countries and funding conditions to channel support towards most urgent needs, such as least developed countries and fragile states.

Uphold solidarity with people in need and counter the drastic global cuts in humanitarian funding by returning German humanitarian aid to at least EUR 2 billion, with a minimum budget for crisis management, reconstruction and infrastructure of EUR 1 billion.

Publish disaggregated project data to transparently demonstrate progress on "leave no one behind".

Scale up locally led approaches to climate-resilient system strengthening

Consistently align projects aimed at increasing the climate resilience of WASH systems with contextual needs, risk profiles and the lived experience of target populations.

Recognise and support local actors as key partners in system strengthening: simplify access to reliable funding for local organisations, small-scale operators and civil society actors, and provide capacity-building support for planning, implementation and monitoring.

Integrate WASH, nutrition, health and education across project funding and implementation stages by systematically institutionalising cross-sectoral cooperation at the local level.

Our Findings: From Practice to Policy

1. Climate Resilience Won't Wash Without Water

There are few phrases as universally agreed upon as “water is life”, which is now joined by recognition of the climate crisis as a water crisis. Widely propagated by governments, businesses and civil society, this reflects a broad consensus on climate change as a disruptor of our way of life. Yet as the changing global climate is increasingly experienced through prolonged droughts and catastrophic flooding, the focus on water security reveals ever-growing disparities. Wealthy countries are proactively investing in “climate-proofing”, with utilities scrambling to protect essential water and wastewater systems. Yet in other parts of the world, billions of people still go entirely without safe and reliable services, let alone climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Despite global pledges to *leave no one behind*, inadequate WASH remains an everyday hardship for more than two fifths of the global population. As ever, a disproportionate share of this burden falls on people who are already disadvantaged. In a bitter paradox, the world's poorest and most vulnerable, who have contributed little to the water-climate crisis, are finding themselves on the frontline of its impacts. Where WASH infrastructure is weak and governance fragile, climate change quickly becomes an existential emergency for individuals and entire communities.

As the adverse effects of climate change are becoming tangible, it is encouraging to note ongoing efforts to operationalise inclusive, climate-resilient WASH. Though the sustainable development goals (SDGs) seem precariously out of reach, water is widely acknowledged as the “blue thread” running through the international development agenda. Germany has been a leading champion of cross-sectoral solutions to achieve the WASH-related SDGs. An ambitious programme to integrate water and climate in domestic policy is complemented by a commitment to strengthening resilience worldwide. There is, however, room for improvement in coordinating water security with climate funding and action in support of aspirations for sustainable and equitable development.

Background

Environmentally Sound and Climate Resilient Transformation of Humanitarian WASH (ECT WASH) is a EUR 12 million global project, primarily funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund, arche nova, the German Toilet Organization and national partners across 13 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Central America (2023–2026).

ECT WASH combines the adaptation of WASH services to the local climate and social context with disaster preparedness, early warning systems and anticipatory action. Through the integration of the Green Humanitarian Approach, the project seeks not only to reduce vulnerability but also minimise environmental harm and support long-term resilience. Activities centre on close collaboration between international and local organisations, authorities and, most importantly, communities. ECT WASH features strong capacity building and knowledge sharing elements that promote and draw on genuinely co-created, locally-led and sustainable solutions to advancing universal access to safe WASH.

However, on a global scale, this work is increasingly hampered by a volatile geopolitical context and drastic funding cuts. International tensions and market instability are the backdrop to the “triple planetary crisis”, where climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss mutually reinforce water insecurity. Recent reductions and strategic shifts in official development assistance (ODA) have widened an enormous WASH financing gap. Amidst fiscal tightening, the external funding landscape for WASH, and humanitarian WASH in particular, remains insufficient and uncertain. High-risk environments seldom attract the private investment and market-oriented resource mobilisation promoted to bridge this gap, leaving least developed and fragile countries in the Global South particularly exposed. Though new “green” climate-related funding sources are emerging, their complexity and stringent conditions often place them out of reach of the most vulnerable countries.

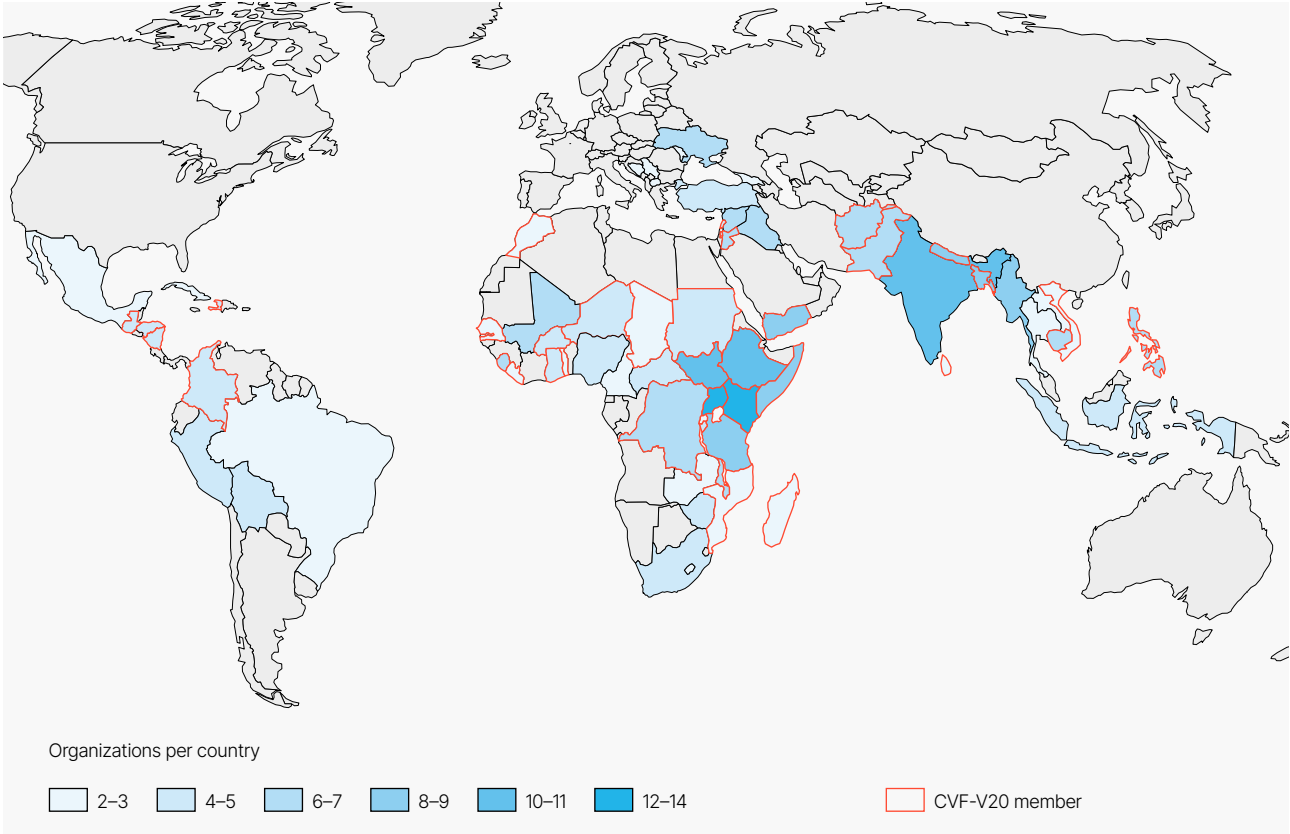
Sustaining and scaling initiatives that move the WASH-climate nexus from concept to operational reality requires stronger integration of climate and WASH in policy and investment frameworks. This position paper is more than yet another call to recognise climate-resilient WASH as central to human development. It is a plea to remember that universal WASH is essential for a safer tomorrow – at home and around the globe. Navigating the final years of the Agenda 2030 offers an opportunity to redouble efforts to anchor water in international climate governance and shape future priorities. Drawing on insights from the ECT WASH project, this paper highlights tried-and-tested solutions for climate-resilient WASH. Crucially, it outlines how better policy can support the vital work of the German WASH Network and its partners in challenging climate and low-resource settings.



Solar-powered pumps fill storage tanks that ensure a continuous supply of water in Mali – both during the day and after dark.

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arche nova/Fairpicture

World map visualising the German WASH Network's global engagement (blue), simultaneously highlighting project countries' membership (red border) in the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF).



2. Climate-proofing WASH

Climate has always been a design parameter for water infrastructure, with variables such as temperature and precipitation patterns determining the choice of materials and technologies to store, treat and transport water and wastewater. For decades, engineers could look to the past as a reliable guide to the future. This traditional approach to planning based on historical climate averages and 1-in-100 year events is no longer fit for purpose. An increasing but unpredictable frequency and severity of droughts, floods and storms, along with slow-onset changes such as sea-level rise, now require systems to cope with too much, too little and deteriorating quality of water. Water supply and sanitation are tied to ecosystems like no other utility: drinking water draws on surface and groundwater resources, whilst sanitation systems return waste to the environment. By interfering with global water and nutrient cycles, climate change upsets the ecosystems that sustain WASH services.

The WASH sector has joined the “race to resilience”: services must continue to function to protect public health, whatever the conditions, and be quickly restored in the event of disruption – all whilst minimising pollution and preserving ecosystems. Vulnerable communities are the first to suffer when prolonged dry seasons restrict the availability of water in the home, heavy rainfall releases pathogens from inundated sanitation facilities or saltwater intrusion into aquifers renders water undrinkable. Least developed countries (LDCs) continue to bear the brunt when climate-driven disasters strike and destroy critical WASH infrastructure.¹

Beyond the headlines about humanitarian emergencies and ecological tipping points, the insidious pressure climate change exerts on broader social and environmental systems is as, if not more, significant: water stress is on the rise, heightening tensions between user groups and stoking unrest. Social and economic upheaval resulting from ecological degradation can cause a precipitous decline in access to WASH. Forced displacement, whether due to climate or conflict, inevitably separates displaced people from services previously enjoyed, while protracted and recurrent crises also create challenges for host communities. Climate change increases the technical complexity of providing WASH infrastructure for the most vulnerable population groups. Whilst resilient, flood-proof and drought-adapted infrastructure requires higher initial investment, it brings significant long-term benefits by reducing losses, damage and reconstruction costs.²

75 % of the world's population lives in countries classified as water-insecure

Source:

UNU, 2026. [Global Water Bankruptcy Report](#)

¹ WMO, 2023

² WaterAid, 2021

The sector is stepping up efforts to anticipate, absorb and adapt to a changing risk landscape. Climate considerations are beginning to feature prominently in WASH programming and interventions to extend access to underserved communities as well as the humanitarian response to emergencies and disaster.³ Strengthening the systems⁴ that underpin effective service delivery remains a key objective as climate resilience is being integrated into governance, financing and monitoring.

The emerging consensus on climate-resilient WASH

“Climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene services anticipate, respond to, cope with, recover from, adapt to or transform based on climate-related events and trends – all while striving to achieve and maintain universal and equitable access to safely managed services, minimizing emissions where appropriate, and paying special attention to the most exposed and vulnerable groups.”

— Sanitation and Water for All
Climate Task Team —

This definition, widely endorsed by sector professionals and already applied by some governments, centres on “integrating adaptation, mitigation and sustainable development across human and natural systems”. It connects responsible authorities, providers, users and wider society with water-related ecosystems and infrastructure. Recommended as a framework for modernising WASH policies, it centres on systems strengthening to address current shortfalls in accounting for climate risks and the need to introduce climate-resilient service delivery.

In contexts where ECT WASH, the German WASH Network and their partners operate, resilience begins with local ownership, collective decision-making and community action. Where climate stress, fragile systems and prolonged resource constraints converge, technical adaptations that enable infrastructure to withstand weather extremes are not enough. Solutions that endure beyond project lifespans must be shaped and carried by the community using them. With the right support, innovation and hands-on pragmatism are turning vulnerabilities into collective resilience.

Humanitarian WASH programmes need to adapt to the negative effects of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of people living in regions affected by conflicts and disasters. Oxfam, with funding support from GFFO, has developed twelve guidance notes on a wide range of climate change adaptations relevant to the WASH sector in humanitarian settings. The Guidance on thematic topics such as integrated and community-based water resources management, groundwater infrastructure resilience, or the programmatic response to extreme heat are intended to support WASH implementing agencies to consider climate risks and how they might adapt WASH programming in response to those risks.⁵

³ Two widely used references for mainstreaming climate resilience into WASH programming are the 2022 GWP/UNICEF Strategic Framework for WASH Climate Resilient Development and the German WASH Network's 2024 WASH Triple Nexus Joint Operational Framework. The latter specifically addresses the operational and institutional realities of WASH in humanitarian and fragile contexts.

⁴ Systems strengthening is all about context – social, economic, political and environmental: it is this rather complex interplay of behaviours, policies, processes, resources, interactions and institutions (the ‘system’) that determines whether and to what extent access to services becomes sustainable and inclusive.

⁵ Oxfam, Technical Briefs on Climate Change Adaptation.

In Practice: Environmental screening for community-led, resilient solutions



© Alren Beronio/ACCORD



For elderly residents of villages in Southern Leyte, Philippines, household rainwater harvesting has eased the daily burden of carrying water over difficult terrain and traveling long distances to collect it. By diversifying their water sources, these communities are also strengthening their resilience to climate-related water shortages.

ECT WASH facilitated inclusive dialogue spaces that enabled local authorities and communities to identify risks, mobilise resources and sustain services. The Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+) was introduced as a simple project-level tool for rapid environmental screening in remote areas, along with training and translation into local languages as needed.

in Kachin State, a region in Myanmar plagued by frequent clashes and supply chain disruptions, trained field teams engaged with community members, local leaders, and camp committees to find community-driven WASH solutions aligned with environmental and community needs. Despite difficult conditions, this approach proved transformative for the project design. Using NEAT+ also encouraged environmental awareness and community readiness to protect local ecosystems and WASH services.

In the Philippines, NEAT+ guided the installation of household, communal and evacuation-centre rainwater harvesting systems in disaster-prone areas. Participatory consultations identified strategic locations with limited access to clean water, to enhance both everyday water access and emergency preparedness. A full tank equipped with accessibility features offers protection for all members of the community to wait out the next typhoon.

In Practice: Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) – nature-based solutions for resilience



Women in Forgho, Mali, supported through arche nova, are turning dry land into thriving vegetable gardens—growing healthy, nutritious food for their families and strengthening resilience in their community.

©Tiecoura N'Daou/arche nova/Fairpicture

Ecosystem services and solutions found in nature – conserving and restoring wetlands, forests and watersheds – can be used to protect and enhance water quantity and quality. EbA complements conventional “grey” infrastructure with “green” alternatives to create low-regret, cost-effective and sustainable climate adaptation pathways.

In the Malian village of Kosseye, the management committee of the newly installed water points reinvested a portion of collected tariffs to plant 200 trees around schools and community spaces. Though inspired by ECT WASH, this nature-based initiative shows how the community has embraced and acted on the link between water access, climate resilience and environmental restoration. EbA examples can be found across the German WASH Network, such as Welthungerhilfe deploying catchment protection and nature-based flood controls in Uganda, Tajikistan and the Caribbean.

In Practice: Lasting change starts with small steps



Agroclimatic volunteers in Nicaragua collect rainfall data to strengthen early warning systems and support disaster risk reduction.

© Olmedo Morales / ASB Latin America

In Nicaragua, ECT WASH engages youth through the Agroclimatic Youth Network, which uses simple and ubiquitous technologies to enhance climate monitoring and early warning systems. Ashley, a teenage girl from Las Chácaras, shares daily rain gauge readings with her community via WhatsApp. The project installed a simple gauge and provided training, but it is Ashley's commitment that allows her family and neighbours make informed decisions about their water supply, crops and safety. One message at a time, she is building a picture of water availability. Understanding the weather has transformed the community's preparedness for climate challenges. People can be put on alert of impending flooding, and farmers are better placed to plan and protect their crops.



In Practice: Transforming water governance



© OWDA



Students in Kaabada Galbeed Village in Somaliland use newly constructed school latrines, providing girls and boys with safe, appropriate, and accessible sanitation facilities. Built by OWDA in collaboration with arche nova, the facilities address the school's previous lack of dedicated latrines for girls and support a healthier, more inclusive learning environment.



© Welthungerhilfe

Climate-resilient WASH can serve as a catalyst for strengthening women's leadership and participation in water governance – and vice versa. In Somaliland, women assumed key roles in managing water distribution and infrastructure maintenance through ECT WASH. Beyond securing long-term sustainability of services, they drew other women into local governance and encouraged girls to shape safer and more accessible school sanitation facilities. In many Latin American projects, women became committed champions for WASH and disaster preparedness. Water governance was transformed in Bundelkhand, India, through the *Jal Saheli* – 'friends of water' – movement. Supported by Parmarth and Welthungerhilfe, the women in sky-blue saris have taken on water resource management, restoring traditional systems and engaging in decision-making forums at all levels.

3. WASH: A Superconnector and Pillar of Resilience

Universal access to WASH is essential for sustainable development and increasingly recognized as a “superconnector” capable of accelerating progress across all 17 SDGs.⁶ Water security is also recognized as a stabilising factor in fragile contexts. Inclusive WASH services can help ease tensions between host communities and populations affected by displacement and forced migration, contributing to peace, social cohesion and resilience.

Applying a systems strengthening lens highlights key touchpoints between sectors. Climate stress amplifies the impact of inadequate WASH on public health, nutrition, education and livelihoods. Especially in crisis-affected regions and emergency settings, there is significant scope for further development and closer integration with adjacent or complementary sectors such as energy and health – work that requires strategic investment and concerted action.⁷

The intersection of WASH and health illustrates how climate hazards exacerbate stacked population vulnerabilities. Contaminated water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene remain major drivers of preventable diseases, such as typhoid and cholera. Diarrhoeal disease still claims over 1 million lives annually, including more than 443,000 children under five.⁸ Climate change accelerates transmission by creating ideal conditions for pathogens and vectors to thrive, while flooded sanitation systems contribute to the spread of antimicrobial resistance, a rising global health threat.⁹ Beyond microbial risks, climate-driven hydrological shifts concentrate natural and synthetic pollutants, adding to long-term health impacts as water scarcity forces people to use unsafe water.

As climate change is driving the overall prevalence of infectious diseases, climate-resilient WASH underpins healthcare systems by breaking disease transmission pathways, reducing exposure to contamination and enabling effective infection control. This health connection provides a compelling argument for accelerating WASH in LDCs and fragile settings where health systems are weakest. As recent global health crises have made unmistakably clear, health cannot be separated from WASH, nor can it be left to individual countries or communities.

Nutrition connects WASH, health and food, with young children again most at risk. Ingestion of faecal pathogens and repeated diarrhoeal infections severely compromise nutrient absorption during the critical “first 1,000 days”, triggering chronic cycles of malnutrition and impaired gut health. Beyond early childhood, safe

⁶ UN Water, 2026

⁷ Bastable et al. 2025

⁸ WHO, 2024

⁹ Aslam and Aljasir, 2025

water and hygiene are indispensable wherever food is prepared and consumed, including in schools. At the systemic level, water insecurity coexists with food insecurity; linkages exist along the farm-to-fork journey no matter the destination, though low-income settings are particularly exposed. Declining water resources and rising fertiliser costs encourage the unregulated reuse of wastewater and faecal sludge, potentially introducing pathogens long before food reaches the plate. With climate pressures degrading irrigation and drinking water alike, agricultural productivity and ultimately the quality and availability of food are at risk. As the water-energy-food-environment nexus suggests, safeguarding water sources and scaling climate-resilient WASH are most effective in combination.

WASH also directly underpins **livelihoods, education and gender equality**. Too many women and children, especially girls, still sacrifice hours each day fetching water. Additional millions of school and work days are lost each year due to water-related illnesses, whilst period poverty and poor sanitation facilities act as deterrents the world over, as studies from Germany confirm.¹⁰ Beyond attendance, inadequate school WASH facilities severely impair health and learning outcomes. Integrating clean drinking water, hand hygiene and dignified sanitation into initiatives such as school meals programmes¹¹, is essential to ensure children stay hydrated, follow a healthy diet and adopt effective hygiene routines that support their growth and learning. Besides being gateways to knowledge and education, schools are also social spaces where inclusive, culturally and gender-appropriate facilities can foster healthy habits that spread into the wider community. WASH interventions must now also integrate climate resilience to protect against environmental disruptions.¹²

At the household and community levels, reliable WASH not only unlocks productive hours and reduces workplace absenteeism in offices and factories; it often kickstarts small businesses. Given the widespread absence of municipal services, the WASH sector itself has always sustained entrepreneurship, such as water vending and pit emptying in low-income areas. Formalised services can become a driver of secure **employment and economic growth**, with the sector offering skilled jobs and strong career prospects across engineering, operations and management. With two-thirds of global jobs dependent on water, a proportion rising to nearly 80 % in lower-income countries¹³, WASH becomes an investment in human capital, gender equality and economic stability.

¹⁰ GTO, 2023

¹¹ BMZ and WFP, 2025; Radovan, R.A. et al. 2026

¹² UNICEF and GIZ, 2025

¹³ UNESCO, 2024

Exacerbated by climate change and environmental decline, unequal access to WASH exposes existing inequalities, fuelling social unrest and undermining trust in institutions. Against this rising uncertainty, water emerges as a blue thread that weaves together previously siloed yet fundamentally interconnected sectors. In fragile contexts – home to more than two billion people and a huge proportion of the world's extreme poor¹⁴ – climate vulnerability shines the spotlight on gaps between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts.

The Humanitarian Development Peace Nexus seeks to bridge immediate crisis response with long-term infrastructure and resource management, strengthening services and social cohesion. In recurrent or protracted crises, acute emergency responses like water trucking can often become a high-cost, environmentally burdensome “new normal” due to insecurity, weak institutions and short funding cycles. This lowers community resilience to future shocks. To ensure service continuity under climate stress, enabling an early transition from emergency delivery to sustainable, locally anchored service models is essential.

Climate change and persistent gaps in achieving the WASH-related SDGs are behind renewed efforts to harness cross-sectoral synergies. Weighing co-benefits and trade-offs is no longer optional if we want to avoid unintended consequences and prevent maladaptation. Communities are actively adopting systems thinking, integrating their WASH needs with watershed management, agriculture, health and urban planning, collaborating with other stakeholders across sectors as much as policy frameworks and external conditionalities allow.

¹⁴ OECD, 2025

In Practice: Strengthening hospital resilience through reliable water access in Somaliland



© OWDA

Residents near the Baligubadle borehole in Somaliland's Hawd Region, now benefit from a reliable water supply powered by solar energy. The shift from diesel to solar provides a more sustainable and dependable source of water for the surrounding community.

Breaking free from trucked water was a game changer for Baligubadle Hospital in Somaliland. Persistent drought and unreliable delivery schedules had turned essential community healthcare services into an exercise in crisis management: the lack of water impaired critical maternity and inpatient care. To build climate resilience amidst rising demand, the hospital partnered with ECT WASH to install a reliable water system with sufficient on-site storage. Senior managers helped plan and coordinate technical works to realise their vision of safe, continuous and high-quality healthcare. The project has transformed the hospital's capability to function despite environmental stress: water shortages are much less likely to interrupt medical services, and the financial strain from emergency water purchases has eased. Today, the hospital maintains consistent hygiene standards, allowing staff to concentrate on delivering timely care without a second thought about water.

In Practice: Drip irrigation builds resilience in Honduras

In El Pintadillo, Honduras, smallholder farmers struggling with unreliable weather installed drip irrigation. Hands-on technical training through ECT WASH guided the group from initial assembly to ongoing upkeep, ensuring operational independence. With seasonal rains no longer dictating planting schedules, the new system significantly improved crop yields, and surplus produce was shared between families. Beyond food security, the mutual support network now sustains collective resilience against climatic risks.

Farmers in Marcovia, Honduras, can achieve higher yields during dry periods by using drip irrigation, while also reducing their water consumption.



© Olmedo Morales/
ASB Latin America



In Practice: Menstrual Health as a catalyst for gender equality, inclusion and empowerment



Disability-inclusive menstrual hygiene training by the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) Bangladesh: entrepreneurs learn to produce and promote reusable sanitary pads in their communities.

© CDD

Across Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Myanmar, ECT WASH integrated menstrual health management (MHM) into school WASH improvements and community outreach. Pairing hardware, such as private, MHM-friendly school toilets, with engaging behaviour-change education aimed at girls and boys created supportive school environments that boost attendance. Outside the classroom, women were encouraged to launch businesses selling reusable menstrual products.

This broader vision of MHM as a catalyst for gender equality and inclusion of female voices has impacts for community resilience far beyond WASH. Through the projects, women, including women with disabilities, emerged as confident leaders, facilitators and entrepreneurs – ready to handle the challenges the future will undoubtedly bring.

© ASB S-SEA



The ECT WASH project team in Indonesia empowers primary school students with knowledge on menstrual health.

In Practice: The humanitarian-development-peace nexus in action



© Malteser International



© Malaika Media / Malteser International

Solar-powered borehole providing reliable access to safe water for communities in Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement, Uganda, while promoting sustainable and clean energy solutions.

In Uganda's Rhino Camp refugee settlement, Malteser International deployed solar-powered boreholes instead of relying on water trucking or diesel generators during the initial humanitarian response. Designed to meet national standards for future government handover, this uncommon emergency intervention reduced greenhouse gas emissions, cut operational costs and established a more sustainable water supply system from the outset.

Subsequent BMZ-funded development projects capitalised on these humanitarian investments: run-off gardens and tree nurseries used excess supply from water points, transforming emergency WASH into a foundation for improved livelihoods, natural resource management and climate resilience. Complementary development funding enabled the training of maintenance technicians, while local governance was strengthened to integrate human, animal and environmental health management under the "One Health" approach.

Crucially, refugee and host communities jointly planned services and engaged in dialogue on WASH, climate change and peaceful coexistence through community theatre. Supported by parallel humanitarian, transitional and development funding, this seamless nexus approach avoided support gaps to deliver lasting climate resilience.

4. Beyond Adaptation: WASH in the Age of Net Zero

The climate response in WASH so far has largely focused on adaptation – preparing for unavoidable impacts to protect infrastructure, ecosystems and lives. Looking to the future, however, adaptation and mitigation must go hand in hand, especially in wastewater and faecal sludge management. Sanitation accounts for some 1.3 % of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, comparable to the aviation sector, though with an out-sized and rising contribution of potent methane and nitrous oxide emissions.¹⁵ At a more local level, sanitation service chains may be responsible for as much as half of a city's total emissions,¹⁶ highlighting the enormous mitigation potential of improving poorly managed sanitation systems.

Emissions trajectories and future climate resilience will depend heavily on the choice of sanitation technologies and their water and energy footprints. Moving 419 million people, five times the entire population of Germany, away from open defecation¹⁷ presents a unique opportunity to build in long-term sustainability and climate mitigation from the outset. Simultaneously, water and wastewater operations, which consume around 4 % of global electricity,¹⁸ hold immense potential for decarbonisation, energy efficiency and circular economy integration. Without mitigation, carbon emissions may continue to rise as intensifying water scarcity forces a heavier reliance on energy-intensive solutions such as desalination and treated wastewater reuse.

Switching to renewable energy sources offers a win-win scenario by cutting GHG emissions while making WASH services more resilient to volatile energy markets and power cuts. Promising low-emission options exist for seweraged wastewater as well as decentralised sanitation. Nature-based biological treatments use plants and soil to process waste without energy-intensive mechanical aeration. Some systems operate completely without water, preventing the high methane emissions from anaerobic storage. Additionally, resource recovery and waste-to-energy technologies capture emissions as biogas, while repurposing treated sludge and effluent as cost-efficient and sustainable sources of energy, nutrients and irrigation water.

Mitigation strategies, like all context-dependent implementations, need to be tailored to circumstances. As over 90% of humanitarian assistance is delivered in protracted crises, where long-term interventions have significant environmental and climate impacts, the integration of climate-smart and resource-efficient WASH solutions is becoming essential across the entire sector, extending well beyond the transition to development.¹⁹ Guided by the “do no harm” principle and always aiming to “build back better”, the Green Humanitarian Approach seeks to minimise contributions to climate change alongside emergency response and recovery operations.

¹⁵ Lambiasi et al. 2024

¹⁶ Johnson et al. 2022

¹⁷ WHO & UNICEF, no date

¹⁸ ALNAP, 2024

Saving lives and saving carbon

The Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations is designed to guide the humanitarian sector in responding to growing climate-related crises through commitments to scale up climate adaptation efforts, reduce environmental footprints, support local leadership and collaborate to protect vulnerable communities through ambitious climate and environmental action.

Since signing the Charter, organizations implementing ECT WASH have moved from acknowledging climate change as a contextual risk to embedding environmental accountability into all of its operations. Without ever compromising on life-saving rapid responses, carbon emissions are duly considered alongside operational efficiency in all procurement and logistics decisions.

In Practice: Clean, "green" access to safe water

Through the ECT WASH project, a solar-powered water pumping system was installed to serve the villages of Chan and Kherbet El Jendi in Akkar, Lebanon, providing access to water for approximately 4,200 people, including 120 Syrian refugees

In Lebanon, installing a solar-powered water pumping system revolutionised access to clean water, ensuring a reliable, cost-effective and environmentally sustainable solution for over 4,000 residents in Chan and Khirbet El Jered. Replacing diesel pumps with high-efficiency solar panels eliminated power outage disruptions and cut operational costs by 60%, while reducing emissions and supporting national climate commitments.

Solar-powered water supply is also changing lives for the better in Luqdhare, an Ethiopian village near the Somali border. Historically prone to flooding, in recent years the nearby Shabelle River has seen some of the most intense and prolonged drought conditions in the Horn of Africa. With the new low-maintenance, low-emission water system, ECT WASH brought safe water close to homes, eliminating the daily risk of facing crocodile attacks when fetching water from the river.



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In Practice: In sanitation, climate-resilience and cost-effectiveness go hand in hand



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In Mali, BORDA helped construct decentralised faecal sludge treatment plants. Conceived as demonstration projects, the new facilities marked a significant step towards safe sanitation and climate resilience by treating excreta to applicable safety standards. The designs incorporated sludge dewatering and co-composting to recycle waste into an affordable, environmentally friendly alternative to chemical fertilisers. Confirmed safe in independent testing, this compost also acts as a soil improver. Additionally, site staff are piloting the use of treated effluent to irrigate on-site banana plantations. Maximising the resale and reuse of sanitation end products is not just good for the environment; it supports the financial sustainability of operations.

A sludge treatment plant and composting system in Diouila and Ségou, Mali, turn human waste into a valuable resource while empowering local teams with the skills to operate and maintain the system.



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5. Anchoring Resilience: Climate-smart WASH Policy and Finance

Climate change is already placing severe pressure on the WASH sector. Extreme weather disrupts and destroys infrastructure, contaminates water resources and raises operational costs. At its worst, it can trigger service collapse, population displacement and catastrophic losses. Extreme weather events remain the top long-term threat in the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report – a position that has been held by climate-related risks for most of the last decade. The latest edition of the report warns that indirect consequences such as service failure may far exceed the direct effects of climate events.¹⁸

There is now a clear economic imperative to embed water security in international climate policy and finance. Yet despite the critical role of WASH as both catalyst and foundation for sustainable development, water and wastewater received only 2.25% of the USD 2 trillion invested globally in climate action in 2024. Mitigation finance in the sector rose by 52% in 2024, albeit from a low base and concentrated in a small number of large-scale projects in China and Latin America. Finance for adaptation remains “vital yet insufficient”, requiring “transformative scaling” to prevent the worst losses and harness its economic benefits.¹⁹

Only a small fraction of the USD 45 billion allocated for adaptation and mitigation in WASH reaches countries with the largest access gaps, including LDCs, where people are twice as likely to lack safely managed drinking water and sanitation.²⁰ None of the 14 priority countries of Germany's International Climate Initiative (IKI) are LDCs, and only Ukraine is a fragile or conflict-affected country. With 80% of bilateral IKI funding earmarked for these priority countries by 2030, the vast majority of support will go towards countries with a 96% average rate of access to basic water services.²¹ This skew is mirrored in the current development WASH portfolio, where just 15% of total Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) funding goes to LDCs.²²

¹⁹ WEF, 2026. Incidentally, inequality ranks as the “most interconnected global risk” in the 2025–2026 Global Risks Perception Survey.

²⁰ Climate Policy Initiative, 2026

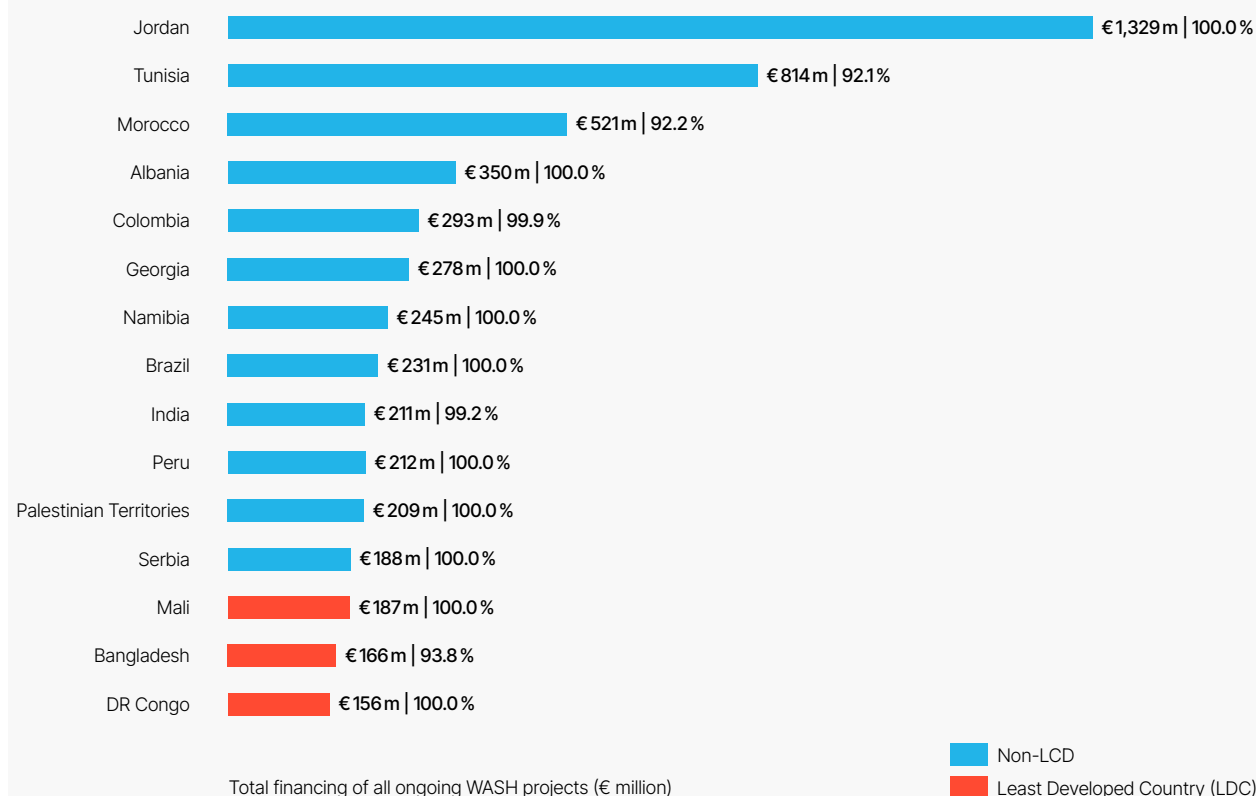
²¹ WHO and UNICEF, 2025a

²² WHO and UNICEF, 2025b

²³ BMZ Transparenzportal, 2026: IATI Data – ongoing projects water, wastewater, waste

TOP 15 Partner Countries of German WASH Development Cooperation

% labels show the share of each country's total financing carrying a climate marker



Top 15 partner countries of German development assistance for water, sanitation and waste interventions. At EUR 1.32bn, Jordan alone receives a larger share than all LDCs combined (1.24bn). Source data: IATI project database, Transparenzportal, BMZ 2026.

Funding patterns clearly contradict political rhetoric on eliminating inequalities. Germany has dropped its 0.7 % ODA / GNI target, with the 2025 coalition agreement foreseeing an “appropriate reduction” in aid. Humanitarian aid in particular faces severe shortfalls. Donor funding cuts following the dismantling of USAID left 78 % of WASH needs unmet in 2025, despite its recognition as a life-saving priority.²³ Germany followed suit by cutting its humanitarian budget by 53 % between 2024 and 2025. Germany's transitional assistance has been halved since its peak of EUR 1.4 billion in 2022.

The 2026 federal budget is also projected to fall short of the pledged EUR 6 billion towards international climate finance commitments.²⁴ Contrary to the growth path agreed at the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Azerbaijan, Germany's contributions are on a downward trend. Trust and credibility are at stake, not to mention climate justice.

Global ODA commitments and disbursements for WASH have been in decline, and current funding flows remain far below what is needed to close the WASH financing gap.²⁵ Achieving SDG 6.1 on safe water and SDG 6.2 on sanitation and hygiene is estimated

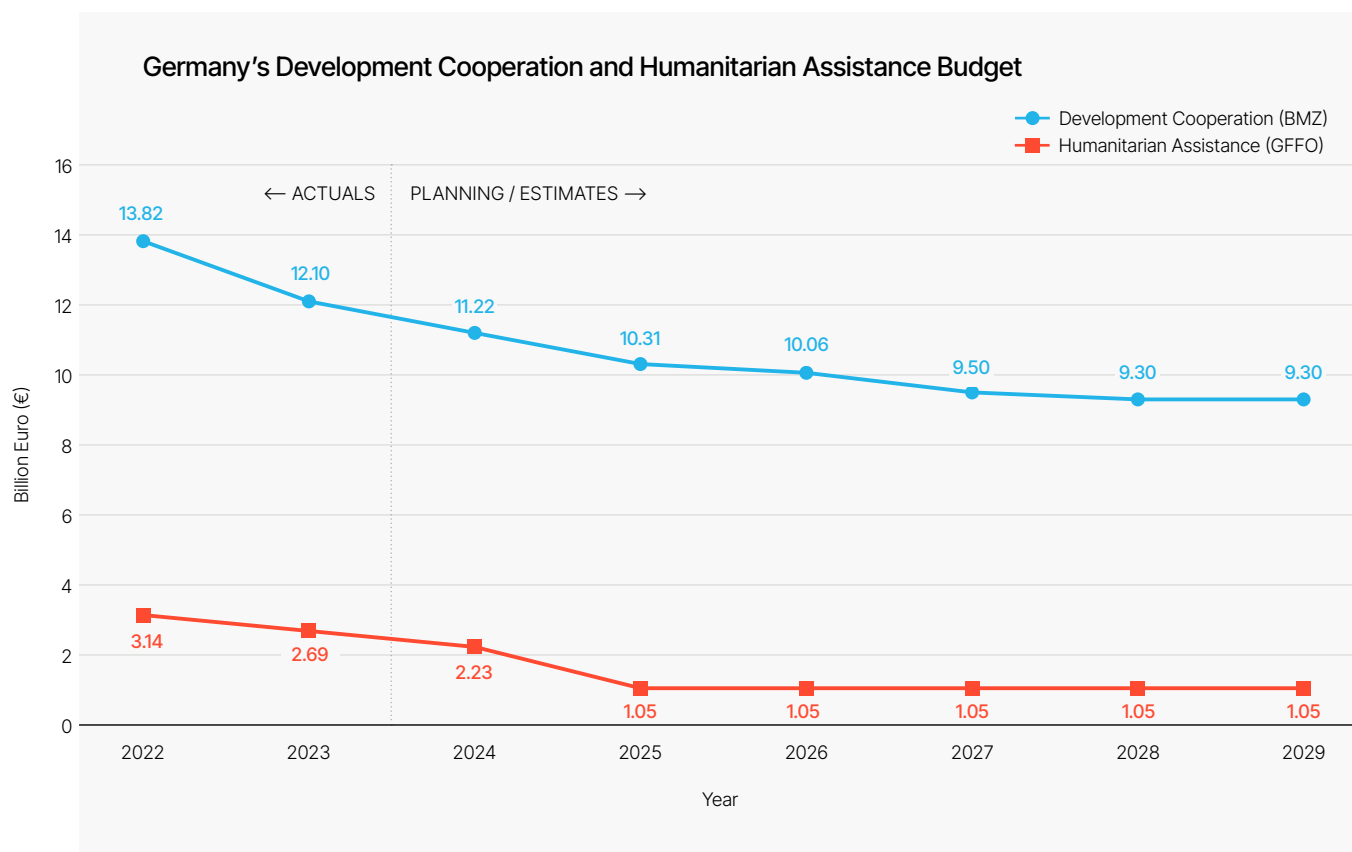
²⁴ OCHA, 2026

²⁵ VENRO, 2025

²⁶ WHO and UNICEF, 2025c

to require USD 138 billion annually. On average, countries would need to triple current levels of spending, while very low-income countries would need to aim for an up to 42-fold increase.²⁶ Rising water stress, scarcity and other climate change-related effects will further widen this gap by weakening the traditional “3T” funding base: climate impacts are undermining tax and tariff revenues and reducing investor confidence in private capital and blended finance whilst international transfers are falling.

Budget development
BMZ and German humanitarian assistance.
Based on VENRO,
2025.



Climate finance could offer an alternative route to vital support, but current funds are often difficult to access, especially for civil society organisations and local actors with limited technical and human capacity. In recent years, IKI has undergone a strategic reorientation towards “large grants” with more restrictive conditionalities. IKI currently funds a total of 21 ongoing WASH projects worth EUR 203 million in total; only three have civil society implementing partners.²⁷ Within the BMZ portfolio, this proportion drops to 2.6%.²⁸ As the picture is similar for other climate funds, locally led adaptation is greatly underutilised and complementary strengths of greater diversity are neglected.

WASH and climate finance are still too often treated as overlapping rather than intrinsically linked, while siloed development, humanitarian and climate financing frameworks hinder anticipatory

²⁷ World Bank et al. 2025

²⁸ BMUKN, IKI 2026:
– All ongoing projects with sector code Water, Sanitation and Waste Management or Water or Sanitation in project title

²⁹ BMZ Transparency Portal, 2026: IATI Data – All ongoing projects with sector code Water, Sanitation and Waste Management

action, emergency response and long-term systems strengthening. Protecting ODA therefore remains essential to help partner countries establish processes and institutions, unlock domestic budgets and enhance climate finance readiness. For WASH, the task is to position climate-relevant activities as investable within climate finance frameworks.

The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) with its prominent thematic target on water and sanitation offers a key entry point. Agreed at COP28, it can support the planning, financing, delivery and tracking of adaptation action through the Belém Adaptation Indicators, provided WASH-related indicators are tested, refined and retained in ways that support implementation, equity and leave no one behind. National Adaptation Plans and Nationally Determined Contributions can mainstream WASH and guide concessional climate finance towards country priorities, while funding eligibility criteria should better capture the direct and indirect adaptation and mitigation benefits of low-emission, climate-resilient WASH.

First, countries and partners need to assess whether systems are prepared for, able to withstand and capable of recovering from climate-related shocks and stresses. Though not yet integrated into formal monitoring frameworks, indicators and methods to define, encourage and monitor climate-resilient WASH are being developed.²⁹ Any adjustments to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme's service ladders should be considered carefully: more ambitious targets are welcome, but they should not incentivise investments in service upgrades over providing first-time access for those without basic services.

Save our NEAT+

Ironically, as climate and WASH are being linked via measurable indicators, funding for on-the-ground assessment of climate and environmental risks is under threat. NEAT+, though demonstrably strengthening environmental awareness, improving project design and supporting more resilient humanitarian interventions, is being defunded.

ECT WASH project evaluations recommended the expansion of NEAT+ assessments to additional locations and translation of NEAT+ tools and resources into local languages. If anything, more is needed, not less. The German WASH Network is supporting the call for dedicated, multi-year funding to further develop NEAT+ as a core humanitarian instrument.³⁰

Germany has long promoted cross-sectoral approaches and should use its political and financial weight to integrate WASH more firmly into adjacent global agendas. Supporting the Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action as a permanent feature of the UNFCCC process would help keep WASH on the climate agenda, increase funding levels, ensure continuity and sustain high-level accountability. The "leave no one behind" principle should be implemented through more targeted allocations, particularly of grants focused on LDCs and fragile and conflict-affected states. Maximising the impact of scarce financial resources requires greater localisation. First and foremost, this entails expanding access to funding for local and regional authorities, as well as non-state local actors.

UN Water Conferences and future intergovernmental processes on water should further encourage countries to develop national roadmaps and costed plans that attract investments and accelerate implementation of climate resilient WASH services. International financial institutions should support countries in gaining greater access to finance, ensuring that funds and capacity support reach the local level where gaps are greatest.

³⁰ WHO and UNICEF, 2026

³¹ ADRA et al. 2026

6. The Bottom Line on Sustainable WASH

As we approach the final years of Agenda 2030, it is more important than ever to back climate-resilient WASH with strong policy frameworks and financial support. Yet instead of closing in on universal access to safe services, we are no longer facing a water crisis alone. According to a recent UN report, many regions have already entered a state of “global water bankruptcy”,³¹ where hydrological systems can no longer realistically return to their historical baselines. Robust WASH systems must be recognised and enabled as a vital buffer against the public health burdens, displacement, economic losses and ecological decline driven by climate change. By connecting human dignity and livelihoods with prevention, resilience and a just transition, WASH becomes a key stabilising force in our increasingly fragile world. It remains a high-return investment into security, at every level.

This paper has demonstrated the immense potential of integrating climate resilience and WASH in practice. Evidence shows that opportunities to protect and promote WASH services that are climate resilient by design exist even in the most vulnerable contexts, where small changes can have a big impact. As climate change remains a multiplier of humanitarian risk that ripples across borders, treating climate and WASH as intrinsically and inextricably linked is necessary. Accelerating climate-resilient WASH for the underserved is no longer just the right thing to do. It is essential to climate-proof our common future.

Our recommendations outline how key German actors can actively promote and facilitate climate-resilient WASH as an enabler of sustainable development. What we need now is rapid, coordinated action to drive progress.

Water bankruptcy: A state where water systems are overdrawn beyond sustainable limits and irreversible damage makes recovery to previous conditions unlikely.

³² UNU-INWEH, Global Water Bankruptcy (2026)

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The German WASH Network is an alliance of 30 German NGOs working in the fields of development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, which are committed to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Their shared goal is sustainable and safe access to water, sanitation and hygiene for all people worldwide.

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