ENSURING ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION FOR ALL
Topic Background for the General Assembly on Access to Clean Water and Sanitation

"At the 2023 UN Water Conference a determined global community came together to make a difference not only for the future of water but for the future of the world." − Li Junhua, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Conference Secretary-General

Water in the World

In the **United Nations Declaration of Human Rights** [i] **(UNDHR),** Article 25 states all people have a right to a good standard of living, meaning people deserve food, clothing, and medical care. They have a right to be healthy. An important part of health and wellness is access to water, especially clean and safe drinking water and services that help people receive water like indoor plumbing and systems that make sure the water is clean. Without these services, many women and children, mostly girls, have to get water for their families. When children carry water, they are able to spend less time at school and with their family and friends.

A 13-year-old girl carries water in Nigeria.
Image credit: UNICEF

As of July of last year, 2.2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water in their homes, and 3.5 billion do not have well run **sanitation services**, which ensures the water people drink is safe.[ii] With so many people needing water, there have been wars between countries and within countries about who has access to clean water and who owns land with water. The war that split Sudan's northern and southern regions into two countries was about water and who should get it.

The people most affected by water **scarcity** live in **developing countries**, often in sub-Saharan Africa and central-south Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 30 percent of people have water services with safe drinking water.[iii] Central-southern Asia is ranked second lowest for safely managed drinking water at slightly over 60 percent.[iv] Most places facing water scarcity struggle with weak **infrastructure** or a lack of government help. Many of these regions also have a large amount of people who live in rural areas where there is less clean water and weaker water infrastructure than in cities.

Sustainable Development Goal 6

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

The United Nations (U.N.) has pledged by 2030 to guarantee access to safe and affordable drinking water globally. This goal works with others to make sure that sanitation services (like those that keep human waste out of water) are working correctly and that water stays clean by preventing people from putting things in the water that do not belong, such as leftover material from making something in a factory or with harmful chemicals.

A report from the World Health Organization claims all efforts to provide safe water worldwide would need to be increased by four times since the places that clean water the most are not close to meeting the target of **universal** drinking water services.[v]

Key Challenges

Challenge 1: Securing Economic Investment

One of the biggest challenges in achieving SDG 6 is finding **investments** for countries that need clean water the most. Organizations or companies might not give money to water projects in countries that have political conflict or weak infrastructure because they worry that the project will not be successful. While areas like sub-Saharan Africa, central-south Asia and Latin America need clean water the most, they can also be the least likely to receive funding. Water projects can also be very expensive and take a lot of time. One project done by the **World Bank** alone cost $86.1 million and won't be finished until 2029.

Pakistan and India use the Indus River for water, but it starts in a part of Tibet controlled by China. Image Credit: BBC – Nadeem Khawar/Getty Images

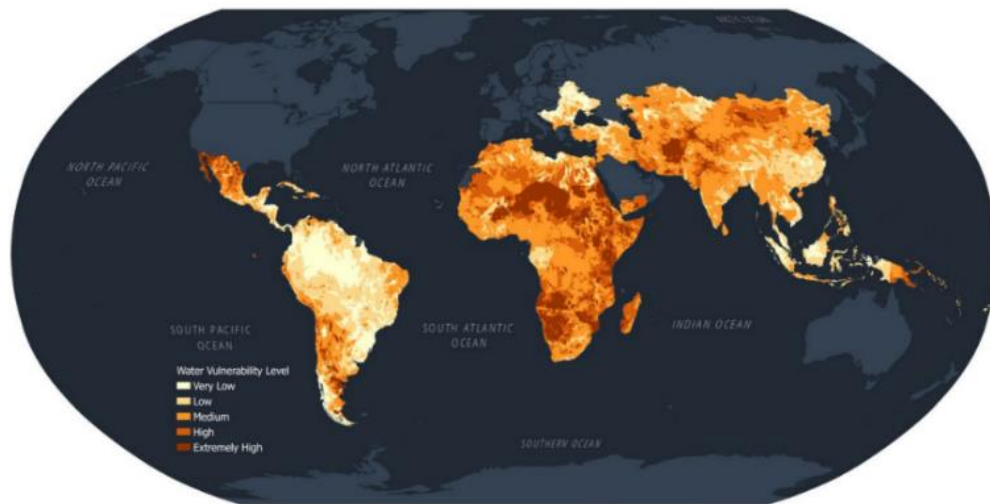**Challenge 2: Environmental Factors – Climate Change and Pollution**

Another challenge for countries with difficulty accessing water and sanitation is environmental conditions. Natural disasters, especially floods and droughts, can hurt water availability more by damaging existing structures for water and sanitation services, making it easier for disease to spread.[vi]

Some countries are threatened by pollution from chemicals or sewage. About 2 billion people in 2020 drank water polluted by bacteria found in human waste. The map below from the United Nations shows places that are most likely to struggle with access to clean water by combining the highest levels of water scarcity and lowest levels of drinking water service. Places shown as light yellow are somewhat likely to struggle with water access, and places shown in dark red are the most likely to struggle.[vii]

Map of areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability[6]

[6] Water stress, interannual variability, seasonal variability, and groundwater table decline were derived from the WRI Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas, drought events derived from the UNEP Global Data Risk Platform, and drinking water service level data were derived from the JMP data set.

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Possible Solutions

Students in Brazil learn about how the Reflorestar program increases the plant population. Image Credit: Government of Brazil

Countries can fight water scarcity by improving farming processes and strengthening water infrastructure. In terms of the United Nations, countries have partnered with the World Bank (called Global Water Security and Sanitation Partnership), and together they have invested in water **resource** projects in Cambodia, Brazil, Turkey, Indonesia, Nepal, Angola, as well as several countries in Africa through programs like Farmer-led **Irrigation** Development (FLID) and the *Reflorestar* Program in Brazil. More funding for this partnership could provide clean drinking water and sanitation services to more places. Each country may also ask for **aid**.

SDG 6 is also connected to SDG 13, which seeks to reduce the effects of climate change and harmful **industrialization**. The continents of Africa and Asia will benefit the most from environmental efforts since they are most likely to suffer natural disasters that impact their water and sanitation systems. Giving more money to the **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change** (IPCC) to help create solutions for climate change could improve water and sanitation conditions. The IPCC's research has already been used to help create the **Paris Climate Agreement**.

Helpful Resources

- **Sustainable Development Report 2023 (sdgindex.org)**
  This Report includes a visual map with progress on every SDG in each country

- **CIA World Factbook (Online Resource for Country Statistics)**
  A helpful resource that provides information and statistics on a country's history, people, government, economy, geography, and more.

- **Preserving every drop (bbc.com)**
  BBC Storyworks features stories from countries around the world and how they are increasing access to clean water.

- **Clean Water - Our World in Data**
  Our World in Data provides important statistics on access to clean water such as access in rural vs. urban areas, the share of a country's population with access to clean water, and death rates from unsafe drinking water.

- **SDG 6 Overview**
  This site provides a helpful overview of SDG 6 and its targets.

- **Water Overview: Development news, research, data | World Bank**
  The World Bank gives an overview of water access around the world and projects they fund to increase access to clean water.

- **When is water safe to drink? - Mia Nacamulli (youtube.com)**
  This Ted talk explains what makes water safe to drink and the process for sanitizing water.

Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Aid	Aid can be food, medical supplies, or money. Typically, the U.N. gives aid in all of those forms, but many times they give aid in the form of money so countries can decide how to use the money. Aid can also refer to "assistance," which means that the U.N. might send people to help a country use their aid.
Developing Countries	Countries that do lots of trading and have many successful businesses, and people often have more money (higher incomes).
Industrialization	The process a country goes through when its businesses use more machines and factories to make things than using people (making things by hand).
Infrastructure	These are the systems and structures that make people's lives in a community (town or a country) easier like paved roads, streetlights, or publicly provided electricity and water.
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	Part of the United Nations that studies science related to climate change.
Investments	This is money that people or organizations put into different people and/or organizations with the hope of making more money.
Irrigation	The act of bringing water to plants or crops.
Paris Climate Agreement	A 2015 treaty (or agreement) made in Paris between 196 countries on how to address climate change.
Resource	Something that can be used for a purpose.
Rural	This describes an area, usually considered the countryside, which usually has fewer people, fewer buildings, and less infrastructure than cities or big towns.
Sanitation Services	It is the act, or process, of making something (like water) clean.
Scarcity	This happens when lots of people want something and there is not enough of it to give everyone.
United Nations Declaration of Human Rights	A United Nations document that explains the rights of all people around the world.
Universal	When something is universal, everyone has it. This is the opposite of scarcity.
World Bank	An organization that gives money and other aid to countries around the world, especially developing countries.

[i] United Nations Declaration of Human Rights - https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english

[ii] "Women and girls bear brunt of water and sanitation crisis – new UNICEF-WHO report" - https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/women-and-girls-bear-brunt-water-and-sanitation-crisis-new-unicef-who-report

[iii] "State of the world's drinking water: an urgent call to action to accelerate progress on ensuring safe drinking water for all" - https://www.unwater.org/news/report-state-worlds-drinking-water

[iv] "State of the world's drinking water: an urgent call to action to accelerate progress on ensuring safe drinking water for all" - https://www.unwater.org/news/report-state-worlds-drinking-water

[v] "State of the world's drinking water: an urgent call to action to accelerate progress on ensuring safe drinking water for all" - https://www.unwater.org/news/report-state-worlds-drinking-water

[vi] "Water and Disasters" - https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/water-and-disasters

[vii] "State of the world's drinking water: an urgent call to action to accelerate progress on ensuring safe drinking water for all" - https://www.unwater.org/news/report-state-worlds-drinking-water

[viii] "Water Security For All" - https://www.unicef.org/media/95241/file/water-security-for-all.pdf