

# Achieving safely managed water services in Africa

## Unpacking the challenge

Based on a discussion convened by IRC for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation,  
18 March 2021

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promise universal access to safe drinking water for all by 2030. That means water that is:

- a) located on premises;
- b) available when needed; and
- c) free from contamination

By definition, the implication of the SDG agenda is that basic water— drinking water from an improved source within a 30-minute walk from home— is not good enough. Safely managed water, that meets the three criteria above, is the SDG end goal.

Basic water service provision is a critical first step on the way toward safely managed services and is a means to realising the human right to water but must not be an end in itself.

For schools and healthcare facilities, the SDGs define the criteria for basic services and encourage national authorities to define targets for safely managed or more advanced levels of service. In healthcare facilities, a basic service comes from an improved source, located on premises and from which water is available. In schools, drinking water from an improved source must be available at the school in order to be classified as basic.

The step from *basic* to *safely managed* is a daunting one. It implies different engineering solutions – such as treated and piped water supplies with household connections rather than wells or boreholes with handpumps (unless these are contaminant-free and located at household level). This in turn requires innovation in service delivery models, and new forms of institutional arrangements between public authorities, service providers, civil society, and development partners.

Most of all, it requires political commitment to mobilise the resources required and ensure they are well spent. As emphasised by Catarina de Albuquerque, CEO of Sanitation and Water for All and former UN



**Figure 1** Three criteria must be met for a basic service to be classified as a safely managed household service, according to the JMP (WHO & UNICEF, 2017).

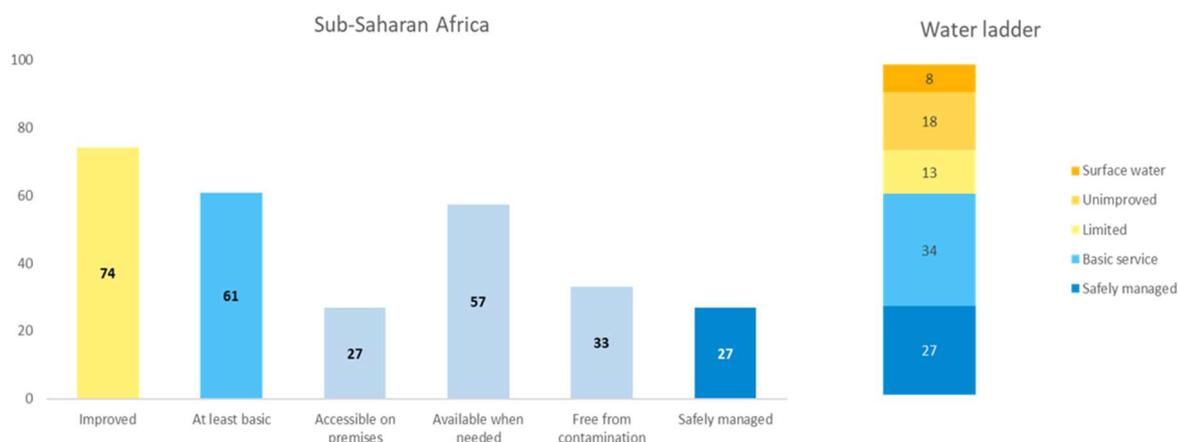
See: [washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water](https://washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water)

Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, many of the challenges we face with access to basic water and sanitation services are not economic nor technical but political.

Current figures show that 71% of the global population has access to safely managed water services, but a closer analysis of the data shows that Africa is being left behind. As of 2017, only 27% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa was using safely managed water services at home. Of these 275 million people, over 200 million (73%) of them live in urban areas. Only 12% of rural citizens had a safely managed service. While water quality is a big issue, the WHO and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) analysis shows that getting piped water to households is the criterion that is least often met.



**Figure 2** Basic and Safely Managed Water Coverage by Geography,  
Source: [WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program](#)



**Figure 3** Progress towards safely managed water in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2017.  
Source: Presentation by Tom Slaymaker, WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP)

## The Hilton Foundation response

In its 2021-2025 Safe Water Strategy, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has doubled down on the commitment to safely managed water, and to bringing safe water services to vulnerable populations in Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, and globally. This means partnering with local, national and international experts to develop and promote innovative models to increase access to safely managed services while reducing inequalities at the same time by targeting specific approaches to reach the last mile.

Where safely managed services are not logistically possible, the Foundation supports strategies to make basic water services safer, such as treatment options at the point of use. Healthcare facilities and schools are prioritised as well as households.

The e-Learning event on 18 March was convened to unpack the priorities and strategies for pursuing safely managed water services while leaving no-one behind.

## Implications of the SDG ambition for national authorities

A Human Rights framing helps to interpret the implications of SDG6. As enshrined in the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, it is the government's responsibility to ensure the *progressive realisation*<sup>1</sup> of safely managed services for its citizens. This means developing and prioritising service delivery models that can deliver safely managed services. Utilities and other professional-managed service providers that offer household connections come to the fore. It also means, in parallel, improving other service delivery models – such as community-managed supplies – until they can be replaced with safely managed supplies. No one can be left behind, and everyone must see progressive improvements.

There should not be a conflict between reducing inequality and extending safely managed services. Both are necessary, and will continue to be, as countries plan and implement strategies to meet the SDG6 targets and realise human rights. As Catarina de Albuquerque further noted-

*To move to safely managed is what needs to be done, it is imposed on us by the recognition to the human right to water and sanitation.*

National Governments must be at the centre of any model for service delivery, even if they delegate key aspects of this role to other stakeholders such as private operators. Since it costs more per capita to provide water to dispersed populations, the government must establish clear incentives to promote targeting of vulnerable populations – whether working with public or private utilities. Performance contracts and results-based financing mechanisms can be used to set targets for equity and form the basis for monitoring and regulation of service providers.

As Engineer Joseph Oriono Eyatu of the Ministry of Water and Environment, Uganda, indicated— *It is us, government, coming up with the idea and frameworks for rural (umbrella) utilities. Delegating service delivery to professional organisations is part of our strategy for fulfilling our obligations.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/water/bookongoodpractices\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/issues/water/bookongoodpractices_en.pdf)

## Implications for service providers

The discussion on safely managed services carries a call for the professionalisation of service delivery. Water that is safe, reliable and available can only be sustainably provided through efficient service models aimed at meeting the defined three-prong safely managed criteria (Figure 1). Piped water networks are more complicated to manage than point sources, so while community managed services may have a role to play in the interim, professional supply systems are ultimately required. Self-supply, with support to improve water quality through point of use treatment, can also play a role in some contexts.

According to Siméon Kenfack of the African Water Association, it is important for utilities and planners to stop thinking in terms of cities and towns versus urban and rural people. It is a false dichotomy. As underscored in the human right to safe water and dignified sanitation, everyone is entitled to a safe service, and it is through strong leadership, proper incentives, and greater technical capacity of national systems that this can be achieved. Learning from the South African experience—legal enforcement mechanisms, and citizens' voices are critical to ensuring service providers deliver and policy frameworks live up to their promise.

## Moving the needle

Five years into the SDG period, there are both signs of progress and causes for concern. In the March convening, break-out groups focused on the safely managed challenge and emerging solutions in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Uganda. These three countries are seen as case studies to inform and catalyze action across Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Ethiopia, while national programs and guidelines are in place, investment in new rural public water utilities, remains a critical challenge. Technology options including solar-powered water supply are currently in use to extend coverage, with measures being taken to professionalize water users' associations. Several environmental concerns such as compounding effects of El Niño and water stress in the Horn of Africa were identified as constraints on the road to achieving safely managed water services in Ethiopia. Like the press for safely managed services, climate-resilient WASH planning depends on the use of service delivery models that are responsive to climate, socio-economic and environmental conditions.

In Ghana, decentralized service providers like the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) have begun to establish a larger footprint in rural areas. The social enterprise model for water service delivery, coupled with community ownership and management of point sources, will continue to play a role in Ghana's water sector in the interim period. The challenge with the for-profit business model lies in reaching the last mile and requires a balanced emphasis on improving the efficiency of operations and accounting for the economic implications of reaching underserved or dispersed households.

In Uganda, the establishment and growth of six regional Umbrella Utilities since 2016, and the expanded mandate for the National Water and Sewerage Corporation to move into smaller cities and towns, are promising steps toward the realization of safely managed services in rural areas. These are complemented by a clear 'leave no one behind' agenda based on monitoring and ensuring that every village in the country has at least one improved water source.

## **Next steps**

Myriad strategies will be needed to address the inequalities, environmental conditions, and different starting points within each country and across the African region. The needs and barriers to achieving safely managed services vary within a single country, so area-based strategies to reach everyone within a district or region are needed where service delivery models can work together.

As urban/rural barriers fade, greater collaboration and joint problem-solving among stakeholders become essential. Clear identification of underserved populations is essential; mapping where they are located makes it possible to leverage technology to increase operational efficiency even where populations are less dense. With respect to water quality, the siting of infrastructure, and the adoption of climate-resilient technology alongside risk management approaches, are key drivers.

It is clear that the technical, institutional, and even financial barriers can be overcome. However, this will only be possible with a strong political commitment to the safely managed ambition, from the highest executive levels to the municipality. While it is acknowledged that basic water services are essential for those lacking services, basic is not enough to deliver on the SDG aspiration, and it does not achieve the full realization of the human right to safe water.

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is committed to working along with national government leadership, partners, collaborators, and communities to achieve SDG 6.1, beginning with securing safely managed services in its target districts in Ghana, Ethiopia, and Uganda over the next five years.

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Presenters include Tom Slaymaker (JMP), Paul Orengho (AMCOW), Catarina de Albuquerque (SWA), Kelebogile Khunou (SERI), Bruce Gordon (WHO), Siméon Kenfack (AFWA), Farai Tunhuma (UNICEF), Ranjiv Khush (Aquaya), Eng Joseph Eyatu (MWE) and Yaver Abidi (WSUP), Abiy Girma (OWNP, GoE), Zinash Kefale (WaterAid), Eng. Worlanyo Siabi (CWSA), Ing. Harold Esseku (WB).

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## References for further reading

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[water#:~:text=The%20JMP%202017%20Thematic%20Report,enhanced%20monitoring%20of%20drinking%20water.](https://washdata.org/monitoring/drinking-water#:~:text=The%20JMP%202017%20Thematic%20Report,enhanced%20monitoring%20of%20drinking%20water.)

WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme Global Database on Household Drinking Water, Basic and Safely Managed Water Coverage by Geography. Available:

<https://washdata.org/data/household#!/heatmap>

We encourage you to explore the Joint Monitoring Programme Global Data at:

<https://washdata.org/data> and <https://www.sdg6data.org/>

## COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR DISTRICT-WIDE WASH SERVICES

Safe Water Strategy partners are strengthening the systems needed to deliver safe water, sanitation and hygiene services to all households, health care facilities and schools by 2030 and forever.

Find out how they are doing this in partner districts in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Uganda .

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