



SDG 6: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

Compiled by:
UK WASH Network

SDG 6 covers the domains of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and sustainable water management. This is a diverse area. Activities range from ensuring access to sanitary facilities so that women can maintain menstrual hygiene to monitoring transboundary water flows in a time of a rapidly changing climate. Besides being essential for life, WASH and water management impact on many other areas, including food, health, education, energy, gender equality, economics and environmental protection. Moreover, delivery of SDG 6 is intrinsically linked to building resilience to climate change.

Progress towards SDG 6 is already off-track and slowing further. One in four people still do not have a safely managed water service at home. Almost half do not have a safely managed sanitation service at home, and almost one in three lack soap and water.¹¹³ Achieving universal access to at least basic drinking water in fragile states by 2030 will require the current rate of progress to increase fourfold, and a sevenfold increase is needed to achieve universal access to basic sanitation. Yet the goal is to achieve more than 'basic' services, and the world is even further away from achieving safely managed services for all.

Underperforming WASH services and inadequate physical infrastructure are symptoms of systemic weaknesses across governance, service providers and asset management. WASH services depend on diverse inputs

113. WHO and UNICEF, '[Updated global estimates for WASH in schools: the world is off track for SDG WASH targets](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

and actions. Responsibilities are often scattered across government departments, agencies and NGOs. Bottlenecks and disconnections create gaps in this system, so good performance in one area does not always result in better WASH services. Inequalities in power and resources are a root part of the problem. This demands new ways of working and funding, rather than just increasing or accelerating current efforts.

In recent years, two external factors have had a significant impact on progress: Covid-19 and climate change. Covid-19 has affected the provision of WASH services and highlighted global inequalities in people's access to WASH. However, Covid-19 has also given rise to innovation, including new and exciting partnerships such as the Hygiene and Behaviour Change Coalition. Climate change also affects water and WASH systems, and makes it more challenging to achieve SDG 6. Increased weather changes, floods and droughts directly affect water resources, WASH infrastructure and service demand, whilst also resulting in social and economic instability that undermines development.

The UK's role

The UK has a great history of supporting SDG 6, particularly on WASH. Many major INGOs in the WASH sector have their roots here, both in development and humanitarian contexts. They continue to be influential and, alongside a flourishing community of researchers and independent consultants, work to ensure that all aspects of WASH and water management are considered. For example, the UK INGO sector has raised the importance of equity and inclusion, working with people with disabilities and people with incontinence, and on transgender-inclusive sanitation¹¹⁴, gender-based violence and menstrual and perimenopausal hygiene. UK research and development has been strong, with many institutions generating vital knowledge.

114. Boyce, Paul, et al. (2018), '[Transgender-inclusive sanitation: insights from South Asia](#)', Waterlines, Vol 37,2, p.102-117.



The ongoing investments in research have developed world-leading capacity, which has enabled the UK to rapidly respond to changing WASH needs during Covid, engage in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change working groups, and leader international WASH programming. But this track record has been critically undermined by the implementation of cuts to the official development assistance (ODA) budget. Both programmatic and knowledge leadership have been lost as a consequence.

The FCDO's role

Within the UK, the FCDO has and will continue to have a central role, not just as a donor but through its leadership and coordinating role. However, its ability to deliver progress on SDG 6 is constrained by significant relative and absolute budget cuts, a trend that predates the pandemic. The Independent Commission on Aid Impact's (ICAI) 2022 review¹¹⁵ of the FCDO's approach documents declining budgets since 2018, showing that WASH dropped from 2.7% of ODA in 2018 to 0.5% in 2021. In tandem, we have also seen WASH programming become more vulnerable as it is increasingly embedded in wider, multi-sector programmes and then squeezed out completely or significantly reduced.

The budget cuts are just one aspect of a wider concern about the priority the FCDO gives to SDG 6. WASH and sustainable water management are critical to supporting the UK's international development priorities of women, girls, health, hygiene and climate resilience. This means both need, not only adequate financial resourcing, but to be made more visible by becoming central to the agendas of decision makers, including international agencies, governments, civil society and the private sector.

ICAI's 2022 review also highlights the emergence of a strategic shift in programming, which will see an increased focus on building WASH systems and sustainable services. This shift is welcome, but will require patient, flexible and long-term investment in institutions, governance and communities, as well as continued capital investment. It also requires new ways of designing interventions, monitoring and measuring change, and places emphasis on continuous learning and adaptive management. System strengthening is therefore unlikely to be a cheaper or easier option than the earlier focus on large, in-country programmes designed to deliver on the UK's global WASH targets.

115. ICAI, ['The UK's changing approach to water, sanitation and hygiene \(WASH\)'](#) [web page, accessed June 2022].

Target 6.a:

By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies.

The magnitude of the global WASH crisis requires a comparable response. Yet we have seen a marked decline in expenditure from DFID/FCDO since 2018. This is making the UK's response woefully inadequate.

Going forward, the renewed interest in systems-strengthening will require a focus on strengthening accountability for water resource management and WASH services. This entails financial support so that sector partners can identify clear roles, responsibilities and performance standards and ensure transparency. Simultaneously, support for civil society and social accountability work is essential to empower the 'demand side' of systems strengthening. Concerted international effort requires continued engagement with, and influence through, the Sanitation and Water for All Partnership, of which the UK is a founding member. Representation in this partnership should extend to the most senior level within the FCDO.

We further note that there is no indicator for capacity building support. There has been little coordinated action since a report by the International Water Association ten years ago. This is a bottleneck to progress, which is restricting activity in other parts of the WASH system.

Target 6.a:

Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

The ODA cuts have significantly affected existing local programmes, forced organisations to close offices and make staff redundant and have led to other governmental institutions withdrawing their grants after the completion of funding submissions. Yet, grassroot interventions are vital to understanding the issues faced by local communities and play a critical role in collecting data and monitoring progress. To address this the FCDO should support interventions such as providing information to affected populations, supporting civil society and citizen accountability programmes (with an emphasis on engaging women's groups and other under-represented communities), consultation, redress mechanisms and improving communication.

Target 6.1:

By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.

Two billion people lack access to safely managed water, and the Covid-19 pandemic has stretched this gap further. Even where people have access, the quality of their service is often low and vulnerable to climate changes.

The FCDO's investments in climate resilient WASH have supported the development of climate resilient water safety planning. But more investment is needed to support the integration of WASH, water resources and climate information to expand climate resilient services.

Target 6.2:

By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

Globally, progress on sanitation is stagnant. Inadequate sanitation services particularly affect women and girls throughout their lives. Addressing this requires more ambition and necessitates focusing on the needs of different groups. For example, adequate WASH facilities are needed to support perimenopausal women's menstrual hygiene. And we need much better provision for sexual and gender minorities and other communities that are marginalised to ensure no one is left behind. The current attention being paid to the rights of sanitation workers, including manual scavengers and street sweepers, needs to be reflected in further investment by the FCDO to protect workers as access to sanitation services is expanded.

Innovation is critical to accelerate work in this space. A good example is the way that the FCDO leveraged its existing investments in WASH research to support the development of the Hygiene Hub, a repository of resources developed by a global network of researchers to improve access to, and uptake of, safe handwashing and the water services to support it.

Target 6.3:

By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally

Water quality is a significant global challenge, and while some aspects have been by addressed by the FCDO, there is scope for much more to be done. FCDO investments have been used to develop novel biosensors for monitoring water quality, and engaged governments and industry on advancing wastewater treatment. Yet, further investment is needed to advance these approaches and ensure progress towards Target 6.3 is embedded in the FCDOs investments in industrial development.

Target 6.4:

By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity and Target 6.5: By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

To date, the UK government's investment in integrated water resources management (IWRM) has been limited, despite the fact that sustainable WASH systems depend on sound and inclusive water governance. UK ODA should identify research, learning and programming on WASH and water resources in a holistic manner, including focusing on activities by corporate actors that impact water security. Strengthening standards, guidelines and transparency is necessary so that investments and supply chains don't deplete water resources. The FCDO has led the way with the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints. Signatories have committed to supporting responsible, sustainable and equitable use and consumption of water (linked also to SDG 8 and 12). This provides the FCDO with significant opportunities to drive and recognise responsible water use.



To achieve SDG 6, the UK government should:

1. Invest significantly more in sustainable WASH and IWRM, and create a more consistent and certain funding environment for NGOs and local grassroots organisations involved in this work.
2. Ensure a whole-of-FCDO approach to WASH that focuses on strengthening WASH systems and protecting the right to water and sanitation. It should also continue supporting fragile and conflict-affected contexts and identify holistic research, learning and programming on IWRM and WASH.
3. Ring-fence funding for cross-sector integration of WASH, including with health, education, economic and nutrition investments. Include WASH targets and indicators in all health, education, nutrition, disability and climate interventions, plans and policies. Integrate WASH and hygiene behaviour change programmes into existing public health programmes, such as for child health, vaccination, nutrition, education and livelihoods. Ensure WASH is included as a crucial element of the government's approach to the international treaty on pandemic preparedness and the development of the cross-Whitehall global health strategy.
4. Introduce mandatory reporting on women's engagement and economic empowerment to help achieve equity in both WASH programming and policy development. Include good governance and accountability measures in both direct programming and government support for WASH to support stronger civic space and voice, and engagement between communities and authorities.