

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

In Need of Speed: Data can Accelerate Progress Towards Water and Sanitation for All

By Joakim Harlin et al. (Aug. 23, 2021)

Even before COVID-19, the world was off-track to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 – ensuring water and sanitation for all by 2030.

The latest data, which is provided in seven SDG indicators reports published today by the UN-Water Integrated Monitoring Initiative for SDG 6 (IMI-SDG6), show us that 2 billion people worldwide still live without safely managed drinking water and 3.6 billion without safely managed sanitation. In addition, 2.3 billion people lack a basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home. Most wastewater is returned to nature untreated. One in five of the world's river basins are experiencing rapid changes, such as flooding or drought with increased frequency and intensity, and 80% of wetland ecosystems are already lost.

Only about half of the world's countries have advanced laws, institutions, and budgets in place for sustainable and equitable management of water resources. Community participation is still not widespread, and in only 24 countries are all transboundary waters covered by operational arrangements for water cooperation. On top of all this, climate change is increasing water cycle variability and related extremes in all regions of the world, wreaking havoc and displacing millions of people. Nearly 10% of the world population live in areas with high water stress.

More than anything, we need politicians and policymakers at the national level to set bolder priorities because the data show that we need to accelerate progress, in some areas up to four times faster, to meet SDG 6 within the next nine years.

The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework, launched in 2020 with the full backing of the United Nations family, sets out what needs to be done. From the recently launched progress reports, two immediate actions emerge for the water community at large:

Encourage National and Sub-national Data Collection

We can only sustainably manage what we measure, and right now, there are too many gaps in the data, despite unprecedented, heroic levels of reporting during the chaos of the pandemic.

Last year, the IMI-SDG6 combined the efforts of WHO, UNICEF, UN-Habitat, UNEP, FAO, UNECE and UNESCO (as custodian agencies of the various SDG 6 global indicators) to reach out to countries with requests for data: this was our '2020 Data Drive.'

COVID-19 caused extreme difficulties for the SDG 6 national focal points in every country, with people forced to work from home with little equipment, few in-person consultations, and many data collection activities cancelled. Under the circumstances, the focal points made a remarkable effort. On average, UN Member States now have data on 8.2 out of 12 indicators (up from 7.0 in 2019), and the number reporting on nine or more indicators increased from 37 in 2019 to 92.

Despite this significant progress, large data gaps remain for some indicators, typically those that rely on in situ monitoring networks, such as water quality and aquifers. For example, many countries base their ambient water quality reporting on relatively few measurements; the poorest 20 countries reported on only 1,000 water bodies in total, whereas the richest 24 reported on nearly 60,000. Addressing these issues is a long-term, capital-intensive effort.

Our country monitoring focal points know better than anyone about the benefits and costs of robust water and sanitation monitoring systems, and the urgent need to establish them. We encourage high-level officials in national ministries to listen to what the focal points have to say. And, as we continue our capacity-building activities in countries, we also call on development partners to support this work. We call on academia, the private sector, and civil society to contribute to the joint effort by bringing their water and sanitation datasets to the table.

Help Policy- and Decision-Makers to Take Informed Action

Without data, we make decisions in the dark. With data, we can prioritize our efforts to where they are most needed, determine whether we achieve the desired results, and learn which solutions are working and which are not, enabling us to direct resources based on this learning. Data truly are the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability.

What all water experts need to think about is how water and sanitation data can be converted into information, in a way that policy- and decision-makers can act on it. For instance, at the IMI-SDG6 we are feeding into the annual meetings of the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and the upcoming Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Water Action Decade, which will convene in 2023. And at the national level, we are increasingly focusing on supporting capacity-building on the use of data for policy. The IMI-SDG6 also manages the SDG 6 Data Portal, which presents the latest data on all SDG 6 indicators by country and region.

The 2030 Agenda can only be achieved if we fully capitalize on the interlinkages and integrated nature of all the SDGs. Coordinated data collection and joint analysis is crucial. As we dig deeper into what the water and sanitation data really tell us, we must bring in both other sectors' data and experts, including those on urban planning, health, agriculture and energy.

Dramatic gains in water and sanitation are possible when governments and all of society's stakeholders pull together. Making sure that there is water and sanitation for all people, for all purposes, by 2030 will help future-proof global society against diverse threats coming down the line.

We need to do much more on all SDG 6 targets, and do it much more quickly. This is crucial for peace, sustainable development, climate action, and human well-being. We know where we need to go, and data will help light the way.

Harlin, Joakin, Graham Alabaster, Tom Slaymaker, Marlos De Souza, Sonja Koeppel, Abou Amani, Bruce Gordon, and Tommaso Abrate. 2021. "Guest Article: In Need of Speed: Data can Accelerate Progress Towards Water and Sanitation for All."

<http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/in-need-of-speed-data-can-accelerate-progress-towards-water-and-sanitation-for-all/> (accessed November 11, 2021).