State of the World's
DRINKING WATER

An urgent call to action to accelerate progress
on ensuring safe drinking water for all

World Health
Organization

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Executive Summary

The first target under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, Target 6.1, is, "By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all". In the last two decades investment in drinking water services has led to considerable increases in access. Two billion people globally gained access to safely managed drinking water services. In 2020, 74% of the world's population used safely managed drinking water, up from 62% in 2000. Despite this progress, there are wide geographical disparities, and 2 billion people still do not use safely managed drinking water. The world is not even close to being on track to meet the SDGs by 2030. Continued progress on SDG Target 6.1, and the additional acceleration needed to achieve universal access, is threatened by the ever-increasing impacts and uncertainty of climate change, competing agricultural and ecological water needs, competing financial priorities and the challenges of existing and emerging threats to water quality.

This report presents the state of drinking water in the world today, the progress being made towards achieving SDG Target 6.1, and the challenges that remain. The SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework calls on governments to make progress on governance, financing, capacity development, data and information and innovation. Using this framework, recommendations are presented, illustrated by examples of how countries have addressed the challenge of providing safely managed drinking water.

As a service that provides immeasurable economic and health benefits, and essential gender equality outcomes, **the need to dramatically increase political commitment to drinking water is clear**, as is the need to strengthen governance and institutions and significantly increase the financial resources available. Drinking water services must reach everyone, including the poor, vulnerable and marginalized, consistent with the promise to leave no one behind.

This report includes a comprehensive set of recommendations structured around governance, financing, capacity development, data and information and innovation. The list of potential actions is wide-ranging and some changes will take sustained action by multiple stakeholders over many years. However, there are many ways in which committed governments can make significant steps to start the process, even with limited budgets and while capacity is developing.

Overarching recommendation on GOVERNANCE

Governments should progressively strengthen existing institutions, fill institutional gaps and facilitate coordination. They should establish a stable regulatory environment supported by legislation and clear policies, including standards for service quality, and ensure enforcement.

- Governments should establish simple and transparent regulation that protects all consumers, allows and encourages continuous improvement, innovation and cost recovery, and facilitates service provision for the poor and vulnerable, consistent with the commitment to "leave no one behind".

- Regulators must be as independent as possible, have authority for and conduct enforcement, and be mandated to publish results.

- Governments should create an enabling policy environment that supports higher service levels in households, health care facilities and schools, so that safe, abundant, on-premises drinking water becomes the norm.

- Government policy should support improvement in the operational performance of service providers, and the establishment of management models that ensure sustainable, professionalized service delivery in both large and small systems.

- Drinking water quality should be regulated using risk-based approaches, for instance, through water safety plans undertaken by service providers and supported by surveillance.

- Governments should consider the impact of climate change and take action to increase the resilience of water infrastructure and services, and mitigate their climate impact.

- Governments should promote coordination between mandate-holders in the water sector, and encourage collaboration across drinking water service provision and water resources management, between rural and urban authorities, and across ministries.

- Governments should review policies, regulatory arrangements, strategies and implementation models to ensure they are inclusive and gender sensitive.

Overarching recommendation on FINANCING

To achieve the quadrupling of progress needed, funding and financing from the public sector, private sector and donors must increase dramatically, water service providers must improve efficiency and performance to ensure funds are used optimally, and governments should provide a stable and transparent administrative, regulatory and policy environment that encourages investment.

- Governments should develop clear policy objectives to guide funding and financing decisions, fully understand all the costs of drinking water service provision,

and make informed, evidence-based decisions on the allocation of funds and the setting of tariffs and user charges.

- Governments should invest in drinking water services, using allocations from the public sector budget catalytically and strategically, creating incentives for efficient, sustainable service provision and prioritizing reaching the unserved.

- Governments should encourage and support improvements in water service providers' financial performance.

- Governments should ensure they achieve an appropriate balance between investing in new infrastructure and supporting the maintenance of existing infrastructure.

- Governments should budget for the costs associated with a supportive regulatory environment.

- Governments should seek to establish a conducive environment for the use of commercial repayable finance, both domestic and international, bearing in mind the complexities and the time and expertise involved. Governments should also develop the expertise and understanding to comply with the requirements of climate finance and access it.

- Governments should work with agencies and institutions that support and provide microfinance to households for water supply investments.

Overarching recommendation on CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Governments should build robust and competent institutions and a capable and motivated workforce through a range of capacity-development approaches based on innovation, partnership and collaboration.

- Capacity should be built in technical areas specific to water supply services and also to create a conducive enabling environment for sustainable water supply services, including competence in long-term planning and budgeting, improved cost recovery, revenue generation and financial sustainability.

- The growth of professionalized service delivery must be supported by capacity development, particularly in small and rural systems.

- Governments should seek to build their own capacity, and that of partners in the sector, by establishing fully institutionalized training programmes.

- Governments should strengthen their capacity to integrate climate resilience and mitigation into planning, designing and delivering drinking water services, including protection of source water.

- Capacity should be built among regulatory agencies, service providers and users to ensure they have the knowledge and instruments to address climate change impacts.

- Governments should foster inclusion in the sector, and seek to achieve gender, ethnic and cultural balance among the staff of sector institutions.

Overarching recommendation on DATA AND INFORMATION

Governments should ensure they have relevant data and information to be better informed, understand gaps and inequalities in drinking water services, and make evidence-based decisions.

- Governments should support the institutionalization of data collection and monitoring within national systems and at all levels (community, utilities, subnational and national), the use of consistent methodologies, including standardized terms and questions, and the use of the data collected.

- Governments should identify gaps in data collection and analysis, and prioritize those areas in which missing data are a constraint, with particular emphasis on the identification of communities and individuals at risk of being left behind in service provision.

- Governments and other stakeholders should encourage and fund research in the water sector, work with academic institutions, and disseminate results to inform decision-making.

- Disseminating data on service provider performance should be prioritized by governments to drive improvements and promote accountability to users.

Overarching recommendation on INNOVATION

Governments should encourage innovation and experimentation through supportive government policy and regulation, accompanied by rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

- Governments should create a policy vision and foster the political leadership required to identify innovative approaches and bring them to scale.

- Governments should create a flexible regulatory environment to encourage innovation, and regulations should be regularly updated to reflect changes in the evidence base and the availability of better technologies.

- Innovation should be encouraged in methodologies and approaches, as well as in technologies.

As highlighted in this report, there are key opportunities in the years up to 2030 to strengthen government leadership, show political will, deepen partnerships and make strategic and catalytic public investments in drinking water. Governments have many opportunities to advance progress on the provision of reliable, safe and sustainable drinking water services, and working across all the SDG 6 accelerators will result in sustainable results and greater impact. Member States, the United Nations system, and other sector stakeholders must rise to the challenge, learn from one another and work together to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030.