



## Research Report

GA4

Ensuring access to water in conflicted zones  
of Africa, avoiding unsafe water consumption

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## Introduction

Access to safe and sufficient water is a fundamental human right, yet millions across Africa remain deprived of it, particularly in regions affected by ongoing conflict. In Africa alone, nations such as Sudan, DRC, Somalia and the Central African Republic suffer under constant violations of human rights. Water insecurity has consistently been taken advantage of in the past and present in nations conflict, so much so that it has become a functioning method of attack/offense against communities. Over 400 million African citizens report to lack basic drinking water and 1 in 3 are affected by overall water scarcity. <sup>1</sup> Through weak governance and poor internal infrastructure, the issue of equitable water access is one that remains persistent in the current world. Populations are affected not only by violence but also through health risks rooting from unsafe consumption, and its negative socio-economic impacts. It is important to note that countries in conflicted Africa, have persistent gaps in their documentations and statistical records, and that the current numeric information on the matter is lacking in its accuracy.

## Definitions of Key Terms

**Access to water:** the ability of individuals and communities to obtain safe, sufficient and affordable water for all consumption purposes.

**Conflicted zones of Africa:** areas within the continent of Africa under direct influence of regional (armed) violence and/or instability.

**Unsafe water consumption:** the act of using water contaminated with chemicals, pathogens or pollutants for drinking, sanitary or other essential purposes.

**Water governance:** The political, social, economic, and administrative systems that influence the use and management of water resources and the delivery of water services at different levels of society.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH): A set of essential services for ensuring safe water, proper sanitation and hygienic practices to protect public health and dignity.

Water insecurity: The lacking of reliable, safe and sufficient water for all consumption purposes due to conflict, poor infrastructure or environmental scarcity

Water-borne diseases: Illnesses caused by unsafe consumption or coming into contact with contaminated water.

Water infrastructure: The buildings and systems that provide and manage water supply for regions or communities.

### General overview

This topic is defined by its difficulties and failures of providing safe access to consumable water in conflicted regions in Africa. Africa's water crisis is shaped by climate change, population growth, and poor infrastructure, but conflict is now a major driver and multiplier.

Affected zones often, if not always, face intensified pressures in the already-noticeable water-insecurities in Africa. These amplified insecurities manifest themselves in the forms of damaged and unreliable water governance and infrastructure systems. This leads to the isolated presence of unsafe, contaminated or simply absent water sources in the region.

The implications have proven to have detrimental consequences on areas such as access to education, (feminine) hygiene and health, displacement and safety, gender inequality, social and economic tensions, food insecurity, and much more.

Particularly children in conflict-affected regions suffer the most under the lacking circumstances. They are vastly affected by the demands of ensuring consumable water for household members. These responsibilities often lie on the shoulders of female or young members of the household. The prolonged time and efforts it commonly takes to collect water,

combined with the heavily limited water available, tends to result in restricted time and capabilities for school and personal care territories.

Armed groups often weaponize water by destroying infrastructure, contaminating wells, or restricting access to rivers. Through the lack in quality and quantity of water, families often reach for contaminated sources of water to stay alive. Many then become vulnerable to numerous life-threatening illnesses such as Cholera, Typhoid fever, Hepatitis A and diarrhoeal diseases. These are leading causes to water-related mortality rates. An example of this can be seen in Sudan's civil conflict (2003-now), causing attacks on dams and contamination in the region's most important water sources, mainly the Nile river. This caused an estimated surge of over thousands of deaths due to water-borne diseases, as stated by UNICEF and the WHO.

Out of desperation and necessity, concerned (armed) groups in areas of conflict threaten not only the health, but also public safety of civilians. Through armed menace, sexual abuse, and deepened gender gaps, an unsafe environment is created for vulnerable populations. According to the IGRAC and DFCA, young girls regularly experience cases of sexual abuse, especially on the long journeys to retrieving water from decent, consumable sources, usually happening in the very early, dark hours of the day. In the DRC alone, 6 cases of sexual violence during water-fetching were reported in the year 2023.

Water scarcity poses threats to the decline in the social and economic security of conflict-affected regions. This is observed among others in forms such as regional displacement and agricultural decline. Somalia experiences this heavily with its ruling authorities such as Al-Shabaab, who control access over water, block access to rivers, poison wells and destroy water infrastructure. This dictation imposes threats to herders and farmers who rely on the extreme policies of these authorities, such as hefty taxes, to be able to sustain their livelihoods.

Sustainable Development Goal 6, Clean Water and Sanitation, centers itself on this issue. It discusses the reduction of water scarcity and pollution and universal access to water and adequate sanitary needs. This issue also touches on many more SDG's such as SDG's 3, Good Health and Well-being, 10, Reduced Inequalities and 16, Peace, Justice and Strong institutions.

According to the United Nations University, solutions to the issue are guided by the 10 water safety indicators:

1. Access to drinking water
2. Access to sanitation
3. Access to hygiene facilities and practices
4. Per capita water availability
5. Water use efficiency
6. Water infrastructure
7. Wastewater treatment
8. Water governance
9. Disaster risk
10. Water dependency on neighboring nations and water resources variability

African countries under conflict continue to suffer under these complex humanitarian issues, many purely depending on outside infrastructure and help. With the increased effects of climate change and political tensions, these efforts are expected to remain insufficient for high solution demands.

### Major parties involved

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF):

This agency plays a central role in delivering WASH services to children and populations under impact of humanitarian crises. When water systems collapse, UNICEF leads in its efforts in providing emergency water trucking, safe water systems, repairs of facilities, WASH coordination in the midst of conflict, healthcare services combating water-borne diseases and much more.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):

This organization serves a special purpose, being one of the few organizations with permission to operate across frontlines. The ICRC negotiates with armed groups to protect water infrastructure, restores water supply in areas under siege or insecurity, repairs water

networks, ensures water access for displaced and cut-off communities, and advocates for the protection of water systems under International Humanitarian Law.

World Health Organization (WHO):

The WHO primarily concerns itself with all themes related to health. Examples relevant to the topic include monitoring water-borne disease outbreaks, providing guidelines for water safety, promoting WASH standards to be upheld in dysfunctional regions, and training local healthcare workers in maneuvering disease control.

African Union (AU):

This IGO advocates for policy-making, stability and peace withing the African community. In the past it has promoted regional water cooperation across shared river sytems, developed water governance frameworks and deployed peacekeeping missions.

African Development Bank (AfDB):

The AfDB funds and coordinates water infrastructure projects across (conflicted) Africa. It provides loans and grnats to governemts for long-term water security plans, finances innovative WASH infrastructure, and remains essential for large-scale water-related engineering and reconstruction projects.

## Timeline of Key Events

1992 - UN International Conference on Water and the Environment

2000 - Africa Water Vision 2025

2002 - Creation of the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW)

2004 - Establishment of the African Water Facility (AWF)

2015 - Adoption of SDGs

2020 - Horn of Africa floods and drought

2023 - UN Water Conference

2024 - United Nations World Water Development Report

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

1. UNICEF has implemented emergency WASH programs across conflicted Africa, specializing in providing water treatment supplies, hygiene kits, peace-driven approaches to reduce water-rooted tensions, and overall WASH education. This all done with a goal centered around prevention of water-borne diseases in efforts to limit the child mortality rate.
2. Peacekeeping operations such as MONUSCO in the DRC have rehabilitated areas under conflict with the safe access to water through setting new infrastructure such as standpipes, wells and water tanks in the region. By providing this source of water directly to communities, MONUSCO also ensured more safety for women and children who usually travelled further to retrieve water.
3. Sustainable infrastructure initiatives such as UNICEF's initiative in 2019, having installed over 1,200 solar powered water systems in over 40 countries, among others Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan. These solar powered systems ensured limited emissions and improved efficiency and quality of water supply.
4. ICRC negotiations and infrastructure repairs have helped nations under conflict like the Central African Republic to regain access to consumable water in local areas. In 2023, this Red Cross organization's deliveries of fuel, spare parts and water treatment products enabled over 160,000 people in cities Bangui and Bouar to access safe water in their respective regions.

## Possible solutions

1. Cross-border cooperation agreements to facilitate the collaboration needed between nations in order to achieve an equally distributed access to consumable water.
2. Investment in rapid-response water purification technologies to ensure adaptability remains central to long term solutions and relevant in a technology-driven society.
3. Regional stability initiatives to foster peace in conflicted communities and restoration of necessary water facilities.
4. Climate-resilient infrastructure to approach the issue in a sustainable manner, integrating itself to standards set around the world in accordance to climate agreements and innovation projects.

## Further Readings

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