# COP31: From Climate Plans to Delivering Climate-Resilient Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Communities on the Frontlines of Climate Change

*In this paper WaterAid sets out the urgent actions needed at COP31 on water security and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to drive progress through effective plans and investment pipelines and build the resilience of communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.*

**Water and WASH sit at the heart of COP31's ambition to move from climate commitments to implementation.** Climate-resilient WASH (CR-WASH) helps build resilient health systems, strengthen food security, support climate-resilient cities and advance greater coherence across the climate, biodiversity and desertification agendas. Yet despite being increasingly recognised by countries as a priority adaptation measure, the implementation of CR-WASH measures remains far too slow.

**At COP31, WaterAid calls on all Parties, donors and other key stakeholders to deliver on three priorities:**

1. Aligning and earmarking high-quality climate finance to implement country-led WASH priorities as a core climate adaptation measure and enabling condition to deliver wider COP priorities.
2. Strengthening implementation, finance and accountability of WASH adaptation through the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA).
3. Strengthening coherence on water across international climate, development and environmental processes to reduce fragmented planning and financing at country level.

**The climate crisis is a water crisis.** 90% of all climate disasters are linked to water.[1] Droughts, floods and sea level rises put a strain on water security – drying out water sources, increasing the spread of water-borne diseases such as cholera, and salinizing coastal freshwater sources. **In 2026-27 El Niño is poised to bring more extreme drought and flooding, damaging water security further. In East Africa, countries are facing likely increased rainfall and flooding,[2] whilst South Asia is already dealing with below average rainfall throughout the monsoon season.[3]**

**But water is also the first line of defence to climate change.** Access to WASH underpins people's ability to recover from floods, droughts and storms, while strengthening resilience across health, education, livelihoods, food security and ecosystems.[4] Without decisive action to speed up WASH delivery, over five billion people could experience water scarcity by 2050, and three in four could face drought impacts.[5] Already, 1 in 10 people don't have access to clean water close to home and 2 in 10 don't have a clean toilet at home.[6]

**Those facing the greatest barriers to accessing water, sanitation and hygiene are often the most exposed to climate impacts**. Women, girls, people with disabilities, Indigenous communities, displaced people, and those marginalised by poverty, race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity are often disproportionately affected. They are also often excluded from local and national decision-making processes to design WASH solutions, meaning these can fail to meet needs. Globally, women and girls spend 200 million hours every day collecting water[7] and often carry the caring responsibilities for relatives made ill by unsafe WASH, limiting their opportunities to get an education or earn an income.[8] Children are also dangerously exposed: one in three

[1] UNDRR. (2025). Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction: Resilience Pays – Financing and Investing for Our Future
[2] World Meteorological Organization. (2026). El Niño impacts Greater Horn of Africa.
[3] World Meteorological Organizaion. (2026). South Asia receives below average monsoon rainfall.
[4] WaterAid (2025). Rising With The Tide: How WASH Powers Community Climate Resilience
[5] UN-Water (2025). Water Scarcity Factsheet.
[6] UN-Water (2026). Water Factsheet.
[7] UNICEF (2016). Globally, women and girls spend 200 million hours every day collecting water
[8] WaterAid (2025). Rising With The Tide: How WASH Powers Community Climate Resilience

children already live in areas facing high or very high water scarcity[9] Access to clean water and sanitation are fundamental human rights.

**Investing in climate-resilient WASH services is one of the most effective and cost-efficient adaptation measures**, identified by the IPCC as a 'low-regrets' resilience action. According to the World Bank Group, water-dependent sectors support around 1.7 billion jobs globally.[10] Every US$1 invested in climate-resilient WASH generates at least US$7 in economic returns in Africa.[11] Achieving universal access to safely managed water by 2040 could generate a net benefit of US$37billion a year, whilst delivering universal access to safely managed sanitation would add a further US$86 billion a year to the global economy.[12] Investing in climate-resilient WASH is both essential for addressing health insecurity, gender inequality and poverty and critical for long-term economic prosperity.

**Important progress on water, sanitation and hygiene has been made across the UNFCCC.** COP29's Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action elevated water security on the climate agenda, while COP30's agreement on nine water and sanitation indicators under the Global Goal on Adaptation created a landmark opportunity to plan, finance and track global water and sanitation adaptation progress.

**Momentum behind the global water agenda is growing.** The UN Water Conference this December provides an opportunity to align political ambition and finance. Initiatives such as the World Bank-convened Water Forward, national water compacts, and Just Water Partnership principles offer pathways to turn existing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) commitments on water and WASH into coordinated investment and delivery plans. The newly adopted Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy provide an additional mechanism for advancing climate-resilient water security across Africa. Momentum is also growing to elevate water security across the Rio Conventions and strengthen efforts to deliver greater synergy through the COP31 agenda.

## At COP31, WaterAid calls on all Parties, donors and other key stakeholders to deliver on three priorities:

### 1. Aligning and earmarking high-quality climate finance to implement country-led WASH priorities as a core climate adaptation measure and enabling condition to deliver wider COP priorities.

Adaptation finance flows remain dangerously inadequate, with an estimated gap of US$310-365 billion per year[13] and loss and damage finance is worse still, estimated at US$447-894 billion by 2030.[14] A central challenge is not only the volume of finance, but also how finance is structured, prioritised and aligned with country-identified adaptation needs, including WASH priorities set out in NDCs and NAPs. Too often, climate finance also does not reach local governments, communities, and local or Indigenous organisations responsible for managing water and WASH-related climate risks. At COP31, progress must be made to ensure the $300 billion NCQG public finance commitment and tripling of adaptation finance goals are met and reach those most vulnerable to climate change in low- and middle-income countries, including for climate resilient WASH. This must include:

- **Identify pathways to finance climate-resilient water and WASH through the Climate Finance Work Programme.** This should include clarifying how the NCQG, adaptation finance goal and Article 9.1 will be

[9] UNICEF (2023). The Climate Changed Child
[10] World Bank Group (2025). The World Bank Group Water Strategy Implementation Plan: Water Forward - Investing in Water for People, Food, and Planet
[11] GWP (2023). International High-Level Panel on Water Investments for Africa. Africa's rising investment Tide.
[12] WaterAid (2021). Mission-critical: invest in water, sanitation and hygiene for a healthy and green economic recovery
[13] United Nations Environment Programme (2025) Adaptation Gap Report
[14] Richards, Julie-Anne et al (2023) The loss and damage finance landscape: A discussion paper for the loss and damage community on the questions to be resolved in 2023 for ambitious progress on the Loss and Damage fund

implemented in practice and how they will improve predictability and transparency of adaptation finance. Finance should be new and additional, grant-based or highly concessional, and aligned with the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC).

- **Address barriers for local governments, local and Indigenous communities, and local NGOs to access climate finance for WASH**, including complex application procedures and eligibility requirements, fragmented funding structures and limited capacity which favour larger or lower-risk investments.
- **Support coordinated, country-led approaches to financing and delivering climate-resilient water and WASH through country platforms and/or water compacts** aligned with the principles of Just Water Partnerships whose ambition is to mobilise finance that prioritises social and environmental justice.
- **Ensure private finance complements, rather than displaces, the grant-based and concessional public finance required for essential WASH services**, recognising its limited role in financing adaptation. Public finance must remain the primary mechanism for supporting adaptation and reaching marginalised communities.
- **Ensure loss and damage finance recognises climate-resilient WASH as a critical component of recovery and resilience-building** following climate-related disasters.
- **Embed climate-resilient and gender-responsive WASH into NDCs and NAPs through inclusive, expert-informed and fully costed commitments**, supported by clear responsibilities across climate, water and sectoral ministries and agencies, implementation arrangements, investment plans and project pipelines to enable delivery at scale.
- **Put WASH at the centre of El Niño and wider disaster preparedness, response and financing.** National and local El Niño response plans, strategies and policies should explicitly identify water supply, sanitation and hygiene as essential services that demand prioritisation in times of disaster. Minimum service levels should be established for vulnerable communities and public facilities including schools and health facilities, with clear arrangements to maintain those services during periods of water stress.
- **Ensure WASH commitments are reflected in national budgeting, sector planning and investment processes**, with clear links between climate plans and the institutions responsible for delivering water and sanitation services.
- **Ensure civil society, rights holders, WASH experts, relevant line ministries and marginalised groups have meaningful opportunities to shape, implementation and monitor progress.**
- **Build strong monitoring and accountability systems around WASH commitments**, including robust and disaggregated indicators that can demonstrate whether implementation is reaching people facing the greatest climate and WASH inequalities in a sustainable way**.**

## 2. Strengthening implementation, finance and accountability of WASH adaptation through the Global Goal on Adaptation.

The nine water and sanitation indicators agreed under the GGA provide a major opportunity to strengthen how countries plan, implement, finance and track climate-resilient WASH. Testing and integrating the GGA indicators into climate planning enables countries and finance providers to identify gaps, set priorities, target investment and assess whether adaptation efforts are delivering results. The focus must now shift towards how these indicators are used to drive implementation and financing. This must include:

- **Agree on a balanced technical task force** which encompasses the necessary technical depth to guide all countries, particularly low-and-middle-income countries with greater need of technical assistance, in testing the GGA indicators**.**
- **Utilise the recommendations from the UN Water report on "operationalizing the Belem and Adaptation indicators on water and sanitation"** when testing and implementing the water and sanitation target.
- **Use the GGA water and sanitation target to inform national adaptation planning, implementation and align funding**, including through refining allocation criteria, introducing internal allocation targets and earmarking funds for water and sanitation.
- **Improve the availability and quality of disaggregated data**, including by gender, age, disability, geography and other relevant dimensions of inequality.

- **Ensure civil society, WASH organisations, communities and marginalised groups are involved in decision-making at different levels**, and testing and applying the indicators so that measurement reflects lived experiences and supports accountability.
- **Use the Baku Adaptation Roadmap and Belém-Addis Vision to strengthen coherence across the adaptation architecture** and maintain a clear focus on implementation.

### 3. Strengthening coherence on water across international climate, development and environmental processes to reduce fragmented planning and financing at country level.

Water sits at the centre of climate, development and environmental action. Yet international processes continue to address water through separate institutions, targets and reporting systems. COP31 provides an opportunity to strengthen coherence across global processes, reducing fragmented planning and financing at country level while advancing integrated water and watershed governance. This includes bringing climate, water and environmental processes into closer alignment, including through the Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action, Rio Convention synergies, the COP31 Action Agenda (including the Climate Implementation Bridge) and the UN Water Conference.

- **Strengthening and reaffirming the Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action as a standing COP-to-COP political mechanism for water.** The Baku Dialogue on Water for Climate Action should be strengthened as a political mechanism under the UN climate process, supported by a dedicated, inclusive, politically independent and sustainably financed secretariat, with the scope to support a permanent agenda item on water within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process.
- **Embed water security and WASH as the blue thread across the Rio Conventions** to align national planning instruments and related investment strategies across climate, desertification and biodiversity, using the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) of convention secretariats and the COP31 Presidency's Rio Synergies agenda as critical launching pads for integration.
- **Leverage the momentum behind Water Forward and the national Water Compacts** to fast-track the implementation of climate-resilient WASH priority measures in NAPs and NDCs.
- **Align international climate and development investments with the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy and its first implementation plan and ensure integration of the vision priorities in NDCs and NAPs**, national development plans and water compacts and direct finance towards climate resilient WASH and water securities for underserved communities.
- **Strengthen regional coordination and collaboration on Early Warning Systems, disaster and WASH preparedness and emergency response**. This includes through facilitating timely sharing of data, convening regional response committees and designing effective long-term systems which connect local and regional preparedness systems.
- **Ensure these processes provide meaningful space** for civil society, rights holders, WASH experts, women and girls, youth, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, displaced people and other groups facing disproportionate climate and WASH impacts.

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