



By Joining Forces, East and Southern Africa Region - ChildFund Alliance, Plan International, Save the Children International, SOS Children's Villages International, Terres des Hommes International Federation, and World Vision International

Day of the African Child

16 June 2026

Ensuring Universal Access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Every Child in Africa

We join children, Member States of the African Union and partners across the continent to commemorate the Day of the African Child (DAC) under the theme: Ensuring Universal Access to water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for every Child in Africa. This is an urgent call to action through our collective responsibility to build a sustainable future for all children to enjoy life in all its fullness.

Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is fundamental to children's survival, development and dignity, transforming their lives. Yet children are being left behind. Globally:

- Around 600 million children lack safe drinking water,
- 1.1 billion lack safely managed sanitation and
- 689 million lack basic hygiene services

In Africa, UNICEF and WHO report that 190 million children lack access to safe drinking water, 240 million lack safely managed sanitation, and 160 million lack basic hygiene services. Unsafe WASH contributes to nearly 300,000 under-five deaths annually across the continent.¹

Unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene is linked to the deaths of around 1,000 children under five every day according to UNICEF. ² In Africa, this translates to over 800 child deaths daily due to diarrhoeal diseases and related infections.

Across Africa, the polycrisis is multifaceted. Climate change, conflict and rapid urbanisation increase the vulnerability of children in fragile contexts susceptible to climate shocks.³ Water Sanitation and hygiene go beyond infrastructure. They are about child rights. Article 14 of the African charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child obliges States to ensure adequate and safe drinking water, hygiene and environmental sanitation.⁴ These services support children's right to health, education, nutrition, protection and overall well-being. ⁵

In 2024, Plan International shared the story of Nelly, a 13-year-old girl in Zambia, living on one meal a day as drought worsened hunger and water shortages. This crisis left the girls with too little water to manage hygiene and children struggling to concentrate in school, with Nelly's mother

¹United Nations.[UN-Water GLAAS 2025: State of systems for drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene – global update 2025](#) Accessed June 10, 2026

² UNICEF. Triple threat: [How disease, climate risks, and unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene create a deadly combination for children](#). March 2023. Accessed 25 April 2026

³ Ibid

⁴ Africa Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). [African Charter on The Rights and Welfare of The Child](#). Accessed April 27, 2026

⁵ Ibid

walking two hours daily to fetch water.⁶ In Mozambique, ChildFund's story of Nilzah shows how access to a new borehole reduced children's long walk for water, improving hygiene, health and school attendance in 2025.⁷ Similarly, World Vision's 2026 study found that better access to water reduced the time women and girls spend collecting it, from several hours to within a 30-minute round trip for women in Kenya and Mozambique.

*Water services must be reliable so that hope is restored and girls and women can be free to focus on their education, livelihoods and leadership. **Maybin Ng'ambi, Regional WASH Programme director, World Vision East Africa.***

This transformation brings bold hope for children and women. This frees up time for play, work, rest and decision making.⁸ These examples from the Joining Forces Alliance East and Southern Africa, show that investing in child-responsive WASH is essential to protecting children's rights, dignity and wellbeing especially for the most vulnerable communities.

The DAC theme aligns with the African Union's Theme of the Year 2026: Assuring sustainable water availability and safe sanitation systems to achieve goals of Agenda 2063. This alignment places children at the centre of Africa's development priorities.⁹ Investment in child focused water, sanitation and hygiene, yield lifelong benefits and drive sustainable change and development.

We call on Africa Union Member states, regional economic blocs, development partners and all stakeholders to take bold and coordinated action to:

- Integrate child-responsive water, sanitation and hygiene strategies and interventions into laws, policies and budgets at continental regional and national level.
- Increase investment to ensure equitable access for the most vulnerable children, including girls, children with disabilities, those in rural areas, informal settlements, displaced children and those affected by conflict and climate shocks.
- Prioritise developing and implementing climate-resilient and sustainable water and sanitation systems
- Strengthen accountability and monitoring through regular progress reports with child and disability disaggregated data.
- Ensure meaningful child participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and solutions.

On this Day of the African child, we reaffirm our commitment to work alongside governments, the African Union, private sector and civil society and amplify the voices of children. Collectively we must ensure that every child in Africa has access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

An Africa fit for children is where their lives are transformed through access to safe and potable water.

⁶Plan International. [One meal a day – the families fearing hunger in Zambia](#) 16 Oct 2026, accessed 26 May 2026.

⁷ChildFund. [Nilza's journey for clean water](#) 19 March 2025, accessed 26 May 2026

⁸ World Vision. [World Vision study uses GPS to track women's water collection journeys, finds major gains in its program that helps women reclaim time, income and voice.](#) (World Vision, 03 March 2026) accessed 26 May 2026

⁹African Union, Theme: [Year of water sustainability.](#) Accessed 24 April 2026