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Water for peace and prosperity in Africa

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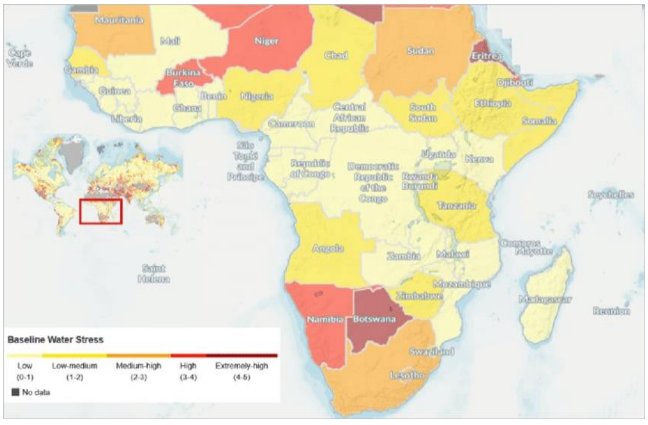
Water Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa

(*By Dursun Yıldız*)

840 million people or 68% of the population had access to at least basic improved water in 2024, up from 587 million people (59% of the population) ten years prior. But the number of people with this level of access remains unacceptably low in rural areas at only 53% in 2024 (up from 44% in 2014), according to the 2025 Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report, which tracks Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene data. Progress on sanitation is also slow, hovering at a third of the population in 2015 and 2024. Because progress has not kept up with demographic growth, that means more people are living without basic sanitation in 2024 than in 2015 (803 million vs. 686 million, nine years ago).



This gap is rooted in service delivery failure, lack of sector prioritization and weak governance, and results in lost productivity, stunted children, and persistent poverty, all exacerbated by climate shocks such as droughts and floods. Women and girls shoulder a disproportionate burden, often spending hours each day collecting water, which limits their opportunities for education and participation in the economy.

According to the JMP 2025 report, 281 million people in Eastern and Southern Africa (2024 data, excluding Eritrea and Sudan) did not have access to basic drinking water services, and 476 million people lacked access to basic sanitation services. The situation is worse in rural areas than in the cities.

About 82% of the population without access to basic sanitation live in 8 countries – Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Angola in that order. For drinking water, 82% of the underserved live in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Madagascar, Angola and Mozambique (in that order).

Water Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Scarcity, and Cooperation

Water politics in Sub-Saharan Africa is shaped by a complex interaction of water scarcity, shared river basins, state power asymmetries, and climate variability. In the region, water is not only a natural resource but also a strategic asset that influences development, food security, and regional stability.

Sub-Saharan Africa hosts both water-abundant and water-stressed areas. Large river systems such as the Nile, Niger, Congo, Zambezi, and Senegal basins cross multiple national borders. However, hydrological endowment is uneven, and rainfall is highly variable. Climate change has intensified hydrological extremes – longer droughts and more intense floods – making water availability increasingly unpredictable.

Transboundary Rivers and Power Asymmetry

Most major rivers are transboundary rivers, meaning that upstream decisions directly affect downstream countries. This creates hydro-political asymmetry. Upstream states with stronger political or economic capacity often gain greater control over water infrastructure, such as dams and reservoirs. The Nile Basin is a clear example where infrastructure development has reshaped long-standing political balances and triggered intense diplomatic negotiations.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, water infrastructure – dams, irrigation schemes, and urban supply systems – is closely linked to development narratives and state legitimacy. Governments present large water projects as symbols of modernization and economic growth. Yet, weak institutional capacity and limited financing often constrain effective water governance, leading to inequitable access and social tensions.

Climate Change Effects

Climate change acts as a risk multiplier rather than a direct cause of conflict. Reduced rainfall, declining groundwater, and ecosystem degradation amplify existing political and social vulnerabilities. Competition over water increasingly intersects with food security, energy production, and migration, turning water into a central element of broader human security debates.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, Sub-Saharan Africa also offers examples of cooperative water governance. River basin organizations and regional frameworks promote data sharing, joint planning, and benefit-sharing approaches. While often under-resourced, these mechanisms show that water can serve as a platform for diplomacy and cooperation, not only conflict.

Water politics in Sub-Saharan Africa is not simply about scarcity; it is about power, governance, and adaptation. As climate pressures grow, the future stability of the region will increasingly depend on the ability of states to transform shared waters from sources of competition into instruments of regional cooperation and sustainable development.

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Climateflation and Water Scarcity: Why Africa Faces the World's Sharpest Food-Security Risks

(*By Asamoah Oppong Zadok*)

In Lagos, a maize seller recently doubled her prices within a single year. In Morocco, pipelines stretch across barren plains, carrying desalinated water to farms that once relied on rainfall. Across much of the continent, the pattern is unmistakable: in the regions most exposed to climate shocks, the future of food security is becoming increasingly uncertain. While the severity varies from one country to another, climateflation is tightening its grip most sharply in rain-dependent and water-stressed zones, from the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to Southern Africa's drought stricken corridors. Erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts and heat waves are no longer isolated events; they are reshaping the price of food and testing the resilience of millions. Traditional inflation is often explained by monetary policy, fiscal deficits or global commodity prices. But climateflation is different. It stems from supply shocks that no central banker can tame with higher interest rates. When rains fail, harvests collapse and floods destroy roads, food cannot reach markets. Hotter conditions foster pests, forcing farmers to spend more on pesticides, costs they inevitably pass on to consumers.

Recent research on 16 West African countries confirms that temperature anomalies directly raise food inflation, with Sahelian nations, dependent on rain-fed agriculture, hit the hardest. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, households devote over half of their income to food. In some rural regions, such as Ethiopia's north-eastern highlands, families spend as much as 65 to 75 percent of their budgets on food, leaving them acutely vulnerable to even modest price increases. The United Nations has warned that millions more risk slipping into poverty during climate-driven price spikes.

While climateflation grabs headlines, water scarcity may prove the bigger long-term threat. Agriculture consumes about 80 percent of Africa's freshwater, even as aquifers are being drained faster than they can refill, rivers dry before reaching the sea, and rainfall patterns grow increasingly erratic. Water scarcity, not a lack of arable land, is the true constraint on Africa's agricultural potential. In Somalia, five consecutive failed rainy seasons have left millions food insecure. In southern Africa, dwindling river flows have crippled irrigation systems. In Morocco, the race to build desalination plants is a desperate attempt to buy time against desertification. By 2025, three billion people worldwide will live in water-stressed regions, and Africa will sit at the epicentre. Without systemic changes, water scarcity will define and confine Africa's food future.

Food crises do not respect borders. Extreme weather-driven harvest failures in Africa contribute to global price surges and increased food market volatility. Rising food prices, often triggered by such shocks, significantly increase the likelihood of social unrest across African countries. Those shocks are felt in rising migration pressures, trembling global supply chains, and strained international aid budgets. Climateflation and water stress are not African problems alone but early warnings of the vulnerabilities every region will face in a warming world. Governments across Africa are scrambling to respond, with Morocco betting on desalination, Kenya experimenting with drought tolerant maize, and Nigeria subsidizing fertilizer and fuel to keep farms productive. These efforts are piecemeal, patches on a bursting dam. What is needed is a broader strategy: investing in climate resilient farming, reforming water governance, adapting economic policy, and strengthening regional cooperation. When African harvests fail, global grain and vegetable oil markets tighten. When African families cannot afford bread, social unrest grows and sends shockwaves across regions and oceans.

But isn't this just another story of mismanagement or corruption? While governance failures certainly exacerbate food crises, blaming them alone misses the point. Even the most well-run system cannot withstand relentless climate shocks without new forms of resilience. This is not about Africa's inability to feed itself, it is about how climate change is rewriting the rules of agriculture everywhere.

Can technology save the day? Yes, but only if paired with equitable access. Desalination plants will not feed farmers who cannot afford water. Genetically engineered crops will not help if smallholders lack credit to buy seeds. What Africa needs is not a silver bullet but a toolbox of innovations, policies and partnerships.

The stakes could not be higher. If Africa fails to secure

its food future, the ripple effects will reshape not only the continent but the world. Rising hunger undermines political stability. Surging food prices deepen global inequality. And each lost harvest is a reminder that climate change is not a distant threat. It is today's crisis, measured in loaves of bread and bowls of rice.

Africa's food future is not doomed, but it is precarious. With bold investment, smarter governance, and international solidarity, the continent can turn climateflation into an opportunity for resilience. Without such action, however, we risk normalizing hunger as the price of a warming planet.

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Africa's future runs on water. So treat it as essential infrastructure

(By Sareen Malik)

Crises in Africa rarely begin with politics alone. They often start with water — too little, too dirty, or unfairly shared. Droughts push pastoralists off their land, floods wash away markets and schools, and in both cases, families are left more vulnerable to displacement, hunger and conflict. The Sahel has seen farmers and herders clash as rainfall patterns shift; in Southern Africa, dry taps in cities have fuelled unrest and forced rationing. Each example underscores a simple truth: when water fails, economies and social contracts fail, too.

This fragility is structural. Nearly 95 percent of Africa's agricultural land is still rain-fed, leaving harvests at the mercy of climate swings. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that water security is under mounting pressure from multiple directions. Adaptation will be impossible unless water is placed at the heart of planning, shaping what is built, how it is financed, and who makes the decisions. I have seen firsthand how communities become more resilient when water is stored, stewarded and shared fairly.

Yet despite this urgency, sub-Saharan Africa remains home to nearly half of the people worldwide who still lack at least basic drinking water services. That single fact ought to reorder our priorities. Water is not only a human right; it is the foundational infrastructure of development, influencing what is grown on the farm, what is made in the factory and what is taught in the classroom.

When fields dry out or taps run dry, it is families, especially women and girls, who absorb the shock. They do so not in abstract numbers, but in hours walked, classes missed, and opportunities lost.

UNICEF estimates women and girls spend around 200 million hours every day collecting water, time that could be spent learning, earning or leading. The inequity extends well beyond water collection. Sanitation progress is limited: no country in Africa is on track to achieve universal access to safely managed sanitation by 2030; only three are on track for universal basic sanitation.

Pipes alone do not bring dignity; people do. Efficient, sustainable and enduring services come when communities help set priorities, when fees are clear, and when users have a real voice. Policy must reflect daily reality. That means standards that fit local water conditions, budgets set aside for long-term upkeep, and information that

communities can access and trust.

Some models work. Global analyses suggest that every US$1 invested in water and sanitation returns roughly US$4 in social and economic benefits — through time saved, better health and higher productivity.

Innovation works best when it is rooted in context. Simple tools such as small-scale filtration, leak detection, solar pumping and water reuse can scale quickly when paired with training and local enterprises. Funding partners, philanthropies and prizes can also help proven solutions to scale.

One such platform is the Zayed Sustainability Prize, which recognises practical, scalable solutions while placing people at the centre. As a newly appointed member of its water category selection committee, I have seen how the prize elevates solutions that are both innovative and inclusive. In 2025, it honoured SkyJuice Foundation for a simple, power-free filtration system (gravity-fed ultrafiltration) that brings safe drinking water to remote and underserved communities often excluded from conventional infrastructure. And in 2023, the prize recognised Eau et Vie (Better with Water) for bringing household taps to underserved urban neighbourhoods and lowering bills for low-income residents.

These examples show that inclusive progress is possible — but only if decision-makers match words with action. So, what should they do now?

Put service, not symbolism, at the centre. Treat a rural hand pump breakdown with the same urgency as an urban pipe burst. Make every budget line traceable, every contract transparent, and every community able to see what was promised and delivered. Finance should be tied not only to infrastructure built, but to hours saved for girls, diseases averted in clinics and crops secured in the field.

Civil society and local governments need a stronger seat at the table. Public forums should be convened in which utilities, users and regulators face the same scorecard, and those results guide investments. Procurement rules should reward technologies that can be repaired locally, by local technicians, with parts sourced within the country. In agriculture, shift from betting only on mega-dams to backing soil-moisture management, rainwater harvesting and small-scale irrigation that reach families faster.

When governments send these signals—backed by predictable finance and political will—companies can follow with co-funding for watershed protection, and citizens will trust that their voices count. The test of every project should be simple: does it free up girls' time, keep children healthy and build jobs where people live?

Make water governance and infrastructure the plan, not a footnote. This means storage in the right places, pipes that do not leak, treatment that keeps running, and operators who are trained and paid. When the system works, health improves and local communities thrive. When you put this infrastructure first, dignity and prosperity will follow.

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The Africa Water Vision for 2025: Equitable and Sustainable Use of Water for Socioeconomic Development

(*Part Finale*)

14. The Way Forward

The attainment of these and other desirable outcomes of the Vision requires action at various levels, such as the grassroots, national and subregional water-basin levels. Action should also be taken at the level of subregional economic

commissions (such ECOWAS and SADC) and of Africa-wide organizations (such as the AfDB, ECA, and the OAU). The priority actions that need to be taken include awareness-and consensus-building, creation of enabling environments for international cooperation, responding to immediate water problems, creating frameworks for integrated water resources management, and capacity-building.

Building awareness and consensus. There is an immediate need to create awareness and consensus about the Vision at all levels, using messages that may be revised from time to time and from place to place to reflect local and changing circumstances. An initial set of such messages is presented in the following box:

Africa Water Vision Messages:

1. Provide safe and adequate water and sanitation for all, urgently.
2. Make equitable and sustainable use of Africa's water resources.
3. Ensure sustainable development and management of water resources for all.
4. Use water resources wisely to promote agricultural development and food security.
5. Develop water resources to stimulate socio-economic development.
6. Treat water as natural asset for all in Africa.
7. Share management of international water basins to stimulate efficient mutual regional economic development.
8. Ensure adequate water for life-supporting ecosystems.
9. Manage watersheds and flood plains to safeguard lives, land and water resources.
10. Price water to promote equity, efficiency and sustainability

Creating an enabling environment for international cooperation. Management of international waters has been identified as a priority in Africa due to the multiplicity of international waters. To respond to this, early action should be taken to develop a framework and an enabling environment for cooperation in the development and management of international water basins. Action would be required at an all-Africa level, at the sub regional level, and at the national level. Good models that have been cited above include the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) and the Protocol on Shared Watercourse Systems of the Southern Africa Development Commission (SADC), the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), and the Niger Basin Authority (NBA).

Responding to immediate water problems. Reference has been made to the inter-dependency between water and economic development. It has been suggested that water-resources issues (such as climate variability and shared river basins) and inadequate access to water and sanitation services can contribute to poverty. Similarly, on the positive side, well-managed and adequate water resources can be a result of and contribute to cause sustainable economic development. The challenge is how to prime the pump to launch the upward spiral in which water-resources development and economic development become mutually supportive. To this end, Africa would like to appeal to its development partners for initial financial assistance to facilitate action in three priority areas: (a) institutional reform; (b) information generation and management; and (c) meeting urgent water needs. Addressing these three fundamental needs would contribute to improved vitality, longevity, and human productivity that can serve as the springboard for socio-economic development.

Creating frameworks for integrated water-resources management. A prerequisite for successfully addressing the pressing water problems is to change from the fragmented approach to an integrated approach to water-resources management (IWRM). A first step in this regard is the establishment of an enabling environment at national level that will include policies and institutional arrangements for water-resources management and allocation between competing demands. This calls for an understanding of the Dublin-Rio principles. It also calls for a programme of gap analysis to determine the types of strategic assistance needed at the country level for implementing IWRM.

Moreover, it will call for an interpretation of the concept of water as an economic and social good. In this regard, it has been stressed that it might be helpful to separate the competing

demands for water for economic development from the competing demands for water for supporting life and the environment. This would make it easier to treat water strictly as an economic good for competing demands for economic development. However, for its use to support life, such as water supply and sanitation for the poor or for food security, a case may be made for treating water as both an economic and a social good. The aim here is to so price water for these services that it can promote equity, efficiency, and sustainability. A lot of debate and public education may be necessary to arrive at a consensus on these issues.

Building capacity. One of the major constraints in the development of water resources in Africa has been identified as inadequate human and institutional capacity for IWRM. Unfortunately, Africa does not have an adequate number of highly motivated and highly skilled water professionals who can deal effectively with the complex issues of water scarcity, climate variability and joint management of international waters. It is fortunate that, under the Global Water Partnership, a program of capacity-building has been launched, starting in Southern Africa. Other regions in Africa need to take the initiative to call for the use of the services of this new program for capacity-building at national and international levels.

Identifying vision drivers. Vision drivers (or vision driving forces) are long-term factors that influence the course of future water developments. They represent the conditions of the social and ecological system and the engines that move forward the development of water resources towards the desired vision. By knowing the most important drivers, it is possible to gain an insight into the direction and speed of water-resources development in the future. In view of their importance, a number of driving forces that might be relevant for the water vision for Africa have been identified. In order of priority, they are socio-economic, demographic, environmental, governance, and technological factors. There needs to be early consensus on how these drivers are to be defined.

- ***Socio-economic factors.*** The main socio-economic factor likely to constrain attainment of the Vision is the widespread poverty resulting mainly from slow economic growth and high levels of indebtedness on the continent. It is feared that this will inhibit investments in water resources development. There is a need to adressthis as a matter of urgency, especially through the expansion of access to safe and adequate water supply and sanitation services.
- ***Demographic factors.*** A key demographic constraint is rapid population growth and urbanization resulting in increasing demand on scarce resources under conditions of limited managerial capacity. A related factor is the high prevalence of communicable diseases and premature death due to inadequate, unsafe and inequitable access to water supply and sanitation. Countries need to review the trade-offs between different population policies in order to ensure that demographic factors do not limit socio-economic development or lead to increased water scarcity.
- ***Environmental factors.*** The major environmental factor is climate variability (spatial and temporal) leading to drought, desertification, floods and other natural disasters. A second factor is environmental degradation from domestic, industrial and agricultural waste. A third factor is failure to allocate adequate water resources to sustain life-supporting ecosystems, both terrestrial and aquatic. Addressing these factors at the national and international level is absolutely critical for Africa's sustainable social and economic development. If they are not addressed, the prognosis is dire.

- ***Governance factors.*** There are numeous governance factors in Africa. They include:

lack of accountability, transparency and good governance, resulting in ineffective management of water resources; inadequate cooperation and coordination in the management of national and international water basins; and inappropriate institutional arrangements resulting in poor management and low capacity in human resources. The governance factors also include: inadequate regulatory and legal frameworks at local, national, and regional levels; inadequate stakeholder involvement in water-resources management, particularly women and the youth; and civil strife and inter-country wars. A lot of work remains to be done on this constraint.

- ***Technology factors.*** The key technological factor is the existence of critical gaps in data (ground and surface water information and knowledge in the water sector). Inadequate technological know-how is another factor. The Internet is a major instrument for overcoming some of the technological constraints; yet in many parts of Africa, high telephone charges constitute a major constraint to access to the Internet. There is an urgent need for appropriate policies on Internet access in African countries.
- ***International factors.*** Water does not recognize borders. One factor is Africa's

abundance of shared international river basins, which will create interdependencies that can be threats or opportunities. A second factor is climate variability, which creates untenable risks in the absence of inter-country and inter-regional cooperation, allowing diversified sources of water, food, power, etc. Regional institutions and governments need to promote cross-border economic cooperation and integration, replacing threats with opportunities and mutual benefits.

15. Conclusions

Water is clearly a major factor in socio-economic recovery and development in Africa. The continent appears to be blessed with substantial rainfall and water resources. Yet, it has severe and complex natural and man-made problems that constrain the exploitation and proper development of its water resources potential. It is now recognized that these problems are surmountable. However, business as usual in water-resources management is not the way to overcome them. It is an approach that is bound to have disastrous consequences. A new Africa Water Vision for 2025 has been developed accordingly to address these problems and to stimulate a shift in approach toward a more equitable and sustainable use and management of Africa's water resources for poverty alleviation, socio-economic development, regional cooperation and the environment.

A framework for action towards the attainment of the Vision has been defined along with milestones and targets towards the Vision. What remains is mobilizing the political will, grassroots support and sustainable financial resources to make the Vision a reality.

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Note: The full Africa Water Vision for 2025 is available here!

Source: African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW)

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