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African Union

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP
GROUPE DE LA BANQUE AFRICAINE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT

AFRICAN STATISTICS DAY 2026

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18 November 2026

Institutionalizing water and sanitation statistics for sustainable and climate-resilient development in Africa

01 Background

African Statistics Day is an annual event celebrated on 18 November to raise public awareness of the importance of statistics in all areas of social and economic life. In 2026, it will be held under the theme "Institutionalizing water and sanitation statistics for sustainable and climate-resilient development in Africa".

The theme is informed by the African Union theme of 2026, "Assuring sustainable water availability and safe sanitation systems to achieve the goals of Agenda 2063". It highlights the need for water and sanitation statistics to be produced regularly, coordinated across institutions, adequately resourced and systematically used in public decision-making. Water and sanitation underpin health, dignity, food and energy security, industrialization, sustainable urbanization, climate resilience and economic transformation.

02 Importance of water and sanitation statistics

Although Africa has made some progress in expanding water and sanitation services, it remains insufficient and uneven. In 2024, 35.6 per cent of the African population was using safely managed drinking water services, compared with 32.9 per cent in 2015. Coverage also differed markedly between rural and urban areas, with rates of 19.3 per cent and 48.4 per cent, respectively. Safely managed sanitation coverage increased from 24.8 per cent in 2015 to 29.8 per cent in 2024.[1]

Climate change is increasing pressure on water resources in connection with changing rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, severe floods and other water-related hazards. Decision makers therefore need statistics that show whether services are safe, reliable and affordable; where shortfalls and inequalities are greatest; which systems are exposed to climate and pollution risks; and whether investments are producing results.

1 Averages for the whole of Africa calculated by the author using data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, "Indicators 6.1.1 and 6.2.1", SDG Indicators Database. Available at https://unstats.un-.org/sdgs/dataportal/database (accessed on 21 September 2026).

To answer those questions, it will be necessary to compile information from censuses, household surveys, administrative records, utility regulators, environmental monitoring programmes and hydrological and meteorological systems. When institutions use different concepts, methods and reporting schedules, information can become fragmented, inconsistent or outdated, while national averages can conceal large inequalities.

A recent statistical brief by the Economic Commission for Africa on the status of water statistics in Africa and national custodianship contained the finding that 19 of the 54 African countries had never submitted water statistics under the United Nations Statistics Division and United Nations Environment Programme Questionnaire on Environment Statistics. Only 10 African countries had reported water statistics during the 2024 round of the questionnaire. This absence of data shows why regular, nationally produced water statistics are needed to inform planning and track progress.[2]

03 Strengthening statistical systems for inclusive, evidence-based decisions

Institutionalizing water and sanitation statistics means making their production and use a permanent responsibility of national statistical systems instead of relying on isolated surveys or short-term projects. It requires clear institutional mandates, common concepts and indicators, regular production and publication, quality assurance, sustainable financing, skilled personnel and responsible data-sharing. The Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy sets out a vision statement on legitimized and integrated water information systems that support science-based decision-making for climate resilience and give greater priority to water management and sanitation in national systems for economic planning, investment and financial allocation.[3]

With such foundations in place, statistical systems can connect information on people, services, water resources, climate, health, agriculture, energy, the environment and the economy. Satellite information, sensors, geospatial tools, big data analytics and artificial intelligence can strengthen monitoring and early warning, but technology cannot replace capable institutions, agreed standards and trusted official statistics.

The aforementioned brief on water statistics in Africa and national custodianship includes a proposal on starting with records already held by utilities, water authorities and treatment plants, then building national water accounts in stages. It also includes a recommendation to identify whether published figures are nationally reported or modelled and to explain the material differences between national and international estimates. These practical steps would make water statistics more transparent and useful for national decisions.

The value of better statistics lies in how they are used. Reliable information can guide infrastructure investment, service delivery improvements, climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and public accountability. It can help utility regulators to monitor service continuity and water losses, support regulators in assessing performance and enable communities to demand accountability.

2 United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, "Status of water statistics in Africa and national custodianship", Statistical Brief (ECA/ACS/10/2026) (Addis Ababa, 2026).

3 African Ministers' Council on Water and African Union Commission, Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy: A Water Secure and Resilient Africa with Safe Sanitation for All (Abuja, 2026).

4 United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, "Status of water statistics in Africa and national custodianship"

To ensure that such decisions benefit everyone, national averages should be complemented by statistics that reveal inequalities in access, service quality, reliability, affordability and exposure to climate-related hazards. Where feasible and appropriate, data should be disaggregated by geographical location, rural or urban residence, sex, age, income and other nationally relevant characteristics. Statistics should also capture the time spent on collecting water and the detrimental effects of inadequate services on education, health, work and personal safety. Gender-responsive governance, sex-disaggregated data and the participation of young people in water governance and water, sanitation and hygiene services are of critical importance.

04 The call to action for 2026

On African Statistics Day 2026, African States are encouraged to make water and sanitation statistics a permanent component of their national statistical systems, supported by clear mandates, regular production and sustainable resources. Connecting information across institutions, applying common standards and safeguarding data quality will make the evidence more trustworthy and useful. Just as important, statistics must reveal which sections of the population remain underserved, instead of allowing inequalities to be masked by national averages. The indicator that this commitment has been honoured will be its impact: better-informed investment, more reliable services, stronger climate and disaster preparedness and greater public accountability.

National statistical offices are encouraged to use the Day to bring together water and sanitation ministries, utility regulators, environmental and climate institutions, local governments, basin organizations, researchers, civil society, young people, communities, the private sector and the media. Celebrations of the Day should include showcasing of available statistics, identification of the remaining information gaps and the promotion of practical commitments to close them.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Follow and participate in the celebrations of African Statistics Day on 18 November 2026 by using the following hashtags:

#AfricanStatisticsDay2026 **#DataForAfrica**

#WaterAndSanitationStats

