6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all in Latin America and the Caribbean[1]

Key regional statistics on SDG 6

- From 2000 to 2017, the proportion of the world's population using safely managed drinking water (the highest level of service) increased from 61% to 71%. Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions where the greatest progress was recorded.
- In 2015, more than 90% of the region's population was using improved drinking water sources and over 80% had access to improved sanitation facilities. However, 91 million people still lacked basic sanitation and 24 million people lacked basic water services.
- In 2015 only 40% of the rural population had access to safely managed drinking water (compared to 82% in urban areas), and only 28% of the rural population had access to safely managed sanitation.
- While the region has abundant water resources on average, many of its large cities are affected by water stress.
- Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean treat less than 50% of their wastewater adequately.
- Of the wastewater that reaches the Caribbean Sea, 85% is untreated and 51.5% of households lack a sewer connection. Only 17% of households are connected to wastewater treatment systems.
- Groundwater extraction accounts for the majority of the water supply in the Caribbean, at around 52.5% of the total, while surface water accounts for 35.8%, desalination 11.6% and rainwater harvesting less than 1%. There is a growing gap in several Caribbean countries between the demand for freshwater and the capacity to meet that demand.
- To meet growing demand, an average annual investment of about 0.3% of regional GDP will be required until 2030 for wastewater treatment coverage, improving storm drainage infrastructure, optimizing and increasing water sources' capacity, standardizing services in marginal urban areas and renewing existing assets.

[1] The analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presented here is the outcome of the discussions held within the framework of the third meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and Caribbean on Sustainable Development, convened under the auspices of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago, from 24 to 26 April 2019.

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SDG 6

- International experience suggests that only one in five countries with less than 95% coverage will reach universal access by 2030.
- In three decades, extreme hydrological, meteorological and climatological events resulted in the loss of 90,000 lives in the region, and the damage is estimated at US$ 120 billion. Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua are three of the four most vulnerable countries in the world.
- Of the total number of people affected by disasters in the region, 50% of cases are water-related disasters (droughts and floods).
- This is compounded by the fact that female-headed households tend to be the poorest and have more limited access to basic services. In Mexico, for example, 24.6% of households headed by women had no indoor water facilities in 2017.

Key messages from the region on the issues addressed by SDG 6 and its targets

- Water-related conflicts have increased considerably in recent years, becoming highly complex, with an impact on economies, the political sphere, social stability, populations and the environment.
- In recent decades, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced a marked change in their relationship with water resources. This shift is primarily reflected in growing modernization of regulatory frameworks for the water sector, which in many cases were outdated where they existed at all. Most such reforms are sensitive to the nature of the problems facing water management, as well as to the visions and practices of today's societies.
- The outlook of global warming is one of the most difficult problems facing water users in the region and it has the potential to affect all aspects of water use. Many countries could experience acute changes in water availability and quality. The frequency, intensity and spatial distribution of floods, droughts, tropical cyclones and other extreme weather events may vary. The impact of climate change is likely to be greatest in areas where there is water scarcity, heavy pollution or dangerous extreme weather conditions.

Challenges and opportunities for implementation, follow-up and review of SDG 6 and its targets

Challenges

- Improvements in wastewater treatment have not kept pace with population growth. Moreover, in many low-income households, the technology used for provision cannot ensure service stability and quality: access is often intermittent owing to drought or failing infrastructure and, in the case of water, the supply is not always properly disinfected. This has repercussions on the health of the population, in particular on child development.
- Most of the region's rivers are more polluted now than they were in the 1990s.
- As regards the goal of ensuring basic guarantees for the development of individuals, their families and communities, there is a substantial gap between rural and urban areas, which is a source of asymmetry in access to drinking water and basic sanitation services.

Opportunities

- Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDG 6 includes environment-related targets, and imposes more demanding criteria on access to safe drinking water and sanitation. In particular, it requires that drinking water and sanitation services be safely managed.

Lessons learned and good practices with respect to SDG 6 and its targets

- The significance or importance of transboundary aquifer systems is different in each case. In some cases, these resources are the main source of water, while in others they are underexploited. Many systems are vital for the ecosystems that depend on them, such as the Pantanal aquifer system, shared by Brazil, Paraguay and the Plurinational State of Bolivia.
- The groundbreaking 2010 Guaraní Aquifer Agreement signed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, ratified by all the signatory States in 2018, could provide useful policy lessons for improving water security in Latin America and the Caribbean. The geographical characteristics of this aquifer make it one of the largest in the world in terms of size and volume of water, and it has the particularity of being transboundary. The Agreement regulates the management and use of the resource and although it has not yet entered into force, it has established the foundations and principles for future application.
- The Ganadería Colombiana Sostenible ("Sustainable Colombian Livestock") project is an example of how silvopastoral production systems can raise farm productivity while enhancing the provision of environmental services. These include: improved water regulation and erosion control, increased biodiversity and carbon storage, and reduced nitrous oxide and methane gas emissions. After five years of implementation, the quality of the water running near the farms improved, with 72.7% less biochemical oxygen demand, soil erosion decreased by 7 tons per hectare and the presence of birds and invertebrates on the land increased by 32%.

Recommendations from Latin America and the Caribbean to achieve SDG 6 and its targets

- Progressing towards achievement of SDG 6 requires integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.
- The level of cooperation between countries ranges from almost non-existent to technical cooperation between civil society, the scientific community and governments. Establishing or strengthening such cooperation is essential to achieving the SDG 6 targets.
- Generate teaching information for schools on the importance of access to basic drinking water services and establish partnerships to facilitate exchanges of information between the education, water and health sectors regarding access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene.
- Address the asymmetry in access to information and technology and the capacity gap that arises from insufficient scientific and technical knowledge to design and implement water policies and risk prevention policies.
- Double average spending on research and development (which stands at less than 0.7% of GDP) and increase the tiny fraction allocated to water innovation and research.

- Promote efficient, sustainable water management, doing more with less and decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation (SDG target 8.4).
- Identify natural hazards linked to weather events and strengthen national strategies for disaster risk management.
- Focus spending on predictive and early warning services, with reliable risk assessments, timely and easily understood warnings, and safety protocols for water infrastructure.
- Use natural resources for sustainable production development: a region with a privileged endowment of water resources has considerable potential for development of sustainable tourism and should reach a regional agreement to advance in this area (SDG target 8.9).
- Faced with inequity or inadequate inclusion, it is important to remember that access to drinking water and access to decent sanitation are fundamental human rights. The legal and institutional frameworks of each country must recognize these rights and guarantee their effective enjoyment.
- Address the aforementioned gaps with a view to improving water governance, increasing effectiveness and efficiency in order to guarantee the human rights of access to drinking water and sanitation, inclusive development and the preservation and recovery of ecosystems.