

**AFRICA
WATER & SANITATION
SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP
SYMPOSIUM**

**Accelerating Water and Sanitation
Transformation for Sustainable Impact**

 **17-21 August 2026**

 **Kigali Convention Centre**
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REGULATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

BACKGROUND PAPER



1. Regulation and Accountability:

A Core Pillar of Systems Transformation and Financial Credibility

Africa sits at a historic threshold in the governance and delivery of water supply and sanitation (WSS) services. With the Africa Water Vision 2025 – led by the African Union – reaching its conclusion, and a new post-2025 continental agenda under development, the time has come to move beyond an overriding focus on the superficial symptoms of poor performance and address the structural roots of failure. This necessitates strong leadership and transforming national and local systems into the credible, accountable, and investable enablers of Africa’s long-term development. This transformation demands developing and strengthening four interdependent pillars required to accelerate progress towards universal and safely managed WSS services:



Leadership,
to anchor the
long-term vision
and ensure ac-
countability.



**Regulation and
accountability,**
to enforce rules
and enable trust.



Professionalisation,
to ensure service
reliability and institu-
tional performance.



**Strategic public
finance,** to
mobilise and
manage resources
sustainably.

The regulation and accountability pillar sits at the heart of systems transformation. Regulators are the gyroscopes of WSS systems, balancing the interests of policymakers, service providers, and consumers, and ensuring continued momentum and progress towards sector targets (World Bank, 2022; IDB, 2024). Systems transformation will not occur without well-defined regulatory frameworks, independent and empowered regulators, robust civil society, and the judicious application of accountability and regulatory mechanisms that respond to the needs of consumers and service providers alike (WSUP; ESAWAS, 2020). Amongst many positive impacts, effective regulation and accountability systems can contribute to:

- Having a clear **sector vision** prioritising universal WSS access.
- A well-defined set of ‘**rules of the game**’ enshrined in legal instruments and standards.
- **Service delivery model professionalisation**, with service provider capabilities strengthened through efficiency and compliance requirements.
- Consistently applied **tariff frameworks** safeguarding user affordability and provider sustainability.
- Standardised and reliable **data systems** enabling performance assessments and evidence-based planning, policymaking, and operational decision-making.
- Service provider creditworthiness and the development of **bankable investment projects**.
- **Transparency, accountability, and participation**, with public accountability systems based on performance monitoring, regular reporting, and consumer engagement.

- Long-term service **resilience** to political, financial, and climatic shocks.
 - Leveraging untapped **circular economy solutions**.
 - Adopting approaches and prioritising interventions to **address inequities**, including financial, demographic, gender-based, and disability-related inequities.
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These positive impacts are indispensable in strengthening the other pillars of systems transformation, supporting service delivery model **professionalisation**, facilitating the **strategic use of public finance**, and underpinning **sector leadership**.

2. The State of Regulation in Africa:

Increasingly Prioritised but Undermined by Structural Weaknesses

Regulation and accountability, largely neglected in the past, have emerged to progressively receive the focus they deserve. Since the 1980s and 1990s, regulation and accountability have been globally recognised as key elements of the WSS system. Nevertheless, until recently, at the global, continent-wide, and country levels, regulation and accountability often did not receive the warranted attention in our collective understanding of the critical enablers of systems transformation and accelerated progress towards universal access. This is changing, and Africa is at the forefront of the global prioritisation of regulation and accountability. This is reflected by the Global Call to Action as well as several recently developed global or pan-African guidance materials on topics such as regulation for inclusive urban sanitation services (ESAWAS, 2019), regulating drinking water quality for small water supplies (WHO, 2024), regulating sanitation services (WHO, 2025), and regulating rural water supply and sanitation and small water supplies in other contexts (ESAWAS, 2025).

Figure 1. Historical Trends in WSS Regulation in Africa

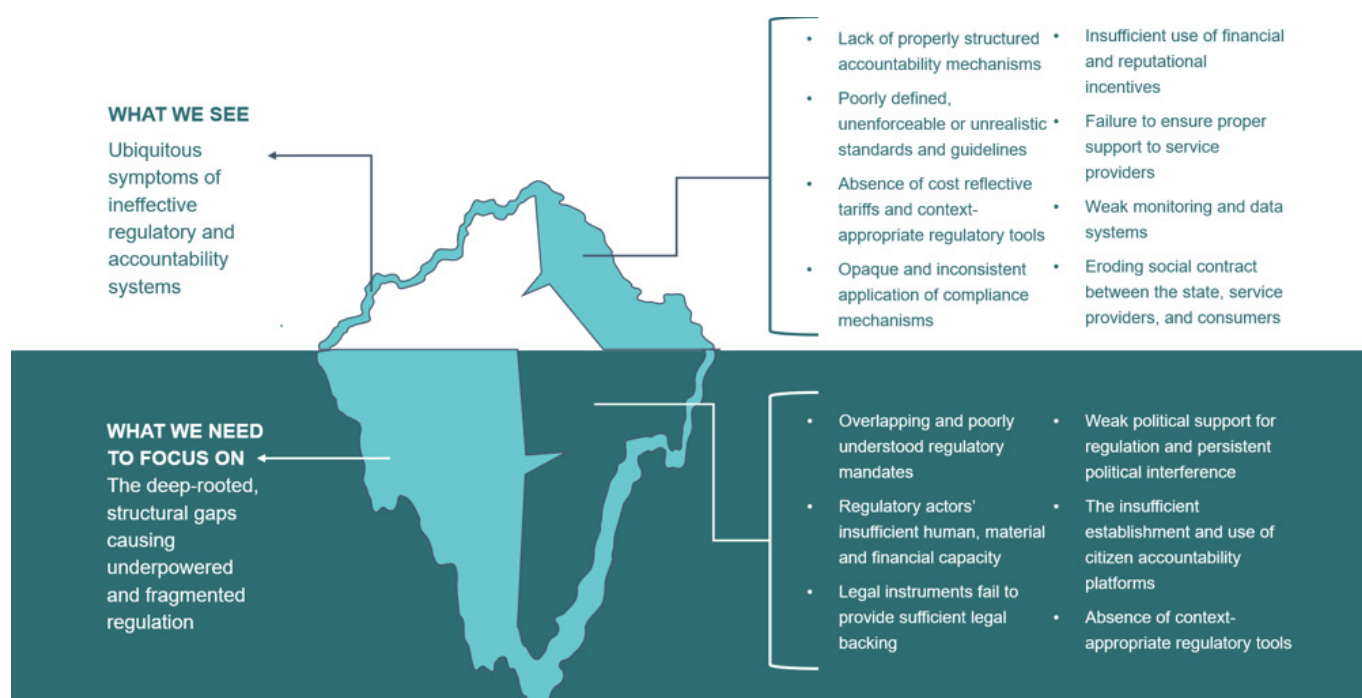


Many regulatory and accountability systems are getting stronger. The enhanced prioritisation of regulation and accountability is not simply occurring on paper or being signalled in top-level declarations and guiding documents; concrete progress has been made in strengthening WSS regulation. This includes:

- The **establishment of dedicated regulatory authorities**, including recently in Angola, Benin, and Burundi, and at the state level in Nigeria. At least 23 (43%) African countries now have a regulatory agency responsible for water supply and/or sanitation (ESAWAS, 2022), and several other countries (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe) have publicly committed to establishing dedicated regulatory bodies.
- Enabling **service delivery professionalisation** by reorganising the sector for commercial viability and increased access to services and supporting private sector participation in service delivery under strong accountability frameworks and a facilitative approach (WaterAid, 2024; IRC, 2021; AfDB, 2024).
- The **expansion of regulatory activities** beyond their historical focus on larger, urban service providers (e.g., chiefly utilities) to cover a broader mixture of service providers, services, and demographic settings (ESAWAS, 2025; GIZ, 2019). This typically involves utilising delegated regulatory frameworks and has enabled several of Africa's most experienced regulatory authorities to progressively expand their regulatory reach to include CBOs and small-scale private operators, rural areas and small towns, and onsite sanitation and point water sources (EWURA, 2020; NWASCO, 2018; WASREB, 2019).

In spite of this positive trend, progress is highly variable among countries, and the symptoms of partial or ineffective regulatory and accountability systems remain ubiquitous. Despite several countries having made noteworthy advances, progress remains highly variable. Unfortunately, in all too many countries, only a modest set of regulatory activities is performed for even the largest service providers, and accountability systems and opportunities for civic engagement remain weak. Moreover, while regulation and accountability increasingly receive the concerted attention they warrant, the legacy and impact of decades of insufficient prioritisation and weak regulatory and accountability systems are widely evident (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Deep-Rooted, Structural Gaps Impeding Effective Regulation



Meaningfully strengthening WSS regulation and heightening accountability requires moving beyond only addressing the surface symptoms of poor performance to confront the structural roots of failure. This can only be done by confronting the underlying, deep-rooted, and structural gaps that cause underpowered and fragmented regulation and the manifestation of these symptoms. In turn, this requires an understanding of, and ability to navigate, the political economy of a sector. Challenges vary from country to country; however, especially acute and widespread underlying weaknesses impeding the effective regulation and accountability of WSS services include (ESAWAS, 2022; WIN, 2024; OECD, 2015):

- **Overlapping and poorly understood and defined regulatory mandates**, especially for sanitation service provision across the service chain – from containment to collection, transport, treatment, and reuse – and solid waste management.
- Regulatory authorities' **insufficient human, material, and financial capacity** to adequately fulfil their mandates and perform key functions. This is especially impactful in contexts without dedicated regulatory authorities, and/or where regulatory responsibilities are progressively expanding to cover more services and service providers.
- **Legal instruments often do not provide sufficient backing** for specific elements of regulatory authorities' mandates and powers and fail to safeguard regulatory authorities' financial and decision-making independence.
- **Weak political support for regulation and persistent political interference** in regulatory authorities' performance of their mandates, especially interference in the application of compliance mechanisms and to suppress tariffs below the true costs of service delivery.
- **Inadequate citizen accountability platforms** to meaningfully strengthen transparency, accountability, and participation, including formal voluntary oversight structures and consumer groups, representation in oversight and decision-making institutions, and substantive public consultations.

These weaknesses are often especially acute for sanitation, particularly the onsite sanitation services serving most of Africa, and water services provided by smaller, deconcentrated service providers such as CBOs and small-scale or informal private operators.

The impact is substantive. It is evident in the slowing progress towards sector targets, consistently high (and often rising) rates of non-revenue water and service providers' insufficient operating revenues, reduced water quality, high rates of unsafely disposed excreta, and the failure, so far, to rise to the challenge posed by climate change.

This systemic failure is not inevitable – it stems from how national and sub-national institutions are designed, governed, financed, and progressively strengthened, as well as the political influences and dynamics present in every country and every sector. As a continent, we must move beyond an overriding focus on the surface symptoms of poor performance to confront these structural roots of failure head-on.

3. Pillar Focus:

Supporting Reforms for Strengthened Regulation and Accountability

The Regulation and Accountability pillar will address, head-on, the actions required to improve regulation and accountability across the continent and address the structural roots of failure. The Regulation and Accountability pillar of the Africa Water and Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium, seeks to catalyse reform of regulatory and accountability systems and foster a culture of performance and transparency across public, private, and civic actors. It will do this by moving beyond a targeted focus on the superficial symptoms of poor performance to meaningfully confront the structural roots of failure and showcase good practice reform processes undertaken by African regulatory authorities and other sector stakeholders.

Three candid, problem-focused, and outcome-oriented **transformation dialogues** will be held that draw on real-world learnings and enable key sector stakeholders to identify and commit to implementing tangible actions to strengthen regulation and accountability across Africa. These are:

1

From Policy to Practice: Regulation and Accountability as Key Enablers within Sector Governance for Investment Readiness. This session will detail practical approaches for transforming policy commitments to strengthen regulation into successfully operationalised regulators that build investor confidence. It will cover elements such as designing and messaging water supply and sanitation regulation in a manner that resonates with policymakers and strategies for operationalising regulatory reforms such as leveraging civil society and cross-sectoral bodies and engaging legislative actors.

2

From Compliance Enforcement to Performance Facilitation: Characteristics and Instruments of an Effective Regulator. This session will look internally at regulators and detail key considerations for a robust regulatory entity and effectively applying regulatory tools. It will cover elements such as the critical importance of legal instruments in providing the foundation for effective regulation, enforcement vs. performance facilitation approaches, and key regulatory tools and instruments to incentivise and sustain improvements and build resilience.

3

Efficiency Reforms: Regulatory Influence on Service Provision Performance and Private Sector Involvement. This session will showcase the steps regulators can take to influence the sector and support business-like operations and professional service delivery at scale. It will cover elements such as how regulators can help bring structure to the sector and reduce fragmentation, expanding the scope of regulated services, the role of regulators in creating the necessary conditions to leverage the private sector, and facilitating service providers to access capital and adopt circular economy approaches.

Beyond these dialogue sessions, **finance matchmaking sessions** will connect committed regulatory actors (along with municipalities and ministries) with potential support partners. These include development finance institutions, technical assistance platforms, consultancy firms, and peer reform champions. Regulatory actors will have the opportunity to present their reform priorities and interact with partners through facilitated rotations. The aim is to accelerate reform journeys by linking credible national and local actors with the finance, expertise, and institutional support they need to succeed.

4. Legacy Vision

The 2063 African Vision and Policy repeatedly reaffirms the importance of effective regulation in achieving a water-secure and resilient Africa with safe sanitation for all. The ESAWAS Regulators Association is the leading professional network for WSS regulation in Africa and plays a central role in strengthening regulatory systems across the continent. Although historically focused on Eastern and Southern Africa, through its 2025–2027 Strategic Plan, ESAWAS is extending its reach and becoming the **continental reference for effective regulation and accountability in the sector**. This includes:

- **Acting as a global resource for WSS regulatory knowledge** by expanding ESAWAS's offerings under its WSS Regulation Training Centre and developing and disseminating evidence for the benefits of regulation.
- **Promoting and supporting effective WSS regulation continent-wide** through assisting countries to accelerate uptake of regulatory practices, approaches, tools, and instruments that advance effective regulation and service delivery improvements.
- **Consolidating ESAWAS's presence and influence on the African continent** and globally through gradually expanding its membership beyond Eastern and Southern Africa and further leveraging platforms and partners for sector influence.

As ESAWAS further operationalises its role as the continental reference for effective WSS regulation and accountability in the sector, its strong partnership approach will remain central in fulfilling the above objectives. This includes:

- The **WSS Regulation Training Centre**, which draws upon the practical experience of ESAWAS's members and partners to provide wide-ranging technical training on WSS regulation and build the capacity of Africa's WSS regulators and other sector stakeholders to execute their mandates.
- Leveraging insights from its members and a strong network of partners to develop **practitioner-focused regulatory guidance** to accelerate the uptake of working practices on topics such as regulating rural WSS and small water supplies, advancing sanitation regulation, utility adoption of responsibilities for onsite sanitation, regulating urban sanitation services, amongst others.
- Anchoring the **Africa Citywide Inclusive Sanitation (CWIS) Network** as a permanent multi-partner platform advancing the collaborative implementation of CWIS approaches across Africa in support of SDG 6 and Agenda 2063.

The Africa Water and Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium will reinforce ESAWAS's central role, consolidating its position as **Africa's champion for regulation and accountability**, bridging policy, practice, and performance.

Based on the rich insights and learnings expected from the Regulation and Accountability Dialogue, the **Kigali 2026 Africa Water & Sanitation Systems Leadership Communique on Accelerating Water and Sanitation Transformation for Sustainable Impact** will reaffirm the critical importance of robust regulatory and accountability systems. Through this communique, Ministers and Heads of Delegations responsible for water and sanitation, finance, and economic matters in Africa will:

- Recognise effective regulation as a critical precondition for investable sector credibility and commit to establish, safeguard, and adequately resource independent regulatory authorities.
- Pledge to support the adoption of holistic and innovative regulatory approaches, including extending regulatory frameworks to cover often neglected sectors and services.
- Reaffirm ESAWAS's central role as the continental reference for effective regulation and accountability in the sector.

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