

Concept Note



High-level
Side Event

WASH and Health Synergies to End Polio and Water-Borne Diseases including NTDs and Cholera

📅 14 February 2026 ⌚ 14:00–15:30 📍 African Union Headquarters (Small Conference Room 2), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

39th Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) Assembly of Heads of State and Government

Co-conveners: Government of Nigeria, Government of Zambia, AUC HHS, WHO, GPEI, OAFIAD

Context

The WHO African Region has made historic progress in public health over the past two decades, most notably achieving certification of the African Region as free of wild poliovirus in 2020. Yet, despite this milestone, persistent outbreaks of circulating variant poliovirus, which affected 18 Member States in 2025, continue to challenge progress and delay the goal of global polio eradication. Concurrently, recurrent epidemics of water-borne diseases—such as cholera, typhoid fever, hepatitis A and E, and water-borne neglected tropical diseases (NTDs)—further strain and compound the burden on already fragile health systems.

Water-borne diseases remain among the leading public health challenges in Africa. Between 2014 and 2021, the WHO African Region accounted for 21% of global cholera cases but 80% of global deaths. More recently, despite a slight decline in the number of cases, cholera outbreaks continued across an expanding number of countries, with the case-fatality ratio rising from 1.4% in 17 Member States in 2023 to 1.8% in 18 Member States in 2024, and further to 2.0% in 21 Member States in 2025, indicating a worsening severity and wider geographic spread of the disease.

NTDs like Trachoma, soil-transmitted helminthiasis and schistosomiasis are highly sensitive to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and the African Region remains the furthest from achieving the 100% benchmark for access to basic WASH services in countries endemic for NTDs. Schistosomiasis affects over 90% of the global burden in Africa, with transmission sustained by unsafe water contact, open defecation, and limited hygiene infrastructure, perpetuating cycles of poverty and ill-health. These diseases disproportionately impact children, women, and marginalized populations, contributing to malnutrition, stunting, increased healthcare costs, and preventable deaths.

Current responses to cholera, polio and NTDs outbreaks are still dominated by short-term emergency interventions that do not sufficiently tackle some of the shared structural, long-term drivers of these diseases, which include poor sanitation, limited access to clean and reliable water sources, inadequate hygiene facilities, weak surveillance, and fragile primary health systems unable to prevent, promptly detect, and effectively respond to outbreaks. Currently, only 31% of the African

population has access to safely managed sanitation, and just 28% of households have basic hygiene services—conditions that allow viruses and bacteria to spread and hinder the effectiveness of health interventions, including immunization campaigns.

Despite significant investments, WASH programming, immunization and mass administration of preventive chemotherapy efforts are often planned and delivered in parallel rather than in synergy. This siloed approach limits the collective health impact and misses opportunities to deliver more resilient, cost-effective, and sustainable solutions. Evidence shows that integrating WASH and health interventions—such as linking routine immunization or preventive chemotherapy with hygiene promotion, or embedding WASH improvements into polio or cholera outbreak responses—can enhance disease prevention, strengthen community trust, reduce transmission risks, and create more enabling environments for public health gains.

The persistence and evolution of the polio, cholera and NTDs outbreaks underscore the urgent need for sustained, preventive, and well-coordinated multisectoral action, that include interventions such as safe water access, sanitation infrastructure, hygiene behaviour change, and environmental management—within routine health services, school health platforms, and community-based delivery systems—to reduce transmission and move decisively towards eradication and elimination of these diseases.

Against the backdrop of the 39th African Union Summit of Heads of State and Government, whose theme is “Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063”, the World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa (WHO AFRO) and the AU Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs, and Social Development in collaboration with the Government of Nigeria and the Government of Zambia, proposes to convene a high-level side event focusing on health security, disease elimination, and universal water and sanitation access. This event will spotlight integrated, multi-sectoral approaches that align WASH, immunization, environmental health, and community health systems to accelerate progress toward a healthier, more resilient, and polio-free Africa.

Objectives

The side event seeks to:

- Highlight the critical role of integrated WASH and health interventions—including immunization, preventive chemotherapy, surveillance, and outbreak response—in preventing and reducing the transmission of polio, cholera, and other water-borne neglected tropical diseases such as schistosomiasis and soil-transmitted helminthiasis.
- Promote cross-sectoral collaboration among governments, development partners, civil society, and communities to align policies, financing mechanisms, and implementation strategies for WASH and health systems strengthening.
- Identify pathways to embed WASH considerations into routine immunization, NTD preventive chemotherapy, school health programmes, community health programs, and outbreak preparedness, ensuring long-term sustainability and resilience against future public health threats.
- Mobilize political leadership and stakeholder commitment to accelerate progress towards a polio-free Africa while simultaneously reducing the burden of water-borne diseases through coordinated, multisectoral action.

Expected outcomes

- Strengthened Policy and Strategic Alignment: Governments and partners commit to integrating WASH and health interventions—particularly immunization, preventive chemotherapy and outbreak response—into national health and development strategies, ensuring coherence with Agenda 2063 and SDG targets.
- Mobilized Political and Financial Commitments: High-level endorsements and pledges from governments, donors, and development partners to accelerate investments in integrated WASH and health systems, supporting a polio-free Africa and reducing the burden of water-borne diseases.
- Enhanced Integration of WASH and NTD Programmes: Countries commit to incorporating WASH indicators and interventions into NTD planning, monitoring, and elimination strategies, strengthening sustainability beyond preventive chemotherapy.

Tentative Programme (90 minutes)

Opening (21 minutes): Moderated by Dr Elijah J. Muchima, Minister of Health Zambia

- Dr Mohamed Janabi, WHO Regional Director for Africa
- H.E. Amb. Amma Twum-Amoah, AU Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development (HHS)
- H.E. Dr Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of Sierra Leone, President of the Organisation of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD)
- H.E. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria
- H.E. Hakainde Hichilema, President of the Republic of Zambia

Panel Discussion (34 min): Moderated by Prof. Muhammad Ali Pate, Coordinating Minister of Health and Social Welfare, Nigeria

- Dr Silvia Paula Valentim Lutucuta, Minister of Health, Angola
- Dr Samuel Roger Kamba Mulamba, Minister of Public Health, Hygiene, and Social Welfare, Democratic Republic of Congo
- Dr Eng. Habtamu Iteta Geleta, Minister of Water and Energy, Ethiopia
- UNICEF Representative
- Ms Thoko Elphick-Pooley, Deputy Director for Advocacy and Communications, Africa Offices, Gates Foundation
- Dr Solomon Zewdu, CEO, END Fund

Q&A session (20 min)

Closing (15 min): Moderated by Dr Mohamed Gedi, Polio Eradication Programme Coordinator, WHO Regional Office for Africa

- Ms Teguest Yilma, Chair of Rotary's Ethiopia National PolioPlus Committee
- Mr Godfrey Bahigwa, Director for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment (ARBE), AU Commission
- Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean



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