

International Budget Partnership SOUTH AFRICA

Our strategy to shift the public resource system in South Africa

In South Africa public resources are being raised and spent unfairly and ineffectively, leaving millions of people—especially women— without access to the quality public goods and services.

South Africa's public resource governance system faces several challenges, including under-resourcing of key social sectors and a lack of spaces for historically excluded communities, particularly women in informal settlements, to have a say and influence how public money is raised and spent.

As a result of these public resource management challenges, South Africa has stark inequalities in women and girls' access to key services they need to thrive like water and sanitation.



Challenges in how South Africa spends public resources for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

The problem:
Approximately 7.4 million women in informal settlements do not have adequate access to dignified water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.

The water and sanitation crisis in South African informal settlements reflects deep-rooted inequalities along racial and gender lines. The racial disparity in access to water and sanitation across South Africa is stark: while 90% of White South Africans have access to flush toilets, only 54% of Black Africans do.

Approximately 14 million people, 24% of South Africa's population, live in informal settlements of which 51% are women and the vast majority are Black. The infrastructure challenges in these settlements are severe. While 46% of all South Africans have piped water in their dwellings, a mere 5,4% of residents living in informal settlements have piped water. 61% of South Africans have access to flush toilets, but only 31% of informal settlement residents have access. Most facilities are communal, requiring long walks to access them, and maintenance is poor. When facilities break down, residents often wait more than a month for repairs, leaving them without access to basic services.

Women and girls face particularly acute challenges in these settlements. Safety is a major concern, with 74% of women reporting feeling unsafe using toilets at night, and 85% noting insufficient public lighting. The burden of water collection falls disproportionately on women and children, who make up 64% of water collectors. Many women spend significant time waiting for water, with 37% waiting over 20 minutes and 78% making multiple trips daily. This time burden hinders their ability to pursue education or economic opportunities, or access healthcare.

The health implications are serious for all residents, but especially for women. Communal toilets are often unsanitary and poorly maintained, increasing the risk of infections. The chemicals used for cleaning these facilities can pose additional health risks. Contaminated water sources lead to waterborne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and typhoid, while limited access to clean water makes maintaining personal hygiene difficult.

Climate change further exacerbates these challenges. Informal settlements are particularly vulnerable to environmental disasters. Regular winter fires occur due to residents relying on candles and open flames for heating and lighting. Floods are also common as many settlements are built in flood plains. Droughts have an outsized impact on these communities due to their already limited water access, and insufficient refuse removal leads to additional health hazards.

Challenges in how South Africa's government raises and spends public resources directly impact its ability to deliver quality, reliable social services for underserved communities.

South Africa's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system



South Africa's water, sanitation and hygiene system suffers from several issues that lead to poor and unjust service delivery.

Laws/Policies: The current policy framework centers on a program to upgrade informal settlements adopted in 2004. It aims to upgrade settlements through a phased approach: identifying suitable land, providing basic services, enabling self-help housing and ensuring tenure security. However, this policy is largely failing due to rigid regulations, government ambivalence toward informal settlements and capacity issues. At the current pace, some cities estimate it could take 50-100 years to provide adequate water and sanitation services to all informal settlement residents.

Norms/Discourse: A significant barrier is the persistent view of informal settlements as illegal and temporary, despite many being up to 25 years old. This mindset, partly a remnant of apartheid policies, leads to three major problems: reluctance to invest in permanent infrastructure, preference for communal rather than household services and application of emergency service standards. The perception of settlements as temporary continues to influence policy decisions and service delivery, even though urbanization is ongoing and these communities are clearly permanent.

Financial Flows: Funding comes primarily through national government grants, but there are significant challenges in allocation and implementation. Local government planning starts with Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), but these often rely on outdated data and insufficient community engagement. Despite large allocations to WASH services (e.g., 34% of the capital budget in Cape Town is dedicated to WASH), informal settlements receive a disproportionately small share (only 3%). The lack of protected allocations means funds can easily be diverted to formal areas.

Implementation/Procurement: All informal settlement WASH services are outsourced to private contractors, reflecting the "temporary

settlement" mindset. The procurement process suffers from multiple problems: poor needs assessments, inadequate tender specifications (particularly regarding women's safety), closed briefing sessions and weak monitoring of contractor performance. Service level agreements are often not published, making it impossible for residents to monitor service delivery.

Incentives and Accountability: While financial incentives and political motivations exist to improve service delivery, accountability mechanisms are weak. Performance indicators rarely mention women and informal settlements, and most cities lack functional fault reporting mechanisms. Existing systems to report service issues are biased against informal settlements, requiring municipal accounts and street numbers that informal settlement residents don't have. Audits often exclude WASH procurement due to the relatively small amounts involved.

Bargaining Power of Women: Women's participation in decision-making is severely limited. Planning and budget participation processes are superficial, with multiple barriers to engagement including language requirements, short participation windows and reliance on online platforms. Despite women holding about 40% of municipal council seats, they remain underrepresented in key leadership positions. Even organized women's groups struggle to engage effectively - out of 24 budget submissions womens groups made over the past three years, only three received written responses. The ward committee system, meant to facilitate community engagement, remains ineffective; as a result, decisions about WASH services are made without public scrutiny.



The future we envision

Our goal is for the government of South Africa to spend public money more fairly so that 3.7 million women have greater access to dignified water and sanitation services.





South Africa's water, sanitation and hygiene system and informal settlement women

Problem

7.4 million women in informal settlements do not have adequate access to dignified water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services.

Policies

Ensure WASH policies and laws provide permanent, dignified and gender-sensitive services to women in informal settlements, informed by inclusive research and stakeholder engagement.

Data

Ensure officials use community-generated data in their planning, budgets and procurement processes so that they reflect demographic and socio-economic information on access to WASH

Accountability

Establish mechanisms for women in informal settlements to report and receive government responses to service faults and WASH issues, including building relationships with City Corporate Services Departments and assessing existing systems to develop gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms.

Procurement

Embed procurement policies and practices that prioritize the needs and participation of women in informal settlements. This involves developing gender-responsive procurement methodologies and ensuring that women are included in all steps of WASH needs assessments.

Bargaining Power

Accompany women in informal settlements so that they are equipped with the skills to influence WASH decision-making spaces.

Goal

3.7 million women have greater access to dignified WASH services.





We will ensure that women in more than 500 informal settlements in 8 municipalities have better access to dignified water and sanitation services, and that many of them report that their information is being used to guide services, that they can access tender specifications, that they are able to report faults and that they feel safe using facilities. To do so, we will pursue these system-level outcomes in our target metros, which we believe are essential for South Africa's sanitation system to work better for women in informal settlements.

Outcome 1. Promote the establishment of policies that are responsive to the needs of informal settlement residents. This includes ensuring that the National Department of Water and Sanitation formulates and adopts one WASH policy for informal settlements that can deliver permanent, dignified and gender sensitive WASH services to all women in informal settlements, informed by their needs.

Outcome 2. Ensure officials use community-generated data in their planning, budgets and procurement processes. We will work to have eight city planning departments develop and adopt a system for collecting demographic and socio-economic information about informal settlements that can inform their planning, budgets and procurement. We will also work to ensure that eight city planning and finance departments formulate and adopt Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Medium-Term Revenue and Expenditure plans (MTREF) based on national policy, recent demographic and socio-economic data, and costing of the need for WASH services in informal settlements.

Outcome 3. Ensure officials establish reporting mechanisms to gather community feedback on whether services provided are responsive to their needs, including whether they are gender-sensitive. We will work to ensure that eight city governments' Corporate Services Departments develop and implement fault reporting mechanisms for WASH services that allow residents to report gender-related service problems. We will ensure city Corporate Service Departments respond promptly and provide feedback to those who report faults.

Outcome 4. Ensure procurement policies reflect women's central involvement in WASH needs assessments. We will work to ensure that eight city governments' Supply Chain Management (SCM) departments formulate, adopt and implement procurement policies that mandate women's central involvement in WASH needs assessments. We will ensure that 50% of tender specifications issued by Supply Chain Management (SCM) departments include provisions for women's safety risks, including considerations for lighting and the placement of WASH services. We will also work to ensure that at least 50% of cities Supply Chain Management (SCM) departments publish WASH tender specifications and service level agreements, so that residents can monitor the performance of service providers.

Outcome 5. Strengthen the bargaining power of women in informal settlements in WASH decision-making spaces. We will work with women in informal settlements to build their capacities to engage in and inform WASH decision-making spaces.

Our strategy for change

Our strategy for change includes five strategic areas to helps us realize the system of tomorrow:

1. **Ensure WASH policies and laws provide permanent, dignified and gender-sensitive services.** Key actions will involve helping officials to formulate policies that guarantee these standards across all informal settlements, with participation from various stakeholders such as the Department of Water and Sanitation and civil society organizations. The implementation of these policies will involve inclusive research and stakeholder engagement, ensuring the needs of women in informal settlements are prioritized in WASH service delivery.

2. **Improve institutional effectiveness by making sure that planning and budgeting documents reflect WASH policies and the socio-economic realities of women in informal settlements.** Our work in this area will require developing and adopting systems for collecting demographic and socio-economic WASH information, which will inform Integrated Development Plans and Medium-Term Revenue and Expenditure Frameworks. These plans will ensure WASH service provision aligns with the specific needs of women in these communities.

3. **Improve information flows by establishing mechanisms for women in informal settlements to report and receive government responses to service faults and WASH issues**. The focus here will be on building relationships with City Corporate Services Departments and assessing existing systems to develop gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms.

4. **Embed procurement policies and practices that prioritize the needs and participation of women in informal settlements.** This involves developing gender-responsive procurement methodologies and ensuring that women are included in all steps of WASH needs assessments. Training both government officials and women in informal settlements will support the adoption and implementation of these policies, promoting broader participation by women in informal settlements in WASH procurement decision-making. We will also ensure national agencies review and align their policy and supply chain management provisions with gender-responsive practices. Key actions include conducting assessments of procurement policies and engaging with women in informal settlements on the outcomes. This will foster accountability and encourage the replication of successful gender-sensitive procurement policies across multiple cities, supporting broader WASH improvements for informal settlement women.

5. **Accompany women in informal settlements so that they are equipped with the skills to influence WASH decision-making spaces**. This area of work cuts across most of the preceding strategic areas and includes building the capacity of women in informal settlements to engage with relevant national and city government actors on the contents of draft WASH policies, supporting women to make submissions on draft city plans and budgets for the delivery of WASH services, training and supporting women to use gender-sensitive fault reporting systems and supporting women to participate in WASH procurement processes.