



AFRICA WATER & SANITATION SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP SYMPOSIUM

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

17–21 August 2026

Kigali Convention Centre
Kigali, Rwanda

BACKGROUND NOTE



Background note for the Africa Water and Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium 2026

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1. Introduction

Why Kigali Matters Now

Across Africa, water and sanitation systems are approaching a point of no return. Despite decades of efforts, millions of citizens still lack safe water, sanitation, and hygiene services. The gap is widening as populations grow, cities expand, and climate risks intensify. The symptoms are visible everywhere: overloaded utilities, fragmented governance, chronic underfunding, and institutions struggling to perform essential public-service functions.

In 2026, Africa has a unique political opportunity to change this trajectory. The African Union has declared the year's continental theme as "Assuring Sustainable Water Availability and Safe Sanitation Systems to Achieve the Goals of Agenda 2063." At the same time, a new Africa Water Vision and Policy framework has been endorsed by the African Union General Assembly in February 2026.

The Africa Water and Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium 2026, hosted by the Government of Rwanda and convened by the African Union and AMCOW, arrives at a critical moment. Facilitated by IRC Africa, the symposium will bring together about 1,000 leaders to focus on how to implement transformation at scale.

This symposium builds on a growing movement:

- **October 2022 – All Systems Go Africa (Accra):** Affirmed that transformation must be African-led and identified six foundational priorities for change.
- **February 2026 – Endorsement of the Africa Water Vision 2063 and Policy by the General Assembly of the African Union:** Set a unified continental ambition for a water-secure and resilient Africa with safe sanitation for all, underscoring strong governance, capable institutions, and transformative leadership as prerequisites for achieving this vision.
- **August 2026 – Africa Water & Sanitation Systems Leadership Symposium (Kigali):** Translates the Vision into a politically anchored, technically sound, and institutionally actionable agenda for systems transformation.

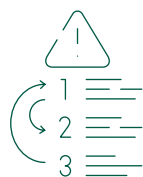
What makes Kigali distinct is its focus on execution. The symposium aims to position African institutions as credible, investable, and accountable—capable of attracting long-term public and private financing. Its outcomes will shape Africa's collective contribution to the United Nations Water Conference (December 2026), providing an important continental demonstration of real progress in the AU Year of Water.



2. Understanding the Challenge: *A Systemic Crisis, Not a Sectoral One*

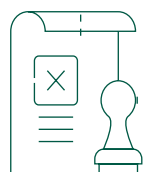
Africa's water and sanitation crisis stems from systemic dysfunctions, which reinforce one another and prevent sustained progress.

2.1 Weak political prioritisation



At the root lies a lack of political ownership and long-term vision for water and sanitation as strategic public services. In many countries, the sector is under-prioritised in national development agendas and receives inconsistent attention from political leadership (African Development Bank, 2021). There is often reluctance—sometimes due to electoral risks, sometimes due to limited policy understanding—to undertake the tariff, fiscal, and governance reforms required to unlock sustainable finance and institutional accountability.

2.2 Fragmented and ineffective regulation



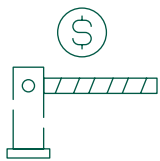
This weak political foundation leads to underpowered and fragmented regulation. Regulatory authorities frequently lack clear mandates, independence, or capacity to oversee performance, protect consumers, or ensure fair tariff-setting (Kolker, 2023a). The absence of enforceable standards of professionalism across the sector means that key actors—from service authorities to utilities—operate without predictable rules or consequences. In sanitation, regulation is often fragmented or underdeveloped, with unclear mandates, weak enforcement of environmental standards, and no clear framework for reuse products such as biosolids or biogas. Oversight mechanisms remain opaque or non-existent across both water and sanitation sectors, weakening trust, performance discipline, and user confidence.

2.3 Under-professionalised institutions



Service providers, municipalities, and national authorities often lack the technical, managerial, and financial capacities required for reliable and equitable services, with many still operating without basic tools such as reliable financial data, adequate tariffs, performance metrics, or modern asset management systems (Pories et al., 2019). This under-professionalisation weakens project preparation, undermines coordination, and leaves systems vulnerable to political, financial, and climate shocks. As Fonseca (2024) notes, structural inefficiencies—poor subsidy targeting, fragmented planning, and weak institutional coordination—limit the impact of existing resources, requiring professionalisation across the whole governance and financing chain. These weaknesses are even more pronounced in sanitation, where unclear mandates, insufficient financing, fragmented responsibilities, and the absence of viable business models continue to impede scalable and sustainable services (African Development Bank, 2024).

2.4 Systemic barriers to investment



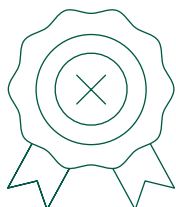
These weaknesses translate into a financing environment where large-scale investment remains elusive. Most countries struggle to combine tariffs, taxes, and external finance into sustainable, effective models. Public finance systems are fragmented, with subsidies poorly targeted and budget planning unpredictable (OECD & African Development Bank, 2024). Rural areas, in particular, remain heavily dependent on declining flows of international aid (Nansi, 2023). Meanwhile, development banks often take a passive stance, stepping back when countries lack the capacity to present investment-ready proposals—thus reinforcing the cycle of underinvestment (International High-Level Panel on Water Investments for Africa, 2023).

2.5 Chronic underfunding



This results in chronic underfunding. Many countries are unable to generate the resources needed to upgrade service quality for existing users, let alone extend access to the growing number of unserved populations. Capital investment remains far below the levels required to meet national or continental targets, and operation and maintenance budgets are often inadequate, compromising functionality (Joseph, Hoo, Wang, Bahuguna, & Andres, 2024).

2.6 Persistent gaps in service quality and access



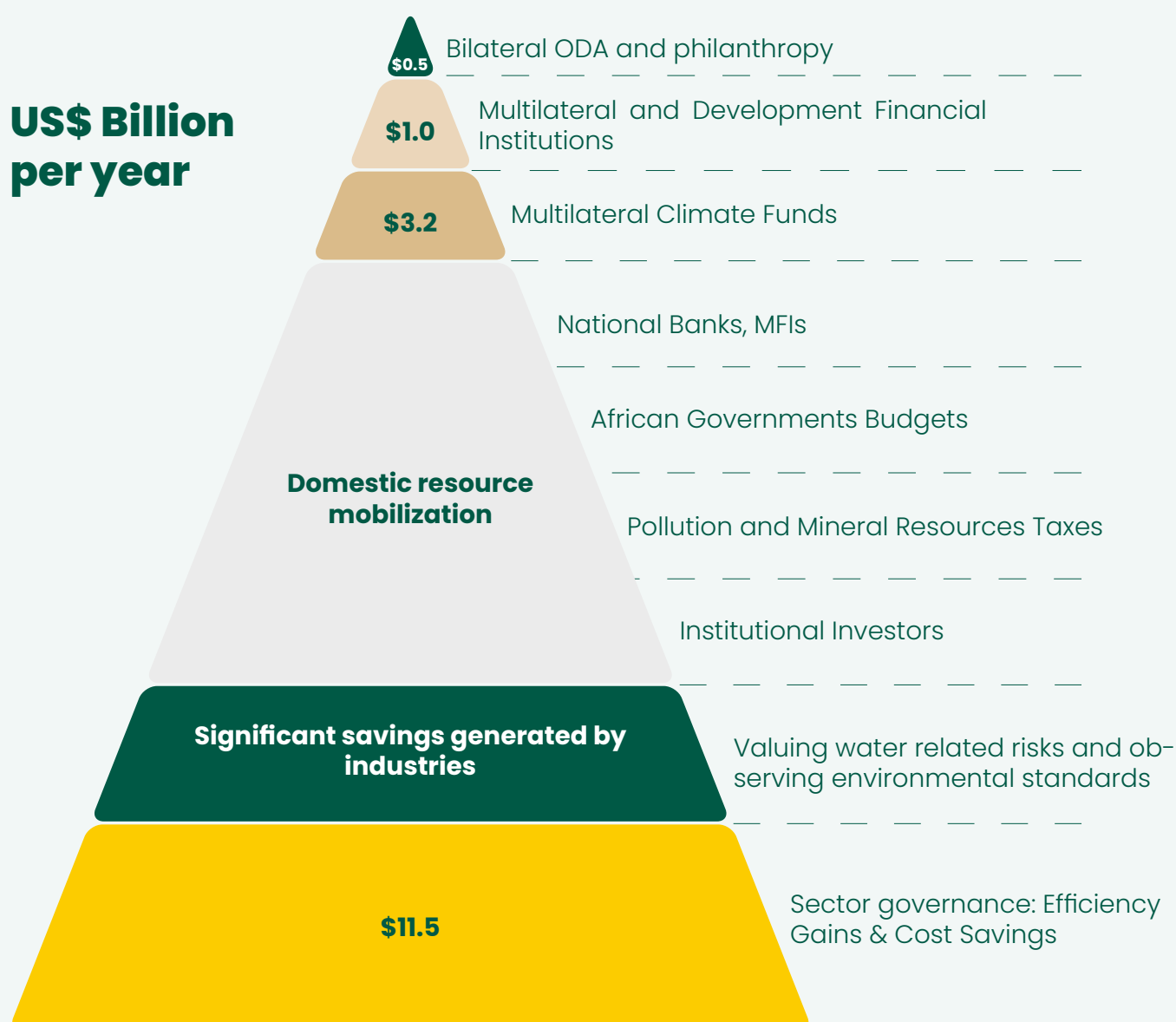
The consequences are stark. In 2022, 69% of sub-Saharan Africans lacked safely managed drinking water, 80% lacked safely managed sanitation, and 77% lacked basic hygiene services (WHO & UNICEF, 2023).

Africa's systemic crisis cannot be solved by isolated projects, new technologies, or short-term funding. It demands a continental shift toward systems that are led, regulated, financed, and managed in fundamentally different ways.

3. Where the Real Priorities Lie: *The Financing Pyramid*

The African Union's High-Level Panel on Water Investments identifies the true foundations of sustainable financing:

- Sector governance: Efficiency gains, stronger tax effort, responsible tariffs, and local finance discipline can generate USD 11.5 billion each year.
- Domestic resource mobilisation: Institutional investors, targeted levies on pollution and mineral resources, government budgets, and national development banks together can generate USD 17.5 billion each year.



Source: International High-Level Panel on Water Investments for Africa (2023).

The key message: Africa's water future will be primarily financed by Africans themselves—through credible, accountable, and efficient institutions

4. From Vision to Capability: *Why Systems Leadership Matters*

The last decade has made one truth impossible to ignore: fragmented services are the result of fragmented governance. Africa does not lack strategies, plans, or frameworks. It lacks systems capable of implementing them.

Systems leadership—political, fiscal, technical, and institutional—is the connecting thread required to turn policy into performance.

This means

- Political leaders who prioritise water and sanitation and protect reform agendas.
- Ministries of Finance that integrate the sector into national fiscal strategies.
- Regulators who enforce predictable rules and accountability.
- Service providers who operate with data, discipline, and professional excellence.
- DFIs that invest not only in infrastructure, but also in the institutions that make infrastructure work.

The experience of Benin and Uganda demonstrates that when systems leadership is aligned across institutions, transformation becomes possible at scale. Benin's integrated reforms enabled a successful €500 million SDG-linked Eurobond and major DFI investments (Republic of Benin Ministry of Finance, 2021), while Uganda's NWSC expanded its network from 8,100 km to over 19,000 km thanks to long-term political support, operational discipline, and a credit-positive institutional environment (National Water and Sewerage Corporation, 2022).

Other countries—such as Senegal, Kenya, South Africa, and Morocco—have pursued, or are currently undertaking, promising institutional reforms aimed at strengthening sector performance and creating the conditions for long-term investment.

These examples confirm that achieving institutional credibility is not the endgame—but it is a turning point.



5. Institutional Credibility: *The Cornerstone of Systemic Transformation*

A central insight has emerged across Africa: sustainable progress depends on institutional credibility, not simply more funding.

Institutional credibility is defined as the ability of national and local institutions to be seen as reliable, transparent, and investable by citizens, governments, and development finance institutions. It reflects the functionality of the entire system, not only the balance sheet of a utility.

As Pories et al (2019) argue, credibility must be built, not assumed.

Institutional credibility

- Makes long-term capital cheaper and more accessible.
- Encourages DFIs to support national reform trajectories.
- Builds citizen trust and willingness to pay.
- Forces institutions to operate with discipline and transparency.
- Creates an environment where reforms become politically feasible.

It shifts the question from:

**How do we find
more money?**

to

**How do we make
our systems worth
investing in?**

This is why the symposium will launch the Kigali Declaration on Systems Transformation, positioning institutional credibility as the continental benchmark for transformation and investment readiness.



6. A Framework for Transformation: *The Four Pillars*

Kigali 2026 structures the transformation agenda around four mutually reinforcing pillars, aligned with the Africa Water Vision 2063 and the African Water Investment Programme (AIP).

6.1 Leadership

Transformation begins with leadership—political, fiscal, and technical.

Effective leadership

- Sets long-term priorities and protects reforms across political cycles.
- Embeds water and sanitation into national fiscal and investment frameworks.
- Builds institutional resilience to financial, political, or climate shocks.
- Mobilises Ministries of Finance and Planning as central actors.

6.2 Regulation and Accountability

Trust is the currency of investment. Regulation is how trust is made visible.

Strong regulation

- Provides predictable tariff regimes and performance standards.
- Enforces environmental compliance and transparency.
- Integrates water, sanitation, and solid waste oversight.
- Balances affordability with financial viability.
- Creates systems where incentives and sanctions drive performance.

6.3 Professionalisation

Systems are only as effective as the institutions that operate them.

Professionalisation means

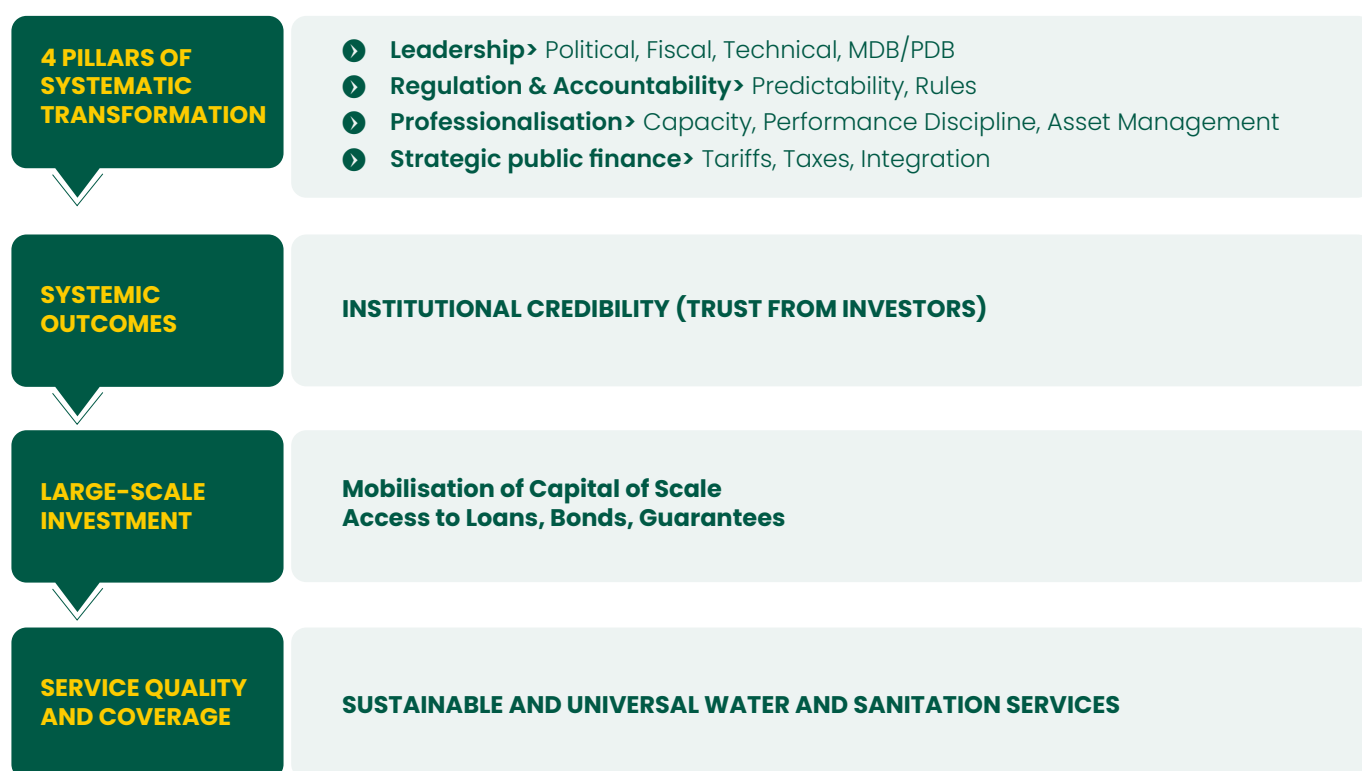
- Competent, well-trained personnel across all institutions.
- Strong financial data, asset management, and planning tools.
- Robust project preparation capabilities.
- Integrated service delivery across liquid and solid waste.
- Climate resilience and continuity planning.

No system can sustain itself without credible public finance.

Strategic public finance entails

- Responsible, socially sensitive tariff policies.
- Predictable budget allocations.
- Blending tariffs, taxes, climate finance, and repayable funds.
- Coherent national investment strategies aligned with development plans.
- Integration of sanitation financing, including circular economy models.

Together, these four pillars form Africa's Framework for Institutional Credibility—the foundation for systems that are credible, investable, and sustainable.



Source: Nansi, J. (2025).

Institutional credibility is an outcome of functional national systems. It emerges when political leadership, strong regulation, institutional professionalisation, and strategic public finance come together to build trust, financial discipline, and investment confidence. Ultimately, unlocking large-scale, long-term capital is essential to achieving universal water and sanitation services.

7. Content Tracks of the Symposium

To turn the four pillars into action, Kigali 2026 will deliver six content streams over the three main days:

1. High-Level Political Dialogues

Heads of State, Ministers of Water, Ministers of Finance, and DFIs aligning on national reform agendas.

2. Strategic Dialogues on Public Finance

Mobilising domestic resources, executing fiscal reforms, and structuring blended financing.

3. Strategic Dialogues on Regulation and Accountability

Peer exchanges on regulatory coherence and performance benchmarking.

4. Strategic Dialogues on Professionalisation

Experience-sharing on workforce excellence, digital tools, efficiency gains, and operational discipline.

5. Youth and Innovation Sessions

Spotlighting young entrepreneurs and transformative solutions.

6. Systems Reform and Investment Marketplace

Connecting digital solutions and technical innovations with DFIs, public development banks, and impact investors.

These segments aim to ensure that every conversation contributes directly to building Institutional credibility and unlocking investment.

By the closing plenary, the Symposium will have seen the birth of a continent-wide movement—generating credible and investable national systems and signalling the shift from aid-driven projects to self-financed transformation.

8. Expected Outcomes

Kigali 2026 will deliver three high-impact outcomes:

1. The Kigali Declaration on Systems Transformation

Trust is the currency of investment. Regulation is how trust is made visible.

- Affirm institutional credibility as the pathway to universal, safely managed services.
- Commit governments to strengthening execution disciplines alongside policy reform.
- Mandate structured coordination between finance, water, and planning ministries.
- Call on financiers to align risk-mitigation instruments with national reforms.
- Articulate leadership pathways for translating the vision and policy into action.

2. Institutional Empowerment Platform (IEP) or equivalent

A mechanism to support countries in structuring reform-driven investment pipelines, strengthening institutions, and enabling blended finance.

3. Country Reform Partnerships

New collaboration pathways between governments, DFIs, and technical partners to accelerate reforms beyond the symposium.

Beyond Kigali, progress should be tracked and documented through:

- The 14th Executive Committee meeting of the African Ministers' Council on Water (AMCOW) in October 2026, where AMCOW will assess the contribution of the Kigali Symposium to the implementation of the Africa Water Vision and Policy.
- The African Union's end-of-year report on water, to track reform commitments and initiatives tied to implementation of the vision.

These outcomes will feed directly into Africa's contribution to the UN 2026 Water Conference, demonstrating tangible progress during the AU Year of Water.

9. Conclusion

A Continental Turning Point

Africa stands at a decisive moment. The continent has the vision, the leadership, and the reform champions it needs. What is required now is alignment, accountability, and action.

With the High Patronage of the Government of Rwanda and the continental mandate of the African Union and AMCOW, the Systems Leadership Symposium 2026 will mark the moment Africa:

- Shifts from vision to transformation,
- From fragmented efforts to coherent systems,
- From plans to implementation,
- And from distrust to institutional credibility.

Kigali will offer the evidence, the partnerships, and the political anchoring needed to demonstrate Africa's readiness to deliver a water-secure continent with safe sanitation for all.

The work begins now.

Kigali 2026 will accelerate it.

The continent's future depends on it.

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Conveners



Facilitator



Sponsors



Strategic Partners (incl. the World Health Organization)

