GLOBAL STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR WATER SECURITY

2024–2030

IFRC

The challenge we face

Climate change is no longer a distant or abstract concern. Its consequences are increasingly visible, disruptive, and compounding, from prolonged droughts and erratic rainfall to severe floods and the contamination of essential water sources. For most people around the world, the first and most immediate impacts of the climate crisis are being experienced through disruptions to water: its availability, quality, reliability, and safety - and the health consequences that follow, including rising rates of water-related diseases.

This unfolding crisis does not exist in isolation. It is intensified by rapid unplanned urbanization, demographic pressures, and population displacement, especially in places with weak governance and fragile infrastructure. When water systems collapse or fall short, the effects cascade: they undermine water access for human consumption, sanitation and hygiene services and systems, public health, disrupt food production and livelihoods chains, halt education, deepen poverty, alter ecosystems and heighten the risk of instability and conflict. Water is the entry point — but when it fails, entire systems are shaken.

While the scale of the problem is global, the impacts are not felt equally. Those who are already vulnerable (because of geographic disadvantage, poverty, conflict or marginalization) are the ones most exposed to the consequences of water insecurity. These intersecting challenges are now converging to form a multidimensional crisis that touches nearly every aspect of human development and demand a shift toward more unified, innovative, and community-anchored solutions.

A need to expand — and to lead

The IFRC has a long and respected history of addressing water-related needs through its global network of National Societies. Through Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programmes, the IFRC and its network play a critical role in preventing disease, delivering safe water, sanitation services and promoting hygiene, both in emergency contexts and in long-term development. Millions of lives continue to be improved and protected through this work.

At the same time, the global water agenda is evolving. New paradigms, including water security, water stewardship, water management, water poverty, and water diplomacy, are now shaping international priorities. The IFRC is well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to these shifts. To remain impactful and aligned with our Strategy 2030, we are broadening the scope of our work and strengthening how we communicate our relevance, scale our impact, and connect across traditional sectoral boundaries — while maintaining our leadership in emergency response.

The conditions we face today are more complex, interconnected, and fast-changing than ever before. While WASH remains a vital and central component of humanitarian and development programming, we recognize that future challenges require more than service delivery alone. They call for systemic, integrated approaches that connect water with health, climate adaptation, urban governance, livelihoods, and peacebuilding among others.

OUR STRATEGIC PROPOSAL: From WASH to Water Security

This Strategic Direction marks a deliberate and necessary evolution in how the IFRC approaches water, one that builds on our historic strengths in WASH, while aligning with the most innovative thinking around water security, systems integration, and locally led change.

Water security refers to **accessibility, availability, quality, and effective management of water systems for healthy and resilient communities.** The sustainable and equitable availability of water, sanitation, and hygiene services for human health, healthy ecosystems, livelihoods, and social stability, and it demands that we connect our work across sectors and scales, unifying interventions that were once fragmented, and aligning them with broader development and peace objectives.

This is not an abstract ambition. Across our network, National Societies are already working beyond the boundaries of traditional WASH, supporting irrigation and agriculture, managing water for health facilities, restoring ecosystems, and facilitating community cooperation in water-stressed areas. This Direction offers a strategic framework that brings those efforts into coherence and alignment, clarifying our identity, enhancing our credibility, and strengthening our collective impact.

By adopting water security as a unifying approach, we acknowledge the complexity of the challenges we face, and we assert our readiness to meet them with clarity, confidence, and renewed purpose.

Why the IFRC Is uniquely positioned

The IFRC network possesses a rare combination of global reach, local presence, and long-standing trust. With 191 National Societies operating in nearly every country, we are embedded in communities that are often overlooked by conventional systems, from underserved urban settlements to remote rural areas. Our more than 16 million volunteers speak local languages, understand cultural contexts, and are present before, during, and after crises, providing a level of continuity and community connection that few actors can match.

This presence is not only geographical but institutional. More than 100 National Societies already manage or support health and water infrastructure, ranging from small community health posts to fully equipped regional facilities. We operate at the intersection of emergency response, development programming, and peace-building, and are uniquely positioned to integrate water into each of these domains.

What we need now is not to build something entirely new, but to organize and amplify what we already do, within a shared strategic framework that puts the localization agenda at the forefront, empowers National Societies, and helps communities themselves lead the way toward more water-secure and peaceful futures.

OUR DIRECTION: Strategy, priorities, and path forward

This Strategic Direction sets a clear and actionable path for the IFRC and its network from 2024 to 2030. It identifies five priority areas where water-related needs are most acute and where our strengths as a largest humanitarian network can deliver the greatest impact.

But our greatest strength lies in addressing these challenges not one by one, but together. We are able to work across sectors and deliver integrated solutions that reflect how people actually experience water-related risks.

The five priority areas are:

First**, CHOLERA** — where the goal is not only to respond to outbreaks, but to end them through early action and lasting improvements to water and sanitation systems.

Second, **EMERGENCY WASH** — where we will continue to support access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene, while embedding these services within resilient health systems and sustainable infrastructure.

Third, **CLIMATE AND WATER ACTION** — where we will invest in climate-resilient water infrastructure, integrate water into adaptation planning, and help communities anticipate and withstand climate shocks.

Fourth, **URBAN WATER ACTION** — where we will work alongside utilities and municipalities to expand access, address inequalities, and develop water systems and sanitation solutions that reflect the realities and needs of growing urban populations.

And finally, **WATER AND PEACE** — where we will use water cooperation as a tool to build social cohesion, reduce tensions, and promote dignity and stability in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

These five focus areas are supported by a set of cross-cutting enabling approaches that include localization, systems strengthening, digital innovation, market-based programming, and community engagement always throughout the protection, gender and inclusion lenses (PGI). Together, they form the backbone of a strategy that is both practical and transformative, one that empowers National Societies to adapt, align, and lead within a changing global context.

01 CHOLERA:
A preventable disease still claiming lives

Cholera remains a deadly but preventable disease, affecting the most underserved communities. Year after year, it re-emerges in the same high-risk areas, driven by unsafe water, poor sanitation, conflict, and the growing impacts of climate change. As these climate impacts intensify, new areas — and larger populations — are becoming vulnerable, expanding the geography of cholera risk. In early 2025, outbreaks were reported in 25 countries, underscoring the persistent risk in cholera hotspots. This pattern is a stark reminder that until systems are strengthened, emergencies will continue to return.

What will we do differently?

If we want to reach the global goal of reducing cholera deaths by 90% by 2030, we must move beyond reactive emergency response. The future depends on integrated, long-term public health and WASH solutions that combine fast emergency response with systems that prevent outbreaks from recurring.

To make this shift possible, we are doing two things. First, we are strengthening the capacities of National Societies across three key areas:

- **Preparedness and early detection.** We're helping communities and National Societes act sooner, spotting outbreaks early through preparedness and anticipatory action, and containing them faster with rapid response.

- **Integrated public health and WASH.** We support long-term, integrated public health and WASH interventions to prevent cholera and reduce the broader epidemic risks communities face.

- **Coordination and advocacy.** We're building stronger partnerships, strengthening coordination, advocacy, and resource mobilization with internal and external actors.

We also strengthen the capacities of governments in cholera-prone countries through the Country Support Platform (CSP), the operational arm of the Global Task Force on Cholera Control, by coordinating technical expertise, supporting national cholera plans, and working closely with ministries to fund and implement long-term solutions.

"Working alongside CSP has strengthened the capacity of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and the government to respond to cholera outbreaks. Through collaboration with the Vaccine Alliance and the successful implementation of Oral Cholera Vaccine campaigns, we have laid a strong foundation for long term cholera prevention and resilience."

Alberto Bocanegra
IFRC, Head of Delegation
Bangladesh

02 EMERGENCY WASH:
Scaling what saves lives

Clean water, sanitation, and hygiene save lives, yet 2.2 billion people still lack safe drinking water, and 1 in 5 health facilities have none. In fragile settings, that gap turns preventable risks into deadly crises. WASH is central to IFRC's mission, a long-standing flagship program that supports National Societies gain visibility, access resources, and unite action under a trusted brand. Today's challenges demand preparedness, emergency response, long-term, and more inclusive action. This focus area strengthens WASH as a flagship service: protecting health, supporting dignity and personal well-being, reinforcing systems, and building communities through locally led, system-wide action.

What will we do differently?

The IFRC is renewing its investment in WASH as a pillar of water security, not only as an emergency service, but as a foundation for resilient health systems and sustainable development. This means strengthening both emergency and WASH at the community and household level and in institutions (such as health facilities, schools, and public spaces) as health priorities, and aligning our efforts more closely with broader systems for long-term impact.

We will scale up efforts across three key areas:

- **Preparedness and rapid response.** We're helping National Societies detect and respond faster — preparing for WASH-related diseases before they escalate and responding with speed and coordination when crises strike.

- **Integrated public health and WASH.** We're building inclusive, long-term WASH systems and health care facilities in high-risk communities, connecting public health, infrastructure, and behavior change to prevent outbreaks and promote dignity.

- **Coordination and advocacy.** We're working with ministries, utilities, and global partners to ensure WASH investment goes further, mobilizing resources, providing technical support, and aligning efforts at all levels.

"In every drop of water we safeguard, we defend not just health, but dignity because in the Americas, resilience begins with clean water and empowered communities."

Omar Robinson
Regional WASH Coordinator
IFRC, Americas

03 CLIMATE AND WATER ACTION:
Protecting today, preparing for tomorrow

Droughts, floods, and unpredictable rains are no longer distant forecasts, they are reshaping lives today. From the Americas to the Pacific, water has become the frontline of the climate crisis. Disasters are more frequent, more severe, and more disruptive. They damage infrastructure, displace families, spread disease, and strain already fragile systems. The most at risk communities, who did the least to cause the crisis, are paying the highest price. Most people will first experience climate change through water. That's why water security must be central to our climate response, not tomorrow, but now.

What will we do differently?

The IFRC is integrating climate resilience into the core of its water and WASH programming. We are not starting from scratch. Across our network, National Societies are already helping communities manage climate shocks, from solar-powered boreholes in drought-prone regions to raised latrines in flood zones. This focus area scales that work with new urgency, broader partnerships, and longer horizons.

We will strengthen National Societies across three interconnected areas:

- **Climate-resilient WASH systems.** We're supporting National Societies to build and adapt infrastructure, services, and behaviors that are safe, accessible, and climate-smart, ensuring people can rely on water in times of crisis, and in the years between.

- **Nature-based and green solutions.** We're building capacity in approaches that work with nature, not against it (from sand dams and watershed protection to solar water systems and aquifer recharge) creating sustainable water sources that also support ecosystems and livelihoods.

- **Anticipatory action and integration.** We're embedding climate risk analysis, early warning, and anticipatory action into water programming, connecting humanitarian response with longer-term planning, and linking water security with food systems, health, and energy.

This shift means rethinking how we work: breaking sectoral silos, acting smarter and sooner, and making water systems future-proof, climate-resilient, and anchored in the everyday realities of those they serve.

"We are integrating water resilience into livelihoods programming so we can enhance the resilience and well-being of vulnerable communities - especially in relation to food security, agriculture, and water-energy systems."

Peter Mamburi
Regional WASH Coordinator
Africa Region

04 URBAN WATER ACTION:
Serving growing cities, reaching those most at risk

More than two-thirds of the global population will live in cities by 2050, yet basic water services often fail to keep pace. In many urban and peri-urban areas, low-income communities live without reliable access to clean water or sanitation. As climate impacts grow and displacement increases, urban water insecurity is becoming a humanitarian crisis in its own right.

What will we do differently?

The IFRC will help National Societies expand their urban presence by working alongside water utilities, local authorities, and city communities. Many are already filling critical gaps in underserved neighborhoods. This focus area supports long-term partnerships, stronger systems, and more equitable access in cities most affected by crisis and inequality.

We will focus on three key areas:

- **Partnering with utilities and authorities.** We are building long-term cooperation with public providers — by including Water Operator Partnerships (WOPs) — to improve access, continuity, and emergency response in high-risk areas.

- **Improving equity and accountability.** We are helping communities engage with local authorities, secure legal services, and shape behavior change that builds trust and reaches those most excluded.

- **Scaling climate-smart and inclusive solutions.** We are unlocking new financing models, expanding green service options, and sup-porting reforms that prioritize safe, affordable water for the people who need it most.

"For 12 years, my family relied on water trucks for our daily needs. But now, thanks to the YRCS Old City of Sana'a project, I can simply turn on the tap at home and pure, clean water flows out. It's a life-changing difference."

Community volunteer
Yemen Red Crescent

05 WATER AND PEACE:
Using cooperation to reduce risk and build resilience

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, water is often both a lifeline and a fault line. When access is scarce or uneven, tensions rise. Poor infrastructure, climate stress, and weak governance create conditions where water insecurity undermines health, livelihoods, and trust. But when communities manage water together — equitably and transparently — it becomes a pathway to stability and peace.

What will we do differently?

The IFRC will support National Societies to address the root causes of water-related stress and use water cooperation as a tool for social cohesion and risk reduction. Building on work already underway in several countries, this focus area strengthens local systems and helps communities turn shared challenges into shared solutions.

We will strengthen efforts in three areas:

- **Community-based cooperation and early action.** We're supporting people-centered approaches that foster trust, reduce tensions, and prevent conflict, through inclusive governance, local agreements, and early warning tools.

- **Conflict-sensitive water programming.** We're helping National Societies identify and reduce risks by applying conflict analysis and adapting water interventions to fragile, high-stress contexts.

- **Bridging humanitarian, development, and peace efforts.** We're linking emergency response, sustainable water access, and peace-building, ensuring long-term investments that strengthen resilience in fragile and water-stressed areas.

"For communities to truly own and sustain water projects, we need to engage them from the start, respecting their knowledge, building local skills, and strengthening governance structures. This is how we build trust, reduce tension, and turn water into a source of stability."

Ali J. Boru,
Head of WASH
Kenya Red Cross

How we'll get there

Achieving the impact, we seek in each focus area requires more than strong intentions. It demands a foundation of practical, adaptable approaches that make change possible. These five enabling approaches guide how we work across the IFRC network (and how we partner with others) to deliver smarter services, scale what works, and build lasting water security across all settings.

• **Localization.** National Societies and local communities are at the heart of this strategy. We will strengthen their leadership, capacity, and autonomy to design, deliver and utilize water and security solutions rooted in real needs.

• **Water Systems Strengthening.** With a systems-thinking approach we will support governments, institutions, water utilities and local communities to tackle water-root issues improving their capacity for the delivery and sustainability of water related services by strengthening the interconnected factors, actors, and their relationships within the water service environment.

• **Community Engagement and Inclusion**. We will ensure that people affected by water insecurity play an active and solid role in designing, managing, and evaluating water solutions —especially women, youth, and marginalized groups.

• **Market-Based Programming.** We'll help to stimulate and strengthen local economies by engaging local WASH suppliers and service providers from local market systems to deliver essential WASH goods and services. We will enable communities to purchase WASH items and services directly from local markets, promoting choice and supporting local businesses.

• **Digital Transformation.** We will leverage technology to better understand needs, measure impact, and deliver smarter services — while equipping National Societies with the digital tools they need to lead.

From strategy to impact

This strategy is more than a plan, it is a collective call to action. It provides National Societies with a common direction and shared language, while offering donors and partners a credible, coordinated framework for investment. It builds on what we already do well, but asks us to do it with greater alignment, clarity, and ambition.

The transition to water security is already underway. Momentum is growing across regions. Our task now is to match that momentum with coordination, resources, and commitment. This is not about doing more with less — it is about doing the right things, together, in ways that last.

Every National Society has a role to play. Whether responding to cholera, working with utilities in cities, or helping fragile communities rebuild trust through water cooperation, this strategy provides a framework for action, not a one-size-fits-all model. The path forward is flexible, inclusive, and built for partnership.

If we succeed, we will not only deliver clean water — we will help deliver health, economic growth and peace. Water can be the foundation of resilience in the 21st century. But only if we work together to make it so.

—

Each focus area in this strategy is supported by detailed frameworks and practical guidance. To explore these resources, visit ***ifrc.org***, ***wash.ifrc.org*** or access the IFRC Community of Practice.