



# All Systems Connect

Uniting experts and activists to  
address the challenges of  
water and climate



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This briefing note draws together the key insights and calls to action from the All Systems Connect International Symposium 2023, World Forum, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2-4 May 2023.

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# All Systems Connect

## Uniting experts and activists to address the challenges of water and climate

### Background

Water supply, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services are critical for building resilience – and supporting adaptation – to climate change impacts. At the same time, these services are highly vulnerable to climate change effects. WASH services rely on hydrological, ecological, financial, and socio-political (sub) systems for their functionality. All these systems are, and will continue to be, severely impacted by climate change.

As such, the risks climate change poses to WASH services are highly heterogeneous. These risks range from increasing the severity of physical hazards<sup>1</sup> and rapidity of urban expansion; to reducing the lifespan of infrastructure and availability of finance for WASH.

Furthermore, climate risks to WASH provision are distributed unevenly within populations. Vulnerable communities are often the most exposed to climate-induced reductions in WASH provision and climate change often exacerbates existing inequities in sustainable, affordable WASH provision.

Due to the complex relationship between climate change and WASH provision, it is critical we take both a social justice and intersectional approach to reducing the risk climate change poses to sustainable WASH provision at all levels. Figure 1 provides a high-level overview of the types of risks climate change poses to WASH systems.<sup>2</sup>



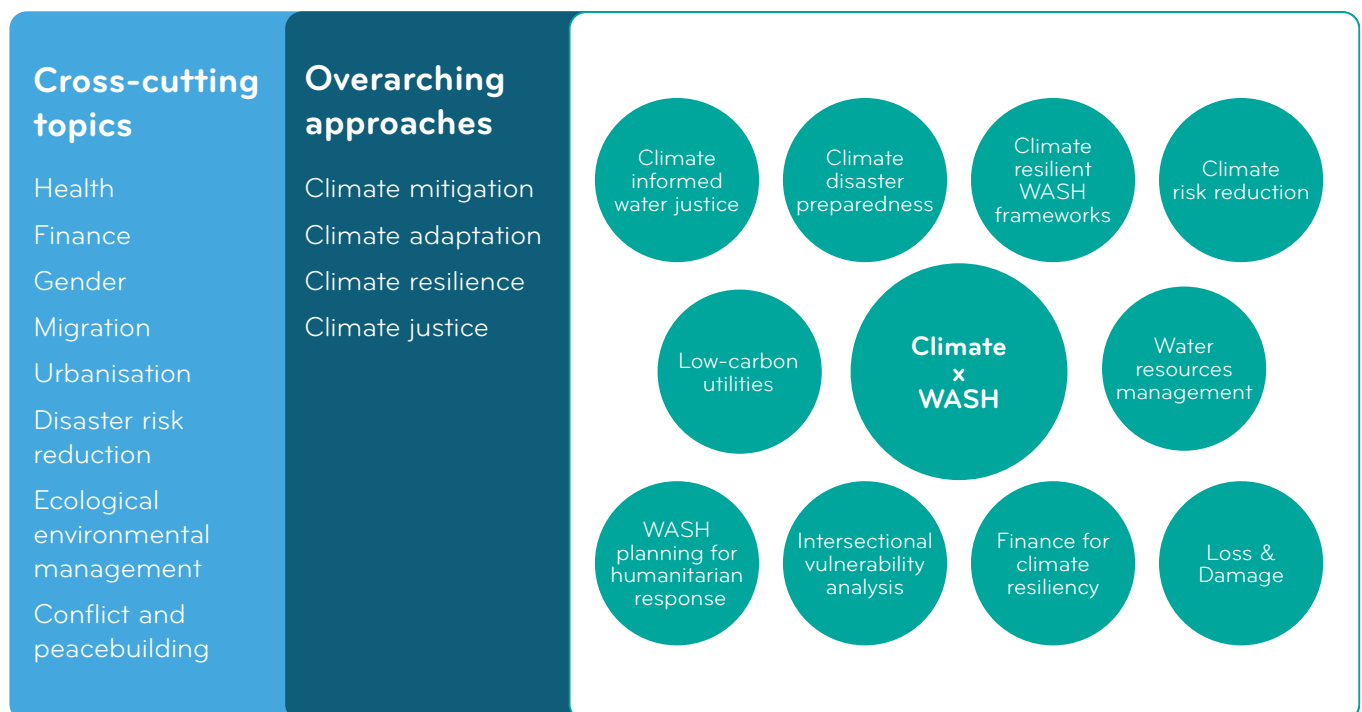
**Figure 1:** Risks posed to WASH by climate change.

<sup>1</sup> Including flooding, droughts and windstorms

<sup>2</sup> GWP & UNICEF Framework

The world is currently on track to surpass 1.5°C of global warming in the next decade and there is increasing international pressure to reduce emissions across all sectors. It is critical that we remain clear sighted on the need for universal WASH provision despite changes in hydrology and calls for decarbonisation. We must not allow talk of 'less water' or 'water conservation' to translate into a reduction of community WASH provision<sup>3</sup> or to become an enabler of 'climate scapegoating'<sup>4</sup> whereby inadequate services are blamed on climate rather than political economy.

In addition, globally, there is an increased pressure on utility companies to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions associated with their operations, and pressure on financiers to decarbonise their investment portfolios. It is thus critical we continue to push for a climate justice approach to reducing emissions whilst ensuring communities who contributed the least to climate change have universal, climate resilient WASH systems, along with other essential services for well-being.



**Figure 2:** The WASH & Climate Sector Nexus

3 Or result in higher tariffs and the reduction in affordable water

4 Climate scapegoating is when governments, finance and industry can blame poor WASH service provision on erratic rainfall rather than political economy. This phenomenon can also appear in different forms across water services e.g. blaming the climate for falling water levels creating borehole failures rather than blaming them on the age or technical design of a borehole.



"We know that the world is fragmented, but that the issues that we face **are all connected.**

We still, and that's perhaps a bit of a surprise, we still have a hard time making those connections from a systems perspective, but **there is a necessity to do that."**

– **Henk Ovink**

Special Envoy for International Water Affairs,  
Government of the Netherlands

# All Systems Connect Symposium

In May 2023, the All Systems Connect Symposium (ASC) brought together experts, activists, and decision makers to think and act differently in our pursuit of delivering safe and sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene services. Despite the relationship between climate change and sustainable WASH provision, there is currently inadequate connectivity between WASH and climate actors.

To increase the speed and effectiveness of this connection, three primary entry points were identified for exploration at the All Systems Connect Symposium: water justice, water resource management, and climate finance.

The Connect-Climate sessions articulated several barriers inhibiting greater alignment between WASH and climate actors:

## Barriers to the WASH sector's ability to access climate finance including:

- A lack of 'climate rationale' articulation within WASH programming.
- Semantic differences between WASH and climate sector frameworks.

- The ineffectiveness of climate finance's 'additionality' model for creating climate resilient WASH.
- Lack of climate funds suitable for building WASH climate-resiliency, such as:
  - The ineffectiveness of climate finance's 'additionality' model for creating climate resilient WASH.
  - The pressure on future 'loss and damages financing' to finance everything (including WASH) that falls outside current climate finance streams.
- There is competing tension on governments and donors to maintain and increase necessary SDG development funding, against growing demand for funds for climate-related activities.

## A lack of a unified 'climate community' making cross-sectoral partnerships between WASH and climate actors difficult. Contributing barriers include:

- Insufficient clarity on who WASH actors need to engage with to catalyse climate-resiliency across the water sector.
- Insufficient representation of WASH in global climate agendas (mitigation and adaptation).

- Complex networks within government managing climate change (e.g. rarely a 'Climate Minister', instead climate risk mitigation is a cross-cutting theme within Ministries. Thus 'climate-resiliency' often lacks adequate funding, coherent policy responses or prioritisation on Ministry agendas).

**Suboptimal connectivity between WASH and environmental, ecological & water resource communities to increase climate-resiliency of water resources and ecosystems. Contributing barriers include:**

- Lack of integrated WASH and water resource programming and national policy.
- Siloed water management between WASH and water resource management despite

opportunities for synergies between sectors to improve outcomes for both.

- Differing scales of water needs, geography, and time that contribute to creating silos and divisions between actors.

The Connect-Climate sessions fed into a larger dialogue about systems leadership, which recognises that people are central to the systems which provide critical services like WASH, and systems leaders are key to transforming systems to face the challenges. Priority actions that emerged include: improving our understanding of systems strengthening and systems leadership, identifying these systems leaders, and stepping up to our role as systems leaders, wherever we are in the system.

"I wish to appeal to all the actors, the governments of the world, nations of the world, the civil society and all the actors in the WASH sector to incorporate the component of climate change as a bigger tool that will help us get the water sustainably and therefore sanitation and hygiene in the sustainable way."

**– Hon. Richard Rwabuhinga**

Chairman Kabarole District Local Government  
Government of Uganda





## Looking ahead: 2024 and beyond

IRC has recently developed its strategic positioning for Connect-Climate and will build on its climate working paper (2021 paper) based on its insights. Connect-Climate seeks to drive the change required for equitable, sustainable, and affordable prioritisation of water, sanitation, and hygiene services within a world of changing climate. We aim to drive progress through advocacy, technical advisory, and research & learning. We seek to cultivate systems leaders within our networks who can serve as confident champions of the Connect-Climate strategies, while continuing to innovate and seek solutions.

We believe a key mechanism for driving this change is through connecting with a wide range of global, regional, and national efforts that are calling for, and driving, socially (and ecologically) just climate-resiliency and climate adaptation within WASH systems. Connect-Climate takes

IRC's existing body of work related to climate and strengthens it by engaging more intentionally with key climate stakeholders.

To operationalise Connect-Climate, IRC has identified four key relationship-building objectives:

**1. To build allyship** around the narrative that climate change is an amplifier of social injustice, not just a hydrological risk.

**1.1. across civil society:** to increase awareness of climate change as a social injustice amplifier and in exacerbating pre-existing socio-political risks<sup>5</sup> within WASH systems.

**1.2 across business sectors:** to increase awareness of the role businesses can play in reducing climate risks to WASH systems, from the global to the catchment-level.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to continuing our work building allyship with civil society on reducing the hydrological risks of climate change.



**1.3 across financial institutions:** to increase financial flows for effective climate resiliency within WASH systems, and to build awareness of the role that resilient WASH systems can play in reducing exposure to climate risk.

**2. To develop relationships with stakeholders** who can reduce climate change risk to sustainable WASH provision and build champions amongst these stakeholders.

**3. To build relationships with stakeholders** to integrate systemic climate risk reduction into WASH sector planning, policies, and budgets, at all levels.

**4. To build allyship across financial sectors** for the increased integration of financial flows for climate-resiliency within water investment.

IRC's strategy primarily prioritises allyship to increase the synergy between climate and WASH actors working to reduce climate risk. This requires breaking out of our sectoral comfort zone to build relationships with the myriad of actors working across the WASH and climate nexus illustrated in Figure 2.

The Connect-Climate strategy relies on deepening relationships with WASH systems leaders, and those with the decision-making power to reduce climate change risks to WASH. The forging of these relationships is critical to the realisation of equitable, affordable, and sustainable WASH provision in a climatically changing world.

IRC is an international think tank actively building strong water, sanitation, and hygiene systems – from the bottom up and the top down. We exist to support countries to build strong local and national services, underpinned by resilient systems, that transform lives and build equity, justice, and opportunity for all.

Achieving and sustaining universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for all requires connecting with changemakers in health, climate, and social justice. As with many of the Sustainable Development Goals, an integrated, multi-sectoral approach will be needed to drive systems change.

In view of this, we have developed the Connect initiative to strengthen our strategic engagement beyond the water, sanitation, and hygiene sectors. This note introduces our strategic framing for Connect-Health. It draws upon our experience working with health sector partners, as well as the many conversations sparked during the All Systems Connect Symposium. We welcome others to join us in this effort, as we move towards a collective WASH-for-health action agenda.



## About the author

**Elsbeth Alexander** is a climate and political ecology specialist working across both the public and private sectors to reduce societies' exposure to climate, water and nature risks and business impacts on the environment. Her recent work has included analysing climate finance flows for urban WASH resilience and working with private companies to implement 'Source to Sea' aligned strategies to reduce their freshwater and marine water impacts.

Elsbeth holds a Master of Science degree from the University of East Anglia in Water Security and International Development and a Bachelor's degree in International Development from the University of Leeds.



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