



**On the Day of the African Child, EFSCRJ Calls for Universal Access to WASH**

The Edward Francis Small Centre for Rights and Justice joins the rest of Africa, especially our children, in commemorating the Day of the African Child 2026. Today marks fifty years since the historic Soweto Student Uprising of 16 June 1976, when thousands of Black schoolchildren in South Africa courageously marched against the Apartheid regime's imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in Black schools. Their peaceful protest against oppression and discrimination was met with brutal force, leading to the deaths and injuries of hundreds of children. Their sacrifice remains a powerful symbol of the struggle for dignity, justice, equality, and the rights of children across Africa.

In recognition of their courage and sacrifice, the African Union designated 16 June as the Day of the African Child in 1991. The day serves both as a tribute to the children of Soweto and as a continental commitment to promote, protect, and fulfill the rights and welfare of every African child.

This year's theme, "*Ensuring Universal Access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Every Child in Africa*," highlights one of the most fundamental yet persistently neglected rights of children across the continent. According to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the theme recognizes the direct relationship between access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services and the realization of the rights guaranteed under Article 14 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Charter obliges States Parties to ensure access to adequate nutrition, safe drinking water, sanitation services, hygiene education, and environmental health measures necessary for the well-being and development of children.

The commemoration of this year's Day of the African Child comes at a particularly challenging time in the Gambia. The country is currently experiencing widespread electricity blackouts that directly affect the provision and accessibility of water, sanitation, and hygiene services. These disruptions disproportionately affect children by undermining access to clean water, proper sanitation, and safe living conditions.

While more than 90 percent of households in the Gambia have access to improved water sources, significant challenges remain. Poor water quality, inadequate sanitation infrastructure, and low levels of hygiene adoption continue to expose many children to waterborne diseases, diarrheal illnesses, malnutrition, and other preventable health conditions. According to UNICEF, only 31 percent of households have a handwashing facility, while 73 percent are at risk of *Escherichia coli* fecal contamination, indicating serious concerns about water quality. Furthermore, only about 12 percent of the population practices optimal handwashing with soap.

Although most primary schools have some form of WASH facilities, major disparities persist between urban and rural communities. Many schools and health facilities in rural areas continue to struggle with unreliable water supply systems and dysfunctional boreholes. While recent solar-powered water projects have begun to address some of these gaps, much more remains to be done to ensure equitable access for all children regardless of location.



In light of these challenges, EFSCRJ urges the Government to adopt more robust, holistic, and strategic measures to improve water, sanitation, and hygiene services nationwide in fulfillment of the rights and welfare of children.

First, we call for the constitutional recognition of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene as enforceable fundamental rights. Access to safe water and adequate sanitation should not be treated merely as policy objectives but as legally protected rights that citizens can demand and enforce.

Secondly, we urge the Government to introduce the right to health as a constitutionally guaranteed right under Chapter IV of the Constitution. Constitutional protection of the right to health would strengthen obligations on individuals, institutions, businesses, communities, and public authorities to ensure that adequate facilities, goods, and services are always available to prevent disease, reduce contamination, and improve public health outcomes, including the provision of adequate WASH services.

Furthermore, schools, hospitals, markets, mosques, churches, public institutions, businesses, and residential communities should be legally required to provide and maintain adequate WASH facilities as an essential component of protecting children's right to health and human dignity.

We also call on the Government to harmonize national laws, policies, and regulatory frameworks with regional and international standards on water, sanitation, hygiene, and children's rights. Effective implementation of these standards will require adequate budgetary allocations, stronger institutional capacity, regular monitoring, and robust accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance and enforcement.

The incidence of child morbidity and mortality in the Gambia remains unacceptably high, with poor water quality, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygiene practices among the contributing factors. We therefore urge the National Assembly, particularly the committees responsible for health, children, local government, and public enterprises, to exercise stronger oversight over relevant institutions and service providers to ensure that WASH standards are established, maintained, and enforced.

Finally, we call on Government institutions, civil society organizations, development partners, schools, communities, and the media to intensify public education and awareness on water, sanitation, and hygiene. We equally encourage all citizens, especially children and young people, to adopt healthy sanitation and hygiene practices that contribute to healthier families, communities, and a stronger nation.

On this Day of the African Child, EFSCRJ reaffirms that every child has the right to safe water, adequate sanitation, proper hygiene, good health, dignity, and a safe environment in which to grow and thrive. Ensuring universal access to WASH is not merely a development objective, it is a human rights obligation and an essential investment in the future of the Gambia and Africa.

**2026: The Year of Empowerment – Empowered Citizens. Accountable Leadership**