

ECONOMIST  
IMPACT

# Putting children first: tackling Toilet Loss in schools



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## Introduction: a sanitation crisis that we cannot afford to ignore

Schools are more than just places of learning. They are essential to a child's development, shaping futures and serving as the foundation for a healthy, productive and fulfilling life. Yet, for millions of children worldwide, this critical environment is undermined by something as simple as limited access to a basic toilet.<sup>1</sup> Without proper sanitation facilities, children lack a safe and hygienic space, which is key for their health, dignity and ability to focus on learning. The absence of toilets compromises the very purpose of schools: to provide an environment where children can thrive.

Across the world, 427m children go to a school that lacks a basic toilet that they can use. Astonishingly, for nearly half of these children (205m), the toilets exist but they cannot be used. Poor maintenance and neglect turn these facilities into unusable spaces, failing students.<sup>2</sup> It is a paradox of progress: in an age of groundbreaking technologies, space exploration and artificial intelligence (AI), something as fundamental as school toilets are not being maintained.

As toilets become unusable through neglect, more and more students are deprived of a basic right every day. This report presents the highlights of a research programme, supported by Unilever, that explores this widespread and largely ignored phenomenon, known as "Toilet Loss". The findings are based on an economic model covering 118 countries, encompassing 65% of the world's school-aged children. The study is the first of its kind to explore the full impact of Toilet Loss.

### Toilet Loss is the economic and societal cost of neglected toilets.

Toilets can become unusable through neglect from:

- a) lack of investment in operations and maintenance;
- b) lack of appropriate school-level management policies, or implementation capacity, to enable toilet use (e.g. safety policies, school policies on routine operations and maintenance (O&M)); and
- c) lack of provision of essential resources (e.g. water and sanitary products).




<sup>1</sup> The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) defines a basic toilet as an improved toilet facility in schools that is single-sex and usable, meaning that it is accessible to students (doors are unlocked or a key is available), functional (not broken or blocked, and water is available), and private (lockable doors with no large gaps in the structure). <https://washdata.org/monitoring/schools>


<sup>2</sup> <https://washdata.org/reports/jmp-2024-wash-schools-highlights>

### Key findings

The findings reveal the staggering scale of the decay of sanitation facilities in schools and the profound consequences that this has on children’s health and educational outcomes, future opportunities, and overall wellbeing and dignity:




**6.2m school toilets** have been “lost” globally since 2015 due to neglect. This amounts to **14% of the 45m school toilets available today.**



Toilet Loss has led to a huge **financial loss of US\$18.5bn**—this is the cost of building toilets and not looking after them. It represents **10% of all global investment in school sanitation.**

Global cost of lost toilets  
**US\$18.5 billion**

10% of total sanitation investment

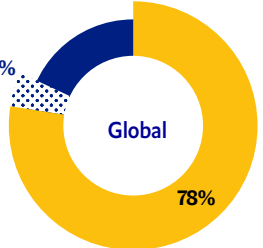



Toilet Loss is not only a financial cost. It has also resulted in an **economic loss of US\$34bn from preventable healthcare spending**, lost income for parents caring for sick children and missed employment opportunities in the sanitation sector.

Without Toilet Loss, the world could have had **2.6m more basic usable toilets** in schools today and been **5% closer towards the goal** of clean and safe toilets for all schoolchildren across the world.


**Where we could have been**

- Share of basic school toilets
- Gap in access
- Additional basic school toilets with greater O&M investment






The **total investment** needed to stop Toilet Loss in schools by 2030 is estimated at **US\$33bn**. For comparison, companies already spend over five times this amount on AI in one year alone.<sup>3</sup> The **economic returns** will also exceed this, reaching **US\$54bn**.



Investing fully in both building and maintaining toilets to provide 100% sanitation coverage by 2030 will generate an **average return of US\$1.7 for every dollar spent.**

Returns (\$ for every \$1 invested)

Construction	0.4
O&M	2.3
Construction and O&M	1.7



For countries with limited resources, the most cost-effective strategy would be to maintain existing toilets first. This strategy would deliver returns of **US\$2.3 for every dollar invested** in low income regions but would leave **13% of the world’s children without access to basic toilets by 2030.**

<sup>3</sup> [https://aiindex.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/HAI\\_AI-Index-Report-2024.pdf](https://aiindex.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/HAI_AI-Index-Report-2024.pdf)

### How is Toilet Loss estimated?

This paper quantifies the magnitude of Toilet Loss and tallies its vast human costs. It also imagines a future in which all children have access to a basic functioning and usable toilet at school, using the data presented to guide and drive collective action. The benefits are far-reaching for millions of children. Ensuring access to sanitation directly supports the achievement of the global goals set out in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which aspires to quality education for all children, and SDG 6.2, which advocates for access to safe sanitation for all. Access to a basic functioning toilet is equally critical to a child's success as a good teacher or a textbook.<sup>4</sup>

#### METHODOLOGY NOTE

The findings presented in this paper are based on custom analysis drawing from data collected by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP).<sup>5</sup> The JMP classifies toilets as one of the following, in the context of schools:

- No service: No toilets or latrines exist, or the facilities that exist are unimproved (pit latrines without a slab or platform, hanging latrines, bucket latrines).
- Limited: The infrastructure for improved facilities exists (flush/pour-flush toilets, pit latrine with slab, composting toilet), but it is not single-sex or not usable.
- Basic: The infrastructure for improved facilities exists and is single-sex and usable (available, functional and private).

The study uses data from the JMP on levels of access to sanitation services to measure the scale, scope and cost of Toilet Loss, and the investment pathways and benefits from providing every child with access to clean and usable basic toilets in school.

We conducted this analysis at the country-level for 118 countries, and then aggregated it to regional and global levels. We based our estimations on a methodology developed for a pilot study conducted in 2023.<sup>6</sup>

**“The WHO/UNICEF JMP has been systematically monitoring and reporting on the state of sanitation in schools around the world since the start of the SDG period. The Toilet Loss initiative is using this data to provide valuable insights into the global economic costs associated with inadequate sanitation and more importantly the huge potential economic benefits that would flow from ensuring all children enjoy basic sanitation services at their school by 2030.”**

Tom Slaymaker, senior advisor, statistics and monitoring, UNICEF

<sup>4</sup> <https://indicators.report/targets/4-a/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://washdata.org/data/school#!/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/download/ei-unilever-toilet-loss-methodology-vf.pdf>

### The harsh reality: too many children go to school without a toilet that they can use

Globally, 427m children go to school each day without a toilet that they can use. Unfortunately, the issue is not only whether schools have toilets. The reality is that 205m children attend schools where toilets exist but are unusable—these toilets have been lost to neglect and children suffer as a result. This is the hidden crisis of Toilet Loss, and it is happening in schools all over the world.

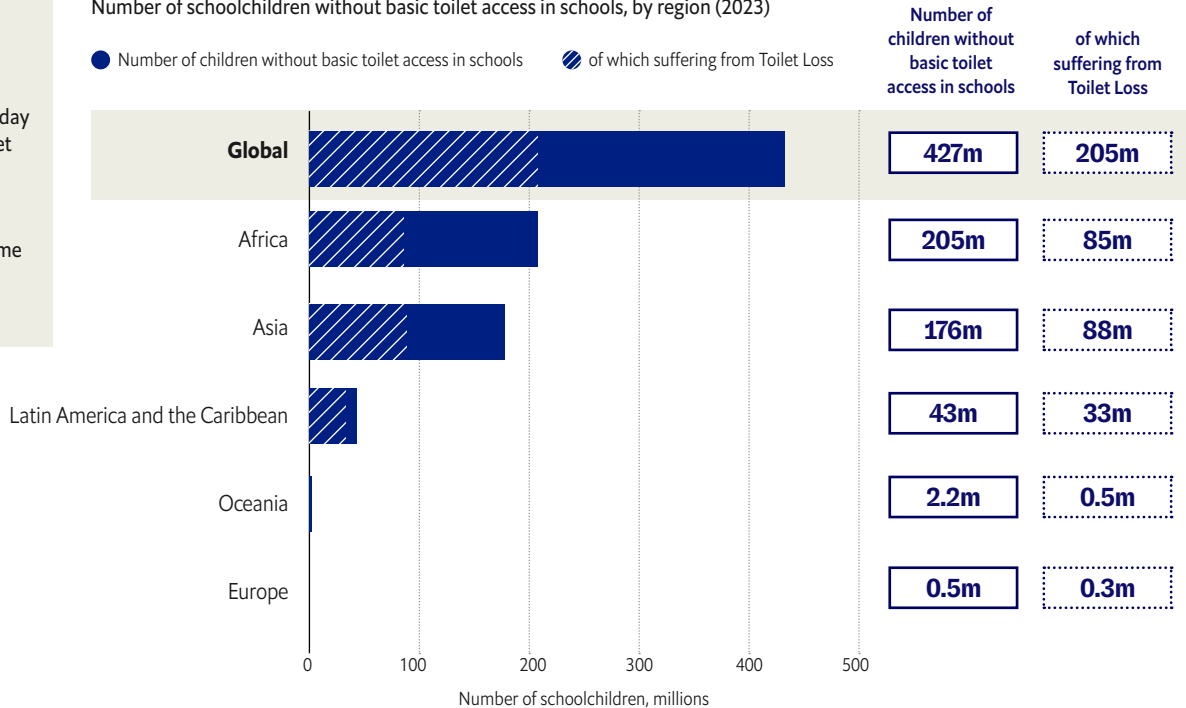
Low- and lower-middle-income countries disproportionately bear the burden of this problem, housing over 80% of these children, despite representing just 8% of the global economy. Africa and Asia share the biggest burden, with a combined 175m schoolchildren who go to school where toilets exist but cannot be used. And yet, this problem also exists in more developed regions—even in Europe, 1m children lack access to a basic toilet at school.

**427m**

One in five children across the world attend school each day without a basic toilet that they can use. For half of these children, a toilet exists but has become unusable through neglect.

**Figure 1. Toilet neglect: a key barrier to toilet access in schools**

Number of schoolchildren without basic toilet access in schools, by region (2023)



Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, Economist Impact analysis.  
 Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.

<sup>7</sup> The Joint Monitoring Programme describes usable services as toilets that are accessible to students (doors are unlocked or a key is available), functional (not broken or blocked, and water is available), and private (lockable doors with no large gaps in the structure). <https://washdata.org/monitoring/schools>

## 6.2m

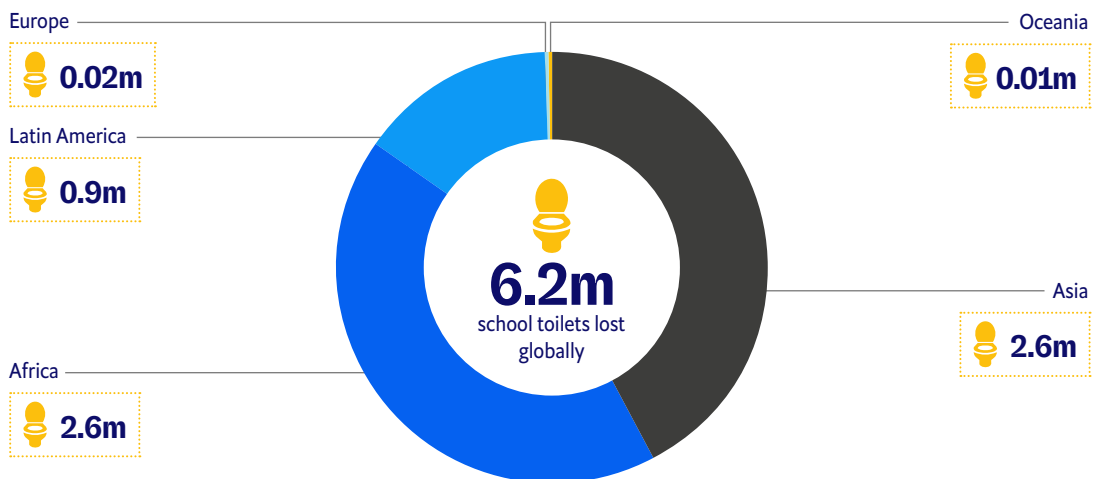
Since 2015, 6.2m school toilets have been lost to neglect, equivalent to removing access to a school toilet for every child in all of Europe and North America combined.

### A loss of infrastructure

Failing to maintain school toilets leads to the deterioration and eventual loss of critical infrastructure. Since 2015, 6.2m school toilets have been lost worldwide, simply because they have been neglected—this could mean that they are broken, unclean or do not have a door or a lock to make them private, and are therefore effectively unusable.<sup>7</sup> This represents a loss of 14% of the 45m school toilets in existence today. To put that in perspective, this would be the equivalent of removing access to a school toilet for every child in all of Europe and North America combined.

**Figure 2. Disappearing toilets: infrastructure loss from neglect**

Toilet infrastructure loss in schools, by region (2015-23)



Source: Economist Impact analysis.

Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.

**“A well-maintained toilet is more than just a fixture; it is part of providing a quality education. Research consistently demonstrates that safe and welcoming school environments, including accessible and sanitary restrooms, are essential for students to focus on learning. Toilet loss is yet another barrier for children, and particularly girls, to go to school; addressing it should be part of any plan to achieve SDG 4.”**

Manos Antoninis, director of the Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO

### The cost of neglect

Once built, a toilet should be maintained throughout its lifetime—anything less leads to loss. Schools and governments have spent huge sums of money building toilets, only to have the upfront investment lost. Between 2015 and 2023, the world incurred financial costs of US\$18.5bn from neglecting school toilets. This translates to a loss of 10% of investment in school sanitation globally since 2015. Africa shoulders the greatest financial burden, losing US\$10.3bn, or 16% of its investment.

The global financial loss amounts to nearly 20% of the US\$100bn investment gap needed to achieve SDG 4, which aims for inclusive and equitable quality education for all.<sup>8</sup> The same amount of money lost on building toilets that are now unusable, if spent instead on maintaining school toilets, could have tackled two challenges at once—improving sanitation (SDG 6.2) by ensuring more equitable access to sanitation for all, and enhancing education (SDG 4.a.1) by providing necessary school infrastructure, allowing more students to attend school and focus on learning. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that targets towards sanitation and education goals are funded and measured separately. The sooner the interdependency between the two is recognised, the sooner stakeholders can come together to take joint action on both.

#### US\$18.5bn

Toilet Loss has cost US\$18.5bn globally over the past eight years in lost infrastructure, equivalent to 10% of all sanitation investment in schools.

**Figure 3. The cost of lost toilets**

Cumulative financial loss from neglecting school toilets, by region (2015-23)



Source: Economist Impact analysis.  
 Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/04/growth-summit-2023-education-finance-gap-sdg4-primary-school/>

**2.6m**

Without Toilet Loss, the world could have had 2.6m more basic toilets in schools today and been 5% closer towards the goal of 100% access for all children.

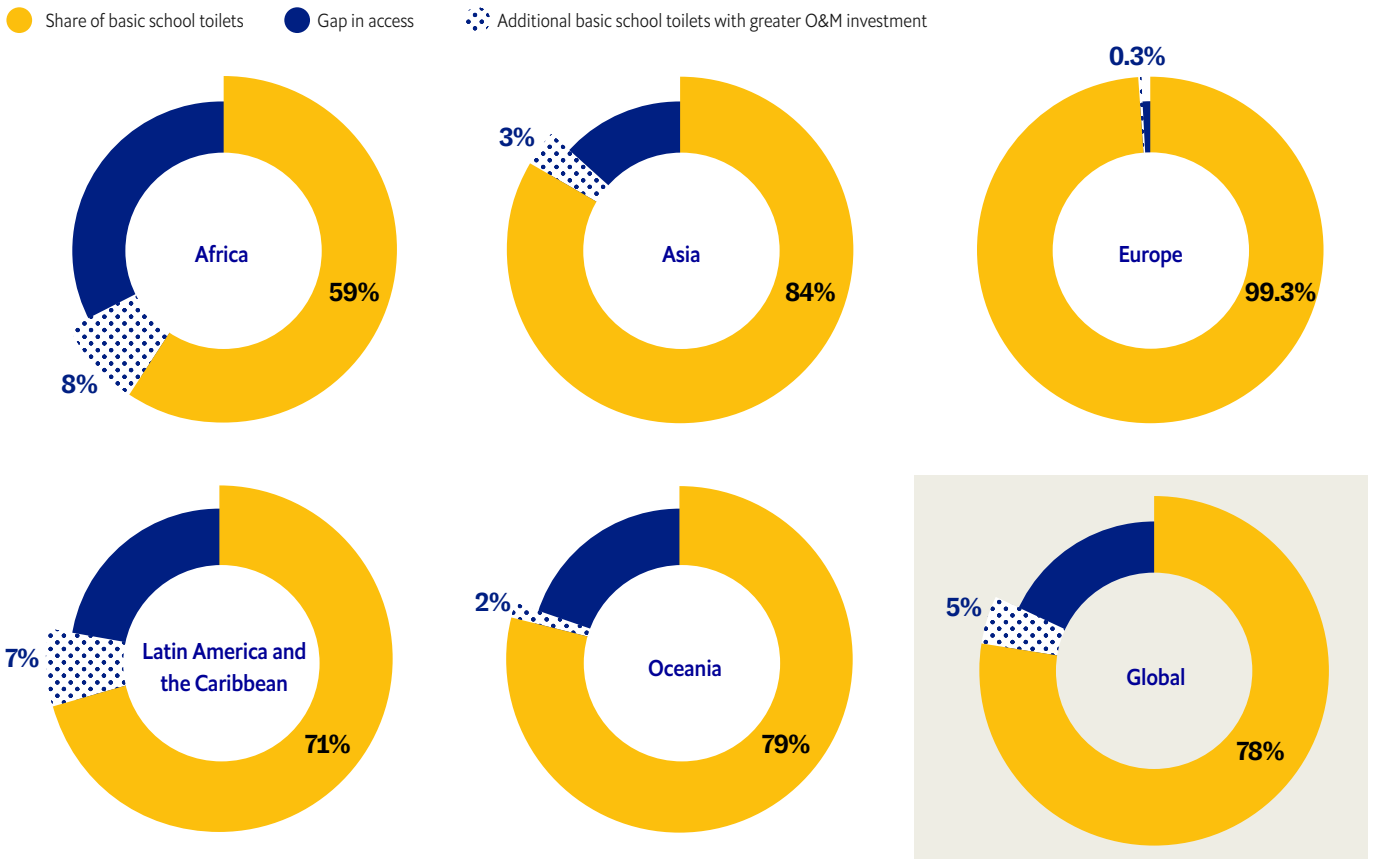
**Not all investments are created equal: why maintaining school toilets is the smarter choice**

Closing the sanitation gap requires both building new school toilets and maintaining the ones that already exist. However, if countries had prioritised maintaining existing toilets, the world could have made significant progress in sanitation—and, by extension, education—access without spending any extra money.

Since 2015, 6.2m school toilets have been lost as a result of neglect and lack of maintenance. If the funds used to build these toilets had instead gone towards maintaining existing ones, the world would have 2.6m more basic school toilets today. This would have brought us 5% closer to achieving full sanitation coverage while saving over US\$10bn of the US\$18.5bn financial cost of Toilet Loss.

**Figure 4. Where we could have been**

Increase in basic access to school toilets from prioritising maintenance over construction (2023)



Source: Economist Impact analysis.   
 Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.



## Imagining a world without Toilet Loss: the benefits for children and societies

Toilet Loss is much more than an infrastructure issue—it is also about the opportunities that it takes away from children and societies. When schools lose clean and usable toilets, the consequences go far beyond financial loss. Students' health and education take a serious hit. For example, diarrhoea spreads more easily, forcing students to miss school and fall behind in their learning. Girls suffer the most—in Africa, half of young girls who drop out of school do so because their school lacks a basic toilet to manage menstruation.<sup>9</sup> The ripple effects of this crisis hold back entire societies. Parents lose income when they need to take time off work to care for sick children. In the long term, children who miss school enter the workforce with fewer skills and lower earning potential. Overall, the global economy has incurred an additional US\$34bn in losses since 2015, on top of financial losses, owing to the neglect of toilets in schools.

Now, imagine if sanitation and education stakeholders, along with policymakers and the private sector, took action to fix this problem and ensure that every student has access to a clean and usable toilet. By 2030, the world would look dramatically different: up to 10% (110m) of the 1.7bn cases of diarrhoea in children each year could be prevented, saving thousands of lives. Healthcare costs could drop by US\$24.5bn over the next seven years, translating to savings of up to US\$3 per student annually. In this brighter 2030 scenario, improving school sanitation would also boost household incomes globally by US\$2.9bn—money that would otherwise slip away as parents miss work to care for sick children. Families in Asia stand to gain the most, with increased incomes of around US\$1.1bn by 2030. In addition, increased employment in toilet construction and maintenance would further boost the global economy, creating a total windfall of US\$54bn by 2030.

### UNILEVER PERSPECTIVE

“The societal and economic impact of stopping Toilet Loss is compelling and the solution to achieve this is clear—**we need to stop building toilets without a plan to maintain them.** Only with collective understanding and focused action can we drive the system-level change required to ensure that every child has access to a clean, safe toilet.”

**Eduardo Campanella**, president, Home Care, Unilever

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/stories/toilets-help-keep-children-especially-girls-school>

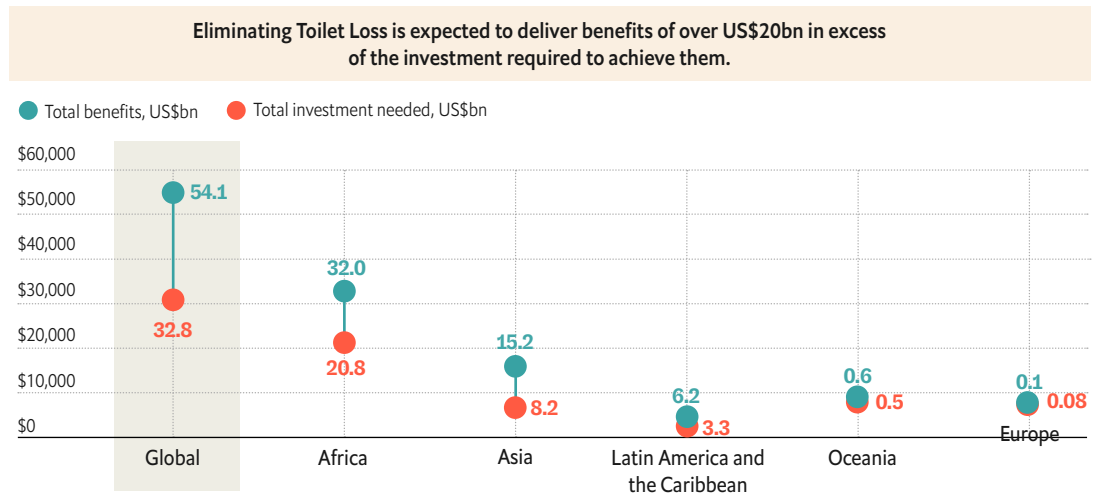
To achieve this future, an estimated US\$33bn will be needed in investment by 2030. The payoff is clear: the benefits would exceed the costs by over US\$20bn. For comparison, companies spent nearly US\$190bn on AI in 2023 alone.<sup>10</sup> While vast sums flow into cutting-edge technology, something as basic and essential as school sanitation remains unaddressed. The returns from investing in AI are yet to be fully determined, but this analysis demonstrates the returns of investing in school sanitation—an estimated US\$1.7 for every dollar spent.

**“Children are under the custody of the education system, yet many schools fail to provide them with basic sanitation. This neglect is a violation of children’s rights. If a school cannot provide access to clean and safe toilets, it should not be allowed to operate. We must demand that schools prioritise the health and dignity of our children. If we fail to act, we are closing the door to their education.”**

Bella Monse, senior advisor, Fit for School, GIZ

**Figure 5. Benefits over and above costs**

Additional costs and benefits from providing access to school toilets (2023-30)



Source: Economist Impact analysis.  
 Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.

<sup>10</sup> [https://aiindex.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/HAI\\_AI-Index-Report-2024.pdf](https://aiindex.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/HAI_AI-Index-Report-2024.pdf)

## Progress is happening but unevenly

Achieving full sanitation coverage for all students by 2030, along with the benefits it brings, will not happen without coordinated efforts from policymakers, regulators, school principals and private-sector companies. Investment needs to be focused in the right areas and sustained over time.

Fortunately, progress is already underway: 162m more students now have access to basic, usable school toilets compared with 2015. Impressively, 70% of these children have gained access in just the past two years. Asia, especially Southeast Asia, has been at the forefront, driving 60% of global progress. Targeted programmes that focus on building gender-segregated toilets, maintaining existing facilities and improving hygiene education have made countries like India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines standout success stories. To reach 100% coverage by 2030, countries around the world must keep up this momentum and pick up the pace.

### UNILEVER'S PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY

#### Change is possible: How Unilever and GIZ joined forces to tackle Toilet Loss in the Philippines

Unilever brand Domestos and the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) joined forces to improve toilet facilities in schools in The Philippines. Together, they implemented a pilot project to assess school toilet conditions and maintenance solutions in the Batangas region as part of the develoPPP programme—the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's (BMZ) funding scheme for sustainable company initiatives.

#### A practical, sustainable, scalable solution

The project team worked closely with local schools and education leaders to develop a practical, scalable and sustainable school toilet O&M programme. It includes daily cleaning reports, checklists, simple management tools and quantifiable supplies, Massive Open Online Course to train teachers and school heads, and an app for schools to calculate the costs for maintenance and cleaning supplies. To drive uptake and sustained commitment to the programme, the Unstoppable Award was also created, rewarding schools for regular toilet cleaning and the recording of O&M measures.

#### It works

- Increase in usable, gender-segregated toilets across schools from 40% to 85% (2015-23)
- Over 19 million children reached (2017-22)
- Increase in the number of schools reporting daily cleaning from 26,811 to 38,563 (2017-22)

#### A PPP model that delivers real impact

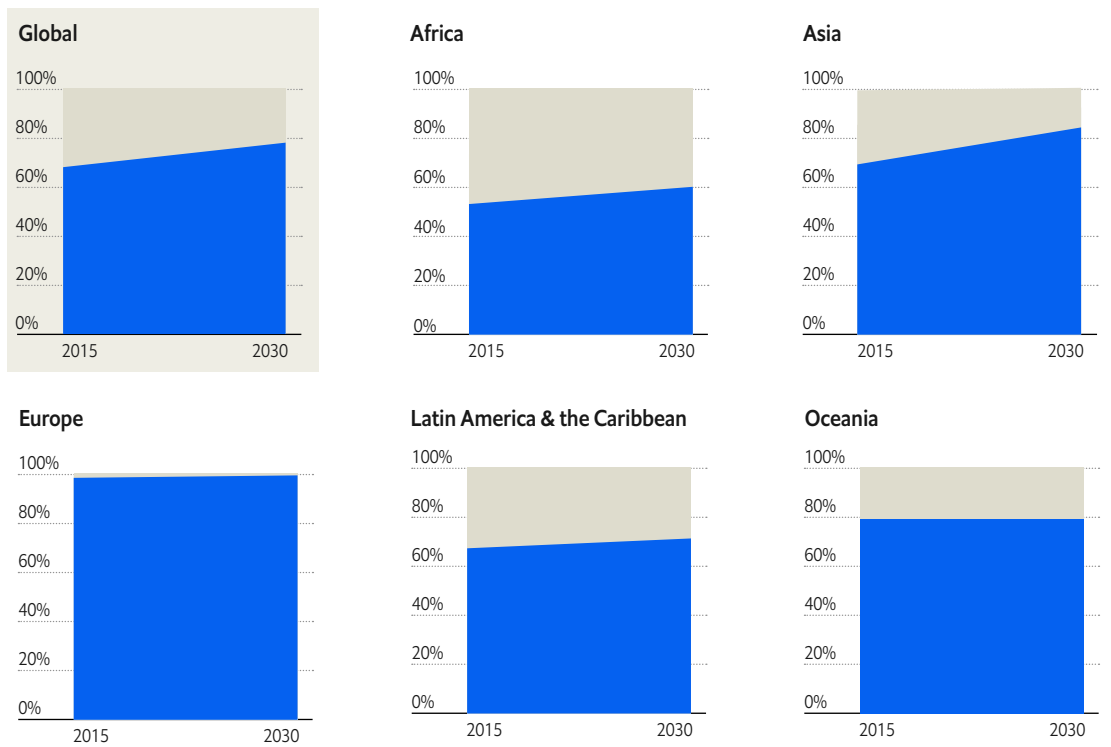
Public Private Partnerships work best when they create added value. Unilever Domestos provides materials and guidance for schools and manages the annual Unstoppable Award; GIZ offers expertise to strengthen systems and support the government in scaling up the national WASH in Schools programme. Each party plays to their strengths in pursuit of a bigger goal—in this instance, a way to keep toilets clean and safe for all schoolchildren in the Philippines.

**10%**

The gap is closing: access to basic school toilets is 10% higher today than it was in 2015. But there is still a long way to go.

**Figure 6. Progress in closing sanitation gaps: sustaining the momentum**  
Comparing the share of access to school sanitation services (2015 versus 2023)

● Access to basic usable school toilets    ● Limited or no service<sup>11</sup>



Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.  
Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets.

<sup>11</sup> Limited or no service means that schools either have improved sanitation facilities that are not single-sex or not usable, unimproved sanitation facilities, or no facilities at all; see <https://data.unicef.org/topic/water-and-sanitation/wash-in-schools/>.

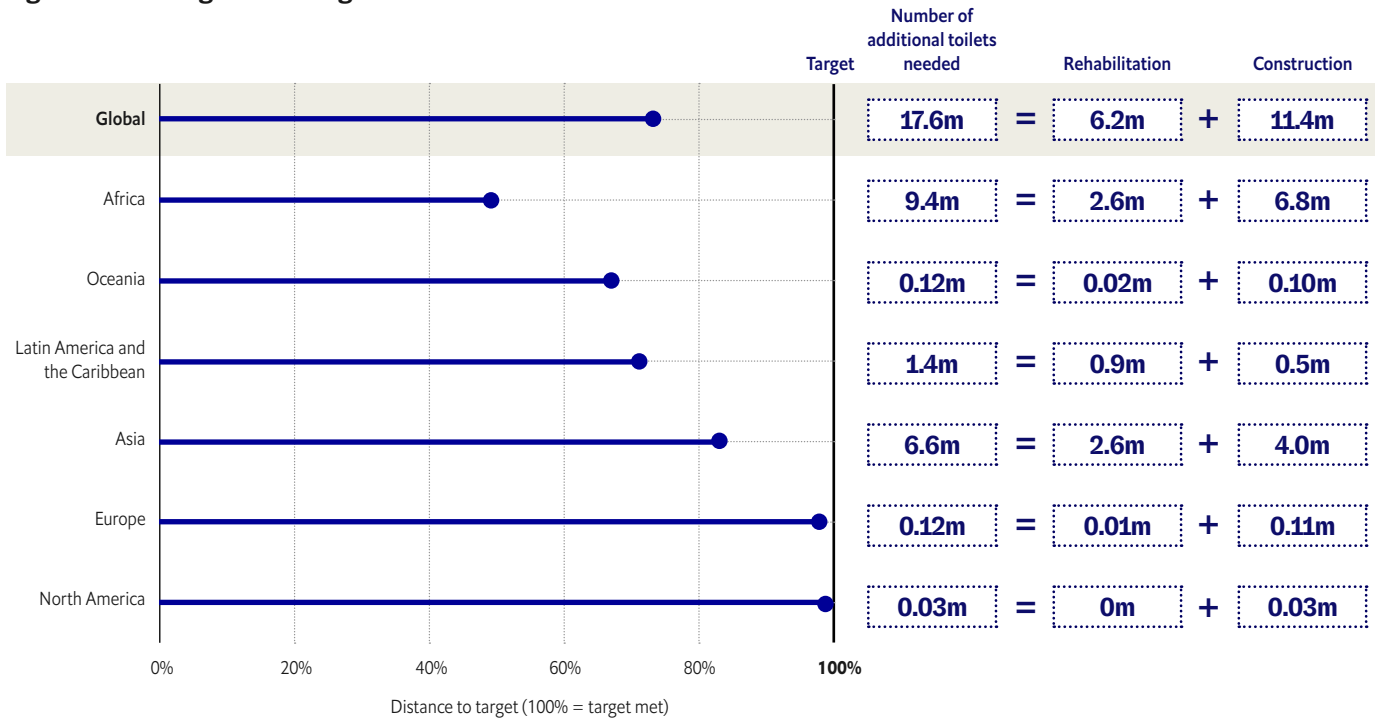
# 17.6m

Globally, 17.6m more basic school toilets are needed to fully close the gap for all children.

## More school toilets are still needed

There is still a long way to go. Globally, 17.6m more basic school toilets are needed to achieve the 2030 target—a 40% increase from what exists today. Of these, 6.2m toilets already exist but need to be repaired, and 11.4m new toilets need to be built. Africa is the furthest behind, needing to more than double the current number of school toilets to close the gap. Other regions closer to the targets also need to continue investing in both constructing new toilets as the school-age population grows, and maintenance to ensure that new and existing toilets are not lost.

Figure 7. Achieving sanitation goals



Source: Economist Impact analysis.

Note: JMP data for North America estimates 100% access to basic school toilets. The additional construction requirements account for population growth in North America to 2030.

### A context-specific path to progress







This paper has explored the unfortunate reality of toilets falling into disrepair due to neglect. But what if things were different? The research imagines a world where maintaining toilets is as much of a priority as building new ones, which would unlock immense benefits for both children and their communities. Looking towards 2030, it envisions alternative possible strategies that policymakers, schools and education officials could adopt to make this imagined world a reality. Each option strikes a balance between cost-effectiveness and the ultimate goal of universal sanitation access. However, the right path will depend on each country’s unique circumstances.

1. **For middle- and high-income countries: build and maintain toilets.** The most effective and fairest strategy is to invest in both building new toilets and maintaining new and existing ones. This would require investment of about US\$2 per child each year but would generate a return of US\$1.7 for every dollar spent. Most importantly, this is the only way to achieve 100% sanitation coverage by 2030. For countries that are either nearing full sanitation access or have fewer budgetary constraints, fully committing to both construction and maintenance is essential to seize the readily achievable gains.
2. **For low-income countries: focus initially on maintenance.** For low-income countries with more limited resources, focusing only on maintaining existing toilets would be a cheaper and more practical intermediary option. This strategy would cost, on average, less than US\$1 in additional sanitation spending per child each year. It would also offer a strong return of US\$2.3 for every dollar invested—but it would leave up to 266m children (13%) without access to proper sanitation by 2030, as it does not address the need for new toilets. This “maintenance-only” option could be seen as a stepping stone toward full coverage, but falls short of being a complete solution.

**US\$1.7**  
Fully investing in building new toilets and maintaining both new and existing toilets will deliver returns of US\$1.7 for every dollar invested.

**Figure 8. Returns on investment**

Least socially desirable    Most socially desirable

Returns (\$ for every \$1 invested)		Projected % of children with basic sanitation access (2030)	
Construction only	 0.4	Construction only	 74%
O&M only	 2.3	O&M only	 87%
Construction and O&M	 1.7	Construction and O&M	 100%

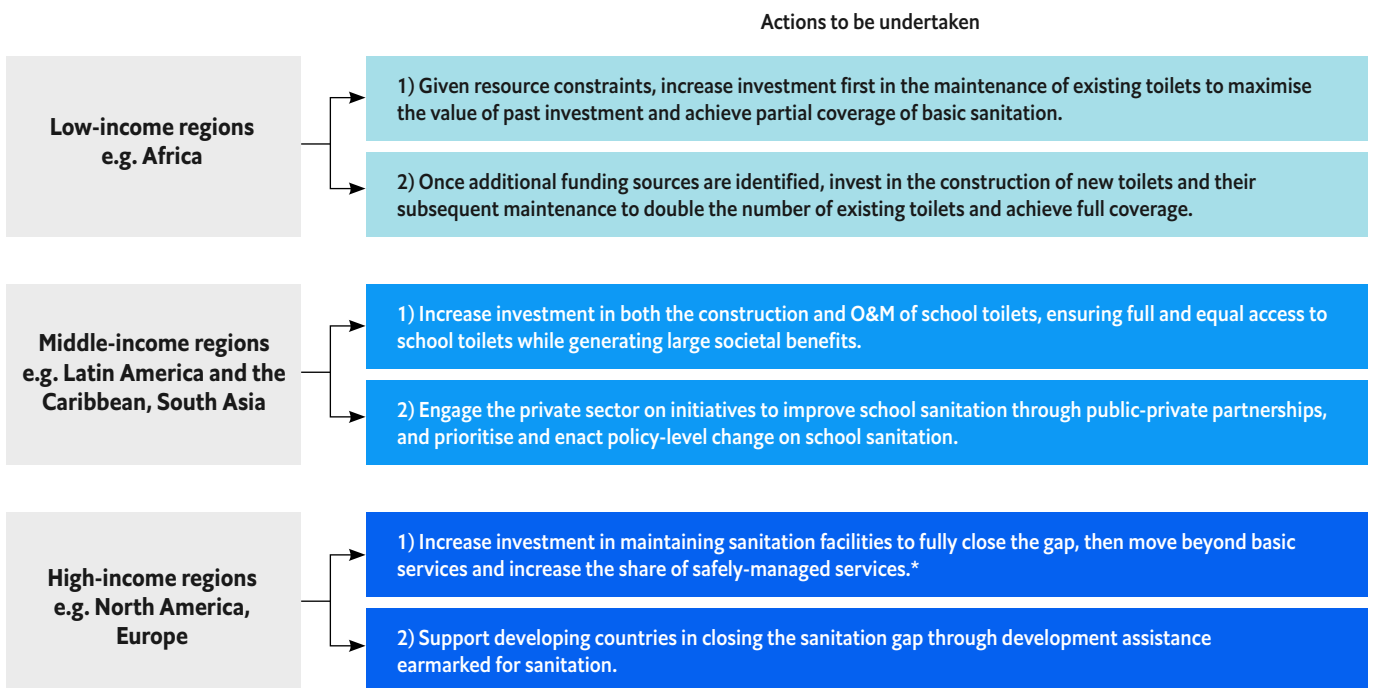
Source: Economist Impact analysis.

A strategy focused solely on building new toilets without investing in maintenance is not a viable solution for any country. This approach would continue the cycle of Toilet Loss and push the world even further from sanitation and education goals. Without proper upkeep, new toilets would quickly fall into disrepair, becoming unusable and leaving 543m children without access to basic sanitation by 2030—116m more than today. Neglecting toilet maintenance is simply not an option. It is not only wasteful, it is counter-productive, transforming what could be a smart investment in long-term progress into a short-term fix with no lasting impact.

**“Many countries that monitor school sanitation focus on the presence or absence of infrastructure without tracking the usability (availability, functionality and privacy) of facilities. In countries where usability is integrated into regular national education monitoring systems, we tend to see faster rates of progress towards the SDG for school sanitation.”**

Christie Chatterley, associate professor of engineering at Fort Lewis College and independent consultant with WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme

Figure 9. How can countries close the gap?



\*Safely-managed services are basic sanitation services where human waste is safely disposed of in situ or removed and treated offsite.

Source: Economist Impact analysis.

### A coordinated intersectoral effort is needed

The analysis provides a clear strategy for investment, tailored for different countries and regions, which emphasises the importance of prioritising maintenance alongside construction. However, implementing this strategy effectively is far more challenging. There are fundamental steps that must be in place to accelerate progress in eliminating Toilet Loss. Closing sanitation gaps and reaping the benefits requires more than just the right investment strategy—it demands system-level change.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of sanitation in schools, this can be summarised as a three-step action plan for enhancing how school sanitation services are planned, delivered and managed:

1. **Accelerate future planning:** No school toilet should be built without a clear plan and budget for O&M. This involves identifying the necessary investment to meet targets, mobilising funds from various sources and ensuring proper allocation for both construction and maintenance.
2. **Better monitoring:** Monitoring progress is critical for ensuring the longevity of sanitation services. Integrating school sanitation indicators into national Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) will allow for comprehensive data collection and analysis across all schools, providing transparency on the state of sanitation. Stakeholders must be held accountable for both the construction and upkeep of school toilets through regular reporting and inspections, preventing facilities from falling into disrepair due to neglect.
3. **Clear governance:** A major barrier to sustainable school sanitation is the lack of clarity around stakeholder roles and responsibilities. Governance structures should clearly define who is responsible for building, cleaning, maintaining and repairing school toilets—at the individual school level, within the private sector, and across local, subnational, and national government bodies.

At the heart of this transformation is strong and consistent political commitment across international, national and sub-national levels.

**Figure 10. Easy as ABC**



<sup>12</sup> Refer to pages 53–56 in our 2023 report for a more in-depth discussion of the roles of different stakeholders in accelerating progress. <https://impact.economist.com/perspectives/sites/default/files/download/ei-unilever-tackling-toilet-loss-vf3.pdf>



**“Regulators play a critical role in ensuring safe sanitation in schools by establishing standards, enforcing compliance and fostering accountability across various levels of government and service providers. Effective regulation can help to ensure that school toilets are not only built but also sustained, ultimately contributing to healthier and more effective learning environments for children.”**

Claire Chase, senior economist, World Bank

#### **Building Blocks: establishing an enabling environment for sanitation**

The Sanitation and Water for All's (SWA) Building Blocks framework highlights the key elements needed at a sector level to deliver sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services.<sup>13</sup> These components can be similarly applied for the delivery of sanitation services to stop Toilet Loss in schools:

- Sector policy strategy: identifying the goals for the sector and the delivery model
- Institutional arrangements: identifying and allocating roles and responsibilities and establishing coordination mechanisms
- Sector financing: establishing required budgets and identifying funding streams
- Planning, monitoring and review: establishing processes for transparent data collection to monitor progress against goals
- Capacity development: developing the capacity of institutions and individuals for sustainable service delivery

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/our-work/priority-areas/building-blocks>

Intersectoral collaboration will be crucial to deliver the system-level change that is needed to drive progress on sanitation in schools. Although education ministries are responsible for setting policies and budgets, schools, communities and the private sector must all work together to ensure that funds are available and allocated effectively. Accountability is essential to prevent waste and neglect and ensure that no child is left without access to proper sanitation.

**Table 1: The roles and responsibilities of stakeholder groups in addressing Toilet Loss**

Roles and responsibilities	
<b>Donors and international development partners</b>	<p>To meet the US\$33bn investment gap identified through this research, donors and international development partners play a central role in prioritising school sanitation and providing funds accordingly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing technical expertise and funding to support long-term investment planning and implementation</li> <li>• Establishing investment planning protocols ensuring that all financial plans for school sanitation investment incorporate both construction and maintenance</li> <li>• Holding policymakers to account for the returns on sanitation investments, ensuring that the full value of each toilet installed is realised through regular O&amp;M</li> </ul>
<b>National governments, policymakers and WASH planners</b>	<p>Policymakers are responsible for creating the enabling environment that supports achievement of the SDGs, guiding local stakeholders in implementation and disbursing funds from budgets. The WASH in School Enabling Environment Matrix, developed by the WASH in Schools Network, identifies the institutional-level factors needed to strengthen existing systems.<sup>14</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensuring budget allocation for school sanitation covers both construction and ongoing maintenance</li> <li>• Establishing national guidelines for planning sanitation investments to help schools identify budget needs</li> <li>• Prioritising gender equality and social inclusion in sanitation investments</li> <li>• Providing capacity-building training and funding to support the implementation of sanitation strategies</li> </ul>
<b>WASH regulators (independent bodies or functions performed by local authorities)</b>	<p>A regulatory function is critical to ensuring compliance on policies established for sanitation in schools. This could be performed by independent regulatory bodies, or other local public bodies with authority to enforce policies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting clear measurable standards for what constitutes adequate and safe sanitation facilities</li> <li>• Working with schools to collect standardised, high quality and high frequency data to monitor conditions</li> </ul>
<b>Local education sector and schools</b>	<p>Policymakers must set the overall direction and strategy to prioritise school sanitation in schools, recognising the interlinkages between sanitation and education. The local education sector, however, is ultimately responsible for implementing these strategies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying resource needs to provide all schoolchildren with toilets that are clean and safe to use</li> <li>• Allocating human resource capacity to ensure that toilets in schools are clean and safe to use</li> <li>• Conducting regular checks on the functioning of toilets against indicators established by policymakers</li> <li>• Coordinating with local suppliers to ensure that toilets are properly equipped and usable for all children</li> </ul>
<b>Private sector</b>	<p>The private sector can complement the efforts of donors, governments, WASH planners and the education sector by filling in gaps in financial resources and expertise.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing funding for the construction and maintenance of school toilets through public-private partnerships</li> <li>• Offering expertise and training programmes for school staff, local communities, and local and national governments on effective toilet maintenance</li> <li>• Engaging actively in the sanitation economy by investing in and testing market-based innovation to offer sanitation solutions to the public sector at more competitive rates<sup>15</sup></li> </ul>

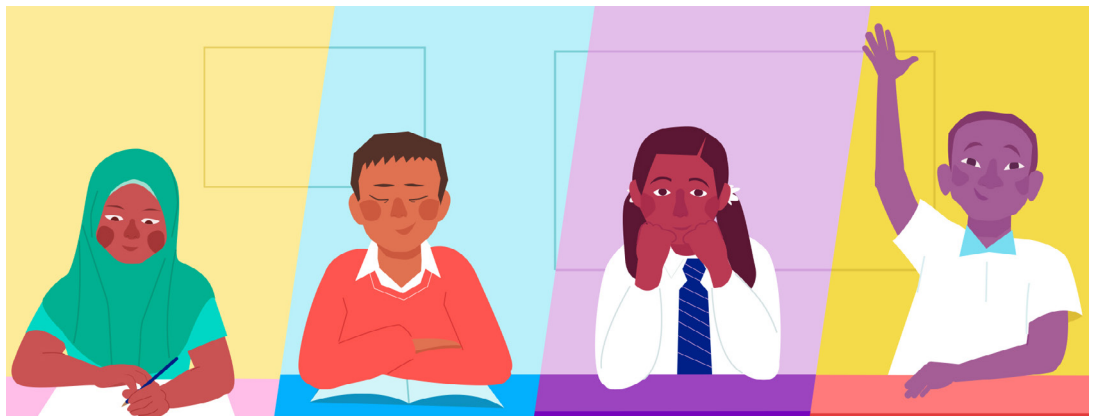
<sup>14</sup> <https://winsnetwork.org/resources/wash-schools-enabling-environment-matrix#:~:text=In%20the%20context%20of%20UNICEF's,Universal%20Access%20for%20All%20with>

<sup>15</sup> The Toilet Board Coalition, for example, is a business-led body that seeks private sector solutions to sanitation issues. [https://www.toiletboard.org/media/52-Scaling\\_the\\_Sanitation\\_Economy.pdf](https://www.toiletboard.org/media/52-Scaling_the_Sanitation_Economy.pdf)

## In conclusion

Changing long-established systems is never easy, but with focused effort and clearly defined roles, transformation is possible. The benefits of addressing Toilet Loss are undeniable: healthier students, improved academic performance and parents who can stay at work, supporting family incomes. Investing in the construction and maintenance of school toilets is more than just the right thing to do for children's wellbeing—it is a strategic and smart investment with returns that far exceed the costs. It is an investment in stronger individuals and more resilient economies.

No child should face a school day without access to a basic human right: a clean, functional toilet. Tackling Toilet Loss goes beyond sanitation—it strengthens communities and lays the groundwork for a brighter future for generations to come.



## Appendix: about the research

Toilet Loss is the economic and societal cost of neglected toilets. Toilets can become unusable through neglect from:

- a. lack of investment in O&M;
- b. lack of appropriate school-level management policies, or implementation capacity, to enable toilet use (for example, safety policies, school policies on routine O&M); and
- c. lack of provision of essential resources (for example, water or sanitary products).

Toilet Loss results in socioeconomic losses that arise from:

- healthcare expenditure (due to higher incidence of waterborne diseases);
- strain on family income (as parents stay at home to look after sick children); and
- lost economic output (due to missed opportunities for employment in O&M of school toilets).

Drawing on data published by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP), this study assesses the state of school sanitation in 118 countries. In total, our analysis covers 65% of schoolchildren worldwide. For the remaining countries, Toilet Loss and its impacts has been estimated using proxy-based extrapolations.

The target scenario for the calculations is full coverage of basic sanitation in schools for every child by 2030, as defined in UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4.a and 6.2.<sup>16</sup> Building on an assessment of the current state of sanitation, the study develops pathways to close gaps in access to toilets in schools that include the mitigation of Toilet Loss to achieve this goal.

The analysis and estimations are based on a [methodology](#) developed for a pilot study conducted in 2023, the findings of which can be accessed [here](#).

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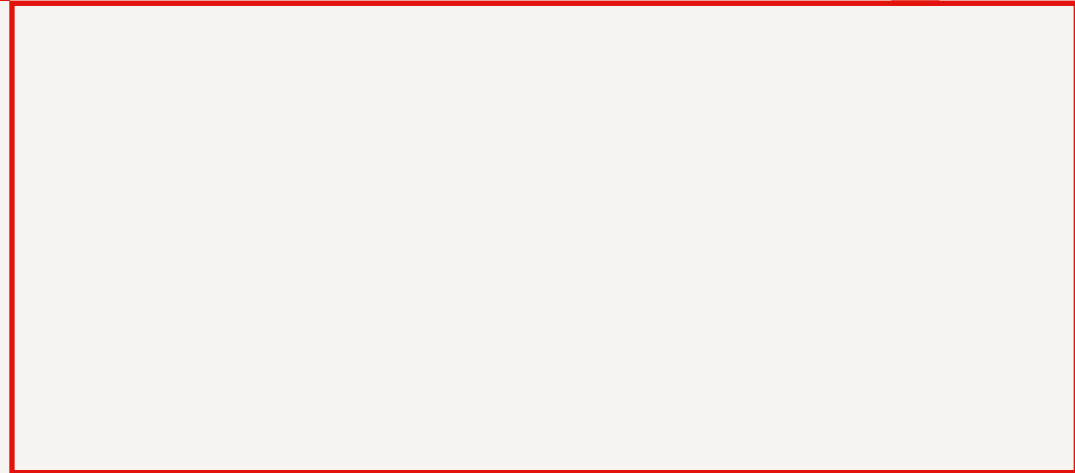
<sup>16</sup> SDG 4.a specifically aims to provide safe and effective learning environments for all. Providing all children with access to a safe and usable toilet at school is crucial to enhancing the learning environment. This goal is complemented by SDG 6.2, which seeks to ensure equitable access to safe sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030.

Figure 11. Countries covered in our analysis



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