13 April 2017 | GENEVA — Countries are not increasing spending fast enough to meet the water and sanitation targets under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), says a new report published by the World Health Organization (WHO) on behalf of UN-Water – the United Nations inter-agency coordination mechanism for all freshwater-related issues, including sanitation.

"Today, almost two billion people use a source of drinking-water contaminated with faeces, putting them at risk of contracting cholera, dysentery, typhoid and polio," says Dr Maria Neira, WHO Director, Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health.

"Contaminated drinking-water is estimated to cause more than 500 000 diarrhoeal deaths each year and is a major factor in several neglected tropical diseases, including intestinal worms, schistosomiasis, and trachoma," added Neira.

The report stresses that countries will not meet global aspirations of universal access to safe drinking-water and sanitation unless steps are taken to use financial resources more efficiently and increase efforts to identify new sources of funding.

According to the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS) 2017 report, countries have increased their budgets for water, sanitation and hygiene at an annual average rate of 4.9% over the last three years. Yet, 80% of countries report that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) financing is still insufficient to meet nationally-defined targets for WASH services.

In many developing countries, current national coverage targets are based on achieving access to basic infrastructure, which may not always provide continuously safe and reliable services. Planned investments have yet to take into account the much more ambitious SDG targets, which aim for universal access to safely managed water and sanitation services by 2030.

In order to meet the SDG global targets, the World Bank estimates investments in infrastructure need to triple to US $114 billion per year – a figure which does not include operating and maintenance costs.

While the funding gap is vast, 147 countries have previously demonstrated the ability to mobilize the resources required to meet the Millennium Development Goal target of halving the proportion of people without an improved source of water, and 95 met the corresponding target for sanitation. The much more ambitious SDG targets will require collective, coordinated and innovative efforts to mobilize even higher levels of funding from all sources: taxes, tariffs (payments and labour from households), and transfers from donors.ÂÂ

"This is a challenge we have the ability to solve," says Guy Ryder, Chair of UN-Water and Director-General of the International Labour Organization. "Increased investments in water and sanitation can yield substantial benefits for human health and development, generate employment and make sure that we leave no one behind."

Additional Findings:

Official development assistance (ODA) disbursements for water and sanitation are increasing, but future investments are uncertain

Water and sanitation ODA disbursements (spending) increased from US$ 6.3 to US$ 7.4 billion from 2012 to 2015. However, aid commitments for water and sanitation have declined since 2012 from US$ 10.4 billion to US$ 8.2 billion in 2015. Due to the multi-year nature of commitments, if commitments were to continue to decrease, it is likely that future disbursements would also decrease. Considering the greater needs to make progress towards universal access to safely managed WASH services under the SDG targets, the possibility of future reductions in aid disbursements is at odds with global aspirations.

Extending WASH services to vulnerable groups is a policy priority, but implementation is lagging

Over 70% of countries report having specific measures to reach poor populations in their WASH policies and plans. However, the implementation of such concrete measures is lagging: few countries indicate that they are able to consistently apply financing measures to target resources to poor populations. Increasing and sustaining WASH access for vulnerable groups will not only be critical for achieving SDG 6, but also for SDG 3 on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages.

The GLAAS 2017 report presents an analysis of the most reliable and up-to-date data from 75 countries and 25 external support agencies on issues related to financing universal access to water and sanitation under the SDGs. Safe drinking-water and sanitation are crucial to human welfare, by supporting health and livelihoods and helping to create healthy environments. Drinking unsafe water impairs human health through illnesses such as diarrhea, and untreated sewage can contaminate drinking-water supplies and the environment, creating a heavy burden on communities.