

Intervention

High-Level Political Forum 2026

Accelerating SDG Achievement in African Countries, LDCs and LLDCs Education & Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG)

Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Onyekachi Williams, Founder of The Williams Hope Alive Humanitarian Foundation, Nigeria, and I have the honour of delivering this statement on behalf of the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group (EASG).

As the international community reflects on the theme of this year's High-Level Political Forum, *"Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda,"* Africa presents us with an undeniable reality:

Achieving SDG 6 requires simultaneous investment in SDG 4.

Water infrastructure is indispensable, but infrastructure alone cannot transform societies. Education equips people with the knowledge, skills and leadership needed to sustain that infrastructure and drive lasting development.

Today, according to the WHO & UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, 2025, 2.2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water, while 3.5 billion people lack safely managed sanitation services. Every day, these deficits undermine health, education, economic productivity, and human dignity.

For millions of African children, the journey to quality education begins not with a textbook, but with access to clean water.

The EASG Sectoral Paper reminds us that education is not merely another Sustainable Development Goal; it is the enabling platform through which progress in water, energy, innovation, sustainable cities, and partnerships becomes possible (EASG, 2026).

In Nigeria, for example, nearly six in ten schools lack reliable drinking water, and inadequate sanitation continues to prevent many girls from attending school regularly due to poor menstrual hygiene facilities (EASG, 2026). From our work with schools in Nigeria, we have seen firsthand how inadequate WASH facilities and poor menstrual hygiene management affect girls' attendance and learning. These experiences reinforce the findings of the EASG Sectoral Paper and demonstrate why integrated investments in education and WASH are essential.

These are not isolated education challenges. They are barriers to health, barriers to economic growth, barriers to climate resilience, and ultimately barriers to achieving the 2030 Agenda.

If we are intentional about accelerating progress in African countries, Least Developed Countries, and Landlocked Developing Countries, SDGs should not be implemented in isolation.

We therefore call upon Member States to prioritize three transformative actions.

First, invest in climate-resilient Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in every school, ensuring reliable drinking water, safe sanitation, disability-inclusive facilities, and menstrual hygiene

management. Evidence consistently shows that safe WASH facilities improve attendance, health, dignity, and learning outcomes, particularly for girls (WHO/UNICEF JMP, 2025; EASG, 2026).

Second, strengthen investment in education, science, technology, research, and artificial intelligence. UNESCO estimates an annual US\$97 billion financing gap for low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4. Closing this gap is not expenditure—it is an investment in the engineers, teachers, scientists, health professionals, and innovators who will secure Africa's water future (UNESCO GEM Report, 2024; EASG, 2026).

Third, strengthen genuine partnerships. Governments, academia, civil society, youth organizations, indigenous communities, development partners, and the private sector must move beyond consultation to genuine co-creation. We also urge governments to strengthen accountability, ensure that investments reach rural and underserved communities, and support locally led implementation that leaves no one behind. Sustainable development is most effective when solutions are designed with communities, not merely delivered to them (EASG, 2026).

Excellencies,

Africa is home to the world's youngest population. This generation is not asking merely for assistance.

They are asking for opportunity.

The opportunity to learn.

The opportunity to innovate.

The opportunity to lead.

And the opportunity to build resilient communities where every child can drink clean water, remain in school, and contribute to sustainable development.

Let us therefore remember that the greatest infrastructure we can build is not only pipelines, reservoirs, or treatment plants.

It is human capacity.

When we educate a child, we strengthen a community.

When we provide clean water, we protect dignity.

When we combine both, we accelerate every Sustainable Development Goal.

On behalf of the Education and Academia Stakeholder Group, we call upon Member States to place education at the centre of SDG implementation, recognizing that lasting progress on SDG 6 depends on the knowledge, innovation, partnerships, and human capacity that quality education makes possible.

As we pursue transformative, equitable, innovative, and coordinated action, let us remember that sustainable development begins by investing in people. When we educate people, they protect water. When they protect water, communities become healthier, more resilient, and more prosperous. And when communities thrive, the Sustainable Development Goals move from aspiration to reality.

Let us act with urgency. Let us act together. And let us ensure that no child, no community, and no nation is left behind.

Thank you.