UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
SPECIAL PROCEDURES
SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS, INDEPENDENT EXPERTS & WORKING GROUPS

PALAIS DES NATIONS • 1211 GENEVA 10, SWITZERLAND
www.ohchr.org • TEL: +41 22 917 9000 • FAX: +41 22 917 9008 • E-MAIL: ohchr-registry@un.org

End of Mission Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, Mr Pedro Arrojo-Agudo

Bissau, 19 March 2025

At the conclusion of my visit to Guinea-Bissau, which took place from 10 to 19 March 2025, at the Government's invitation, I am pleased to share my preliminary findings and recommendations. These insights are based on the information gathered both prior to and during my visit. A complete and final report will be presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council at its 60th session in September 2025.

I want to thank the Government of Guinea Bissau for the invitation and collaboration in the organization of the visit and for the respectful dialogue we had during the country visit, which I am sure will continue in the future.

I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the ministries, local and regional authorities, teachers, and health workers who shared their knowledge, difficulties, and challenges with me openly. During my visit, I also met with civil society organizations, water committees, youth groups, women's organizations, rural communities, and individuals deprived of liberty. I appreciate them sharing their stories, concerns, and the difficult living conditions they face, as well as their proposals for overcoming the daily challenges of realizing their human rights to drinking water and sanitation. Meeting with these groups has reaffirmed my belief that Guinea Bissau must prioritize the rights to drinking water and sanitation as a critical national issue, especially in light of the harsh realities of climate change, while paying particular attention to those in the most vulnerable situations.

Finally, I would also like to thank the United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office and the UN Country Team in Guinea Bissau for facilitating and supporting this visit.

Guinea Bissau: the country, the population and water resources

Guinea-Bissau (the Republic of) is a small, least developed country vulnerable to climate change, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Senegal and Guinea. It includes the Bijagós Archipelago, with over 100 islands, and hosts two major rivers, the Geba and the Corubal,

which originate from neighbouring countries. The Atlantic aquifer, shared with Senegal, Guinea, and Gambia, is the main water source.

The increasing severity of the dry season and concentrated intense rainfall over just a few months reduce aquifer recharge and increase flood risk. During my visit to Bafata and Djobel I also listened to testimonies about how seawater has infiltrated river estuaries, salinizing coastal and island aquifers.

Most of Guinea-Bissau's urban population lives in the capital, Bissau, with about 215,000 residents. However, the majority of its population resides in rural villages known as *tabancas*, and many urban dwellers maintain rural lifestyles.

Data from 1997 indicated that only 22.5% of the population lived in urban areas, but by 2023, this figure had risen to 45.5% according to the World Bank. In Bissau, rural-to-urban migration has resulted in the city accounting for 25% of the national population. Access to electricity remains low, with only 31% of residents connected. Extreme poverty affects many, with 26% of the population living on less than $2.15 per day and 64.4% classified as multidimensionally poor, as per UNDP. The Human Development Index ranks Guinea-Bissau 179 out of 189 countries, reflecting a life expectancy of only 60 years.

Extreme poverty also manifests itself in a very significant way in the generalized lack of access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation services, as well as in the total lack of garbage collection and treatment, which accumulates everywhere, affecting public health and contaminating water bodies. Additionally, the fiscal space is very limited, with tax revenue averaging 8% of GDP annually, according to the African Development Bank.

Safe drinking water and sanitation: state of the art

Aquifers are vital to the country’s water supply, storing large amounts of water without the need for extensive pipes or canals. This ensures a reliable year-round water source, especially during dry months. However, many aquifers in the country suffer from pollution—chemical, saline, or biological—making the water undrinkable.

Only 24% of the population has access to safely managed drinking water, 15% have safely managed sanitation, and just 20% have hygiene facilities with soap at home. Water supply networks are limited to parts of Bissau and some regional capitals. Additionally, sewage networks don’t exist, even in urban areas.

As I have seen, the lack of chlorination and disinfection of drinking water is common. The poor condition of scarce water networks and inadequate maintenance result in significant leakage issues. To reduce this, water is supplied intermittently, which allows contaminants to enter at leak points when pressure drops. In general, even in urban neighborhoods, water from mains, public fountains, and wells is untreated and unsafe to drink. As a result, families who can afford it often turn to bottled water or boil their water to ensure it is safe for consumption.

In addition, due to the geological structure of some aquifers, water in some areas is contaminated with iron and manganese. However, I visited a foreign-aid-funded water treatment plant in Mansoa, where water is consistently chlorinated, addressing the iron contamination issue.

The lack of secondary water networks means that even in cities with a supply system, only a few residents receive domestic water service. Most women in these cities must collect water from public fountains connected to the network. In areas without a water supply system, women depend on wells to meet their water needs.

A major issue in urban areas is the lack of effective garbage collection and waste management. The accumulation of trash in streets and drainage canals poses serious public health risks.

In both urban and rural areas, women and girls are disproportionately affected by a lack of access to water. They spend a significant part of their day fetching it, often standing in long lines at wells and public fountains, which are only operational for a few hours each day. For many, the day begins at 5:00a.m. just to secure the water their families need.

Many *tabancas* in rural areas lack water. In particular, the situation is dire in the Tchethé and Bilonco *tabancas* that I visited. In Bilonco, the sole well, which is yielding less water over time, is closely monitored by the community head to ensure that each woman carries no more than two buckets. For washing, hygiene, and cleaning needs, the water source is located one and a half kilometers away. Orchards in the community are drying up.

At present, there is only one water analysis centre in the country, which is clearly insufficient and inaccessible to most people.

Additionally, the salinization of coastal and island aquifers poses a significant threat that is likely to escalate rapidly due to rising sea levels.

Legal and institutional framework and public policies

The Water Code outlines management principles that are generally sound, but there are areas for improvement, especially concerning climate change and access to safe water and sanitation for rural and impoverished urban populations. There are also implementation inconsistencies due to institutional challenges and insufficient budgetary resources.

In my thematic reports, I have consistently emphasized that being a low-income country does not justify failing to prioritize human rights to drinking water and sanitation. As an example, I often highlight the plight of women in the most impoverished families and communities, who devote time and energy to fetching the water their families need because, for them, water is the main priority. Beyond strengthening the fiscal space, mentioned often by Government agencies and development organizations, it is essential to assume the priority of meeting the basic needs of the population, particularly in the area of water and sanitation.

The country's water governance faces challenges due to poor coordination among ministries and between national, regional, and local institutions. During my visit, I met with

representatives from the Ministry of Natural Resources, which oversees water and sanitation policies; the Ministry of Energy, which manages the public water and energy company (EAGB); and the Ministry of Public Works, which is responsible for well drilling licenses. I observed overlapping functions and unclear responsibilities, which complicate effective management.

The absence of municipal institutions in Guinea-Bissau is worrying, as they usually manage water and sanitation services in most countries. Local governments that are directly connected to their communities are urgently needed. While a comprehensive reform is necessary, it is important to avoid creating bureaucratic redundancy if the existing central government structures are to be maintained.

On the other hand, the enormous potential represented by water management committees and community authorities in *tabancas* and urban neighbourhoods should not only be valued and respected but also strongly supported, promoting public-community partnership strategies to which the State should commit resources and attention.

The well-framed Water Code plays a vital role in creating a regulatory framework for water resource management, but should be updated to help prioritise vulnerable populations. This framework should address local needs, especially in rural and marginalized areas, address climate change more effectively and include clear responsibilities, along with mechanisms for monitoring, sanctioning, and encouraging best practices.

A stronger emphasis on sanitation is essential. Joint interventions that integrate access to water and sanitation and raising awareness are crucial to achieving Open Defecation-Free Communities (ODF). Additionally, promoting water disinfection as part of awareness and education campaigns is crucial to ensure that communities adopt safe water consumption practices, thereby reducing the risk of diseases transmitted through contaminated water.

Regulation should promote a human rights-based approach to governance based on the principles of equity, accountability, equal participation of women and men, and affordability for all, including those living in conditions of greatest poverty and vulnerability.

During my visit, I observed that many people do not see themselves as rights holders but rather as individuals reliant on international cooperation and non-governmental organizations' aid. However, I also encountered young people, women, and men, along with social and community organizations that are taking responsibility for driving the necessary changes to advance human rights-based governance.

Transboundary waters

I commend Guinea-Bissau for joining the UN Water Convention and for its efforts in establishing transboundary agreements for the sustainable management of its shared basins and the Atlantic aquifer. During my visit, I have witnessed firsthand the consequences of inadequate regulation. When I visited Pirada and travelled along the Bidigor River—once a vital source of food security and water—I saw that it was completely dried up due to the construction of a dam upstream in Senegal, to develop agribusinesses.

Additionally, during my visit to Tchethé, community members expressed their concerns about alleged toxic contamination in the Corubal River, which stems from upstream mining activities in Guinea and has serious impacts on the community's health.

I urge Guinea-Bissau to continue its efforts to reach agreements with neighbouring countries and to advance the implementation of those agreements through further dialogue and cooperation.

The experience of community management in the city of Bafatá

The city of Bafatá, home to over 70,000 inhabitants, has a positive example of community management regarding its water and sanitation services, which are provided by Associação de Saneamento Básico, Proteção da Água e Ambiente de Bafatá (ASPAAB).

The management approach is participatory and community-based, organized through an active neighbourhood network. Each neighbourhood has coordinators responsible for overseeing public fountains. The community also engages in discussions to establish tariffs that will financially sustain the services.

The water supply system is rooted in the colonial network, with public fountains that provide quality water, but the distribution network is generally in poor condition. High levels of leaks and the limited flow from springs and wells serving the network led to discontinuous service. This situation often results in contaminating intrusions at the points of leakage. Additionally, the absence of chlorination means that the water available to residents is not safe for drinking.

ASPAAB is expanding its network to reach households, but where access is not possible, public fountains are being installed under the supervision of community leaders.

From the beginning, ASPAAB recognized the community model as the only viable option given the current institutional fragility in Guinea-Bissau. I would like to go even further, praising this community management model as a prime example of participatory governance that can and should be replicated in other cities across the country. Furthermore, valuable lessons can be learned from this model to benefit cities in other countries.

However, there is a notable absence of an empowered municipal institution capable of providing state support, e.g., in renovating and extending the supply network.

Rural community management

During my visit to the communities of Tchethé, Bilonco, and others, I observed not only significant needs and legitimate demands but also an impressive level of responsibility and organization. While the isolation and lack of State support pose challenges, projects by an NGO and the UN mitigate the situation.

Climate change, particularly the shortening of the rainy season, is causing serious issues by reducing the capacity of available wells. This is especially concerning for Bilonco a community I visited that relies on a single well, where women collect water by hand. To avoid conflicts and ensure fairness, community authorities supervise this process, allowing each family a maximum of two buckets of water. Additionally, the water necessary for personal hygiene and washing clothes must be fetched by women from a source that is one and a half kilometres away from the community.

The community articulated feelings of abandonment, highlighting that the State does not recognize the urgent need for a school or provide a teacher. Nevertheless, the residents have taken the initiative to build a school and are actively raising funds to support a teacher.

I was impressed by the community's organization in financing small projects. Groups consisting of 20 women and 20 men collectively save money and lend it to individuals who wish to purchase and sell goods, such as a load of onions, within the community. Once the small business is completed, the borrower returns the funds.

In Tchethé, pump breakdowns have halted water pumping, as is the case in many communities. It is important to note that estimates indicate over 50% of installed pumps are non-functional. As a result, women must make the challenging trek down to the river and then climb a steep slope back to the community. I received testimonies from these women regarding the health issues faced by many children, who experience symptoms like blood in their urine. Local health centers attribute these problems to possible toxic contamination of the Corubal river, allegedly caused by mining activities in Guinea. Such activities frequently generate heavy metals and other toxic pollutants that gradually and irreversibly harm the population, with particularly severe effects on children.

With 80% of the population in coastal areas, addressing aquifer salinisation from rising sea levels is urgent. An extreme case I witnessed is that of the island communities of Djobel who lack water and urgently need dignified resettlement.

In summary, based on these visits, I would like to emphasize the significant social value of community organizations in rural areas of tabancas. Additionally, there is a pressing need to prioritize attention and resources for these rural communities through the establishment of regional support centres.

Water and sanitation in schools, health centres and hospitals

During my visit to Bissau, I was informed that most schools and health centres lack water and sanitation facilities. In some schools I visited, there was only one toilet available, with no separation between boys and girls, and no water. Where there were toilets designated for girls, they still lacked water, and there were no doors or curtains for privacy.

In one school in Bissau with a piped water supply, there was only a single tap located away from the toilet, which only received non-drinking water at certain times. Of all the schools I

visited, only one school in Catel had separate toilets, running water, and maintains good condition, thanks to a cooperation project funded by bilateral cooperation.

During my visits to various health centres, I found difficulties to access clean water or proper toilet facilities. The Gabu hospital I visited had unsafe water and a small, inadequate toilet. As a result, individuals who could not wait in line often resorted to open defecation behind the hospital. However, I visited the Health Centre Bacar Mané- Sao Domingos, where I observed a reliable water system sourced from a well that continuously supplies the entire facility. Additionally, I noted that the centre has separate, hygienic toilets for men and women, each equipped with doors and maintained in dignified conditions.

I recommend the Government to take immediate action to ensure that all health centres have a reliable water supply. This water should be collected in tanks and properly chlorinated for safety. Additionally, rainwater harvesting systems could be implemented to collect and store rainwater in large tanks, which should also be chlorinated.

Furthermore, schools should incorporate lessons on how to treat and disinfect water to make it safe for drinking into their curricula.

It is also vital that schools, health centres, and hospitals are equipped to ensure menstrual hygiene for women and girls.

The hygiene, water, and sanitation situation in detention centres

I visited the Bissau's Bandim detention centre, where I observed the inhumane conditions in which approximately one hundred men and women are currently living. According to the information received there are plans to allocate even more people without access to drinking water, hygiene, or basic sanitation. The facility lacks outdoor space, drinking water, and minimal sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Particularly devastating for me was entering one of the so-called rooms at my request. In reality, it was a narrow corridor barely 1 meter wide, about 10 meters long, and 4 meters high, with no ventilation. Around 20 young people were cramped together in this space, with barely enough room to sit or sleep.

Public officers themselves painfully acknowledged that the situation was untenable. I urge the Government to find a solution to the overcrowding and inhumane conditions faced by detainees. This includes providing access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and services to ensure adequate hygiene, which they are entitled to.

Water Treatment, Disinfection, and Potabilization

As mentioned above, with a few exceptions, most of the water supplied to households and public fountains across the country is neither treated nor disinfected to ensure it is safe for drinking.

In Bissau, the Electricidade e Aguas da Guinea-Bissau (EAGB - Public Water and Electricity Company of Guinea-Bissau) acknowledges that it only chlorinates and treats the water twice a year because of budget constraints. Considering the relatively low cost of chlorinating water for disinfection, the argument regarding costs is not very convincing.

The complete absence of water chlorination and disinfection results in widespread diarrheal infections, as well as more severe diseases like cholera. Diarrhoea is the second leading cause of death among children in the country, contributing to 9 per cent of deaths before the age of five. It is important to note that frequent diarrhoea in children not only harms their health but also hinders nutrient absorption, leading to serious malnutrition, even when they receive sufficient and nutritious food.

Moreover, the sale of water in plastic bags, conducted with little to no oversight or regulation, fails to ensure safe drinking water for consumers and can worsen public health issues. Although there is an inspection service intended to monitor and control the quality and safety of market water, this service often does not reach many locations where the water is bottled or packaged.

In Bissau, EAGB's efforts to expand water coverage throughout the city are insufficient, given the rapid influx of rural migrants into peri-urban areas that lack basic services. The existing water network, which dates back to colonial times, is deteriorated, resulting in discontinuous service to minimize losses. Unfortunately, this leads to contamination due to pollutants entering the network through leak points when there is no pressure, in a supply that does not have chlorination.

Discontinuity in supply is also due to other issues. The decreasing availability of water in aquifers, exacerbated by ongoing climate change, is a significant reason for the lack of continuous service in towns like Bafatá and Gabu. In areas such as Bambadinca, where electricity is available, power cuts disrupt the pumping of water. Furthermore, the limited capacity of the reservoirs that collect the pumped water can also hinder a consistent supply.

Without sanitation, there will be no safe drinking water and no hygiene

It is important to clarify that the human right to sanitation includes access to basic toilet and hygiene facilities, menstrual hygiene for women, and the collection and treatment of domestic wastewater.

The lack of toilets that meet adequate standards for hygiene, safety, and privacy presents significant challenges and risks for women and girls. This deficiency often forces them to defecate in the open, particularly in public spaces such as streets, schools, health centres, and even hospitals. Furthermore, inadequate resources to manage menstrual hygiene, coupled with cultural prejudices, often lead to girls dropping out of school once they begin menstruating. The widespread absence of suitable latrines in rural areas particularly affects women and girls.

In Bissau, I visited the Chao de Pepel community, an impoverished area lacking electricity and located just a few meters from the city centre. I observed that the residents draw water from shallow wells situated just 10 meters away from unsanitary toilets, resulting in water contamination from human waste. Fortunately, the nearby school has a tap that occasionally provides water from the mains; however, this water is not safe to drink and does not reach the toilets.

The lack of waste collection and treatment services in Bissau and other cities is one of the major public health and hygiene issues. Many residents have expressed frustration over the absence of rubbish collection trucks and suitable landfill sites for solid waste disposal and management.

In Bissau, the drainage channels I observed have been turned into dumping sites. During the rainy season, this leads to the accumulation of large amounts of rubbish and plastic, which block the channels and cause overflows and flooding in the urban environment.

I met with Government Officials at the National level: President of Guinea-Bissau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Natural Resources, Ministry of Environment and Biodiversity, the Directorate General of Water Resources (DGRH), the Public Water and Electricity Company of Guinea-Bissau (EAGB), technical public officer from the Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Education; Ministry of Public Works, Construction, and Urbanism; Ministry of Women, Family and Social Solidarity; Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Justice; I also met with local authorities in Bissau Bafata, Mansoa, Pirada, Gabu, and São Domingos and visited schools and health centers in Bissau, Gabu, Pirada, Bambadinca, São Domingos, and Djobel.

At the outset, I want to reiterate that this Statement includes my preliminary thoughts and ideas. A report containing a larger analysis and information related to human rights to water and sanitation will be presented to the Human Rights Council's 60th session in September 2025.