

IDC INQUIRY On Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

WaterAid Written Submission

03/03/2023

CONTEXT¹

Climate change is experienced through water, either causing too little (droughts, water scarcity), too much (flooding, sea level rise) or too dirty water (lack of access to safe and clean WASH services). Currently, 2.3 billion people live in water-stressed countries (UN-Water, 2021), with demand for water rising due to increased food needs, rapid urbanisation, population growth and climate change. The world is not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals on water and sanitation, with only 21 countries on target to achieve basic water and sanitation services for their population by 2030, whilst 68 have seen the number of people with access to water and sanitation decline. Urgent action is needed to ensure everyone has access to these basic human rights, and to end preventable deaths.

KEY MESSAGES

WASH is a critical development imperative that underpins all development including climate adaptation, global health and food security. Yet, progress both in the UK and globally is lagging. To reach the goal of universal access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030, a fourfold increase in progress is required.

Despite water's fundamental importance to human existence, and the growing threat of climate change, the critical importance of WASH is still not sufficiently recognised by the UK Government or the International development community. Failure to address the WASH crisis urgently will lead to increasingly worsening global development, health and security outcomes.

The UK cannot deliver on its gender or global health goals without addressing the critical lack of investment in WASH. Climate resilient WASH underpins all the women and girls' and health objectives within the International Development Plan. Without a coherent plan for WASH, these objectives are built on quicksand.

To remain a credible development, climate and global health leader, the UK Government must increase its WASH budget and staffing expertise back to a minimum of its pre-2018 levels and ensure a coherent cross-government approach. This must include:

- a. Investment in locally-led climate adaptation projects that increase access to clean water for climate vulnerable communities
- b. Investment in global health care facilities to ensure universal access to WASH in all health care facilities is delivered.
- c. Investment in WASH to turn the priorities of the "Ending Preventable Deaths" and "Health Systems Strengthening" Papers into action.

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all statistics derive from WaterAid research

- d. A coherent X-Whitehall UK Strategy on global water security – recognising the critical interlinkage of water to global economic, food, energy, health and national security.

Q1. What is the importance of WASH for successful development?

Access to safe, clean and adequate water, toilets and hygiene are human rights denied to billions of people. This violation leads to growing inequalities that are holding back lives, nations and the entire development agenda. The global community is doing too little, too slowly, to fix it. We need to act now. 771 million people still do not have clean water close to home (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2021); 1.7 billion don't have a decent toilet of their own (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2021); and 29% of schools globally do not have clean water (WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme 2022 Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools). Two-thirds of healthcare facilities in the world's least-developed countries do not have access to hygiene facilities, and half of those globally. This costs lives and prevents families, communities and countries from reaching their full potential.

WASH is critical to successful and sustainable development. With everyone, everywhere able to access clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene, we can end extreme poverty, develop economically, advance education and gender equality outcomes, and give all people an equal chance at being healthy and financially secure. Around the world, around 443 million school days are lost every year because of water-related illnesses (Human Development Report, 2006).

WASH can drive economic growth. Investment in WASH generates positive returns in reduced medical burdens and increased productivity, removes barriers to marginalised groups' participation in society, and creates long-term jobs. Basic WASH services can provide up to 21 times more value than upfront costs, and are a vital step towards safe, climate-resilient WASH. Every \$1 invested in water and toilets returns an average of \$4 in increased productivity (WHO, 2012). WaterAid research has shown that achieving universal safely managed sanitation will yield net benefits of US\$86 billion per year between 2021 and 2040.

According to the World Bank and the WHO, promoting good hygiene is one of the most cost-effective and effective health interventions (Disease Control Priorities, third edition (volume 2), 2016). Achieving safe, adequate and safely-managed WASH has an impact on the achievement of other Sustainable Development goals, namely Goal 4 (Quality education); Goal 8 (Decent work and economic growth); Goal 10 (Reduced inequalities); Goal 13 (Climate Action); Goal 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

Q2. How close are we to achieving SDG6? What are the challenges in achieving it?

Despite some progress towards SD6, the world is not on track to meeting the goal. At current rates of progress, global access to safely-managed water will only be achieved in 2066, and global access to safely-managed sanitation will only be achieved in 2102 (WaterAid, 2018). Only 21 countries are on target to achieve basic water and sanitation services for their population by 2030, whilst 68 have seen the number of people with access to water and sanitation decline. That means billions of people dying from preventable diseases, centuries of children's development irreversibly damaged as parasite and water-borne diseases leave

them undernourished, and centuries of mothers dying because midwives aren't able to wash their hands. To reach universal access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030, the current rates of progress would need to increase fourfold.

Barriers to achieving SDG6 include an increased demand for water owing to rapid population growth, urbanization and increasing water needs from agriculture, industry, and energy sectors, as well as decades of misuse, poor management, overextraction of groundwater and contamination of freshwater supplies have exacerbated water stress. In addition, countries are facing growing challenges linked to degraded water-related ecosystems, water scarcity caused by climate change, underinvestment in water and sanitation and insufficient cooperation on transboundary waters.

Achieving Goal 6 will require considering how to ensure access for all—particularly those experiencing marginalization like women and girls—and how to ensure WASH systems are resilient in the face of climate impacts. They must reach everyone and continue to function sustainably to meaningfully address Goal 6. If we want to make real progress, we need to consider everyone's diverse needs and vulnerabilities, work together and break down power imbalances. Only then will we achieve gender equality and climate resilience in water, sanitation and hygiene. To make gender-responsive, climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene a reality – we need to integrate different knowledge, partners and sectors to break through the barrier and make real progress.

In order to achieve SD6, we also have to increase and improve 1) Finance 2) Integration and 3) Sustainability

- **Finance:** Close financing gaps in national WASH plans through taxes, tariffs and transfers, ensuring a vibrant private sector. Increase official development assistance to WASH, and support climate-vulnerable countries to access climate finance for WASH
- **Integration:** Build cross-ministerial and multi-stakeholder processes between WASH and intersecting thematic areas. Ensure integration across policies and programmes and embed WASH in plans
- **Sustainability:** Deliver sustainable, climate-resilient services with a focus on creating lasting behaviour change. Improve planning, monitoring, accountability and adaptive management, involving rights-holders throughout

Achieving Goal 6 is possible – with strong leadership from national governments that prioritise WASH and are committed to realising people's human rights to safe water and sanitation.

Q3. Thoughts on the UK Government Strategy towards WASH, what progress is being made on the UK WASH strategy?

It is difficult to comment on the UK Government Strategy towards WASH due to an absence of an up-to-date, coherent public development strategy for WASH: The UK is found wanting of a clear approach to the upcoming Water Conference; a consistent approach to water and climate adaptation building on the energy-water-climate nexus from COP27 through to COP28; an International Development Strategy that references WASH, despite putting women and girls at the heart of it; an integrated review that recognises water as a critical risk to food, supply chains, energy, health and national security globally; and a clear implementation strategy for the “Ending Preventable Deaths” and “Health System Strengthening” papers which identify WASH in healthcare facilities as a priority.

If the UK is serious about addressing the biggest challenges in the 21st century – climate change, emerging health threats, food security and energy security – then it must have a coherent UK strategy on global and domestic water security. This means addressing the demand, supply and pollution problems at home. Just like the 2022 US “Action Plan on Global Water Security,” it must take a global, not just a local approach.

WASH and the risks from global water insecurity should also be reflected in other government strategies, most notably the update to the Integrated Review.

Q4. What have the impacts of the Aid cuts been on WASH? Who has been most impacted?

Since 2018, the UK aid budget for WASH has been cut by two-thirds, falling from £206.5 million, to approx. £70 million in 2021. For comparison, in 2021, Education received £364,454,107, and Health received £548,027,515 (ICAI, 2022). These cuts pre-date the subsequent development aid cuts. WASH is the first line of defence against pandemics and climate change, and making these cuts in the midst of COVID-19 has, and will continue to have, significant impacts on the lives of so many, particularly children and vulnerable communities. The current Minister for Development stated himself that he anticipates more than 100,000 avoidable deaths as a result of the aid cuts. The full impact of these aid cuts may never fully be quantified. However, we do know that women and girls have been disproportionately impacted by these cuts - due to cultural and biological factors - as well as people living in poverty and in climate-vulnerable communities. Not only do these aid cuts cost lives, but they put the UK at a reputational risk, choosing to do less at a time when people need it the most. By not acting, the UK risks losing out to China as a development leader and other autocratic actors.

Furthermore, the cuts to the WASH budget are in direct conflict with both the wishes of the UK, and those of MPs: WaterAid recently did some polling of the UK public and MPs, both of which ranked WASH interventions as the top choice for how they believe the UK should be spending its aid budget:

- 53% of Britons believe that increasing access to water, sanitation and hygiene is one of the top three most important ways of spending overseas aid.
- 51% of MPs think that access to clean WASH should be in the top three areas that receive the greatest UK investment.

It is important to recognise that the WASH crisis is not a new problem. Prior to the initial 2018, and subsequent 2019 aid cuts, WASH as a proportion of ODA budget was already significantly underfunded and resourced compared to its level of strategic importance for UK development.

Q5. What is the role of the private sector and National Governments in responding to WASH crisis?

Due to a funding gap as a result of high upfront investment costs; lack of capacity to deliver at the scale and pace needed; and an increase in climate-related events, there is an urgent need to leverage both public and private finance to achieve SDG6. The focus of the water community is too often on relatively small flows of capital such as international aid and climate finance. Though strategically important and potentially transformative, these flows are tiny, representing around 1% of total needs.

In order to achieve SDG6 targets in low and middle-income countries, investment in WASH needs to triple by 2030, with at least \$200 billion a year needing to be invested into WASH systems.

Governments need to play a catalytic role with their ODA, in the same way they have with the energy transition – the private sector can and should be investing into WASH and wider water resources and services, but the sector is fragmented, capacity is low, and there is a lack of investible projects, a weak enabling environment, and no information to connect potential investors with the opportunities. The private sector and governments need to work together on water, understanding the barriers to investment and putting in place the right incentives to enable finance to flow. This will also mean recognising the complexities and interconnected nature of the water sector, and making links into investments and policy on agriculture, energy, urban design, health, infrastructure, industry and more.

The potential for investment and returns is there, but the challenge is ensuring that the benefits can be realised. Scaling and optimising water-related investments can deliver at least \$500 billion a year in economic value from both big water infrastructure through to nature-based solutions. In addition, our research shows that every £1 invested in water, sanitation and hygiene could generate up to a £21 return, and every £1 spent on flood resistance can avert £62 in costs from worsening floods. The value of WASH investments is likely to rise, due to the increasing impact of climate change.

With support to design and deliver the right policies, governments can send clearer signals directly to participants in the market, a rich ecosystem of public and private financiers, providers and users of water resources and water supply, sanitation and hygiene services. Clearer, stronger market signals, coupled with a strong enabling environment, can enable more private finance to be invested in high impact projects, driving positive change in the way water is managed for communities, nature and climate.

Governments also have a role to play in enforcing environmental protection measures, reducing inefficient subsidies, and, where necessary, incentivising activities that will ensure that operations are sustainable and do not jeopardise the rights of water users to access clean water close to home. We need common, mandatory standards for water disclosure, better evidence of how water risks affect enterprise value and the financial system, as well as ecosystems and society, and to include these risks in stress testing for financial institutions and the wider financial system. Crucially, such mechanisms need to be interoperable across borders and throughout global supply chains and investment portfolios. Finally, governments need to use their own public financial institutions to better incentivise private investment, as engines of blended finance, project preparation and structuring.

We are designing the Resilient Water Accelerator (RWA) to bridge these gaps. The RWA will support the design and feasibility of ambitious and comprehensive climate-resilient water security programmes, unlocking new sources of transformational blended financing, and securing safe and sustainable water for all. It will work with governments at a national and local level, investors and communities to identify a portfolio of interventions – policy and projects – and to help to put in place the data, feasibility, capacity and project preparation to ensure that these investments happen in a coordinated manner. The RWA is starting its work in Nigeria and Bangladesh and will look to replicate this model in other developing countries.

Q6. Importance of WASH for Women and Girls – including Sexual and reproductive health?

Inadequate access to WASH disproportionately affects women and girls. This is due to both cultural and biological factors. In addition to needing WASH to meet women's menstrual, sexual and reproductive health needs, women are responsible for around 60% of household water collection needs globally. Every day, approximately 800 million women and girls are on their periods, yet one-third do not have access to clean water, female-friendly and decent toilets, hygiene facilities, and sanitary materials to manage menstruation with dignity. Poor sanitation and hygiene endangers women and girls, and perpetuates inequality. Going to the toilet outside, or in facilities shared with men, puts women and girls in danger. Lack of good hygiene knowledge or facilities prevents effective menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and can lead to serious health problems. Without adequate access to WASH facilities, women, girls, older people and disabled people are excluded from full participation in public spaces, workplaces and education.

Achieving universal access to WASH would have significant benefits for women and girls: it would free up more than 77 million working days for women each year between 2021–2040, and would keep millions more young girls in school. In South Asia, up to 1 in 3 girls miss school every month during their period. This results from the unavailability or expense of menstrual hygiene products, and inadequate sanitation facilities at schools. According to UNESCO (2014), one in ten girls across sub-Saharan Africa miss school due to menstruation and then eventually drop out.

Access to WASH in healthcare facilities is essential to women's right to health and safety. Women represent nearly 70% of the health and care workforce and are 90% of frontline health workers (WHO, 2021). Every year up to one million mothers and newborns die because of preventable infections linked to unclean births (WHO, 2015). Furthermore, providing access to WASH in healthcare facilities can help stop the spread of antibacterial resistance – projected to be the UK's number one killer by 2050.

Despite the UK having an International Development Strategy that places the rights of women and girls at the heart of it, it fails to mention WASH – a necessity for women and girls to live a safe, healthy and dignified life.

Q7. Importance of WASH in tackling infant health and mortality?

Water, sanitation and hygiene are fundamental to improving infant health and mortality, with the WHO (2020) estimating that 13% of all deaths among children under 5 are attributed to inadequate WASH. Furthermore, every minute a newborn dies from infection caused by a lack of safe water and an unclean environment (WHO, 2015). Yet evidence suggests [handwashing with soap](#) can reduce cases of pneumonia by 50% and acute respiratory infection by 16–23%, while reducing risk of endemic diarrhoea by 48%.

Diarrhoeal diseases are responsible for more under-five child deaths than any other condition apart from acute respiratory illness – the transmission of which is also interrupted by regular handwashing (WHO, 2017). Poor WASH is responsible for 60% of all diarrhoeal deaths, with children being disproportionately vulnerable. Along with the risk of death, diarrhoea can lead to long-term chronic health conditions. Diarrhoeal disease in childhood is linked to nutrition intake and poor health outcomes later in life, which can lead to stunting, poor cognitive development and obesity.

Hospitals and clinics without safe water and basic hygiene and sanitation services are a potential death trap for pregnant mothers, newborns, and children. Every year up to one million mothers and newborns die because of preventable infections linked to unclean births. Having WASH facilities readily available in healthcare settings dramatically improves reproductive, maternal, adolescent and child health. Practising straightforward hygiene during antenatal care, labour and birth reduces the risk of healthcare-acquired infections, sepsis and death for infants and mothers.

Q8. Role of WASH in Global Health Security?

As Covid-19 has shown, infectious diseases do not respect international borders. They spread fastest and most easily in places where preventive measures, such as WASH, do not exist or are inadequate. Robust pandemic preparedness and response is unachievable without adequately addressing these most fundamental pillars of public health.

Resistance to antibiotics is a silent pandemic and a major threat to global health. It is already a major cause of death worldwide, contributing to around 5 million lost lives a year – more than HIV, malaria and breast cancer individually. It is a crisis that most threatens the lives of children under five, and those living in low- and middle-income countries – particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. That said, there is a very clear imperative for the UK to act on antibiotic resistance and antimicrobial resistance (AMR) to protect our own health and economy. AMR already costs the NHS an estimated £1 billion a year and the Government has predicted that AMR will be the leading cause of death domestically by 2050. The majority of multi-drug-resistant infections treated in the UK originated elsewhere in the world, particularly low- and middle-income countries. Without effective global action, the UK's world leading efforts to tackle antibiotic resistance here in the UK will be of little use.

Infection prevention and control is of critical importance to containing and controlling antibiotic resistance. Infections such as Sepsis – accounting for almost 20% of all global deaths, with half of these among children – are often resistant to antibiotics, making the need for prevention vital (WHO, 2017). Yet 1 in 2 healthcare facilities in the world don't have basic hand hygiene which is creating environments where harmful bacteria can thrive. Ensuring all HCF have adequate WASH services is therefore critical to Global Health Security. Antibiotics are essential to modern healthcare. Without effective antibiotics, premature babies would not survive. Cancer chemotherapy, organ transplants and joint replacement surgery would be impossible. Adequate WASH services in HCF would slow the spread of antibiotic resistance by reducing infections acquired in HCFs and reducing the need to use antibiotics to prevent or treat them. According to the WHO, 70% of healthcare-acquired infections could be prevented through good hand hygiene and other cost-effective healthcare practices facilitated by WASH.

Q9. UN Water Action Agenda – UNWC – what should the UK be pledging under this at the UN Water Conference?

The UN Water Conference present a unique opportunity for the UK government to demonstrate global leadership in the areas where it is known for being credible: on trade, climate, nature, development and health. At present, just 2% of climate finance goes to water, and only 0.1% on basic water and sanitation. There is a desperate need for the UK to commit

long-term finance to leverage vital, catalytic funding for the sector, including by supporting the Resilient Water Accelerator (RWA), and encouraging other governments to see this as a priority for investment and support.

We strongly welcome the FCDO's Ending Preventable Deaths approach paper which clearly positions WASH as a core element of FCDO's work on health. However, we need to see this translated into action with meaningful FCDO investment in the EPD flagship countries.

Antimicrobial resistance is set to be a key topic at UNWC, on which the UK is co-leading a thematic dialogue on water-health. As such, the UK should itself be committing its fair share of funding support to national plans and roadmaps that strengthen WASH in healthcare facilities and hand hygiene. The UK's annual fair share of the external financing gap for WASH in healthcare facilities is \$34.5 million. If the UK were to ringfence just 0.3% of its annual overseas aid budget for this, then we would meet our fair share of the cost.

The UK must catalyse progress by ensuring that WASH in healthcare facilities is at the heart of this discussion, working with governments to secure tangible commitments to developing and financing national plans to progress this. As a key donor to a number of global health funds, the UK should push for commitment from them to increase their funding to WASH in healthcare facilities as part of a wider health systems strengthening approach. Furthermore, the UK should ensure all FCDO health programmes support progress on WASH in healthcare facilities as a core component, including leveraging UK contributions to multilateral development financing.

Q10: How is WASH affected by natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding etc

WASH is significantly impacted by both natural and climate-related disasters such as earthquakes, floods, cyclones, drought, wildfires, sea-level rise and glacial melt. Events such as these threaten water security and therefore all water, sanitation and hygiene systems which rely on available and consistent water supply. Earthquakes destroy vital WASH infrastructure and WASH systems; flooding damages infrastructure like pit latrines, tanks and sewers, degrades catchments, contaminates water supplies, increases pollution due to runoff from agricultural land, cities and industries; droughts: reduce water availability and degrade source water quality, force people to move to find better water sources, and cause changes in hygiene behaviour; the retreat of glaciers contribute to water scarcity; wildfires degrade catchments and water quality; and sea-level rise and storm surges will increase the salinisation of water resources.

Q11: What is the impact of climate change on WASH in lower-income countries and what effect that will have on achieving SDG6 by 2030

The impacts of climate change are threatening water security and therefore all water, sanitation and hygiene systems, which rely on an available and consistent water supply. By 2100, 700 million people will live in regions affected by extreme drought (WHO, 2021). Climate change increases the likelihood of extreme events such as floods, droughts and cyclones, as well as longer-term change such as sea-level rise and glacial melt. (See above for the impacts these have on WASH systems). Climate change is having a significant impact in the lower-income regions that WaterAid works, but specific vulnerabilities make people experience the

effects of climate change differently and increase vulnerability for women and children, and according to different political, economic and social differences. For example, during droughts, women and girls without WASH services travel further to collect water and use toilets, therefore increasing their physical burden when collecting water, taking up more time, and exposing them to dangerous situations including sexual violence. These water sources are also often of lower quality and reliability and may cause illness, therefore increasing care responsibilities. Reduction of water availability means lower hygiene care which can increase disease and cause a greater care burden for women and girls.

The impact of climate change on WASH systems increases inequalities, jeopardises progress that has already been made towards achieving SDG6, and destroys important WASH infrastructure, thus making the attainment of SD6 more difficult. Sustainable, responsive and climate-resilient WASH can help decrease inequalities and build community resilience to climate change, particularly for those who do not currently have access to WASH or those who have fragile water sources which often fail in the face of droughts, floods and extreme weather.