

WaterAid's response to the International Development Committee inquiry on the future of aid

May 2021

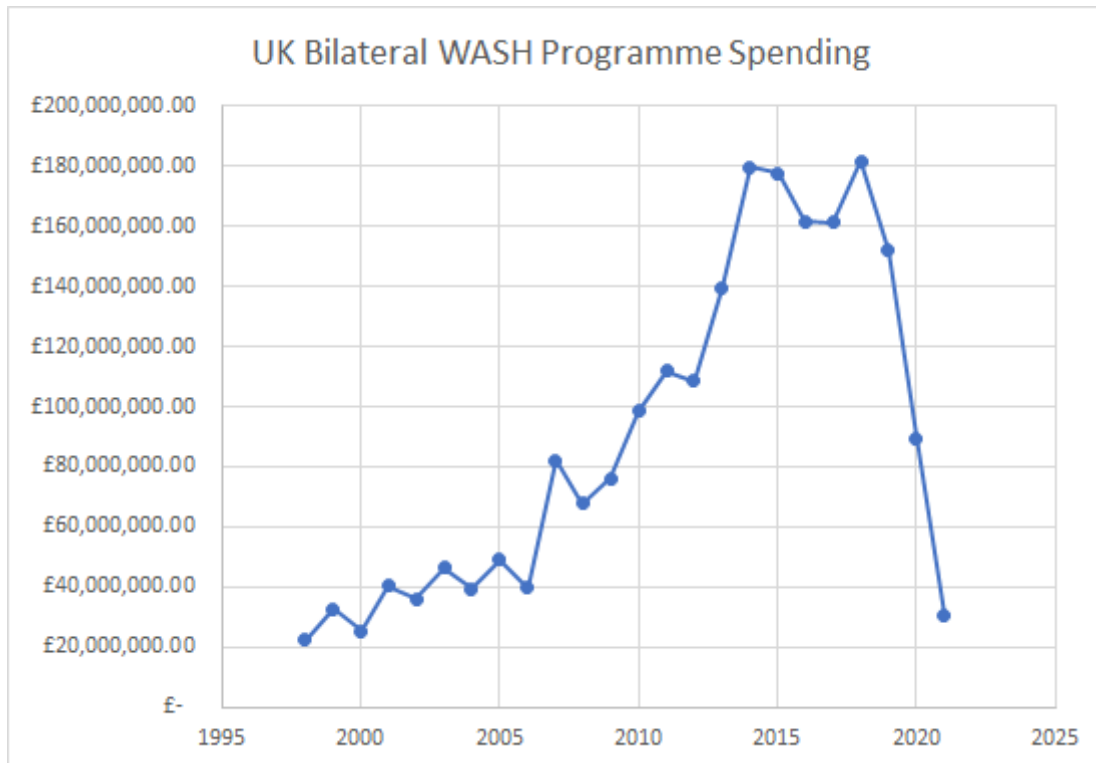
1. Summary

- 1.1. WaterAid works to transform lives by improving access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in the world's poorest communities. We work with partners in 27 countries in Africa, Asia, Central America and the Pacific region, and influence decision-makers to maximise our impact.
- 1.2. WaterAid received news of cuts to UK aid for water, sanitation and hygiene via a FCDO briefing in late April 2021. These were indicated to be on a scale of 64% reduction to overall spend on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and over 80% cuts to bilateral aid spend on WASH.
- 1.3. At the present time we are unable to provide specific examples of the impact of these reductions in the countries where we operate. However, we are extremely concerned about how these cuts will affect communities in developing countries around the world – especially given the current global pandemic, for which water and hygiene are critical defence mechanisms.

2. Scale of cuts to water, sanitation and hygiene

- 2.1. According to the information we received, bilateral spending on WASH will be cut by at least 80%. This will take annual spending from £150 million to £30 million. Overall WASH spending will be cut by 64% in 21/22 compared to 2019.
- 2.2. As the UK is one of the world's biggest grant donors for this sector, this represents almost a 10% cut in the total amount of bilateral grants for WASH of all reporting countries globally - at a time not only of pandemic but when the Sustainable Development Goal on water and sanitation is off track.
- 2.3. Over the last few years, the UK aid spending reached around 13.4m people per year through bilateral programmes. This means a cut of 80% could lead to 10 million people losing out on access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities this year.
- 2.4. We understand that in future UK programmes will likely focus on just three countries: Ethiopia, Mozambique and Nepal. These countries represent only 6% of all the people lacking basic sanitation access, only 10% of those lacking basic water access, and only 5% of those lacking handwashing facilities.

2.5. The following graph and table shows the UK's WASH ODA spending over time:¹



3. Impact of cuts to WASH

3.1. There is never a good time to cut aid for lifesaving water and sanitation.

However, in the midst of a global pandemic – for which both the WHO and the UK Government itself have recommended handwashing as one of the main lines of defence – it is all the more extraordinary.

3.2. Globally, 3 billion people are unable to wash their hands with soap and water at home. One in three healthcare facilities globally – and almost half of those in the least developed countries – currently do not have handwashing facilities. Today, [more than 900 million people](#) have to seek care at facilities that do not have water on site.

3.3. While the provision of vaccines through the COVAX initiative is a vital global public health measure, it will be some time before the population of the world's poorest countries is vaccinated. In the meantime, the lack of water access in hospitals and clinics puts health workers and patients at risk and perpetuates the pandemic. Water access for handwashing and hygiene is also a vital tool in holding back future pandemics – for example, the [re-emergence of Ebola](#) as an epidemic in Guinea.

¹ NB: This is calculated using a definition of WASH ODA aligned with the UN Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS₁). 2020 data has been estimated based on IATI data which suggests a 41% cut from 2019. See page 37 of "[Raising the high-water mark for WASH aid](#)" for further explanation.

- 3.4.** This is a particular problem for maternal and newborn health. Infections associated with unclean births account for 26% of newborn deaths and 11% of maternal mortality – together accounting for more than 1 million deaths each year. The UK Government has recently re-committed itself to tackling preventable maternal and newborn deaths globally; an ambition for which sustained investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is critical.
- 3.5.** It is notable that these cuts were announced as the UK prepares to host both the G7 and COP26 summits. Pandemic preparedness and response has been trailed as a major theme of the G7 summit; the impact of such severe reductions to lifesaving water, sanitation and hygiene projects on the UK's ability to galvanise global action on this topic remains to be seen.
- 3.6.** As diplomatic activity in the run up to COP26 intensifies, there is an increasing focus on helping climate vulnerable communities adapt to climate change. Coping well with extreme weather, droughts, and flooding relies in large part on access to clean water, good hygiene and decent sanitation. The government acknowledges this: water is a key element of the Adaptation Action Coalition that the UK is driving through its role as host of COP, and [COP26 President Alok Sharma has said](#):
“And too often, water is a casualty. Whether through droughts, floods, or sea level rises, extreme weather events make it harder for communities to access clean water. This impacts health, it impacts livelihoods, food production and more. And ultimately threatens economic growth.”
The cuts to WASH budgets undermine this high profile and vital element to achieving a successful COP.
- 1.1.** We know there is enormous support for funding in this sector among the UK taxpayers. A [poll conducted by YouGov for WaterAid UK](#) earlier this year shows that 83% of those surveyed believe that aid spent on WASH makes us all safer ahead of the next pandemic, and research carried out by the [Development Engagement Lab in autumn 2020](#) found that WASH was the UK public's first priority for aid spending.

Conclusion

- 1.2.** WaterAid urges the UK Government to reverse these savage cuts to UK aid funding, which will have huge negative impacts on the lives of millions of people and severely undermine UK global leadership – whilst making a saving equivalent to less than 1% of UK borrowing to deal with the pandemic.