

SDG 6 Water & Sanitation - Inputs to the 2023 HLPF from UNICEF

(a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 6 from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the three dimensions of sustainable development and the interlinkages across the SDGs and targets, including policy implications of their synergies and trade-offs,

The COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on the WASH sector that are still felt today (e.g. lower levels of WASH services, threatened financial sustainability, and limited CAPEX investments), but it also had some positive impacts, such as: 1) enhanced communication and coordination, 2) increased innovation and improved efficiencies, 3) earmarking financial resources for WASH, 4) increasing access towards the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation, or 5) the opportunity for a green recovery and higher contributions of the sector to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. See attached paper from Science of the Total Environment on the WASH impacts and response to COVID.

The most significant impacts included interruption of WASH services, increases in the cost of services and decline in service levels. As the pandemic progressed, governments tended to allocate more funding to the health sector for addressing the pressing health needs. This increase in allocations resulted in decline in funding levels to other sectors including WASH. The said reduction covered both development and operational budgets, thus, affecting service continuity (deferred maintenance) and expansion of services. While increase in service costs was specific to some countries, it predominantly resulted from limitations on supply chains, increase in prices of service delivery elements such as fuel and consumables. While other interlinked areas including social, economic and environmental impacts were not monitored, it's expected that reduction of service levels and expansion of services may have resulted in social tensions in forcibly displaced hosting communities and between communities where service level disparities exist. Economic implications may have included affecting the household economy due to the increased costs associated with service provision and treating increased WASH-borne diseases. Environmental impacts may have included increased pollution due to discharge of untreated or sub-optimally treated wastewater into the environment. It is worth noting that the world is witnessing an unprecedented increase in the number of countries affected by WASH-borne diseases especially cholera. While linkages have not been studied, the total number of cholera affected countries in 2022 was 30 and now 27 countries are reporting cholera cases whereas 17 additional countries are considered priority countries for preparedness activities based on the joint UNICEF/WHO analysis. Again, it's believed that this spike in cholera outbreaks worldwide may be linked to the sub-optimal investments made during the COVID pandemic time. Please see attached documents on UNICEF COVID HAR and cholera risk and prioritization approaches at country to global level.

(b) Three key areas where transformative actions for accelerated progress have been successful, and three key areas where support is most urgently needed, with regard to the cluster of SDGs under review in July 2023.

We have witnessed many transformative approaches to accelerate WASH progress.

- While climate change threatens the progress made over recent decades on the access to, and sustainability of, WASH services, the WASH sector is increasingly recognizing these risks, and

incorporating these into the siting, design, technology choice and management/operation of WASH services. To guide the sector, UNICEF has developed a [Climate Shift paper](#), which provides step by step guidance to WASH programmes on this important process and updated the [Strategic Framework for WASH Climate Resilient Development](#) in 2022 to reflect the many advances in the sector. Implementing this process has highlighted the potential of the WASH sector for both mitigation and adaptation strategies, and the opportunities to leverage large-scale climate finance to ensure that WASH services are climate resilient and reduce emissions, while ensuring the most efficient use of water and energy. While the sector is increasingly moving towards climate resilience there are still challenges (see below).

- It is interesting to see a stronger alignment of SDG6 (water and sanitation) and SDG 13 (climate action), which has linkages with SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 9 (innovation), and SDG 17 (partnerships). There has been a water pavilion in COP26 (Glasgow) and COP27 (Sharm El Sheikh) and water (SDG6) is coming more strongly in climate discussions, and vice-versa. In 2022, the SWA Sector Ministers Meeting supported by UNICEF brought together ministers of water, sanitation, and hygiene, and their counterparts responsible for climate, environment, health, and the economy. It provided a space for leaders around the world to meet and find innovative ways to work together to increase the political prioritization of water, sanitation, and hygiene and ensure the integration of these services in national climate, health, and economic policies and strategies.
- Also promising is the growing number of sector stakeholders and particular donors) that identify systems strengthening as one of the key areas for accelerating SDG6 progress. This is showing good momentum for a more holistic approach to WASH issues and UNICEF has been working on this issue for many years across a wide variety of contexts with clear sector tools and approaches to support Governments. Allied to this is the work UNICEF and partners have been doing to build resilience and to build on the key role WASH plays in de-escalating conflict and as a peace building tool within the triple nexus approach of humanitarian - development-peace building WASH work.
- Water, sanitation and hygiene in all health-care facilities (HCFs): UNICEF and WHO have been working closely to support global partners to accelerate WASH improvements in HCFs and there has been remarkable progress from just over 1,500 HCFs reached with WASH services in the years before the Call to Action to over 3,000 in 2018 and 2019, to over 6,000 in 2020. In the same year, UNICEF and WHO published guidance on the Eight Practical Steps that governments and partners need to undertake to accelerate progress on universal WASH services in HCFs. The two organizations also published a water, sanitation and hygiene facilities tool (WASHFIT) to help health care workers and partners make incremental improvements in WASH services in HCFs. This guidance and tool have been used widely in countries and have contributed to improvements in WASH infrastructure and services in HCFs. Close to 50 countries have so far had training on WASHFIT implementation with over 250 participants from governments, partners and UNICEF staff. UNICEF has also been working on strengthening governments capacities to scale up WASH services in HCFs.
- Hand Hygiene: In June 2020 UNICEF, WHO, WaterAid, the World Bank and other stakeholders began the [Hand Hygiene for All](#) initiative with the launch of the Hand Hygiene Roadmap program, which supports government leadership in accelerating progress towards achieving universal access to basic hand hygiene facilities. To date, over 60 countries have been involved in the roadmap process, either through creating standalone roadmaps or integrating hand hygiene into existing strategies and policy documents. In 2021, UNICEF and the World Economic Forum launched the [Hand Hygiene Market Accelerator](#) (HHMA), with the objective of strengthening local

market systems to mitigate the disruption to hand hygiene markets - and subsequent negative health impacts - during national/regional/global shutdowns. The HHMA builds upon previous work to understand national and local markets, and define clear approaches to strengthen them. In 2022, HHMA identified Nigeria and Indonesia as priority countries, described a clear program, but was unable to identify funding for implementation. In 2022, UNICEF, WHO, and WaterAid co-developed the [Hand Hygiene Acceleration Framework Tool](#) (HHAFT). Building from the findings of the *Roadmap* and the *State of the World's Hand Hygiene* report, the HHAFT assesses progress that countries have made in strengthening their policy environment as well as the quality of the enabling environment. Thus far, ~15 countries have applied the HHAFT, which helps them identify areas to prioritize efforts and deploy resources.

But it's not all positive with many challenges still in place:

- Progress towards SDG 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5 is under threat due to increasing water scarcity due to a range of factors, including increased demand and competition for water and poor governance of water systems and climate change. The lowering of water levels, deterioration of water quality, and damage and destruction of WASH services threaten the progress made to date and poses technical challenges to reach those without access to a safe and affordable drinking water source and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene services, and detrimentally impacts the resilience of communities. To address this, climate resilience needs to be incorporated into the urgent and large-scale design, implementation and management of WASH services to ensure the access to, and sustainability of, WASH services and water resources. To promote the interlinkages between access to WASH services, water scarcity, early warning systems and community resilience and peace, UNICEF released the [Water Security For All Initiative](#) to highlight the issues and the need for more resources.
- Aligning humanitarian, development and peace work is an area calling for attention. With the decline in domestic funding and shrinkage in ODA, aligning humanitarian, development and peace work has never been more pressing in humanitarian situations. Humanitarian situations are generally characterized by SDG setbacks, erosion in overall SDG gains and social tensions. While humanitarian situations pose major challenges, they also offer opportunities. Opportunities that need better harnessing include aligning humanitarian, development and peace work whereby humanitarian actors partly address humanitarian needs through durable WASH solutions thus making up for some of the WASH SDG setbacks. It should also include ensuring that WASH interventions “Do No Harm” by being conflict sensitive and “Do More Good” by contributing to peace building.
- Despite the recognition that WASH is at the centre of any public health emergency (cholera, COVID-19, Ebola, etc) the sector continues to be severely underfunded, requiring to quadruple the current level of investments to reach SDG6. With the current economic context, and with relevant cuts in both domestic and foreign investments in the sector, the efforts to increase funding to SDG6 needs to be sustained and increase significantly.
- The sector is still very fragmented, as mentioned by several stakeholders during the recent UN Water Conference. There is need for stronger coordination and more concerted efforts
- Capacities in the sector are low, in particular in fragile states, and stronger emphasis on professionalization of service providers and other sector professionals (including vocational training and creating job opportunities for the youth)
- Progress towards universal sanitation is alarmingly off track, unevenly distributed between countries, and inadequate to eliminate inequalities and ensure that the most vulnerable are

reached. *UNICEF's Game Plan to Reach Safely Managed Sanitation* responds to this challenge with a focus on strengthening government systems to achieve impact for children at scale and building resilience towards the increasing effects of climate change. [Link to Game Plan](#). Additional background on critical gaps, including capacity, can be seen in the [GLAAS 2022 report](#). Additional resources are needed to take forward this and the hand hygiene work.

(c) Examples of specific actions taken to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic that also accelerate progress towards multiple SDG targets, including actions identified by your intergovernmental body, building on interlinkages and transformative pathways for achieving SDGs.

Please see attached a paper from Science of the Total Environment on the WASH impacts and response to COVID. Some key issues still that can be considered include to:

- Enhance synergies, collaboration, and coordination among stakeholders
- Strengthening information systems to support evidence-based decisions
- A digital reform of the water sector
- Progressive realization of the Human Rights to water and sanitation
New opportunity for green spending
- Earmarking additional funds to the WASH sector
- Ex-post review of emergency regulations and increased use of regulatory management tools
- Building up capacities in the areas of resilience and disaster preparedness of all stakeholders, at all levels
- Improve WASH and Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) in health care facilities
- Supporting safe return to schools by securing access to WASH

(d) Assessment of the situation in the mid-point of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and within the respective areas addressed by your intergovernmental body, and policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Please find attached the concept paper #1 which UNICEF and WHO prepared for the interactive dialogue on Water and Health in their recent U N2023 Water conference. This provides a comprehensive assessment of the current status and trends in WASH at the mid-point of the 2030 Agenda and that the key messages on the actions needed to accelerate progress remain unchanged. We should note that while the concept paper includes the latest available data on WASH in schools and WASH in health care facilities, the WHO/UNICEF JMP will release updated estimates for WASH in households in June ahead of the HLPF in July. The updated global estimates have been shared with UNSD for inclusion in the Secretary General's 2023 SDG Progress Report together with a draft narrative summary as follows:

Despite progress, 2.2 billion people still lacked safely managed drinking water services, 3.4 billion lacked safely managed sanitation services, and 1.9 billion lacked basic hygiene services in 2022. While the majority live in rural areas, the unserved population is decreasing in rural areas and stagnating or increasing in urban areas. Achieving universal coverage by 2030 will require a 6-fold increase in current

global rates of progress on drinking water, a 5-fold increase for sanitation and an 8-fold increase for hygiene.

Since 2015, the global population using safely managed drinking water services increased by 687 million, with the largest numbers of people gaining access in Central and Southern Asia (251 million). But despite progress, 2.2 billion people around the world still lacked safely managed drinking water in 2022, including 703 million who lacked even a basic water service (408 million in Sub-Saharan Africa alone). Between 2015 and 2022, the population lacking safely managed drinking water decreased from 1.5 billion to 1.3 billion in rural areas, and increased from 784 million to 857 million in urban areas.

The global population using safely managed sanitation services has increased by 911 million, with the largest number of people gaining access in Central and Southern Asia (328 million). But in 2022, 3.4 billion people still lacked safely managed sanitation, including 1.5 billion who lacked even a basic sanitation service (762 million in sub-Saharan Africa and 482 million in Central and Southern Asia). Among these 419 million people still practiced open defecation, falling from 763 million in 2015. Between 2015 and 2022, the population lacking safely managed sanitation decreased from 2.2 billion to 1.9 billion in rural areas, but remained largely unchanged at 1.6 billion in urban areas.

Over the same period, the population with a basic hygiene service increased by 637 million, with the biggest contribution coming from Central and Southern Asia (395 million). But despite progress, 1.9 billion people worldwide still lacked a basic handwashing facility with soap and water at home (895 million in Sub-Saharan Africa), including 653 million with no handwashing facility at all. Between 2015 and 2022, the rural population lacking basic hygiene services decreased from 1.3 billion to 1.2 billion in rural areas, but the unserved urban population rose from 666 million to 764 million.

Achieving the SDG global targets of universal coverage by 2030 will require a 6-fold increase in the current global rate of progress on safely managed drinking water services, a 5-fold increase for sanitation safely managed sanitation services, and an 8-fold increase for basic hygiene services.

(e) Key messages for inclusion into the Political Declaration of the September 2023 SDG Summit.

Please see the Concept Note attached for the Interactive dialogue but in addition and at country level:

The systemic problems:

- At country level, the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector can be fragmented, disorganised, spread across multiple ministries and levels of government, with unclear and overlapping mandates and gaps in responsibilities, and key disconnects between water management for agriculture, industry and drinking water supply purposes
- Sector assistance is fragmented, with many types of development partners involved, often driven by the imperative to increase coverage in the short term, rather than build long-term capacity, institutions and systems. A “charity” mindset predominates.
- Governments may not see the WASH sector as a “good bet” due to its poor record of sustainability and poorly understood or articulated benefits (not helped by confusing health evidence) and so is reluctant to invest to build, or even maintain, happy to leave this sector to donors and NGOs to support, with the resulting multitude of approaches and major funding gaps.

- It is politically difficult to increase tariffs, compromising sustainability, contributing to a downward spiral of under-investment, and making the sector a drain on the public purse. However, publicly funded subsidies are poorly targeted, and the poor often pay more (in both time and money) than the rich to access services. Gaps in service force users to invest in coping mechanisms, such as buying poor quality water from vendors.
- The charity mindset and decades of underfunding means that many water supply services are delivered using volunteers, and rely on amateur, not professional, operators and managers, with the result that performance is poor.
- A short-term focus on increasing coverage means that service levels are low, and systems are not necessarily climate resilient. Low levels of water and sanitation service means that users, particularly women and girls, suffer the burden of water carriage and also lack the privacy, convenience and dignity they need from sanitation facilities.
- Hygiene is often neglected and is not included as a government policy issue.

The solutions:

Governments with a track record of success in WASH (e.g., India, Thailand, Ethiopia) have strong policies, develop well-articulated plans and strategies, set the “rules of the game”, and show political leadership and commitment. They are not afraid to say no to development assistance not in line with policies and plans. They invest in strengthening their institutions and systems, optimise public investment, leverage other investment, and translate political will into results.

Ten steps for governments to accelerate WASH progress and ensure sustainability could be:

1. **Have a clear policy framework.** This may not be a central policy for the entire WASH sector, but interlinked policies across the relevant ministries (water, health, rural development, housing etc.). Policies should define who does what, what levels of service and management options are to be used, and who is accountable. Policies should cover water supply, sanitation and hygiene, and encompass both rural and urban areas. These policies should be designed to achieve high quality, sustainable, professionalized service delivery, consistent with the definition of “safely managed”. Policies should reflect the government’s role, as duty bearer, in meeting the human rights to water and sanitation.
2. **Be clear about financing and funding approaches.** Specify where investment will come from, including government budgetary allocations, donor support, and domestic resource mobilization through tariffs and user charges. Design efficient, well-targeted subsidies to support the most vulnerable. Allow repayable finance to play a role, both at household level (microfinance), and through borrowing by service providers.
3. **Establish mechanisms to ensure affordability for the poorest households,** but make clear that water, sanitation and hygiene are not free services, and that cost recovery is key to sustainability.
4. **Establish strong and transparent government oversight and regulation,** in line with the government’s role as duty bearer. Identify leaders and mandate holders at all levels of government and make their accountability clear.
5. **Set feasible, achievable targets.** SDG targets can be inspirational but for many countries universal access by 2030 may not be attainable, and it is important to set targets on which achievable medium-term plans can be based.

6. **Use policy as a basis for a set of interlinked plans and strategies**, for instance a human resource development strategy, a sector funding and financing strategy, implementation plans for each subsector and for both rural and rural areas, and costed investment plans for each subsector
7. **Harness the private sector** as both a source of finance and expertise, but within the context of government oversight and regulation.
8. **Place a strong emphasis on building both institutional and human resource capacity**, including technical staff and skills, plus skills in administration, management and regulation etc. Strive for gender balance, bringing women into the operation and management of service provision.
9. **Seek assistance from external support agencies for well-defined parts of each plan**. Approach donors, UN agencies, development banks, NGOs to assist with the development of human resource and funding strategies, build human resource capacity, support implementation where there are gaps or in hard-to-reach areas, and fund or finance certain investments.
10. **Oversee progress, course correct and publicize results**. Establish a national monitoring system that provides transparency through publicly available information on progress against targets. Make regulators' reports publicly available. Use monitoring information to determine the success of strategies, realign investments, and identify areas for special attention.

Overall pitch to the Head of State

- **Put in place policy** – ensure transparent policy for all parts of the sector, identify who does what and who is accountable for maintaining progress.
- **Set targets** – for instance, make your country ODF by 2028, increase the number of people with at least basic services, increase the number of skilled workers, achieve gender balance in the workforce.
- **Make a clear implementation plan** – identify the priorities, plan against targets, identify funding and capacity required.
- **Invest strategically** – increase government budget allocations and leverage other investments in line with the plan.