

# COVID-19 and WASH:

## Mitigating the socio-economic impacts on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Sector - *Summary document*



© UNICEF/UNI324885/

4 May 2020

---

## COVID-19 and WASH: Mitigating the socio-economic impacts on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Sector

---

*Note:* This document has been developed by the Global Wash Cluster (GWC) which is made of [77 full and associated members](#) and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) which has [+200 partners](#) with the support of UNICEF and ICRC.

Frequent and proper handwashing with soap is one of the most important measures that can be used to prevent infection by COVID-19. Now more than ever, the benefits of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cannot be underestimated. Today billions of the most vulnerable people lack access to safe WASH services, leaving them behind, and exposed to the risk of COVID-19.

**WASH is a key preventative measure in reducing the spread of COVID-19 and is one of the principal public health recommendations.<sup>1</sup> The severity of the current response to COVID-19 poses grave detrimental impacts on WASH service provision and sustainability if not adequately mitigated. Equitable access to WASH commodities and services must be protected and extended for all, without any form of discrimination by nationality, income or ethnicity.**

Nevertheless, the most vulnerable populations with no access to adequate WASH or without social and economic safety nets will be hit hardest. This impacts marginalized people already affected by poverty, disability and ill-health, social exclusion and humanitarian crises including - refugees, migrants and internally displaced, those living in urban slums or camps, with weak or no health systems.

We call for **immediate collective and strategic actions** by national governments, service providers, partners and donors to rapidly and effectively coordinate response efforts, at global and national levels, to ensure:

1. Uninterrupted global supply chains for WASH commodities and services to maintain the movement of goods and production capacity. This includes the protection of WASH service providers' personnel and assets, ensuring safe access with no restrictions to the movement of essential staff and humanitarian workers, materials or equipment to maintain the continuity of vital WASH services in communities and healthcare facilities, and on-going humanitarian WASH responses.
2. Continued access to WASH commodities and services for all. This includes controlling price fluctuations for WASH commodities, deferring payments for WASH services and a collective approach by national governments, service providers, partners and donors.
3. Maintained and increased funding, with no diversion away from the existing commitments and priorities set for the WASH sector. This includes financial support for WASH service

---

<sup>1</sup> This is of critical concern in contexts already dealing with disease outbreaks, such as cholera.

4 May 2020

providers, avoiding shifts in domestic funding allocations that support WASH services and sustained support by international donors to on-going WASH humanitarian responses, and broader [Grand Bargain](#) commitments.<sup>2</sup>

The shock waves of COVID-19 are rippling through our societies globally. Substantial interruption of WASH services and reduced access to WASH commodities is expected and will take a heavy toll on the WASH sector. Restrictions on the entry and movement of materials and equipment coupled with price increases for WASH services and commodities, which play a direct and critical role in suppressing the global reach of the pandemic, will have a grave impact on maintaining good hygiene practice. This could further exacerbate the severity of COVID-19, with the highest impact felt in countries with protracted and/or humanitarian crises and amongst the most vulnerable populations. We must come together to ensure:

*Continuity and extension of WASH services for all is a priority and non-negotiable:* populations with no access to piped water supply and wastewater systems, that are experiencing restricted or no movement due to curfew and quarantine measures and those already affected by protracted and/or humanitarian crises are the most vulnerable to the risk of COVID-19. This requires support to WASH commodities and services to ensure effective COVID-19 preventative measures in communities and health care facilities.

*Sustain global supply chains for WASH services and commodities is vital:* essential staff and humanitarian workers, materials and equipment are critical to ensure the quality of WASH services and on-going humanitarian WASH responses should not be subject to the restriction of movement as a result of COVID-19. Prices for WASH commodities must be controlled to ensure access to essential items such as soap, chlorine-based products. Exemptions for sanitations or special clearances must be put into place for humanitarian need.

*Reducing WASH service vulnerabilities and re-building WASH services for all is crucial:* protection of WASH service providers' personnel and assets is vital to maintain critical WASH services. Financial support is required to alleviate the economic hardship caused by COVID-19, to ensure the continuity of and payment for WASH services and commodities for all, prioritizing service providers and the most vulnerable populations.

At this critical juncture in the COVID-19 response, we must act now to support the WASH sector to achieve its core responsibility of ensuring that no one is left behind and that our continued efforts toward achieving universal WASH are not compromised by the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Grand Bargain, launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, is an agreement between donor agencies and humanitarian organisations, committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action for people in need.