

Breaking down barriers: why quality health care is reliant on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and how to make integration happen

Report of the event '[Breaking down barriers](#)' WASH and health event, sponsored by the Governments of Japan and France in partnership with the Global Health Council (GHC) and international NGO WaterAid, with the support of the GE Foundation, Intrahealth, Frontline Health Workers Coalition, White Ribbon Alliance and partners, on the margins of the Sustainable Development Summit, New York. 26 September 2015.

This report can be found online: <http://www.wateraid.org/~media/Publications/Breaking-down-barriers-event-report.pdf?la=en>

Links to the reports mentioned in the discussion can be found at <http://bit.ly/washhealthlinks>

Introduction

In parallel with the Sustainable Development Summit in New York, a high-level panel of government, multilateral, business and civil society voices was convened to demonstrate the role of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in supporting health systems, and discuss practical proposals for improving the quality of care. In particular, the event highlighted the need for ambitious and holistic consideration of WASH in the Global Goal indicator framework, through the exploration of real-world examples from disease outbreaks, maternal health, and other experiences from around the world.

Summary of speakers' points

Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and African Ministerial Council Goodwill Ambassador for water, sanitation and hygiene

- President Sirleaf spoke about the implementation of WASH and the need to focus on both the policies and the delivery mechanisms to turn the strategy into actions. Only by doing could we

accomplish the goal to deliver basic access to WASH to everyone everywhere by 2030.

- The President highlighted the role WASH played in the country's response to Ebola. It was clear that a lack of sanitation at Ebola centres was crucial, but also that communities were affected by poor sanitation in other ways. If schools had no running water or toilets the risk of spreading the disease was increased. This knock-on effect from a lack of sanitation demonstrated the vital link between WASH and health care, and reality hit home that "without clean water and toilets our children will suffer". President Sirleaf said that recognising this was the first step, and that empowerment of communities was the key to combatting the disease. "Once the communities took ownership of the response things began to change."
- President Sirleaf also spoke about how WASH must be built into health system improvement. After Ebola, Liberia is trying to get the structure right before they start to rebuild. "WASH must be an integral part of improving the health-care system," she said.
- President Sirleaf spoke about implementing the Global Goals and the need to focus much more on water and sanitation. She said we have the commitment and

political will, and now we must ensure that implementation takes place. "I will be a champion of WASH," she said.

Her Royal highness Princess Sarah Zeid of Jordan, maternal health champion

- Princess Zeid spoke about the integration of WASH called for in the Global Goals, saying: "The right to health and water is not only universal, but indivisible." She highlighted that 2030 is a long way away and action needs to happen now if we are going to achieve what we have set out to do. She talked about the need to frame integration as not just a new fad but the only way to uphold and sustain dignity.
- Princess Zeid shared some facts: "40% of health facilities have no source of water, 20% are without staff sanitation, 50% of health-care facilities lack access to electricity to sterilise, and one in five children do not live to celebrate their fifth birthday. It is a lack of clean water that is the leading cause of these deaths."
- The Princess explained why she became involved in WASH. As a young girl in southern Iraq she had to step over a stream of sewerage to get to school. Girls stopped going to the school because the bathrooms had no doors. The lack of proper WASH

facilities meant boys were vulnerable to disease.

- She discussed the issue of gender-based inequity and said this was a big challenge to WASH. She articulated that improving WASH for women and girls creates the opportunity for them to be partners in implementing the Global Goals. She made the link that WASH interventions designed and run with the inclusion of women are the most sustainable, and women will be able to play a broader role in community if relieved of the burdens created by lack of access to WASH.
- The Princess also spoke about WASH in fragile and conflict areas, bringing in humanitarian work streams. In these areas facilities are often neglected, with women and children most affected. She spoke about *Every Woman, Every Child* – a global movement addressing the major health challenges facing women and children, including access to clean water and private places to defecate as a human right. She stressed the importance of integrating WASH into development and humanitarian work.

Key points from the panel:

Dr Maria Neira, Director of the Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health, WHO

“I feel satisfaction and hope, to see such strong women behind WASH,” said Dr Neira. In her early career as a doctor she went to work in a refugee camp, where she soon realised that she “needed to concentrate on health not just disease”.

- Dr Neira stressed the importance of access to clean water as the principal of public health, and said there is a need to go back to basics; without have the basics of WASH at health facilities you cannot do any good as a doctor.
- Dr Neira highlighted a WHO study which demonstrated that in 54 countries in sub-Saharan Africa almost 40% of health facilities didn’t have access to water.
- She asked: “How can we talk about the Global Goals if we don’t have access to safe water?” and reinforced the need to make the relationship between health and WASH clear.

Mr Estifanos Mengistu, WASH in Health Facility Advisor, International Medical Corps

- Mr Mengistu spoke about WASH in health-care settings. He said it

is critical both emergency and development settings. In emergency settings it is key for the safety of health workers, the quality of care they provide and in their training.

- Mr Mengistu said a well trained and well managed health workforce was crucial to improving WASH, and there was a need for integration of sectors to bring about stronger health systems.
- He concluded that WASH is critical in health facilities, and is important to enable integration and coordination for stronger health systems. WASH is needed in health systems, as are well trained and well supported health workers.

Philomena Okello, Senior Nursing Officer, Lira Referral Hospital, Uganda

- Ms Okello described how WASH stopped being siloed in her community. She said that she had seen more change in past two years than in the previous 40.
- She stressed that clean water is essential to the health of a new mother, and that every human being needs a clean place to go to the toilet.
- Ms Okello set out several examples she had witnessed in her work as a midwife and nurse, including visiting nine health

facilities which did not have running water and meeting mothers who had to walk a mile to collect water.

- She also described the improvements she has seen in the past two years, including that all health facilities her district are working to ensure WASH access. This rapid improvement demonstrates that it is possible to reach everyone everywhere. Ms Okello stressed that people should know that they have a right to WASH, and should be encouraged to demand that right. She urged the audience to go to citizenpost.org. “It is not just our right to be heard, but it’s our right that they listen to us, involve us. It is the only way to have sustainable change,” she said.

Ms Asha Varghese, Director of the Global Health Portfolio, GE Foundation

- In 2004 the GE Foundation launched Developing Health Globally (DHG), a programme aiming to improve health-care delivery for some of the world’s most vulnerable populations. DHG focusses on strengthening health systems and maternal and child health.
- Ms Varghese said that in this programme the GE Foundation quickly realised that equipment

alone was not going to solve the problem. Capacity building and clinical training coupled with water, power and basic infrastructure are needed.

- She stated that an integrated approach from government, academia, civil society and the private sector is vital. She said it is necessary to train leaders in health facilities, and in technology maintenance.
- Ms Varghese said that, to sustain WASH activities, and build on the momentum behind it, we need to increase awareness at community level, to generate revenue to maintain the upkeep of technology and encourage to leaders to drive skill development.

Mr Atsuyuki Oike, Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan

- Mr Atsuyuki Oike thanked President Sirleaf, Princess Sarah Zeid, the panellists and organisers for their time and audience.

- He noted that this week encapsulated what the Agenda 2030 would look like in general – one of many competing priorities. He also noted that climate change would play a critical role throughout the next 15 years, much more so than during the MDG era, and would show up heavily in Goal 6.
- Mr Oike said that one of the greatest challenges of the Global Goals is fragmentation and that to overcome this we need global partnerships of the sort that can bring together sectors that do different things such as WASH and health.
- He acknowledged that there is money being put into WASH and Japan spends a significant amount, but we must put greater focus on spending efficiently and sustainably. We must also match needs to money available, and be smarter about where it is spent.
- Finally, Mr Oike noted that the event had given him much to think about ahead of the G7, which Japan will host in 2016.

Read a roundup of tweets from the session at bit.ly/washandhealthevent

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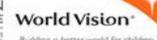
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Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia.



Her Royal highness Princess Sarah Zeid of Jordan.



Sarina Prabasi, CEO WaterAid America.



Dr Christine Sow, President and Executive Director, Global Health Council



Dr Maria Neira, Director of the Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health, WHO.



Philomena Okello, midwife with White Ribbon Alliance.



The panel: (L-R) Philomena Okello, Asha Varghese, Dr Maria Neira, Dr Christine Sow.



Atsuyuki Oike, Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan.