

WASH, children and young people

Safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are crucial for all, but inadequate WASH has a particular impact on children and young people. In addition to the direct effect on health, there are wider impacts on education and wellbeing, for girls in particular. The importance of increasing investment in WASH, and improving coordination across sectors, to secure a better future for the next generation, is clear.

WASH and the early years

Diarrhoea is the third biggest killer of children under five in Sub-Saharan Africa¹ and a leading cause of child deaths globally. Every day, almost 2,000 children die from diarrhoeal illnesses that are entirely preventable. Nine out of ten cases of diarrhoea can be prevented by safe water, sanitation and hygiene, which are ranked among the most cost effective health interventions by the World Bank².

Approximately a third of all child deaths are attributable to nutrition-related factors, such as low birth weight, stunting (low height for age) and severe wasting, all of which are closely linked to a lack of access to water and particularly sanitation and hygiene. Many children in developing regions suffer stunting, which reflects chronic nutritional deficiencies, and repeated ingestion of animal and human faeces due to poor waste management and a lack of sanitation. According to the World Bank, open defecation accounts for most or all excess child stunting in India³.

The failure to achieve the MDG sanitation target has held back progress on associated MDG targets relating to child and maternal health, and inadequate WASH continues to constrain early years development and the subsequent life chances of young people born in developing countries.

WASH and children's welfare and development

The burden of inadequate WASH at home

In communities without access to improved water sources, two thirds of the burden of collecting water falls on women and girls⁴. From a young age, children participate in the collection and transportation of water, which reduces the time available for developing their learning potential. In the long-term, carrying heavy water containers can also result in injury to the spinal column⁵.

Unimproved water and sanitation facilities are often unsafe to use, and young children are more vulnerable to accidental injury and health risks. Children's security is often put at risk when they travel long distances to collect water or find somewhere to

defecate, and young girls in particular face a heightened risk of harassment and violence⁶.

Inadequate WASH in schools and the importance of ‘change agents’

The child’s right to water, sanitation and hygiene remains a major challenge for policy-makers, school administrators and communities in many countries. Although steady progress has been made to safeguard the wellbeing of schoolchildren, almost half of all schools in low-income countries still lack water and sanitation facilities⁷.

Providing adequate WASH in schools significantly reduces preventable diseases; can increase student attendance and learning achievement; and helps promote dignity, inclusion and equity, establishing an important foundation for ongoing development and economic growth⁸. Adolescent girls in particular are disinclined to use school toilets that are dirty or lack privacy, especially when they are menstruating, and this affects their attendance. Because menstruation is a taboo subject in many culture and has negative connotations attached to traditional beliefs, effective education programmes need to be supported by fully accessible, child-friendly and gender-segregated WASH facilities. Without them, the resulting stigma, learned at a young age, exacerbates the challenges of managing menstrual hygiene in societies where there are no safe, private toilets with water⁹.

Creating an environment that positively reinforces the benefits of WASH to young people helps to create ‘behaviour change agents’ who can encourage and advocate the introduction and implementation of WASH services where they otherwise would not exist¹⁰.

WASH and opportunities for young adults

In the world’s poorest countries, young adults face significant challenges in finding decent work and housing, as well as accessing services that protect their welfare and support their participation in society and the economy.

Unemployment disproportionately affects young adults, forcing many to live in poor quality housing. Lack of access to basic utilities like electricity, water and sanitation is particularly acute in informal settlements and slums, which in turn has an impact on the health and welfare of the population.

Poor living conditions often put young people at a disadvantage in finding jobs, which can in turn force them to accept lower pay and poor working conditions. Inadequate WASH in the workplace (including a lack of facilities for handwashing and menstrual hygiene management) not only undermines the health and productivity of the workforce but further disadvantages young women.

Addressing the sexual and reproductive health needs of young adults is increasingly being recognised as a development priority. It is crucial that they have access to healthcare facilities that provide a safe, sanitary and hygienic environment for receiving advice and treatment once they become sexually active.

Tackling inequalities in young people's access to WASH at home and in schools, health facilities and work places is key to efforts to improve their life chances and harness their full potential.

WASH and youth in the post-2015 framework

WaterAid's vision is of a world where everyone, everywhere has access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030. We are calling for an integrated approach to delivering this vision. With specific reference to youth, this would include the following:

- Integrating WASH into health and nutrition goals, to ensure that the third largest killer of children in Sub-Saharan Africa (diarrhoea)¹¹ is tackled.
- Ensure that any goals aimed at improving levels of participation in education include measures of WASH in schools as an indicator.
- Ensuring that goals and targets for WASH go beyond the household and include schools, health facilities and workplaces.
- Ensure that all goals and targets include an explicit focus on progressively eliminating inequalities between the general population and disadvantaged groups, including young people.

WaterAid's post-2015 vision

WaterAid's vision for post-2015 is an ambitious new development framework unifying poverty eradication and sustainable development objectives, supported by a renewed global partnership ensuring effective resource mobilisation and mutual accountability for progress achieved. To ensure that everyone, everywhere has access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) the framework should:

1. Include a dedicated goal on water and sanitation and set ambitious targets to achieve universal access to WASH by 2030 that prioritise the following¹²:
 - No-one practises open defecation.
 - Everyone has safe water, sanitation and hygiene at home.
 - All schools and health facilities have safe water, sanitation and hygiene.
 - Water, sanitation and hygiene are sustainable and inequalities in access have been progressively eliminated.

2. Recognise that universal access to WASH is an essential component of an integrated approach to tackling poverty, hunger, ill-health and inequality.
3. Recognise that achieving and sustaining universal access to WASH depends on establishing accountable systems for equitable and sustainable management of water resources.

Endnotes

¹ Child Health Epidemiology Reference Group (CHERG) 2012

² Jamison D T et al (eds) (2006, 2nd ed) *Disease control priorities in developing countries*, chapter 41. OUP and the World Bank

³ Spears D (2012) *How much international variation in child height can sanitation explain?* (Working paper)

⁴ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2013) *Progress on drinking-water and sanitation, 2013 update*

⁵ Dufaut A (1988) Women carrying water: How it affects their health, *Waterlines*, vol 6, no 3, pp23-25

⁶ Amnesty International (2012) *Risking rape to reach a toilet. Women's experiences in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya*. Available at: www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR32/006/2010/en/6eab2ee6-6d6c-4abd-b77c-38cfc7621635/afr320062010en.pdf

⁷ UNICEF (2011) *Water, sanitation and hygiene annual report*

⁸ UNICEF (2012) *Raising even more clean hands: Advancing health, learning and equity through WASH in schools*, p7. Available at: www.unicef.org/wash/schools/files/Raising_Even_More_Clean_Hands_Web_17_October_2012%281%29.pdf

⁹ Fisher J (2006) *For her it's the big issue – Putting women at the centre of water supply, sanitation and hygiene*. WSSCC and WEDC

¹⁰ UNICEF (2012) *Raising even more clean hands: Advancing health, learning and equity through WASH in schools*, p7. Available at: www.unicef.org/wash/schools/files/Raising_Even_More_Clean_Hands_Web_17_October_2012%281%29.pdf

¹¹ Child Health Epidemiology Reference Group (CHERG) 2012

¹² WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme shared vision for progressive realisation of the human right to water and sanitation. See www.wssinfo.org/post-2015-monitoring/overview/ for full technical proposals for post-2015 WASH targets and indicators.