

WaterAid Statement

Agenda item 17. Public health emergencies: preparedness and response

Chair and honorable delegates,

A coordinated and effective response to public health emergencies - including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and previous Ebola outbreaks - requires significant scaling up of the most fundamental pillars of public health: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Yet, 3 billion are unable to wash their hands with soap and water at home, while 1 in 3 healthcare facilities globally do not have access to handwashing facilities. Since women make up 70% of the healthcare workforce, and are the main users of healthcare, they are disproportionately affected by poor WASH in healthcare facilities.

As indicated by the recent report of the IPPPR and the report of the Review Committee on the Functioning of the International Health Regulations, multi-sectoral collaboration, especially engaging stakeholders beyond the health sector, is urgently needed to strengthen preparedness. At the same time, implementing public health measures at scale is paramount to addressing the current pandemic. WASH, and particularly handwashing, are a first line of defense. Expanding access to WASH in households and public spaces, especially healthcare facilities, is therefore essential to build resilience to future health threats including the 'silent pandemic' of anti-microbial resistance, to ensure patient and health worker safety, to improve gender equality, and is key to delivering quality healthcare as fundamental components of strong health systems in pursuit of universal health coverage.

We call on Member States, the WHO and partners to:

1. Prioritise WASH in the ongoing global response to COVID-19 (17.1), in the implementation of the International Health Regulations (17.3), and in the development of the proposed new international treaty on pandemic preparedness and response.
2. Ensure adequate funding commitments accompany this prioritisation, including to strengthen coordination across WASH and health sectors, improve monitoring and data on WASH and WASH in healthcare facilities, and strengthen long-term sustainable WASH infrastructure and associated behaviour change interventions.

Thank you.