

# South Asia Regional Strategy

2016–20



WaterAid/ Mani Karmacharya



Ramsha, 13, during a WASH club meeting in Government Middle School Kalarwala in the village of Kalarwala, District Muzaffargarh, Province Punjab, Pakistan.

# Introduction

WaterAid’s work in South Asia incorporates country programmes in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, and, from 2017, Myanmar; regional initiatives involving member countries of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC); and regional fora and institutions.

Our mandate in South Asia is to contribute to the realisation of our vision of a world where everyone, everywhere has access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) by 2030. The WaterAid Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan country strategies<sup>i</sup> set out the direction and priorities the countries will pursue in order to achieve WaterAid’s mission – to transform the lives of poor and marginalised people by improving access to safe WASH.

This regional strategy seeks to provide greater impetus by focusing collective energy and action on four strategic priorities. It seeks to enhance the enabling environment for accelerating progress on national-level WASH across the five countries where WaterAid works, and contribute to extending our influence to the other four countries in the South Asia region, and more widely across the Asia Pacific region, in collaboration with WaterAid Australia. It also seeks to influence policy and practice of regional stakeholders and institutions through advocacy, campaigns, innovation and knowledge sharing, and to further contribute to WaterAid’s global influencing agenda.

Thematic working groups comprising staff from the country programmes and the regional team developed the strategic priorities and will be responsible for steering their delivery. Building on country programme strategic objectives, this strategy will further strengthen the individual teams’ efforts, making the combined effect greater than the sum of its parts.

<sup>i</sup> WaterAid Myanmar was established in 2016 and will develop its country strategy after an inception phase.

# 1. South Asia Context Analysis

Over the past decade, there have been noteworthy gains in WASH service access, especially in urban areas across the South Asia region. As a clearly stated priority in all eight SAARC countries, WASH has become part of the political and development agenda all the way to the grassroots. People’s increasing awareness of their rights to water and sanitation and a growing need continue to multiply demand for better WASH services, even in remote communities.

In 2015, it is estimated that more than half of the SAARC region’s citizens – approximately 1.1 billion people – lived without access to either water or sanitation.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, more than 40% of the 2.3 billion people without access to a decent toilet and 25% of the 844 million without access to clean drinking water live in the WaterAid South Asia region.<sup>2</sup>

**In 2015, more than 50% of the SAARC region’s citizens lived without access to either water or sanitation**



**More than 40% of 2.3 billion people are without access to a decent toilet**



**without access to clean drinking water live in the WaterAid South Asia region**



Mobile toilet on the street, at a technical signal crossing, supported by WaterAid, in Kollanpur, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Table 1  
**Key indicators for WASH and associated mortality and morbidity in SAARC countries (plus Myanmar).**

Country	Per cent population with access to 'at least basic' sanitation <sup>2</sup>	Per cent population with access to 'at least basic' water <sup>2</sup>	Under-five mortality rate <sup>3</sup>	Under-five WASH-related diarrhoeal disease deaths <sup>4</sup>	Cholera cases reported (2015, unless stated otherwise) <sup>5</sup>
<b>Afghanistan</b>	39	63	91	3,560	58,100
<b>Bangladesh</b>	47	97	38	2,200	8
<b>Bhutan</b>	62.9	98	33	16	19 (1998)
<b>India</b>	44	88	47	60,700	889
<b>Maldives</b>	96	98	9	0	No data
<b>Myanmar</b>	65	68	50	700	100
<b>Nepal</b>	46	88	36	700	80
<b>Pakistan</b>	58	89	81	19,500	1,220 (2014)
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	94	92	10	10	9

**In South Asian countries the people with least WASH access are those who live below the poverty line of US\$ 2 per day. The people in WASH poverty include those who are socially, economically, geographically and technically hard to reach.**

All South Asian countries have signed up to relevant human rights conventions and the UN resolution on the human right to water and sanitation, and Bangladesh and Nepal have incorporated this into their constitutions. In India, the Modi Government launched the Clean India campaign – a huge programme aiming to eliminate open defecation. In Pakistan, the Government, UNICEF and WaterAid together have launched a national hygiene behaviour change campaign. Policies and strategies abound and resources are committed. And yet, the evidence shows that South Asia has the largest number of people underserved by WASH services of any region.

In South Asian countries the people with least WASH access are those who live below the poverty line of US\$2 per day. The people in WASH poverty include those who are socially, economically, geographically and technically hard to reach. Women and girls, people with disabilities, minorities, old people, people of certain castes and transgender people face the greatest challenges in accessing their rights and entitlements to water and sanitation.<sup>i</sup>

**Earthquakes, extreme weather, floods, droughts and human activity, including over-abstraction of groundwater and**

**dumping of untreated human and industrial waste in water resources increase the fragility of water and sanitation provision across the region. These challenges increase the investments necessary to achieve universal WASH services.**

Regional stakeholders interviewed for the strategy development acknowledge that regional-level political platforms such as SAARC are hampered by historical geo-political conflicts and relationships between member countries. This makes it difficult to secure accountability for any SAARC-related agreements. Similarly, governments are not held accountable for SACOSAN ministerial commitments.

Nevertheless, these regional political and policy spaces are useful platforms for knowledge sharing among all WASH stakeholders and for encouraging actions among government representatives. WaterAid's regional-level actions need to focus on: approaches that enable effective sharing and promotion of lessons across the sector in all the countries; effective national-level advocacy amplified through regional partnerships, fora and spaces; and effective collaboration with knowledge networks, people's movements, service-delivery agencies and government bodies.

<sup>i</sup> Data cited in this paragraph come from WaterAid Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan country strategies for new strategy period.

# Four Critical Regional Challenges

WaterAid's South Asia Regional Leadership Team has identified four critical areas that are impeding progress to universal WASH access, and require collaborative actions at a regional level.

## 1. Rapid Urbanisation

**About a third of South Asia's population lives in cities and towns, with about 35% of these people living in slums.<sup>6</sup> Urban populations are expected to grow to 50% of the total population in about 35 years, with small towns experiencing the highest growth rates.<sup>7</sup>**

If current trends persist, South Asian towns and cities will see an even bigger crisis in urban sanitation and in solid and liquid waste management than they have now – an estimated 90% of faecal sludge is disposed of, untreated, in water bodies or on land.<sup>8</sup> The impact of an unsanitary environment on public health is beginning to be better understood – recent demographic and health survey data show that open defecation is more strongly correlated with stunting in urban than in rural areas.

**Our work on urban sanitation will build on efforts on urban WASH in the previous strategy period.**

WaterAid, especially in Bangladesh, is becoming known for its work on faecal sludge management (FSM). WaterAid are developing, researching and practising FSM models, for example in Sakhipur, Bangladesh, and are disseminating lessons. We have demonstrated community and public toilet schemes. All four country programmes have made progress.



A general view over Yarpur slum in Patna, Bihar, India

**Recent demographic and health survey data show that open defecation is more strongly correlated with stunting in urban than in rural areas.**

However, we need to deepen our experience and insight on how to engage in town-wide sanitation planning, better identify the stakeholders we need to engage with and develop strategies to ensure government-led processes in towns are inclusive and sustainable. This strategy will address these areas and focus on learning, capacity development, planning, implementation and engagement.

Tapoti Mandol, a female councilor from ward 6, demanded drainage systems to be brought to her area, Paikgacha Municipality, Khulna, Bangladesh, 2014.

**Increased water levels and flooding are also associated with spikes in diarrhoeal rates as environmental contamination becomes more widespread.**

waterlogging, water pollution, saline pollution, changing seasonality, erratic rainfall patterns, increasing temperatures and increased frequency and intensity of extreme disaster events.

**A substantial evidence base links climate change and rising disease burdens, through adverse impacts on water security, sanitation infrastructure and collective behaviour change.**

Climate effects could increase the burden of diarrhoea by up to 10% by 2030 in some regions,<sup>10</sup> and exacerbate rates of malnutrition and stunting.<sup>11</sup> Higher temperatures favour the development of pathogens, and water scarcity negatively affects water quality and the hygiene habits that can prevent diarrhoea. Increased water levels and flooding are also associated with spikes in diarrhoeal rates as environmental contamination becomes more widespread. Projections estimate that 48,000 more children under the age of 15 will die each year from diarrhoeal illness by 2030<sup>12</sup> because of climate change effects.

In 2009–15 our climate change response focused on disaster risk reduction. From 2016 to 2020, we will extend and deepen our efforts towards developing approaches, technologies, capacity and advocacy that will create resilient WASH policies and programmes.

**As the only INGO in the region exclusively focused on WASH, we can already demonstrate innovation and leadership in climate change.** Although the issues surrounding resilient WASH are complex and rapidly evolving, we have a great opportunity to be ambitious and pro-active in promoting resilient WASH in South Asia.

## 2. Climate Change

Evidence shows that water is the primary medium through which climate change influences the global ecosystem and thus the wellbeing of societies. The five South Asian countries where WaterAid works, plus Afghanistan, are categorised as ‘extreme risk’ countries in the 2011 Climate Change Vulnerability Index produced by a global risk advisory firm.<sup>9</sup> These countries face sea level rises, flash floods,

## **Hygiene Behaviour Change**

**The South Asia region has the highest prevalence of stunting. This suggests that the health gains that would be expected from increased access to water and sanitation may not be being realised because of the continuation of poor hygiene behaviours, poor sanitary habits and unsafe water storage.**

Women and girls' rights, wellbeing and dignity are often compromised because of the lack of sanitation and hygiene services that enable them to manage their menstrual periods hygienically. Deeply embedded cultural taboos – along with lack of information on, facilities for and affordable means of menstrual hygiene management – impact on women's access to water and sanitation, education, employment and social activities. These taboos also expose them to threats to their physical safety and personal dignity.

**Lack of focus on hygiene behaviour change in South Asia is a common theme across the region.** Most countries have no main institution accountable for hygiene, and lack national guiding policies or strategies to focus on hygiene behaviour change, with limited coordinated efforts, fragmented approaches and no baselines or targets to direct resources and track progress.

Our regional response will build on the hygiene work of country programmes and the regional team over the past four years, through which we have built relationships with other institutions and made significant contributions to knowledge and advocacy on hygiene behaviour change. We have developed approaches and resources on menstrual hygiene, initiated the first national hygiene baseline study in Bangladesh, and in Nepal partnered with the health sector to pilot the integration of hygiene behaviour change promotion into routine vaccination programmes.

Country strategies show country programmes' intentions to deepen their involvement in hygiene behaviour change at scale and in WASH in Schools programmes, including promotion of handwashing and menstrual hygiene. We



Sawaira, 7, washes her hands at a WaterAid installed WASH facility in her school in the village of Pabuvero, Union Council Chhachhro, District Tharparkar, Pakistan,

WaterAid/ Sibtain Haider

**Lack of focus on hygiene behaviour change in South Asia is a common theme across the region.**

recognise the need to innovate, build our own capacity and knowledge, and share our learning to generate evidence and advocate for what works in hygiene behaviour change in the region.

In collaboration with UNICEF and WHO, we will advocate for integration of hygiene promotion with other sectors – in particular education and health – and ensure targets and indicators are established within Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) plans at regional level to support national processes. The SDGs present an opportunity – achievement of the goals requires integrated approaches.

## 4. Sector Governance

The quality of WASH governance in countries underpins whether the urban sanitation crisis will be addressed; whether preparations for, adaptation to or mitigation of climate change effects are effective; and whether hygiene behaviour change promotion will receive the necessary attention in communities, schools and other institutions.

Weak WASH governance includes: **lack of accountability and transparency of public institutions and programmes; lack of inclusive participation by those unserved, underserved and marginalised in decisions on governments' WASH priorities; weak or non-existent sector reviews and coordination platforms for planning investments and analysing results; fragmented institutions; and few qualified personnel available to work in WASH institutions to deliver and manage sustainable services.** It also means unaffordable services and investments that are skewed by political affiliations and expediency.

Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, 58, working at filtration tank, Kharelthok, Kavre, Nepal.

# 1

## Rapid Urbanisation

# 2

## Climate Change

# 3

## Hygiene Behaviour Change

# 4

## Sector Governance

These four critical challenge areas and their consequences for human indignity, deprivation, suffering, disease and mortality – especially for those marginalised by the prevailing economic, political, social and cultural systems in the region – are the drivers of this regional strategy. They inspire our urgency to focus our energies, talent and resources to work collectively and collaboratively across WaterAid programmes in South Asia, and to seek other regional partners so our combined efforts can hasten progress.

The management review of regional effort on WASH governance in the previous strategy period indicates significant efforts were made; but these have not yet delivered the results we sought. Our new strategy shows more focus on making government-led planning and review processes more inclusive, with participation of under-served and marginalised people, including processes for delivering WASH SDG targets in the region. In addition to advocacy for and engagement with these processes, tracking progress on governments’ and service providers’ commitments, we will collaborate with new and existing fora, networks and coalitions, including WASH and non-WASH stakeholders, to strengthen demands for rights to water and sanitation.

Figure 1 South Asia regional contribution to WaterAid’s Global Strategy

**VISION** **EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE** *has access to*  
**SAFE WATER, SANITATION and HYGIENE BY 2030**

**Equality** **Sustainable Services** **Hygiene** **Integration**

**CONDITIONS of CHANGE**

- LEADERSHIP** prioritising safe water, sanitation and hygiene, with a focus on the rights of the poorest and most marginalised communities.
- ACTIVE COMMUNITIES** calling for their rights to safe water and sanitation and holding their leaders to account, practising good hygiene and helping to maintain services.
- EQUALITY** Governments and service providers fulfilling their duties to all their citizens.
- SUSTAINABILITY** Service providers having the skills, resources and systems necessary to deliver and maintain permanent services.
- INTEGRATION** Key sectors integrating universal access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene into their policies and programmes.

**OUR CONTRIBUTIONS to conditions of change in South Asia will focus on the four critical WASH challenges in the region**

- URBAN SANITATION** City/town-wide planning for faecal sludge management and effective management models for public and community toilets.
- CLIMATE CHANGE AND RESILIENT WASH** Knowledge networking; strengthened capacity on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptations; interventions for improved resilience; policy influence on climate finance.
- HYGIENE INTEGRATED WITH HEALTH AND EDUCATION** Incorporated SDG targets and indicators for hygiene in schools; knowledge catalysis for hygiene behaviour change.
- SECTOR GOVERNANCE** More inclusive and accountable WASH sector planning, financing and monitoring, and strengthened South Asia regional civil society alliance for the right to water and sanitation.

**DELIVERED through**

- Advocacy and campaigns**
- Knowledge management and sharing**
- Capacity development**
- Partnership**
- Innovation**

## 2. Strategic Priorities

### 2.1

#### Urban sanitation, focused on medium, small and emerging towns

We will contribute towards inclusive and sustainable urban sanitation in South Asia, especially for the poorest and excluded people, in growing urban centres. We will focus on ensuring urban governance institutions have the capacity for pro-poor town-wide planning – this is one of the most crucial conditions required for change.

**Working with at least two country programmes in the region, we will focus on two key areas:**

1. Strengthening governance through supporting town-wide inclusive planning and faecal sludge management.
2. Influencing change in policy and practice for delivery of sustainable public and community toilet management models in urban poor areas.

Through coordinated initiatives we will develop country and regional team capacity to engage in improving governance models and inclusive planning – focusing on city-wide urban sanitation services – and position WaterAid as a knowledge leader in the South Asia region on sustainable and pro-poor urban sanitation.

A family sits in the doorway of their home in Safeda Basti, Delhi, India.



Community collecting water  
in Narai Ka Pura village in  
Madhya Pradesh India.

## 2.2

### Climate change and resilient WASH

This strategic priority will extend and deepen our work during the previous strategy on disaster risk reduction. Because climate change and resilient WASH is a complex and extensive issue, and our work in this area relatively new, our focus will be on adaptation, rather than mitigation. The integration of WASH, climate change and resilience is a crucial gap in the WASH sector in South Asia, so this is an opportunity for us to be path-makers. We will need to be ambitious in this rapidly developing area, and pro-active to position ourselves at regional and country levels.

The change we envisage is for vulnerable communities in South Asia to have strengthened WASH services that are more resilient to disasters and the effects of climate change.

#### To contribute to this change we will focus on three main areas:

1. Knowledge networking, so that partners, WaterAid and national stakeholders have a regional hub through which to share learning.
2. Capacity building, with two components:
  - Strengthened capacity of WASH professionals and practitioners to identify, address and act on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation
  - Interventions with improved resilience in which WASH services will function during climatic hazard emergencies and extreme events.
3. Policy influence to strengthen country and regional-level capacities to access climate finance through evidence-based advocacy and influencing.

### 2.3

## Hygiene integrated with health and education

Through intensifying work on hygiene behaviour change we will ensure more people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised, sustainably practise key hygiene behaviours, supported by institutional delivery mechanisms and community responsiveness.

**We will support the establishment of conditions crucial to achieving this change, including:**

- WASH, health and education sectors in South Asia (including WaterAid and its partners) have improved knowledge and capacity on innovative, integrated and scalable approaches to hygiene behaviour change.
- Hygiene behaviour change is recognised as central to realising outcomes within key sectors, and is integrated in their plans and budgets, prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable and the marginalised.
- The most vulnerable and marginalised people secure their right to appropriate sanitation and hygiene services, and are motivated to adopt and promote hygiene behaviours.

**We will seek two main outcomes:**

1. Governments and education authorities in South Asia have incorporated SDG targets and indicators for hygiene (including handwashing and menstrual hygiene management) in schools across relevant plans, policies, standards and information systems.
2. WaterAid is recognised as a knowledge catalyst in South Asia for hygiene behaviour change.

Ramsha, 13, washing hands at the WASH facility in Government Middle School Kalarwala in the village of Kalarwala.



2.4  
**WASH governance**

Our work on WASH governance at the regional level will concentrate on institutional arrangements, sector finance and performance monitoring – three of the five building blocks for sector strengthening, as defined by WaterAid.

Our regional initiatives will promote accountable WASH governance through evidence-based advocacy, with meaningful participation of civil society and under-served and unserved people in poor and marginalised communities. We want to change the formal structures, processes and initiatives of government and service providers to be more inclusive, open to participation and interactions with marginalised people and under-served and unserved poor people and their advocates. We also want governments and service providers to show accountability for the commitments they make on national, regional and global platforms, including those made at the SWA and SACOSAN, and, of course, SDG 6.

**We will seek two main outcomes:**

1. Government-led national and sub-national WASH sector planning, financing and monitoring processes in at least two countries in South Asia are demonstrably more inclusive and accountable, resulting in an increase in poor and marginalised people gaining access to WASH services.

2. Strengthened South Asia regional civil society alliance for right to water and sanitation, involving existing and new networks, raises its collective voice and advocates for inclusive WASH services and accountable government and service providers.

Figure 2  
**Links between regional and country strategy priorities**



# 3. How we will deliver this strategic plan

The following principles will guide specific activities for each strategic priority:

Collective effort of country programmes and the regional team, and through cross-country coordination and shared leadership.

Learning across WaterAid country programmes in the region and other WASH (and related) sector stakeholders in South Asia outside the countries where WaterAid works.

Regional-level or global institutions involved in the WASH sector in South Asia recognise WaterAid's reputation, profile and influence.

These principles are further guided by our understanding of the valued roles we play in the sector, in particular being a:

## PROMOTER

Demonstrating and promoting solutions to the challenges faced by poor and marginalised people in ensuring access to lasting WASH services

## PATH MAKER

Developing and sharing innovative solutions and approaches to realising 'everyone, everywhere by 2030'

## CONNECTOR

Being a bridge between the South Asia region and the rest of WaterAid; as well as wider sectors

To fulfil these roles, and deliver our strategic priorities, we will apply **innovation, knowledge management, capacity development, advocacy and campaigns**, and **partnerships**.

## 3.1 Innovation

**Innovation is essential to address emerging challenges and gaps in the sector, learn from failures, and strengthen our own understanding and effectiveness.** Our regional initiatives will include new and

adapted approaches, and we will enhance learning and reflection through planning, monitoring and evaluation. We will also scan for innovations by others and seek to collaborate with them.

## 3.2 Knowledge Management

**Effective knowledge management will be essential to fulfil our promoting and connecting roles, both internally and externally.** All four strategic priorities incorporate specific knowledge management activities. To underpin this, we will require

improvements in our internal systems, processes and behaviours to advance our methods and support a culture conducive to generating and sharing learning. We will link with existing external platforms such as SUSANA and the SACOSAN Resource Centre.

## 3.3 Advocacy & Campaigns

**Advocacy and campaigning are tools in our human rights-based approach.** At the regional level, we will make our advocacy and campaigning work more effective and systematic through better planning and coordination, on the basis of clear political analysis of stakeholders and allies, opportunities and risks, better definition of the theory of change, and better alignment of our efforts and resources. As we directly advocate WASH sector governance being more inclusive and participatory, so too

will we practise what we preach in how we conduct our advocacy and campaigning. We will be a connector, supporting allies from civil society organisations representative of marginalised and unserved poor communities to work with us on commonly defined advocacy goals. We will achieve this through financing, sharing knowledge, and opening national and regional spaces to them so they can communicate directly with powerful decision-makers and donors.

### 3.4 Capacity Building

**We will assess capacity development needs for WaterAid, partners and sector stakeholders against our strategic priorities and WaterAid's quality programme standards.** Our approaches to capacity development will include: peer support, exchange

and secondment (for example between country programmes); development of training modules, e-learning, and exposure visits; and working with external support agencies and specialist institutions to provide internal and external capacity development.

### 3.5 Partnership

**Our strategic priorities will only bring about lasting change if delivered in partnership with others, including civil society, academic, private sector and government institutions, and regional and global development agencies.** Through this we aim to enhance work at national level, and consolidate and amplify country-level efforts to have influence across the region.

Our strategic priorities will only bring about lasting change if delivered in partnership with others, including civil society, academic, private sector and government institutions, and regional and global development agencies. Through regional partnerships and collaboration, we aim to enhance work at national

level, and consolidate and amplify country-level efforts to have influence across the region. We will continue to strengthen existing partnerships with: national organisations, by involving country programme partners and specialist national institutions in regional initiatives; and regional agencies, including building on our work with UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO), Freshwater Action Network South Asia (FANSA), Water Supply & Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and the Asia Foundation on themes such as sector governance, WASH in Schools, climate change, and hygiene behaviour change. We will also explore new partnerships.

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Children washing hands  
at the Rajkiya Madhya  
Vidyalay, in Dumka,  
Jharkhand, India.





**WaterAid is a registered charity:**

Australia: ABN 99 700 687 141.

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**Cover image:**

Laxmi, 12, with her friends in the school. (L-R) Man Kumari, 12, Laxmi, 12, Amrita, 14, and Minsang, 12, Naamtaar, Makawanpur, Nepal.