

Influence, connections and recognition: WaterAid at the 2018 UN High Level Political Forum

The UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) meets annually in New York to review progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2018 theme addressed 'Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies', and the forum included the first global review of SDG6 (on water and sanitation). A thematic week from 9-13 July addressed SDG6 along with several other 'focus goals' (on energy, cities, sustainable consumption and production, biodiversity, and financing/partnerships), and was followed by a three-day ministerial segment from 16-18 July. This included the presentation by 46 countries of their Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports, updating the international community on national progress achieved towards implementing the SDGs.

At the 2018 HLPF, WaterAid organized **5** high-profile side events; spoke at and/or co-organized **19** public events or sessions; gave **10** media interviews; held **4** bilateral meetings with governments; led **3** civil society advocacy caucus sessions; hosted a dynamic photo **exhibition**; and led an engaging **solidarity walk for water**. Our delegation drew from the leadership of country programmes and federation members, media and policy experts, and advocacy colleagues from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the US.



Why was the 2018 HLPF important for WaterAid?

The HLPF is the primary platform for gauging governments' progress towards the 2030 Agenda and therefore the most meaningful accountability space surrounding the SDGs. The 2018 session's focus on SDG6 offered an especially relevant locus of activity through which to galvanize urgent action on the global WASH crisis, and to convey WaterAid's messaging on achieving access to clean water and sanitation for everyone, everywhere by 2030. Six countries in which WA has a presence chose to present their VNRs in 2018: Australia, Canada, Colombia, Mali, Niger and Senegal. These SDG reviews provided a venue for us to build synergies between the national and global levels, and to articulate ways of framing our work as part of the broad remit of the 2030 Agenda and its mechanisms of accountability.

WaterAid's accomplishments at the 2018 HLPF

1. Established leadership and recognition, conveying depth of expertise and comprehensive presence

In our first major engagement in the HLPF, WaterAid amplified the visibility of WASH perspectives and illustrated how our work in 28 countries relates to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Perspectives from Bangladesh, Colombia, Mozambique, and

Nigeria, and leadership of three members of the international WaterAid federation (the UK, the US, and Sweden) presented tangible, relevant and country-specific content on a range of issues, from menstrual hygiene management (MHM) to data to gender equality to health.

Florencio Marerua, WaterAid Mozambique Country Director, spoke as lead respondent during the HLPF official session examining progress towards SDG6. Florencio drew connections between WASH (sanitation and hygiene in addition to water, which dominated the official discussion), health and gender equality by illustrating how WASH poverty contributes to high rates of maternal and child mortality in Mozambique. (Watch Florencio's [remarks](#) via UN WebTV, at 2:03:16).



During the ministerial segment, Tim Wainwright, Chief Executive of WaterAid UK, intervened in two important spaces, including the UN DESA-organized [VNR labs](#), a new platform bringing together governments presenting their VNR reports with civil society and the UN system to address cross-cutting themes such as Leaving no one behind (the session in which Tim spoke). Tim also took the floor during the SDGs Business Forum, the annual meeting of corporate partners active in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. There, over 600 participants gathered to discuss how greater business action and effective partnerships can help achieve the SDGs. Until Tim's plenary intervention, WASH was mentioned but not prominent on the agenda; Tim's remarks reinforced the importance of access to WASH as a prerequisite for the achievement of many of the other SDGs.

Three other **official speaking slots** were offered to WaterAid representatives throughout the HLPF: a respondent slot in the session on Lessons from the regions, allocated to ChiChi Okoye, WaterAid Nigeria Country Director (who was unfortunately not called on as time allowed for only governments); the NGO slot during the ECOSOC general debate, in which Global Campaigns Director Savio Carvalho issued a rousing, collectively-written three-minute [statement](#); and the ECOSOC session with international trade and financial institutions, which provided an opportunity for Katie Tobin, Advocacy Coordinator, to link the discussion of WASH and other social service provision to systemic questions of economic governance and SDGs financing.



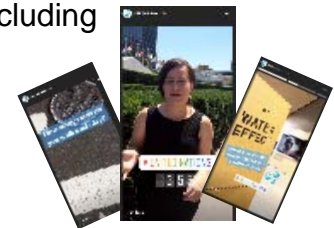
Through the Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) system – our designated entry point into the UN sustainable development processes as a civil society organization – WaterAid contributed significantly to **collective analysis and organizing**. The [statement](#) in response to the Secretary-General's annual report on SDGs progress that we wrote and disseminated just ahead of the HLPF garnered 138 sign-ons from organizations throughout the world including human rights, LGBTQ and indigenous collectives, and was [disseminated](#) (and translated into Russian!) by Public Services International, one of the largest global trade union federations. We planned and led three advocacy sessions of the MGoS, two focusing on collective efforts to



uphold the accountability agenda of the HLPF, and one to engender a new WASH caucus. We also shepherded the process of drafting and disseminating the [final MGoS statement](#), a bold and prescient step on behalf of collective civil society urging governments – the duty-bearers of the 2030 Agenda – to step up urgent and dedicated action towards making the SDGs a reality for all.

Recognition of our work echoed throughout both traditional and social **media**, with pick-up exceeding expectations in both realms. WaterAid was mentioned and/or interviewed in Al Jazeera, the BBC (Radio 4, Focus on Africa and World Service), the Daily Mail, Reuters, Radio France, Televisa, and Voice of America. Among our many media successes were two mentions in the widely-read international relations publication Devex, which cited Lisa Schechtman, Director of Policy and Advocacy at WaterAid America, in an MHM-specific [article](#) and in their overall [recap of the HLPF](#).

We also channelled our HLPF content through social media, including our first use of Instagram Stories to provide regular updates, news and behind the scenes content from the UN. Advocacy and Campaigns Officer Maisie-Rose Byrne took charge of this platform, creating a [Story](#) that had over 18,000 views!



2. Cemented our influence and built political momentum for WASH

We influenced the debate at the UN through our own content and through the formal statements of our advocacy targets, focusing on:

- a) Highlighting the WASH crisis
- b) Making WASH central to the sustainable development conversation, to build momentum for action and financing
- c) Acknowledging the key role of SDG6 as an enabler for the 2030 Agenda, specifically for goals 10 (reducing inequalities), 5 (gender equality), 3 (health), and 2 (nutrition).

We projected this messaging throughout the HLPF, providing a much-needed ‘reality check’ that grounded the sustainable development discussion in our sectoral expertise and the range of WaterAid national contexts present.

Our **exhibition *The Water Effect***, on which we partnered with Water.org, featured



dynamic photographs from our work in the field, embroidered by Mexican artist Victoria Villasana. We co-hosted a launch reception on the first day of the HLPF with Water.org, the H&M Foundation (which sponsored the exhibition), and the Permanent Mission of Sweden. The reception, featuring WaterAid Sweden CEO Cecilia Chatterjee-Martinsen as dynamic moderator and Behailu Shiferaw, Voices from the Field

– WaterAid Ethiopia reinforcing the connection to the country programmes by sharing the narrative behind his photo in the exhibition, made for a truly inspiring kick-off to the HLPF while conveying the importance of the Water Effect in changing lives for the better.

We partnered with the Government of Nigeria to host, at the Nigerian mission to the UN, an informal **breakfast dialogue on Nigeria’s recently-declared federal state of emergency on WASH**. There, ChiChi Okoye encouraged the federal government to comprehensively implement their new national WASH action plan and undertake concerted efforts in funding, stakeholder engagement, enabling collective monitoring, and addressing the root causes of conflict and displacement to ensure Nigeria achieves SDG6 by 2030. The breakfast featured Engr. Suleiman Adamu, Honourable Minister of Water Resources, and Princess Adejoke Orelope-Adefulire, Senior Special Assistant to the President on the SDGs, sharing assessments of Nigeria’s challenges and potential ways forward.

WaterAid representatives **spoke at and/or co-sponsored 19 events** (in addition to the 5 on which we led), where we shared our perspectives and examples from our work. Manuela Pinilla, WaterAid Colombia Country Director, was one of the panelists at Women Deliver’s high-level breakfast on partnerships for the SDGs; Savio Carvalho made the links between WASH and data at UNICEF’s evaluation event; ChiChi Okoye called out the “masculinized” nature of the WASH sector during her remarks at an event on ‘Leave No Woman Behind’; and Katie Tobin engaged with Asia Dalit Rights Forum at a discussion on the caste-based discrimination and achieving SDG6 in India and beyond.



3. Created and strengthened connections with WASH allies and outside the sector

While we influenced the tenor of the conversation at the HLPF and laid the groundwork for subsequent collaboration with governments, corporations and civil society, we also strengthened and perhaps created new WASH champions and allies, through partnering on side events, informal networking, and bilateral meetings between WA Country Directors/CEOs and their government missions at the UN in New York.

Our flagship **side event on SDG6 and inequalities** featured perspectives from governments (Bolivia, Canada, Mozambique, Nepal) from four world regions framing WASH access as both a marker of inequality and a lever to reduce inequalities within and among countries (SDG10). For this event, we partnered with Center for Economic and Social Rights, a human rights organization that does profound and far-reaching work on the 2030 Agenda, accountability and its human rights interlinkages. Working with them and the Movement for Community-led Development exemplified our intention to ‘break through the WASH bubble’ and ally ourselves with likeminded groups outside our sector, which expands our audience and broadens the political support for WASH in the sustainable development arena. The event, on which we also worked closely with WSSCC, garnered approximately 100 participants despite being offsite and during the busy thematic week of the HLPF.



We co-organized our event on a **rights-based approach to MHM** with the European Union, International Women’s Health Coalition and the Permanent Mission of Nepal. The event forged connections between MHM and sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, and legislative efforts to end domestic violence, in a standing-room-only conference room at the EU delegation offices.



Our side event **Driving gains in health and nutrition through WASH** showcased WaterAid’s leadership on WASH and health, while strengthening our relationships with the World Bank, the Scaling Up Nutrition movement, Sanitation and Water for All, UNICEF, several influential CSOs, and the governments of France, Mali, Madagascar and Zambia. This engagement also provided a powerful link to our work around the World Health Assembly and the cholera resolution spearheaded there by Zambia and helped to frame our UN engagement as a coherent whole encompassing several policy contexts and thematic strands.

We forged strong connections with existing and new **corporate partners**, through



several engagements during the second week of the HLPF, where business and industry joined the discussions to demonstrate their commitments to SDGs delivery. Over 40 participants attended the reception we co-hosted with Diageo to debate the role of the private sector in achieving SDGs. This provided a conducive and informal setting for constructive discussions on the role and

responsibilities of the private sector in the sustainable development arena. Through our membership in the WASH4Work coalition, we also co-convened a breakfast briefing on 17 July on Strengthening the business case for water, sanitation and hygiene, where we soft-launched our new [publication](#).

Reflections on our engagement and where this takes us

WaterAid’s HLPF engagement in 2018 solidified our connections with new and existing partners: governments, civil society, our fellow WASH actors, and corporate sector. It also clarified the work ahead for us in this UN arena. Cecilia Chatterjee-Martinsen wrote in her reflections after the opening day of HLPF 2018,

There’s no doubt in my mind what the main message for the coming week will be: time is running out to make the SDGs meaningful. Governments must understand that they are placing millions of lives at stake if they do not commit more financial resources and focus to the Goals, and it’s our job to pile the pressure on.

Looking towards the 2019 HLPF and, more broadly, to infuse the international arena with meaningful accountability for the 2030 Agenda and its commitments, WaterAid will continue to advocate for increased political momentum to address the WASH crisis. Working with our allies, we will keep pushing our messaging on SDG6 as an enabler for the 2030 Agenda and the fulfilment of the human rights to water and sanitation, throughout sustainable development discussions at the UN and beyond.

Annex. Summaries of WaterAid events

This section includes detailed recaps of three events we co-convened: I. Reducing inequalities through urgent action on WASH: SDG 6 as an enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda for all; II. Driving gains in health and nutrition through water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); III. A rights-based approach to menstrual hygiene management: Integrating water, sanitation, health, and gender equality to achieve the SDGs.

I. Reducing inequalities through urgent action on WASH: SDG 6 as an enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda for all, 10 July

Co-organisers: Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, Center for Economic and Social Rights, Movement for Community-led Development, and the Permanent Missions of Bolivia, Canada, Mozambique and Nepal to the United Nations

“There is a correlation between lack of voice... and lack of access to WASH.” Our lead event on inequalities set out from the start that deprivation of rights to water and sanitation is both a cause of inequality and a solution to it, with Savio Carvalho, Global Campaigns Director at WaterAid calling for governments to use a human rights lens and address the fact that they are far off achieving the targets of the 2030 Agenda.

H.E. Mr. Durga Prasad Bhattarai, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Nepal to the UN, built on this opening by giving examples of how the Nepali government have tried to redress this balance by focusing on creating open defecation free (ODF) districts to ensure that all members of society have access to sanitation. He called for richer countries to scale up their infrastructure, financial and innovative commitments and hailed HLPF as an opportunity for key actors to come together and accelerate action on WASH.



Kate Donald from the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) facilitated a lively panel discussion, where the importance of governments backing up their commitments with strong policies and financial plans was emphasised. Rolf Luyendijk from WSSCC presented additional examples from Nepal and introduced the importance of governments committing to issues beyond the remit of the SDGs. He highlighted menstrual hygiene management (MHM) as an important issue not captured in the current targets, but an important indicator of whether we are reaching the furthest left behind. Veronica Cordova Soria, Deputy Permanent Representative of Bolivia to the UN, shared that since the Bolivian government increased WASH investment by 86% in 2005, the gap between rich and poor has been reduced by two-thirds, a clear example of how political commitment and investment in WASH has direct impact on inequalities.



The panel continued to emphasize how insufficient access to WASH further extends the inequalities faced by women and girls, including on an international basis through Canada’s feminist international assistance policy. Candace Holt from Global Affairs Canada explained that WASH is a key aspect of this, which she illustrated by highlighting the Wins for Girls programme which has launched in ten countries and focuses specifically on providing better WASH facilities for girls in schools. Candace explained that Canada are currently working on a national policy to align with their international work, saying that it is impossible for Canada to make strong international commitments “without addressing the vast inequalities that still exist within our own country,” explicitly citing indigenous communities. Mahinour El-Badrawi from CESR introduced the theme of accountability and measurement, citing the new [ESPI tool](#) for collaborative monitoring and accountability in Egypt and explaining how the mixture of fact-based and analytical indicators can help delineate and clarify existing extreme inequalities.

Florencio Marerua, Director of WaterAid Mozambique focused on the link between WASH and gender by highlighting that women “are the workhorses of the economy but reap none of the rewards,” with their financial reliance on men exposing them to domestic violence and minimal protection. Florencio gave insight into WaterAid’s work with the Mozambique government and how different ministries and partners are coming together to ensure school programmes encompass construction and education, but ultimately called for wider society interventions to ensure gender-sensitive WASH facilities, including MHM, are embedded into the culture.

During the discussion period, Carlos da Costa, Minister Counsellor at Mozambique’s mission to the UN, reinforced his country’s commitment to WASH action and expressed their appreciation for Florencio sharing the Mozambican experience in this space. A representative from the Dhaka water supply authority shared the efforts of the Bangladesh government to provide access to water for populations living in slums, as well as the lessons sharing they are undertaking with cities in neighbouring India and Nepal.

The event concluded with a call to action from Katie Tobin, WaterAid to use the UN space as an opportunity to speak up as civil society and push governments to make greater connections between WASH and other issues of inequalities. She called for greater policy coherence, financing and commitment to a rights-based approach to WASH, sentiments echoed by Kate Donald who underlined again how WASH access is intrinsically linked to inequalities and requires actors from all areas of specialties to work together to achieve the SDGs.



II. Driving gains in health and nutrition through water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), 10 July

Co-organisers: Action Against Hunger, French Water Partnership, Global Taskforce on Cholera Control, Save the Children, SUN, SWA, UNICEF, WaterAid, WHO, World Bank

On 10 July 2018, a side event at the HLPF was convened by Action Against Hunger, WaterAid and partners, with the Governments of France, Madagascar, Mali and Zambia. The focus of the meeting was to discuss how to better coordinate and integrate health and nutrition with water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) to maximize outcomes across multiple SDGs. The session highlighted the role that health and nutrition outcomes play as proxy measures for sustainable and equitable access to WASH, and discussed some of the challenges to cross-sectoral working and ways forward including how to prioritize action.



The session opened with Dr Jurgis Sapijanskas from the Government of France who described the critical importance of strengthening interactions across the SDGs, particularly since WASH underpins multiple SDGs including health, malnutrition and agriculture. He described the Government’s target to reach 0.53% of GNI to ODA in the coming years, and strong commitment to WASH as outlined in a new WASH strategy.

Part 1: The case for targeting WASH investments towards public health objectives

The WHO’s cholera lead, Dr Dominique Legros presented new findings which show that cholera hotspots in sub-Saharan Africa account for only 4% of the total population of the continent. A map of cholera is essentially a map of poverty and marginalization, representing the communities that are left furthest behind. Using cholera data to prioritize these geographical areas with improvements in WASH will have a substantial impact on not only cholera prevalence and mortality, but will also yield broader benefits on health, social and economic development, while contributing to reducing inequalities.

Dr Luis Andres, lead economist from the World Bank presented findings from the World Bank’s WASH Poverty Diagnosis, highlighting how available data can be better used to prioritize and inform investment decisions in WASH, including how to reduce spatial inequalities. Dr Andres shared three key messages needed to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the SDGs, including:

- Coordination of investments and interventions needed across sectors to improve human development outcomes;
- Future investments better targeted to reach the poor and efficiently allocated, given that most countries have limited fiscal space;
- A better understanding of the broader governance context within which WASH services are delivered in order to reduce gaps between policy and implementation.

Part 2: Country Experiences from Madagascar, Mali and Zambia

Government representatives from Madagascar, Mali and Zambia shared successes and challenges to cross-sectoral working through drawing on various examples.

Dr Andrew Silumesii, Director of Public Health and Research from the Ministry of Health in Zambia, shared experience of integration of health and WASH interventions during the recent cholera outbreak in Lusaka, and how Zambia is seeking to strengthen coordination of national development planning over the longer term. Lessons shared include:

- The importance of high level political leadership – the President appointed a committee of ministers from various sectors of government (WASH, health, education) to respond to the cholera outbreak, which was critical to bringing all sectors and stakeholders together;
- Zambia has adopted a new approach to national development planning, from planning in siloes, to an integrated approach by grouping sectors into clusters according to pillars of development. For example, the human development pillar brings together health, education and WASH into one cluster to plan jointly;
- Cabinet approved a health in all policies, which means all sectors need to take into account policies which impact on health;
- Coordination platforms at national, provincial and district level are essential for joint planning to facilitate greater synergy between the sectors.

The National Coordinator of the National Nutrition Office in Madagascar, and SUN Government Focal Point, Mr Ambinintsoa Raveloharison shared his experience of embedding WASH as a key priority in the 3rd phase of the National Nutrition Action Plan. He shared how different partners from nutrition and WASH sector have been involved in developing the plan, but challenge remain is how the plan is implemented including ensuring sufficient budget for planned activities. Political instability and upcoming elections in Madagascar also pose significant challenges to ensuring continued political leadership and support from across government.



Mr Modibo Tiemoko Traore, Director of Multilateral Cooperation in Mali outlined the challenges associated with operationalizing political level commitments to integration across health, nutrition and WASH. He described how decentralization is critical to the process of coordination across sectors, and this should begin at the local and commune level involving all relevant stakeholders and led by local Government. He stressed the importance of this coordination through developing and strengthening institutional platforms.

Part 3: Multi-stakeholder partnerships

Finally, multi-stakeholder partners including Catarina de Albuquerque from SWA, Tabalaba Boureima, CN-CIEPA WASH civil society platform from Mali, and Eric Ostern from Unilever shared their perspectives on how different partners are contributing to this agenda. Collaborating with multiple partners, whether civil society, private or public sectors requires setting clear objectives and expected results at the beginning, being transparent on these objectives and motivations, allowing sufficient time to plan and implement activities, and utilizing everyone's skills and expertise.

Summary and recommendations:

In closing the session, moderator Gerda Verburg, coordinator of the SUN Movement summarized the discussion and key lessons on driving and delivering cross-sectoral integration in these broad categories:

- The importance of high level political commitment, ideally from the highest level of government and not owned by one ministry alone;

- Involvement and ownership at the local level and taking a bottom-up approach, and geographical conversion as a first step;
- Formation of new and innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships including with the private sector, with clear and transparent objectives and responsibilities that make best use of everyone’s skills and capacity;
- To ensure the mechanisms are in place to enable working together including joint data systems that are accessible and open to all, and institutional coordination platforms at all levels of government.
- Various toolkits on integration and multi-stakeholder collaborations exist: [UNICEF Nutrition-WASH](#); [ACF nutrition-WASH manual](#); [Inter-sector Toolkit](#); [Cholera Roadmap](#).

A closing recommendation to UN-DESA emphasized that there should be a focus on reviewing and measuring synergies across the SDGs, and not simply reviewing progress across a number of goals in isolation.

III. A rights-based approach to menstrual hygiene management: Integrating water, sanitation, health, and gender equality to achieve the SDGs, 12 July

Co-organisers: International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC), the Permanent Mission of Nepal to the UN, and the European Union (host).



Access to WASH is central to proper menstrual hygiene management, as evidenced by this side event which explored the complex realities and solutions in Colombia, Kenya, and Nepal. The discussion highlighted that menstrual health is intrinsically linked to achieving targets across the SDGs, particularly those related to education—including comprehensive sexual education—gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, child marriage, sustainable consumption, and economic opportunity, among others.

Lisa Schechtman, Director of Policy and Advocacy, WaterAid America, opened the event by sharing that lack of access to proper facilities, sanitary products, and traditions that segregate girls during menstruation leads to a sharp decrease in school attendance, citing that girls in India are estimated to miss up to 20 percent of the school year due to their periods. Addressing these issues requires an expansion of MHM from being addressed as a SDG 6 issue (where it is not actually an indicator), to being integrated into the agendas of SDG 4 and 5.

Chantal Marijnissen, Head, Unit for Environment, Natural Resources, Water, DG International Cooperation and Development, European Commission raised the importance of classifying MHM as a human rights issue. By raising examples of the cultural implications of menstruation, Chantal emphasized its clear link with girls’ and women’s future development and socioeconomic opportunities. She claimed that we cannot just measure success by the number of girls who have access to services, but rather in societies’ “openness to discuss this topic, women’s participation in decision-making and more gender equality,” thus underlining the interlinkages across the 2030 Agenda.

Members of the panel presented multiple examples to highlight that even though millions of women are menstruating every day, the topic remains shrouded in silence and taboos. Women and girls lack dedicated, integrated services and information to menstruate in dignity, obstructed not only by lacking infrastructure—including the fact that one in three women live without a decent toilet—but also deeper challenges of gender norms, myths, and stigma. A recent survey conducted by IWHC and the period-tracker app Clue found that in some countries, close of half of respondents felt they hadn’t received sufficient information or education about starting their period.



Lisa Schechtman shared that in India, 70 percent of girls do not know what is occurring when they began their first menstrual cycle. This lack of information perpetuates stigma and leads to violence

against women as bleeding is often viewed as a sign of sexual activity, a taboo for unmarried girls and women. Access to proper facilities, sanitary products, and traditions that segregate girls during menstruation leads to a sharp decrease in school attendance, with girls missing up to 20 percent of the school year due to their periods. Rural communities and indigenous women are disproportionately impacted by the lack of information, proper WASH facilities, and menstrual supplies.

Nirmal Raj Kafle, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Nepal to the UN illustrated a powerful example of how the government is committed to empowering women and girls, explaining that Nepal's constitution now includes violence against women as a punishable crime and stating that this is a key enabler in changing attitudes towards women. Elizabeth Okumu from TICAH Kenya shared examples from low-income areas in Kenya, where some girls prefer to get pregnant to have a year off of menstruating. Liz explained that she is often confronted with questions regarding sex, highlighting the need to start sexual and reproductive education at an earlier age and include boys in these discussions.



Manuela Pinilla, Director of WaterAid Colombia spoke about the vast inequalities that exist in Colombia, where despite national figures showing that 91% of people have access to water and 85% to sanitation, in dispersed rural communities like La Guajira these numbers fall to just 16% for water and 4% for sanitation. Manuela described cultural practices of the Wayuu people, who seclude girls upon their first menstrual period for a time of learning cooking and weaving, in preparation for marriage. WaterAid Colombia is working with the local communities to find ways to continue marking girls'

change into womanhood in a way that celebrates the cultural heritage of La Guajira without punishing young girls.

Solving these problems requires a comprehensive, collaborative, and intergenerational approach that engages both boys and girls, the discussion emphasized. This must include ensuring access to toilets and availability of sanitary supplies, but also account for issues like stigma, gender norms, and gender-based discrimination. It requires solutions grounded in unique local contexts that ensure that girls have comprehensive and accurate information about their bodies, their options and their rights, and can make informed decisions about their health. The panel concluded that only through a holistic and multi-sectoral approach that applies gender equality, education, human rights, and sustainability perspectives can girls be empowered to take control of their bodies and, ultimately, their lives.