Ending the water, sanitation and hygiene crisis together
Policy priorities for accelerating progress

Executive summary
March 2023
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In this paper, we make policy recommendations to countries working to accelerate progress towards sustainable and safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services for all. It is for developing country government ministers, policy makers and decision makers at national or sub-national level, and is relevant for development partners.

WASH services, including safe hygiene behaviours, are vital for everyone. WASH is indispensable to economic development, as well as health, tackling gender inequality and building resilience to climate change. Investment in universal basic drinking water can yield up to US $32 billion annually and investment in basic hygiene can yield US $45 billion annually. Increasing investment in safely managed sanitation can yield US $86 billion annually.1

Over the past 20 years, we have seen that real progress is possible when WASH is prioritised in national development. For example, in India, basic sanitation coverage rose from 15% in 2000 to 71% in 2020, and in Nigeria, basic drinking water coverage rose from 43% in 2000 to 73% in 2020. Yet, we are mid-way through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and progress is still unacceptably slow and uneven, especially among the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the least developed countries (LDCs). For example, at current rates of progress, only 37% of people in sub-Saharan Africa will have safely managed water by 2030.2

The next decade will see a continued rise in population and rural-urban migration. Climate change, political instability, disease outbreaks and economic downturns pose additional threats to health, water security, food security, the economy, gender equality and social development. Ensuring sustainable and safe WASH will become even more critical to build people’s resilience.

Those countries that have made rapid progress, such as India, had the full leadership of the Head of Government. The launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) in 2014 by the Indian Prime Minister, backed by US $20 billion in funding and human resources at all levels, were key ingredients to reducing the number of people who defecate in the open. The SBM reportedly resulted in the construction of 100 million toilets and over 500,000 villages where people are no longer forced to defecate in the open.3

Why is progress slow?

- Government leadership and political prioritisation are lacking.
- Institutional arrangements and capacity are inadequate.
- Financial resources are insufficient, and spending is inefficient.
- Gender equality and social inclusion are not adequately considered and funded in WASH and health policies.
- Public health policy neglects the fundamental aspects of WASH for safe living environments.
- WASH is not articulated as a service that needs sustaining.
- WASH, water resources management and climate change are poorly integrated.
- Accountability and regulation are weak.

Priority policy recommendations to governments to accelerate progress

WaterAid is making a series of policy recommendations for governments to follow to address the key barriers to accelerating access to sustainable and safe WASH.

The recommendations should be adapted to suit the country context. However, the top three recommendations are particularly important for laying the foundation for accelerated progress.

Figure 1: Policy recommendations and illustrative examples of immediate actions

Make WASH a top national priority, champion an inspirational vision and drive institutional reform that has results at all levels.

- Constitute a high-level steering group to review and revise enabling frameworks for WASH (laws, policies, standards, regulation, leadership and funding).
- Task the presidential/prime ministerial office with overall coordination of sanitation efforts, including cross-sectoral meetings, to address emerging bottlenecks.

Establish clear institutional mandates and responsibilities for different aspects of WASH, with mechanisms established for cross-sectoral coordination.

- Define clear responsibilities and standards for managing faecal waste at all levels - from toilets to treatment and disposal/reuse.
- Establish a multisectoral coordination group for sanitation which is formally backed by a legal framework and has sufficient authority to take decisions on plans, responsibilities and resource allocations.

Substantially increase WASH financing, ensuring costed finance strategies are developed, backed by sufficient public funds to build a high-performing sector that attracts finance and improves the quality of spending.

- Establish and enforce systems for timely disbursement and efficient use of allocated budget for WASH.
- Increase WASH allocation to at least 5% of government budget in three years.
- Set up and support affordable and efficient financing models in a way that protects people living in poverty and covers operation, maintenance and ongoing behaviour change.
- Lobby climate finance institutions to acknowledge WASH as key to climate resilience and adaptation and devote climate finance for WASH-related adaptation.

Ensure and monitor that all policies promote gender-responsive approaches and strengthen women’s roles in WASH decision-making and service provision.

- Establish standards for gender-responsive WASH in public spaces, workspaces, schools and healthcare facilities.
- Make menstrual health and hygiene in schools a key education ministry function, integrate it in monitoring systems and take measures to address affordability of menstrual products.

Legislate and fund transition towards safely managed services through appropriate service delivery models and professionalisation, designed to target everyone, especially people living in poverty and facing marginalisation.

- Approach sanitation holistically, covering not just toilet use (behaviour change, demand generation and supply) but also the rest of the service chain: emptying, transport, treatment and disposal or reuse.
- Set out in policy the roles of different water supply and sanitation service models and the associated financing models, covering new connections, faecal waste management, repairs and asset replacement.

Ensure that WASH is embedded in health policies and strategies, lead coordination with adequate financing.

- Review and integrate WASH in universal health coverage and pandemic preparedness strategies.
- Invest in gender-responsive WASH in healthcare facilities, raising standards beyond basic service levels and integrating accountability mechanisms.

Prioritise WASH and water security to strengthen resilience to climate change, with the required finances and upgraded implementation capacities at all levels.

- Embed WASH service improvements in nationally determined contributions (NDCs), national adaptation plans (NAPs) and climate funding proposals.
- In the face of climate hazards and unpredictable water availability, establish and enforce guidelines to prioritise and safeguard well-managed water resources.
The roles of development partners in supporting government

Governments are the key drivers of progress towards universal access to WASH. But development partners, private sector and civil society organisations also have an important role to play to support the implementation of the recommendations in this paper.

Development partners should enhance coordination, reduce fragmentation of official development assistance (ODA) and loan support for WASH, and help ensure equitable distribution.

**Bilateral donors including Group of Seven (G7), Group of Twenty (G20) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states** should substantially increase their ODA to WASH as grant finance, prioritising LDCs and poorer quintiles of populations, rural areas, informal urban areas, gender-responsive WASH, and sustainability. They should align their WASH ODA with government visions and plans and participate in blended financing opportunities to augment sector financing.¹

**United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs)** should coordinate in-country to align with government policies and priorities, and ensure harmonised influencing and support efforts; focus on working with governments to strengthen the WASH systems that underpin service delivery; signal the importance of accelerating progress, prioritising vulnerable groups; frame WASH as a service; increase attention to hygiene and sanitation in particular; and increase focus on climate-resilient and gender-responsive WASH.

**Multilateral banks including international finance institutions (IFIs)** should recognise all components of WASH as central to climate resilience and adaptation, and reform climate financing accordingly; increase the proportions of financing for climate adaptation; increase the quantity of grants and reduce interest on loans for WASH to help improve and sustain public health.

**Private sector organisations** should increase investment in WASH to secure a healthy and sustainable workforce and market; support the government efforts in offering innovative solutions to expand WASH services and improve their quality; subscribe to public utility services to support their viability; support water security efforts by ensuring that industrial wastewater is treated to standard before discharging.

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¹ Blended finance is the strategic use of development finance for the mobilisation of additional finance towards sustainable development in developing countries. See more at: oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/blended-finance-principles/

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Ladislaus Stephano, site employee, and Julius Chisengo, Group Operator for the Decentralised Wastewater Treatment Systems (DEWATS), a system that recycles faecal waste into bio-gas and recycles water used for irrigation. Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. March 2021.

Front cover main image: Fatimata Coulibaly, a member of the Benkadi women’s group, is in charge of water monitoring and management. Segou Region, Mali. February 2019.

Front cover small image: Chea and his colleagues working to unclog a sewer in the Battambang province, Cambodia. March 2022.

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WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.