

COVID-19 and WASH:

Mitigating the socio-economic impacts on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Sector



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Note: This document has been developed by the Global Wash Cluster (GWC) which is made of [77 full and associated members](#) and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) which has [+200 partners](#) with the support of UNICEF and ICRC.

Advocacy for WASH in COVID-19

Clean drinking water, improved sanitation and good hygiene practices are life-sustaining and play an important role in maintaining public health. The benefits of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cannot be underestimated in controlling the spread of disease, as well as underpinning human rights, well-being and development.¹ Safe water, sanitation and hygiene is a necessity to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and maintain good hygiene practices. Today billions of the most vulnerable people lack access to safe WASH services, despite its importance to health, social and economic outcomes, leaving them behind, and exposed to the risk of COVID-19.

A serious disease outbreak which has rapidly expanded into a pandemic, COVID-19 is reaching deadly proportions globally. COVID-19 poses direct threats and impacts with immediate consequences on human health. **The severity of the current response to COVID-19 poses grave detrimental impacts on WASH service provision and sustainability if not adequately mitigated. WASH is a key preventative measure in reducing the spread of COVID-19 and is one of the principal public health recommendations.**² **Equitable access to WASH commodities and services for must be protected and extended for all, without any form of discrimination by nationality, income or ethnicity.**

Nevertheless, the most vulnerable populations with no access to adequate WASH or without social and economic safety nets will be hit hardest. This impacts marginalized people already affected by poverty, disability and ill-health, social exclusion and humanitarian crises including - refugees, migrants and internally displaced, those living in urban slums or camps, and with weak or no health systems.

We call for **immediate collective and strategic action** by national governments, service providers, partners and donors to rapidly and effectively coordinate response efforts to ensure:

1. Uninterrupted global supply chains for WASH commodities and services to maintain the movement of goods and production capacity. This includes the protection of WASH service providers' personnel and assets, ensuring safe access with no restrictions to the movement of essential staff and humanitarian workers, materials or equipment to maintain the continuity of vital WASH services in communities and healthcare facilities, and on-going humanitarian WASH responses.

¹ UN (n.d.) <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

² This is of critical concern in contexts already dealing with disease outbreaks, such as cholera.

4 May 2020

2. Continued and equitable access to WASH commodities and services for all. This includes controlling price fluctuations for WASH commodities and deferring payments for WASH services as part of a collective approach by national governments, service providers, partners and donors.
3. Maintained and increased funding, with no diversion away from the existing commitments and priorities set for the WASH sector. This includes financial support for WASH service providers, avoiding shifts in domestic funding allocations that support WASH services and sustained support by international donors to on-going WASH humanitarian responses, and broader [Grand Bargain](#) commitments.³

Impacts of COVID-19 on WASH

WASH commodities and services play a direct and critical role in suppressing the global reach of the pandemic, along with other measures such as physical distancing and quarantines. These actions will have a range of primary and immediate socio-economic impacts that can occur simultaneously.

The immediate socio-economic impacts of the pandemic pose a significant risk to WASH services, including limited access to safe WASH services, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.

The immediate socio-economic impacts arising from COVID-19 may, in turn, constrain the role WASH services can play in suppressing the global reach of the pandemic – a vicious circle. Low and middle-income countries will be most affected, particularly those with protracted and/or humanitarian crises. Improving the WASH sector's resilience to absorb the shock of the primary and immediate socio-economic impacts caused by COVID-19 is key.

Substantial interruption of WASH services and reduced access to WASH commodities is expected and will take a heavy toll on the service sustainability of the WASH sector. This is of major concern especially for countries with protracted and/or humanitarian crises.

Restrictions on the entry and movement of materials and equipment coupled with price increases for WASH services and commodities, which play a direct and critical role in suppressing the global reach of the pandemic, will have a grave impact on maintaining good hygiene practice.

This could further exacerbate the severity of COVID-19, with the highest impact felt in countries with protracted and/or humanitarian crises and amongst the most vulnerable populations. With a decreased available workforce, limited materials and equipment, ruptures in global supply chains and shrinking fiscal space, WASH services are at grave risk of collapsing.

This will only further aggravate weak governance, policies and strategies that already plague the WASH sector. Immediate technical, material and financial inputs are required for access to WASH commodities and continuity of WASH services for all to alleviate the severity of the impact of COVID-19.

³ The Grand Bargain, launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, is an agreement between donor agencies and humanitarian organisations, committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action for people in need.

4 May 2020

Primary impacts	Socio-economic impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in the quantity and quality of WASH commodities and safe service delivery. • Decline in access to and increase in prices for WASH commodities and services due to rupture in global supply chains caused by restrictions or no movements of goods and essential consumables (e.g. fuel, chemicals), affecting continuity of services. • Increase in interruptions in WASH assistance to populations already affected by pre-COVID-19 humanitarian situations. • Inability to promote handwashing and cleaning in water-stressed contexts, and likelihood to impact water scarcity. • Decline in quality of response due to restricted or no movement, limiting due diligence and quality assurance by essential staff and humanitarian workers. • Diversion of donor funding from on-going WASH humanitarian responses to support COVID-19 response. • Increase in fraud and corruption due to the constrained economic situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in access to and increase in prices for WASH commodities and services due to rupture in global supply chains caused by restrictions or no movements of goods and essential consumables (e.g. fuel, chemicals), affecting continuity of services. • Increase in disease outbreaks (e.g. cholera) and malnutrition due to weak WASH sector. • Decline in the financial viability of WASH services due to loss of revenue and subsidies, and income loss by households, limiting ability to pay for WASH commodities and services. • Decline in national government's ability to deliver WASH services, affecting social cohesion, leading to tension and instability. • Diversion and deprioritization of domestic funding away from the WASH sector, due to inability to pay for or suspension of loans. • Shift in donor funding from the existing commitments and priorities, such as the Grand Bargain, resulting in a significant reduction in the overall funding of on-going humanitarian responses and sector.

Priorities for WASH in COVID-19

The shock waves of COVID-19 are rippling through our societies globally. A range of impacts from restricted to no movement due to curfew and quarantine measures, to shrinking household economy due to income loss are being felt by all. To address the inevitable increase in public health risks and arising needs to mitigate immediate socio-economic impacts, the WASH sector must prioritize access to WASH commodities and continuity of WASH services for the most socio-economic fragile populations and to critical facilities (e.g. treatment, refugee, displaced or migration centres etc.). At this critical juncture in the COVID-19 response, we must act now to support the WASH sector to achieve its core responsibility of ensuring that no one is left behind and that our continued efforts toward achieving universal WASH are not compromised by the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Continuity and extension of WASH services for all

- The continuity of WASH services for all, prioritizing the most vulnerable populations is non-negotiable. Those with no access to piped water supply and wastewater systems, that are experiencing restricted or no movement due to curfew and quarantine measures, and those already affected by protracted and/or humanitarian crises are a priority. This includes the need to support COVID-19 preventive measures, such as frequent and proper handwashing with soap and regular cleaning of surfaces with chlorine-based products. This is particularly critical and important in healthcare facilities providing treatment and care for COVID-19.
- The availability of essential staff responsible for the functionality, operation and maintenance (O & M) is vital to avoid gaps in continuity of WASH services. The necessity

4 May 2020

to ensure a steady supply of materials and equipment, such as fuel and treatment chemicals to maintain quality WASH service provision is also critical.

Sustain global supply chains for WASH commodities, materials and equipment

- The monitoring of price increases for WASH commodities (e.g. soap, chlorine-based products) or reduced access to material and equipment for WASH services (e.g. piped water, desludging) is vital. This includes consumables (e.g. fuel and treatment chemicals) and spare-parts, due to limited or ruptured stocks, limited or decreased production, price fluctuations etc.
- Sustaining global supply chains for materials and equipment required for the continuity of WASH services, ranging from rural small-scale systems to urban, large-scale systems is a necessity to avoid a collapse in the continuity of services and on-going WASH humanitarian responses. This includes exemptions for sanctions or special clearances for materials and equipment based on humanitarian need.

Reducing WASH service vulnerabilities and re-building WASH services

- Alleviating economic hardship for all, prioritizing the most vulnerable populations, and its impact on the ability to pay for and access WASH commodities and services is a priority.
- The protection of WASH service providers' personnel and assets to maintain critical WASH services and to avoid a reduction in functionality, O & M and continuity in services is crucial. This includes freedom of movement for essential staff and humanitarian workers, financial support to ease decreased revenue, and prohibiting discontinuation of services (i.e., for those that cannot pay).