



WATER ACTION DECADE

2018 - 2028

3rd HIGH-LEVEL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR ACTION

“WATER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT” 2018-2028

10-13 June 2024, Dushanbe, Republic of Tajikistan

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE –1. WATER FOR HEALTH

Concept Paper

Title

Water for Health

Subtitle

Transforming the WASH sector to achieve the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation.

Co-organizers

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Background information and rationale

The latest data from the WHO/UNICEF JMP show that in 2022, 2.2 billion people lacked access to safely managed water services; 3.5 billion lacked access to safely managed sanitation, 419 million still practiced open defaecation and 2 billion lacked basic hygiene services. The consequences for people’s health are devastating – noting that poor access to WASH accounts for 69% of the total burden of diarrhoeal disease – one of the biggest causes of under 5 child deaths. Women and girls are particularly affected by this situation – which extends to the lack of WASH in healthcare facilities and schools, as well as in households, and its consequent impact on health and wellbeing. With the resurgence of cholera, the proliferation of dengue, the emergence and spread of antimicrobial resistance, and the need for pandemic preparedness, there is a need to bring the health and WASH sectors together to establish a comprehensive, coordinated response.

Globally, progress needs to accelerate at least 6 times to achieve SDG 6 target for water supply and 5 times for safely managed sanitation. Even more has to be done in least developed countries and in situations affected by fragility, conflict and violence. The challenges imposed by climate change make it even more necessary to put in place an effective response to tackle this global crisis. The lack of WASH in healthcare facilities is a particularly grave concern: Half of the world’s health facilities do not offer a basic hygiene service at the point of care.

It is also increasingly clear that public expenditure and development aid are insufficient to achieve SDG 6 WASH targets and achieve the universal rights to safe water and sanitation. A major shift in approach is urgently needed. This shift needs governments, supported by their development partners, to overhaul the performance of the WASH sector in ways that minimise inefficiency, meets demand for affordable WASH services, and help secure private investment at scale.

Change is not a straightforward process, and needs to be encouraged, led and nurtured by well-informed political leaders at all levels, with evidence-based interventions and reliable data that capture ground reality. As part of the change process, extending WASH services to reach poor and vulnerable communities, households and individuals, and to all healthcare facilities and schools, should be prioritised. To be effective, the change process must engage with youth, who represent the majority of stakeholders across the developing world; with women, who face the greatest burden associated with lack of access to WASH services; and with the poor and other marginalized groups.

Cross-cutting issues

CLIMATE: Across the world, climate change is increasingly affecting access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene. Ensuring WASH services are resilient to the current and future impacts of climate change, and do not contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, is now imperative. In many countries, resilient WASH services are the first line of defence for people who would otherwise struggle to adapt to a fast-changing climate.

INCLUSION: Poor and vulnerable individuals, households and communities face the greatest risks of inadequate access to resilient and reliable WASH services. Prioritising their rights to safe water and sanitation has to be a priority, and establishing evidence based policies and strategies to do this is a political imperative. Also set out in the rationale, it is imperative that **YOUTH** is also part of the solution.

GENDER: WASH has exceptionally strong links with gender; improving access to WASH services can do much to empower women and girls in particular. At the same time, a poorly considered approach may maintain the status quo or make it even worse.

Link with results and recommendations of the UN 2023 Water conference

The Interactive Dialogue 1 of the 2023 UN Water Conference established the following recommendations:

1. Government leadership and willingness to drive change is key. Political will is essential to accelerate transformative change. Development partners are ready to collaborate, joining with other stakeholders in support of government leadership and systems, working across sectors.
2. Funding and financing from the public sector, private sector and donors must increase dramatically. Governments must develop policy to guide funding and financing decisions and strategies, attracting and making best use of funding and finance.
3. Governments and development partners see the need to develop a capable and motivated WASH sector workforce, investing in people and institutions.
4. Data and evidence are key to progress, and must reflect the needs of all people, including the marginalized. Data must drive decision-making and be used to reinforce accountability.

5. Governments and partners need to encourage WASH innovation, especially scalable, climate sensitive innovation, and experimentation.

The Interactive Dialogue on Water for Health will build on these recommendations with a focus on committing to practical actions that can transform access to WASH services. It is aligned with the G20 Development Working Group's focus on WASH and the forthcoming One Water Summit at UNGA.

Main questions for discussion

- a) What steps can political leaders take to improve sector coordination, performance and drive investment in extending water supply, sanitation and hygiene services, in particular for healthcare facilities, as well as for communities and schools?
- b) What needs to change to help secure public and private finance at a meaningful scale?
- c) How do we ensure that water and sanitation services play a central role in climate change adaptation?
- d) How do we target limited resources to benefit those whose health is most impacted by inadequate WASH?

Key messages

- 1) Meaningful progress on WASH largely depends on governments establishing the enabling conditions, efficiencies and institutional arrangements needed to attract significant private investment in the sector.
- 2) Leadership and collaboration are key, needed to introduce and sustain change (from reducing non-revenue water and tariff reform to establishing an independent regulator); to align development partners in support of government initiatives; and to establish collaboration between sectors, not least to accelerate progress on WASH in healthcare facilities and schools.
- 3) A further suite of actions is needed to realise the full potential of water and sanitation services to help societies adapt to the growing threats posed by climate change.
- 4) Data sharing between health and WASH sectors is critical to identify priorities, establish effective strategies and plans, and assess their effectiveness. Mechanisms for intersectoral coordination must be strengthened.
- 5) WASH in health care facilities serves as an entry point for the WASH and health sectors to work collaboratively, and countries are taking concrete action to accelerate progress towards sustainable WASH services in health care facilities.

Follow-up actions and commitments

- Call for coherent actions in support of national leadership on WASH, with SMART objectives backed up by commitments to review these using established platforms and processes, such as the Mutual Accountability Mechanism established by the Sanitation and Water for All partnership (SWA);
- A focus on global and regional commitments, including the *Protocol on Water and Health*, a legally binding instrument adopted in 1999 by the member states of the United Nations Eco-

conomic Commission for Europe with the aim of protecting human health and well-being by better water management, including the protection of water resources, provision of safe drinking water, and sanitation.

- A call for increased political attention and financial resources to improve access to WASH in communities, schools, and Healthcare facilities and to strengthen coordination mechanisms that bring together the health and WASH sectors.