



Fenosoa, like many who live in the Amoron'Akona neighborhood, works by supplying dozens of households and businesses with well water. Location: Amoron 'Akona, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Photo © Tsilavo Rapiera – www.tsilavorapiera.com / www.arikamedia.com

WASH Within Reach: Moving Towards a Forward-Thinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Agenda

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic put into stark reality the critical role that access to clean and affordable water and sanitation plays in human health and economic prosperity. It also added a layer of ambiguity around the sustainable financing and servicing of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) globally, especially for developing countries. As COVID-19 continues to devastate communities around the world, examining where WASH systems have proven resilient provides important insights for future investments and innovation. To take stock of the pandemic's impact on the WASH sector, the Wilson Center and Circle of Blue launched *WASH Within Reach: 50 years, \$400 billion, and a global pandemic later – water, sanitation and hygiene define a moment in human history*. The project interviewed over 50 authorities on five continents, hosted a public dialogue on the status of achieving universal access to WASH, and convened a private roundtable to assess the status of WASH and explore a forward-thinking agenda for the sector. This policy brief provides an overview of the project's findings and recommendations.

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BACKGROUND

Water is critical for the well-being of individuals, the health of communities, and the security of nations. As a vital natural resource, water touches virtually every facet of life and industry—food, energy, health, livelihoods, biodiversity, drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. Shared water resources provide opportunities for cooperation across communities, countries, and regions. They can also amplify the risk of water-related disputes and conflict, especially when excess strain is placed on scarce resources. Climate change, rapid urbanization, at-risk coastal megacities, and the exploitation of water resources have many concerned that 1) too much or too little water will cause human suffering and impact economic activity, and 2) existing infrastructure may become overwhelmed and unable to provide safe water or sanitation services.

In 2015, the United Nations set 2030 as the deadline for achieving 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 6—achieving universal access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)—focuses on the links between improved quality of life and economic benefits from sustainably managed drinking water, wastewater, and ecosystems. The advantages of having safe and sustainable water, especially in improved health outcomes, can only

be realized when there is also access to improved sanitation and positive hygiene practices. And improved sanitation and hygiene practices require more than just clean water. For example, soap, waste management, surface disinfection, and best practices for mopping are additional elements of WASH that impact the ability to provide healthy and sustainable WASH services.

Over the last half century, a global network of finance, health, diplomatic institutions, and governments invested billions to improve WASH access in the developing world. That level of spending—paired with the global goal of achieving SDG 6—has produced measurable results. [Between 2015 and 2020](#), the proportion of the global population using safely managed water services increased from 70 percent to 74 percent, from 47 percent to 54 percent for safely managed sanitation services, and from 67 percent to 71 percent for basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home.

However, more is needed. [As recently as 2020](#), 2 billion people around the world still lacked safely managed water services, 3.6 billion lacked safely managed sanitation services, and 2.3 billion lacked basic hygiene services. Sustained integration and cross-coordination of WASH among the broader



In the Cox's Bazar district in the summer of 2020, aid workers show Rohingya refugees handwashing practices to protect them against COVID-19. Photo © World Vision



development goals remains minimal. To meet SDG 6 by 2030, current rates of progress for safely managed WASH services [need to quadruple](#) and it is estimated that capital spending for WASH needs to reach [US\\$114 billion annually](#), far more than the current annual US\$20 billion invested in the sector.

KEY ISSUES & FINDINGS

1. Pandemic Brought WASH to an Inflection Point

In December 2020, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development reported that because of the pandemic, international investment in water, sanitation, and hygiene [fell 70 percent in the first three-quarters of 2020](#). Concerns around the sustainability of financing and servicing WASH, especially for developing countries, became very apparent. Water utilities in developing nations reported that [spring and summer revenue for 2020 declined](#)—in some cases by 60 percent—due to business closures, job losses, and government orders to provide water for free. But while all signs pointed to a potentially catastrophic impact on WASH delivery, the actual consequences of the pandemic on WASH delivery to the most vulnerable were not as dire as initially feared.

Governments throughout the world took steps to ensure that households would not be disconnected for non-payment of bills, and utilities worked hard to ensure that services continued to be delivered despite financial and human resource challenges. And while COVID-19 was still an impediment to delivering and sustaining WASH access, the pandemic's impacts are overshadowed by the other impediments the sector has been dealing with for 50 years—like rapid urbanization, rural poverty, and financing and funding barriers. By examining the effects of COVID-19 on WASH, *WASH Within Reach's* reporting found that, in fact, even in the face of these decades-long challenges, the WASH sector has achieved significantly more progress than has been acknowledged.

2. Progress Has Been Made and Should be Harnessed

Since 1970, more than US\$400 billion has been spent on official development assistance, official development finance, government aid, loans, and philanthropic grants for WASH in developing nations. This number does not include national budgets for WASH, which increased greatly, especially in low-middle and middle-income countries. These investments have produced results that often go unacknowledged compared to the work that remains towards achieving SDG 6.

As countries went from being lower-middle income to middle income and then to upper-middle income, governments invested more in water and sanitation infrastructure and services improved. Between 2000 and 2020, according to the Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) Household Wash Data, [countries like Vietnam](#) have seen an increase of approximately 16 percent in access to basic drinking water services and a 37 percent increase in basic sanitation services. There is an opportunity for the sector to work with countries to leverage economic growth to support advancing WASH priorities on a faster and more ambitious timeline. In countries with many WASH successes, the sector has the chance to move beyond providing basic services to ensure that the services provided are expanded and sustained. These services expand beyond the household level, as the progress of institutional WASH (e.g., schools, healthcare facilities, workplaces, and markets) is crucial for universal WASH to be achieved.

Additionally, an inventive community of finance professionals has helped to underscore the importance of helping WASH providers become “creditworthy” to open new paths for raising money and delivering it more efficiently to WASH providers.



3. Governance and Local Demand for WASH

Social enterprises provide substantial guidance on how to achieve SDG 6 but in order for those models, methods, and strategies to have an impact, they will need to be integrated into service delivery systems that are managed by governments. Achieving SDG 6 will take more than the work of any single social enterprise or institution, and the focus should continue to be on building those systems at the local and regional levels.

Governments at all levels in developed and developing countries must prioritize WASH in order to achieve SDG 6. There is little that external investment can do to accelerate progress if government stakeholders are uninterested and unaccountable for the delivery of sub-national WASH services. An empowered, skilled, and well-resourced civil society comprised of community leaders and WASH advocates that can hold governments accountable is also key to improving services. It is critical that the WASH sector continue rolling out models that strengthen institutions and aid in sustaining service delivery. It is also important to note the sub-national challenges of WASH service

delivery in fragile and conflict-affected settings and the need for [conflict-sensitive approaches to WASH](#) in all settings.

4. WASH Data Collection Can Be Further Leveraged To Highlight Successes and Gaps

By 2030, around 95 percent of the world could have access to water and sanitation. JMP data shows that WASH is making substantial progress everywhere, with Africa remaining the last frontier.¹ The household data used to inform these assessments, however, are limited and there is a need for more and higher quality data that provides information on managed services, which households are not equipped to answer (e.g., where their sewage goes after it leaves their premises). Data can be improved by increasing its standardization and having national bodies that independently cross-check its validity. There are many challenges to collecting regulatory data, however—for example, many countries do not have regulators, or they have regulators, but they have very low capacity and are not collecting reliable data.



Rochel is a father of 3 children who cycle more than 2km by bike per day to meet their water needs. Location: Amoron 'Akona, Antananarivo, Madagascar. Photo © Tsilavo Rapiera – www.tsilavorapiera.com / www.arikamedia.com





Merasi girls carry water containers on their heads on a sweltering morning in India's Thar Desert south of Jaisalmer, a city in the state of Rajasthan. The United Nations sustainable development goals prioritize water for all and an end to long walks to collect water. Photo © J. Carl Ganter / Circle of Blue

There is also a need to go beyond basic data to get more accurate “quality of life” assessments. For example, little data is collected on disparities in distances traveled for water collection, which is time-consuming and places an outsized burden on women and girls. Utilizing technologies, like cell phones, can increase data collection, visibility, and investment. Using cell technology to look at water points or toilet conditions, for example, can reduce the costs of data collection and help with providing data to identify priority areas and assess whether existing systems are still working.

5. Building Partnerships and Reframing WASH

The success of the WASH sector over the next 20 years will be largely defined by the success of its partnerships with other sectors, like climate change,

nutrition, water safety, etc. Without cross-sectoral engagement, the WASH sector will remain limited in engaging governments and high-level policymakers. By highlighting critical linkages that exist between WASH services and other essential investments in health, education, trade, and transport, for example, the sector’s role in broader sustainable development becomes better defined. For example, as climate change poses a drastic threat to water and health services, the sector should consider how WASH fits within climate change risk analyses and responses and where partnering opportunities could emerge. The sector must also close the gap between the dual efforts to raise awareness at the global level and the need for implementation at a local level.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To create a forward-thinking agenda for WASH, project participants identified the following priority recommendations.

- At the international level:

- 1. Identify and leverage upcoming international opportunities.**

The UN Secretary-General's call to action on water and healthcare—"International Decade for Action on Water for Sustainable Development, 2018-2028," resolutions in the upcoming [World Health Assembly](#) on infection prevention, and SDG 6 implementation all provide entry points for building partnerships, communicating needs, and highlighting successes.

- 2. Support leader-to-leader, high-level peer exchanges.**

Action at a high-level among political leadership can prompt sweeping change. For example, India put WASH at the top of the country's development agenda and invested US\$20 billion in the sector over five years through its [Swachh Bharat Mission](#). The country's political leadership believed it would yield a return on investment and electoral dividends since improving WASH also improved quality of life, particularly for women and girls in India. The President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, took interest in how Prime Minister Narendra Modi placed eliminating open defecation on the national agenda. When India hosted a global conference, Nigeria's Minister of Water Resources came to India to gather information that helped spur the "[Clean Nigeria: Stop Open Defecation](#)" campaign.

- At the national level:

- 1. Leverage success in providing basic services to incentivize government investment in sustainable, long-term service delivery.**

Leverage successful sub-national initiatives to provide basic services to broaden national government-level investment in WASH services. Stronger civil society interactions with governments can help to accelerate progress.

- 2. Broaden beyond "drinking water".**

Look at how water and WASH are characterized within the broader goals of a country to ensure that its connection to other sectors, like health, education, and climate resilience, is clear. This is important for convincing and engaging leaders to promote WASH in broader national development agendas.

- 3. Share stories of cross-sectoral impact from WASH sector initiatives at the local level.**

This will help leaders understand what their constituents want for WASH, including what drives demand, and inform policy efforts towards cost recovery and service formation.

- 4. Donors should support governments who demonstrate an interest in WASH services.**

Be flexible enough to capitalize on political will and committed governments or agendas to create lasting investments in WASH.

- 5. Promote the importance of government ownership and investment in the WASH sector.**

Government involvement and investment are necessary to achieve the US\$114 billion



annually for universal WASH. Private donor investment in WASH has not been and will not be adequate to scale necessary investment.

- At the sub-national level:

- 1. Foster opportunities for scaling up.**

Social enterprises need to be able to demonstrate replicable results over a long period of time and at a large scale so that they are valuable nationally. Partnerships with governments and across sectors are imperative for the scaling-up of these models. Working across the linkages that exist between WASH and, for example, waste management, agriculture, and climate resilience, helps to build stronger WASH-related policies and enable services to succeed.

- 2. Build upon perceptions and demands for water security in local communities.**

Initial provision of services drives local perceptions of how WASH impacts lives and

raises expectations for standards of living. By building upon perceptions and demands for water security in local communities, organic demand will continue to grow and begin driving larger, national-level agendas.

- At all levels:

- 1. Ensure a deliberate approach to WASH equity and inclusion.**

The WASH sector could be more deliberate in its approach to “leave no one behind.” The sector needs to expand its collaboration with groups dealing with human rights (e.g., women’s rights, disability rights, Indigenous rights), as well as health. For example, the WASH sector can use health data like cholera hotspots and neglected tropical disease endemicity to target WASH investments and interventions to the most marginalized and impoverished communities.

- 2. Leverage technology to increase data collection, visibility, and investment.**



A girl fills water jugs at a Afridev pump in Bangladesh Cox’s Bazaar refugee camp. Photo © Jennifer Möller-Gulland





A mother scoops a murky bucketful from a watering hole in San Marcos Tlacoyalco. Surrounded by barren land, this pool is intended for livestock, but families come to collect water for bathing and laundering as well. Photo © J. Carl Ganter / Circle of Blue

3. Create an enabling environment for creditworthiness.

The WASH sector tends to be locally serviced, and sub-national governments tend to have the biggest challenges in maintaining WASH services. By enabling small service providers to become creditworthy, the providers are able to better access financial opportunities from different sources, like commercial institutions or blended finance structures, which will assist in scaling their water and sanitation portfolios. International entities like the [Global Water Security & Sanitation Partnership](#) at the World Bank and national entities like the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#) can assist with building creditworthiness.

4. Enhance workforce development.

Improvements are needed for WASH training and youth engagement. These include lowering the threshold for participation and entry into the sector and focusing on skill-building and creating pathways for advancement—a “ladder to success.”

5. Strengthen civil society leaders and networks.

Professional civil society advocacy to governments will make it more likely that the voices of the most marginalized (rural communities, women, people with disabilities) will be heard and acted on through stronger budgets, policies, and programs.

6. Highlight and replicate successes that have been made at the country and local levels.

In Rwanda, for example, donors funded US\$30 million for basic water access, and the government was highly engaged in the process; in Chad, manual drilling for water found local success and expanded to Nigeria and other parts of West Africa.

7. Facilitate opportunities for WASH sector self-reflection and peer exchange across levels of implementation, management, and decision-making.



8. Incorporate WASH into the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) agenda.

This will better promote corporate financial accountability and transparency.

9. Lose technocratic jargon and internally-oriented discussions.

To be more effective, the WASH sector must “get out of WASH” by broadening its coalition of partners and communicating more effectively with other fields.

10. Incorporate cross-sectoral work with related issues (e.g., climate change).

This will help achieve concrete health and economic gains and ensure that drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene are integrated into relevant agendas. It also provides an opportunity to show how WASH helps deliver on other commitments and goals.



Ujang delivers water to customers in the poor neighborhoods of North Jakarta. His cart is a crucial supply line to communities beset by water insecurity. Photo © J. Carl Ganter / Circle of Blue

EXPLORE WASH WITHIN REACH

Project Reporting

- [Pandemic Brings WASH to Rare Inflection Point: Despite Fears of Collapse, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Draw Closer to Epic Goal](#)
- [Innovation in Financing Brightens WASH Galaxy: Funding for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Starts to Arrive Faster, With Clearer Requirements](#)
- [Universal WASH Gains Traction Even as Hand Pumps Lose Ground: Troubled Water Supply Systems in Africa Spur Demand for New Technology](#)
- [Universal access to clean water is within reach. How can we achieve it?](#)

Public Event

- [50 Years and Billions Spent: New Reporting Shows Universal Access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Draws Closer to Epic Goal Despite Global Pandemic](#)

Sources: Clean Nigeria Campaign, Government of India, Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation, United Nations, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, United Nations-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water, U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Small Business Administration, World Bank, World Health Organization.





Endnotes

- 1 JMP data has been historically based on data collected through household surveys, primarily the UNICEF-supported multi-indicator cluster survey and the USAID-supported DHS.




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