



# WATER FOR THE WORLD'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Around the world, the primary directive to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is the same: Wash your hands.

Handwashing is our first layer of defense. However, in developing countries already lacking access to water in homes, communities, healthcare facilities and schools, this simple task is not possible. In addition, measures to stop the spread of the virus are severely straining existing water and sanitation systems, and may reverse progress in increasing access.

## IMPACT ON WATER SECURITY, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 and help communities deal with its economic impacts are affecting water security, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services and their ability to continue to serve customers during and after the pandemic.

Primary threats to long-term WASH include:

- At a time when access to safe drinking water and water for handwashing is more critical than ever, providers of water and sanitation services do not have adequate funding to continue providing these essential services. They face insolvency as user payments drop or are relaxed by local authorities.
- Materials needed to provide safe water, such as chlorine for treatment and fuel for pumps, are harder to access due to travel restrictions, border closures and other COVID-19 mitigation efforts.
- Women and girls—who bear the responsibility for water collection and face gender-based violence due to lack of access to private household sanitation—are especially at risk of COVID-19 transmission when using public water points and latrines.

These challenges are an urgent priority for the global community. An estimated \$260 billion is lost globally each year due to lack of basic water and sanitation, and three in four jobs in the global economy depend on water. **Sustaining water and sanitation operations and supporting service providers is critical for health now, as well as economic recovery.** Without it, we could see a second wave of COVID-19 and other secondary shocks, such as cholera outbreaks.

Through WASH efforts in developing countries, USAID has extended safe and sustainable access to water to 37.3 million and sanitation to 24.1 million over 8 years. The scale and scope of the COVID-19 impact puts this progress at risk and could reverse it, making recovery more difficult and lengthy.

## ADAPTING TO RESPOND TO DYNAMIC CHALLENGES

Access to WASH services is a crucial pillar of USAID's response to COVID-19 and long-term recovery efforts. We must keep services going and expand them to meet the full scope of this challenge.

USAID is taking proactive action by adapting ongoing Water for the World programs to provide emergency assistance. At the same time, we are supporting water and sanitation systems to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19, protect progress, and speed recovery. Priorities include:

- **Maintaining and Extending Services:** Helping schools, businesses and markets safely reopen with reliable access to water for handwashing.
- **Keeping Supply Chains Going:** Helping water and sanitation service providers secure critical materials to stay open, including chlorine, fuel for pumping, and spare parts.
- **Developing Contingency and Risk Management Plans:** Working with service providers and local authorities to develop plans to minimize risk associated with reduced labor and user payments, through worker safety protocol and financial planning.
- **Unlocking Finance:** Guiding governments and banks to extend liquidity to service providers and relax existing loan terms so providers can maintain critical operations without going bankrupt.

### KEEPING WATER PROVIDERS IN BUSINESS

The government of Kenya is requiring water service providers to supply free water to underprivileged communities. While a critical step to keep water flowing to the most vulnerable during the pandemic, the directive is a setback for already financially strained water service providers. Reduced revenue will impede their ability to supply water and impact 11,000 employees.

USAID has helped providers respond to this challenge with solutions to maintain services, staff and financial solvency. Service providers are assessing their operations and maintenance costs, tariff collections, and loan repayment periods, and are better equipped to create scenarios and action plans.

## THE CRITICAL WORK AHEAD

The ever-expanding impact of COVID-19 on WASH will quickly outstrip existing resources, requiring us to build on current efforts while also focusing on additional priorities:

- **Partner** with utilities and other providers to understand the risks they face and develop plans to not just maintain operations now, but also strengthen systems and their resilience to future shocks.
- **Support** national and local governments and service authorities to strengthen water and sanitation policies and regulations—including risk management and continuity of operations—and build a professionalized workforce that is ready to respond to this and future shocks.
- **Leverage** the deep bench of U.S. expertise on water finance to help vulnerable service providers avoid financial stress and potential shut-offs during this critical time.

We must invest now in strengthening the capacity of water and sanitation service providers and helping countries make handwashing with soap a regular behavior. This will ultimately enable long-term recovery and growth by making reliable water and sanitation a reality for all.

*For more information, visit [globalwaters.org](https://globalwaters.org) to access USAID's WASH Strategic Approach to COVID-19.*