



WATER FOR THE WORLD'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

COVID-19 has made access to essential water, sanitation, and hygiene services more difficult at the exact time when these services are needed most.

Handwashing remains critical for reducing the spread of COVID-19, and access to reliable water services is needed to safely reopen economies. However, in developing countries, access to soap and water for handwashing remains a challenge. In addition, measures to stop the spread of the virus are severely straining existing water and sanitation systems, and may reverse progress.

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 serve customers during and after the pandemic.

Already, COVID-19 has disrupted access for hundreds of millions of people, including as many as 300 million in Sub-Saharan Africa alone. As the pandemic's impact continues to unfold, many more are at risk of losing access to critical WASH services.

- A 2020 survey found that 1 in 3 people across five Sub-Saharan countries faced new challenges to accessing water as a result of the pandemic, including struggling to afford water and concerns about safety of waiting in lines.
- Water and sanitation service providers that struggled prior to the pandemic are now at severe risk for insolvency amid the growing cost of operating safely and diminishing revenue. Many countries are requiring them to provide water for free.
- Women and girls—who bear the responsibility for water collection—are especially at risk of COVID-19 transmission in addition to gender-based violence 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 sustainable access to water to 54 million people and sanitation to 38 million since 2008. 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, healthcare facilities, businesses and markets safely reopen with reliable access to water for handwashing.
- **Developing Contingency and Risk Management Plans:** Working with service providers and local authorities to develop plans to minimize risk associated with increased costs and reduced user payments through financial evaluations and 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 underserved 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 to access USAID's WASH Strategic Approach to COVID-19.