



Advocacy brief: A Water Crisis in the time of COVID-19

Impact of funding shortages on Public Health in Yemen

- 11.2 million Yemenis are in acute need of Water, sanitation and Hygiene assistance.
- Acute funding shortages are cutting off access to water and soap, essentials of COVID-19 prevention.
- By the End of June, WASH services for 6 million people, including 3 million children could close
- Water supply Major Cities will be forced to completely stop in parts of the country.

1. Asks:

- WASH must be embedded as an integral part of public health priority
- Rapid mobilization of financial support is critical to save lives avert a public health catastrophe
- Urgent action is needed to give Yemenis the means to protect themselves from COVID-19
- Water and sanitation systems must be sustained and workers protected

Background – COVID-19 on top of a humanitarian crisis

- 20.4 million Yemenis need humanitarian assistance to access safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) provisions. Of those 11.2 million are in acute need, requiring life-saving assistance, especially those affected by disease outbreaks, displaced populations and marginalized groups
- The first confirmed case of COVID-19 occurred in Yemen in April 2020- since then the virus is spreading through the country. Without adequate testing facilities the full scale of the outbreak is unknown but WHO estimates that at least 16 million people will be infected

This briefing paper outlines the urgency at which sustained financial support for WASH programmes is needed to curb the spread of COVID-19 and cholera to avert a public health catastrophe

A WASH Response is a COVID Response – Up to 70% of Yemenis lack soap

Water, sanitation and hand hygiene, are central to a public health response and to preventing the spread of COVID-19, as a first line of defence against this serious threat to lives and health systems. Ensuring continuity of essential WASH services is vital to disease prevention, core to survival and protection, and impacts livelihoods. Handwashing with water and soap kills the COVID-19 virus, 70% of other pathogens and can reduce diarrhoea rates by 40%. However, for this to be possible access to soap and water is a prerequisite, currently 60-70% of Yemenis lack access to soap for handwashing and personal hygiene.

Urgent Humanitarian WASH Needs – 60% of Yemenis do not have enough water

Yemen is one of the most water scarce countries in the world. Access to water has been further diminished by the impact of over five years of conflict. The lack of water contributes to a high prevalence of preventable disease, and, now, the rapid spread of COVID-19. The conflict, and subsequent economic

collapse has caused dramatically increased household poverty, displaced over 3.6 million people, and increased vulnerability to, and prevalence of, life-threatening WASH-related disease. Amidst the breakdown of public services, only 30-40 per cent of Yemenis have access to sufficient and safe water. An estimated 20.4 million people require humanitarian assistance to enable access to safe and sufficient WASH services in 97% of districts. Of those, 11.2 million are in acute need; without assistance, their lives could be under threat.

WASH as a Public Health Response –Reduce disease and support health services to cope

Analysis of the burden of disease suggests that lack of access to a safe water, sanitation and hygiene is a major risk factor for poor health, resulting in high mortality rates. Yemenis are increasingly and severely affected by preventable, WASH related diseases across the country. This places increasing pressure on overstretched health systems.

Currently, 1.6 million children under the age of 5 year are suffering from moderate acute malnutrition and 325,000 from severe acute malnutrition. The country is dealing with one of the worst cholera outbreaks in history, with over 2.4 million cases of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea. Dengue fever and malaria cause large scale but preventable suffering and mortality year after year. With the arrival of COVID-19 in Yemen, the situation is further deteriorating. Health systems are being pushed further to the brink of collapse with the vulnerable being disproportionately affected. Amidst conflict, disease and displacement, preventable WASH related diseases are re-emerging, with WHO announcing the detection of vaccine derived Polio in May 2020, despite it having been eradicated in 2006.

Critical Funding Gaps - 6 million Yemenis without protection from COVID-19

The humanitarian WASH Response in Yemen requires 198.9 million USD to reach 12.5million people with urgent assistance to prevent death and secondary impacts of disease as well as to protect health systems. The current Yemen COVID-19 strategy and funding appeal does not include access to water and soap, as a core preventative measures for communities from COVID-19, and many other preventable, communicable diseases. Without critical funds and access to soap and water, the total preventable deaths could be catastrophic and the burden of disease could cause health systems to completely collapse

As of June 2020, less than 4 per cent of funding requirements have been met. The impact is felt dramatically across emergency programs and for the most vulnerable, amidst growing need in the context of COVID-19. If urgent funding is not received critical lifelines will close. By June 2020, tens of WASH programs will be forced to close. The result will be almost 6 million vulnerable people, including almost 3 million children without safe access to water and soap and thus reducing their ability to prevent disease. This includes urban water systems in nine major cities serving 4.4 million people stopping, cholera response teams halted, and over 400,000 of the most vulnerable displaced populations in camps left without water and soap.

Critical funding and attention is urgently needed to ensure the continuity of vital WASH services to prevent disease and save millions of lives.

Key Asks

Embed humanitarian WASH as an integral part of public health priority

WASH is core to survival: The ability of the WASH sector to deliver an effective response that addresses lifesaving needs, is key to achieving public health outcomes for populations, reduce disease and relieving pressure on collapsing health services. However, the sector is not given the support required to deliver at scale. Response Plans and appeals at all levels – must prioritize water, sanitation and hygiene services.

Donors and humanitarian actors must ensure that WASH is embedded as an integral part of public health priorities and plans. By promoting this approach, and ensuring that WASH assistance can be delivered according to humanitarian principles, for the safety and dignity of populations, the WASH sector can reduce public health risks and life-threatening disease that put millions of affected populations in danger

Prioritize the rapid mobilization of principled, predictable funds for the continuity of essential WASH

Investments in WASH are investments in public health. Donor funding must be forthcoming and existing pledges delivered at speed. Commitments and priorities set for water, sanitation and hygiene must be maintained as a core part of public health response. Funds should be without conditionalities and delivered based on humanitarian need alone.

In line with Grand Bargain commitments, funding should be flexible and recognize the longer-term impact of COVID on vulnerabilities and humanitarian need. New financing modalities should be explored that dissolve the distinction between funding for emergency and development WASH. Diversification of financing (including the private sector) in humanitarian WASH should be further expanded to expand strategic partnerships that reinforce resilient, risk-informed WASH service delivery.

Support community-based prevention; Equip populations with the means for protection from infection

Water, sanitation and hygiene should be available to everyone, everywhere, leaving no one behind and giving Yemenis the means to prevent WASH related disease, protect those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 and reduce the need for medical care. This includes the elderly, people with disabilities, those with pre-existing conditions, and those living in precarious situations, as well as those whose livelihoods are negatively impacted by COVID-19. Prioritizing provision of water and soap (alongside physical distancing measures) in communities, is critical to protect vulnerable populations from COVID-19, prevent other infectious diseases and provide essential relief to collapsing, overwhelmed hospitals, doctors and nurses.

Ensure water and sanitation systems are sustained and workers are protected

To limit future impact and further degradation, support to systems must be sustained to protect people's health and support national systems. Service providers for water, sanitation and hygiene - including utilities and informal providers - will have difficulties maintaining services, with reduced financing. Yet this is essential to save lives in both the short and long-term. Undisrupted supply chains, including movement of goods and production capacity, for WASH commodities and services must be maintained at all costs. Water, sanitation and hygiene workers must also be granted protection from stigma and abuse and be provided with sufficient personal protective items to be able to provide services without disruption.