



Action Against Hunger briefing note

Water, sanitation and hygiene as EU priorities: the way forward to reach the SDGs

Action Against Hunger welcomes the prioritization of water by the Slovenian Presidency and the upcoming Council conclusions on Water in the EU's external action. The world is off track to reach Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG6) on clean drinking water and sanitation for all: achieving universal coverage by 2030 will require nothing less than a quadrupling of current rates of progress. According to the World Health Organization and UNICEF, 2 billion people around the world lack safe drinking water. Almost half of the global population lacks safe sanitation. Every day, over 700 children under the age of five die from diarrhoea linked to unsafe water, sanitation and poor hygiene. Access for all to water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH) is at the core of human development and a prerequisite for achieving not just SDG6, but also SDG1 (No poverty), SDG2 (Zero Hunger), SDG3 (Good Health), SDG11 (Sustainable cities and communities), SDG13 (Climate change) and SDG14 (Life below water). The Council conclusions come at a critical time to ensure water remains a top priority of the EU and its Member States' external action.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON WATER IN EU'S EXTERNAL ACTION

The Council Conclusions should:

1. Re-emphasize the need to **improve, and invest in, sanitation and hygiene**. Drinking water is critical for survival, but so are adequate sanitation and hygiene.
2. Promote the right to water and sanitation as an essential human right, which implies that governments worldwide have an **obligation to fulfil this right**.
3. Recognise the centrality of WASH both for the triple Nexus as well as for achieving the SDGs, and consider **water security** as a top political priority to prevent future shocks from happening or to mitigate their impact. The EU and its Member States should get behind the **Humanitarian Roadmap** for WASH 2020-2025, which sets out a clear path towards improving the ways that humanitarian interventions are delivered.

3. Promote a unified WASH sector, and thus improved coordination and enhanced synergies between actors involved in crisis prevention, humanitarian response, resilience building and development, recognising the **need for sustained support** and funding mechanisms that guarantee access to basic WASH services in communities, health facilities and schools.
4. **Spend more than the agreed 20% funding target on human development** in the Global Europe - NDICI instrument to ensure the multisectorial approach to human development and ensure access to basic social services (such as health, WASH, nutrition, social protection and education) for all.
5. Highlight the need to **integrate WASH activities with nutrition and health interventions**. To end undernutrition, we need to tackle exposure to the water-related diseases that contribute to it. Evidence shows that WASH interventions are effective in combating both acute as well as chronic undernutrition. This evidence needs to be translated into delivering effective minimum packages of combined health, nutrition and WASH services.
6. Commit to **reversing the stagnation in funding** since 2010: the share of total ODA disbursements allocated towards WASH has stagnated at 4% and the humanitarian funding gap for WASH continues to widen.
7. Prioritize **funding towards rural and urban infrastructure for the most vulnerable and hardest to reach**. Without access to WASH infrastructure, people cannot be expected to live healthy lives. **Innovative funding mechanisms** (loans, blended finance) **are not a panacea**: they are not suitable for small-scale infrastructure, do not address poor sanitation and hygiene, and should not be considered in fragile contexts, which are home to 23% of the world's population (1.8 billion). The new European Financial Architecture for Development (EFAD) should allow for investments in small-scale WASH infrastructure and for their funding sources to be earmarked and tracked.
8. Actively **integrate the global Water and Climate Agenda** to support more effective adaptation and resilience. Sustainable and climate-friendly agriculture must be promoted with adequate water and soil management. Water should be much more prominently featured during the upcoming and future UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26 and subsequent COPs) to help speed up progress towards SDGs 6 and 13.
9. Recognise that new and necessary requirements and higher quality standards for WASH (environmental considerations, sustainability of interventions in emergencies or protracted crises) also come with a cost.
10. Commit to **evidence-based decision-making**, by supporting the research, development and implementation of holistic risk assessment tools that allow for early warning and forecasting of WASH-related risks, and in turn help to orient and sustain political and financial support to where they are most needed.
11. Underline the need to increase the participation of civil society, local actors and local authorities in sector governance and ensure the implementation of the **localisation agenda**.
12. Finally, we call on the **next trio Presidency** - France, the Czech Republic and Sweden - to **continue prioritizing water** as a key cross-cutting issue for sustainable development, given the lack of progress and political neglect to date.

LESSONS LEARNT

Through its double mandate, its multi-sectoral activities with an invested research component and its link with international and local actors, Action Against Hunger has learned the following :

- Even during severe crises, interventions that aim to improve resilience are feasible and necessary, as long as the most pressing needs can be met. Short-term funding however is always an obstacle to establishing a resilient response.
- As illustrated by the example from Iraq, water services in our intervention zones are deteriorating due to climate-induced shocks and stresses. Water conservation measures are therefore critical to protecting the living conditions and livelihoods of millions of people, in all our intervention areas.
- Not just reliable data, but also trusted analysis frameworks are needed to inform decision-making and efficiently allocate resources. Continued support is needed to bolster the quality of prediction models, which in turn will help to prevent and mitigate future crises.
- Groundwater is the largest freshwater source on earth, yet we know very little about it. Measuring groundwater levels is indispensable to anticipate water shortages for household consumption, food shortages, and ultimately adverse health outcomes.
- The water sector has always worked with the private sector under a regulatory framework. We underline the difference between the privatization of water and the involvement of the private sector in funding, managing, operating or maintaining WASH infrastructure or services. The private sector, including micro-enterprises and social enterprises, can be a catalyst for employment creation as well.
- The aid sector is evolving, and organizations with a double mandate can play an important role in bringing the right people together, at the right time and in the right place. WASH partnerships with local universities, foreign experts, rural communities, utilities etc are a key enabler to put the Nexus into practice.



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Action Against Hunger expertise in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

Action Against Hunger provided WASH assistance to over 5.6 million people in 2019 through the construction or rehabilitation of water points, sanitation facilities and hygiene promotion activities. The WASH sector represents approximately 25% of Action Against Hunger's operations; more than 270 projects each year.

Action Against Hunger works with its partners to promote nutrition security and a nutrition-sensitive approach. This approach combines nutrition and health, food security and livelihoods, mental health, health system strengthening, and creating a safe environment through improved water, sanitation and hygiene. WASH interventions contribute to mitigating the consequences of hunger and addressing its root causes, by :

- Improving the quality and access to drinking water and sanitation, and adapting hygiene and care practices in the communities where we work;
- Limiting exposure to infectious diseases;
- Ensuring minimum WASH standards in emergencies and in medical facilities or schools in our intervention zones;
- Promoting sustainable and climate-friendly agriculture with adequate water and soil management;
- Engaging in collective efforts to address the root causes of hunger, including poverty, conflict, inequality, climate change, poor governance and insufficient political will.

In addition to these operational approaches, Action Against Hunger is a well-known actor in the areas of WASH advocacy, WASH-related research, and humanitarian coordination.

IMPLEMENTING THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Over the last 10 years, the WASH sector has seen encouraging progress. Humanitarian coordination has improved - including across sectors, but challenges remain to “operationalize” the Humanitarian-Development Nexus (HDN). The “Nexus approach” was designed to ensure continuity and address the gap between rapid emergency response and longer-term development by ensuring that humanitarian responses to protracted crises also contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **But this is easier said than done.**

During emergencies, **rapid standalone WASH or multi-sectoral interventions prevail over the need to set up long-term sustainable services, not only to save lives or respond to immediate needs, but also to allow for proper disengagement** and a progressive transfer of responsibilities to local actors. At the same time, this does not relieve us of the obligation to think about the long-term consequences of short-term interventions.

This briefing captures how Action Against Hunger has been examining **WASH along the humanitarian-development “contiguuum”**, through a range of projects and partnerships. As implementing agencies strive to improve their action, the European Union and its Member States should provide the programmatic framework, institutional support, and the necessary funding to foster this type of projects.

❖ How can WASH contribute to early warning and crisis prevention?

An example from Madagascar

Currently, Madagascar is experiencing its worst drought-caused famine in 40 years. According to the United Nations, Madagascar is the first climate change-induced famine. Water scarcity is one of the multiple factors associated with undernutrition. Consequently, rainfall trends have a direct effect on surface (immediate effect) and groundwater sources (delayed effect), on food production and on safe hygiene and sanitation practices. These in turn all affect disease and malnutrition rates.

Aside from responding to this crisis, Action Against Hunger is also studying the relationship between hydroclimatic data, nutritional and child health indicators, and data on WASH services and food security. As it takes time for water to infiltrate into the soil, and because groundwater is the main water source, **groundwater levels are important markers for later health outcomes**. Through the implementation of a more reliable hydro-climatic and health data collection system, Action Against Hunger aims to provide scientifically robust **alerts** on climatic, food security, nutrition and health impacts in southern Madagascar. The research (“Hydronut”) also looks at how these data can improve the timeliness and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. This unique early warning system has shown the **value of groundwater measurements in prediction models**, and can be replicated by other agencies or NGOs in other countries.

❖ How can WASH contribute to prioritizing interventions to those areas with the greatest needs? Introducing the WASH Severity Classification (WSC)

Over the past decade, the WASH sector has generated more, and more reliable, data. Yet the absence of a standardized framework to transform complex datasets into actionable information has become a bottleneck in decision-making for WASH. Other standardized frameworks do not take WASH data sufficiently into account, and **WASH-related crises are therefore not well captured**. This strategic gap has prevented the sector as a whole from effectively developing evidence-based planning, prioritizing the response, allocating resources efficiently, and using this data for advocacy.

Inspired by the IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a similar approach - where various data sources are fed into a recognized and trusted analysis framework - has now emerged, with the support and early buy-in from over twenty aid organizations. The **WASH Severity Classification** is a set of tools and protocols designed to enable analysts from **humanitarian and development organizations** to measure the severity of WASH conditions across various crises and across time. It classifies these areas into 5 phases (phase 1 being the least severe to phase 5 “catastrophic”), to quantify the number of people in need by severity level, while assessing likely situational changes and monitoring key risk factors. This is critical for response preparedness and early warning systems, and will support decision-making, including longer-term resource allocation, to those areas most in need. So far, the WSC has been applied to Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, South Sudan and Iraq. Over 20 countries will follow in 2021-2022.

❖ **How can WASH contribute to mitigating the consequences of climate change during reconstruction? An example from Iraq**

The Middle East and North Africa region is the **most water scarce region in the world**, and the situation is deteriorating: the 2020-2021 rainfall season in Iraq was the second driest in the last 40 years. Cyclical patterns of drought, followed by flooding, displace over 57,000 people each year. In Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI) water conservation is essential: the Mosul reservoir is 15 feet below normal levels due to erratic rainfall and high demand. Furthermore, studies show that up to 40% of water is being lost due to dilapidated water systems, insufficient maintenance and the **inability to detect leaks**. Water loss results in higher operational costs, less budget for maintenance and repairs, and ultimately more leaks. In addition, leaks are also a health hazard, as the latest **cholera outbreak** in KRI was attributed to an undetected leak in a water pipe.

Action Against Hunger implemented a **leakage detection project** to reduce water losses in Dohuk city, reflecting a shift from emergency interventions towards more sustainable development. This project developed the capacity of local service providers on leak detection technology and repairs, by drawing upon the expertise from **Aquassistance who trained and equipped local operatives**. Action Against Hunger financed the Dohuk Directorate of Water to detect and fix 59 leaks in the city. Nine months after the project closure, all operatives are still using the equipment in their daily maintenance activities.

Currently, Action Against Hunger and the University of Mosul are jointly developing a model to **predict the scale of water scarcity** in Iraq, funded by the Start Fund. The model will generate a monthly forecast (*Water Scarcity Index*) based on temperature, rainfall, evaporation, run-off and water consumption, and estimate the impact on domestic water use, irrigation, and the number of drought-affected individuals. Hopefully this will allow the humanitarian community to **prevent or mitigate future water crises**.

❖ How can WASH contribute to the sustainable improvement of water services to refugees and vulnerable populations? An example from Lebanon

The **Syrian crisis** is one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time, displacing 4 million people from their home country. UNHCR has estimated that over **1 million refugees have fled to Lebanon since 2012, and this influx has exacerbated pre-existing constraints** in the country - among the most pressing issues are polluted and scarce water resources. Poor water resources management, environmental pollution, weak water governance, social tensions around access to water and the high cost of water, **exclude Lebanese residents and Syrian refugees from reliable and affordable services**. To respond to these needs, Action Against Hunger is currently implementing *HawkaMaa-EU*, a three-year national level project funded by EU MADAD Trust Fund, to support Lebanese authorities and Syrian refugees.

The project addresses immediate water and sanitation needs of vulnerable populations across Lebanon (South, Bekaa, North and Mount Lebanon regions) by enhancing the capacity of communities and institutions to **manage WASH services in a participatory and inclusive** way. It aims to improve dialogue and collaboration between National level Ministries, the four Regional Water Establishments (WEs), local authorities and civil society on the sustainable improvement of water service delivery. The impact is measured through the actual increase of water supply and quality to households, increased revenue generation of WEs, decreased cost of water, and the use of unsustainable water resources. Over 147,000 vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian individuals will be provided with above standard quantity of safe water through water/wastewater projects. This project demonstrates how WASH is key for reducing social tensions, improving refugee protection space, and creating inclusive governance.

❖ How can WASH improve people's livelihoods? An example from the occupied Palestinian territory

Action Against Hunger has worked in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) since 2002 to help protect and strengthen the resilience of Palestinian communities. Funded by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), a 4-year project aims to **increase opportunities for self-sustained livelihoods of conflict-affected people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip**. The project focuses on **women and youth** through three different strategies: first by supporting basic service provision and rural infrastructure by constructing and rehabilitating water networks, setting up water connection points to service communities in need, and providing households with rain water harvesting cisterns and irrigation works. Second, the project increases the technical skills and abilities of rights holders to improve their employment opportunities, while also working on the surrounding ecosystem for their employability. Finally, the project supports micro-enterprises, women's groups and social businesses.

Climate change, protracted crises, endless armed conflicts, and the COVID-19 pandemic all have a devastating impact on WASH service provision; ; and access to water, sanitation and hygiene for all is often a condition to address those shocks.. Water, sanitation and hygiene are vital needs, and a prerequisite for a life with dignity. During this Water Action Decade, and in the run-up to the COP26 (2021), the World Water Forum (2022) and the UN Water Conference (2023), we believe that finally, there is momentum for WASH. We therefore applaud the Republic of Slovenia for putting water at the heart of external action during its EU Council Presidency. We hope that beyond the Council Conclusions, real political commitment, including adequate resources, will follow suit. We have less than a decade to reach the SDGs. The time to act is now.



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