

Outcome Brief

First session: Utilities' Support to Inclusive WASH Access in Informal Settlements and Vulnerable Communities

19 May 2020, 13:30 – 15:30 CEST

162 Participants

Introduction

Water utilities are playing a central role in the efforts to ensure the safety and continuity of water supply required to maintain basic hygiene and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Their efforts in informal settlements and other vulnerable communities are particularly critical at this time, such as extending distribution networks, communicating about good hygiene, and providing mobile service stations, among others. This first-in-a-series webinar brought together water utilities from around the world to exchange experiences on the challenges they are facing and outlooks for the future. Key questions addressed were: What new technology, partnerships and other innovations are being brought to life through these concerted efforts? What challenges do they imply? And as utility revenues drop, who is paying for them? Finally, can the fight against COVID help overcome other water-related diseases that cause almost half a million deaths a day?

Water as a Fundamental Right

The webinar opened with a keynote by **Mr. Léo Heller, UN Special Rapporteur** on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, who urged utilities and other actors involved in COVID-19 response to use the lens of human rights to plan interventions during this time. He stressed the need to target those who are most vulnerable and live in poverty, with special attention to slums and informal settlements, people living in public spaces (homeless), rural areas and residents of detention centers, health centers and nursing homes.



"The pandemic is not democratic. Vulnerable communities are less protected, they have less access to water, and so they are certainly most affected. We need to identify and to focus on those people that are more disadvantaged and provide proper water supply to protect them from the disease."

The webinar also launched the [UN-Habitat/UNICEF Interim technical note on water, sanitation and hygiene for COVID-19 response in slums and informal urban settlements](#), which were presented by **UNICEF's Ms. Kelly Ann Naylor**, Associate Director, WASH.

"Informal settlements and slums are not homogeneous areas, but are very much diverse across ethnic groups, languages (...) There is a strong need for mapping these areas: COVID-19 outbreak happens in clusters and it is important to be able to understand them to be most effective."



The following are the key messages for WASH in informal settlements highlighted in the joint publication:

- Incorporate basic WASH service provision in national and city level response plans
- Strengthen systems and mechanisms for effective hand hygiene and other hygiene practices
- Ensure adequate and regular WASH service provision with focus on reaching the most vulnerable population
- Secure continuous access to WASH and IPC services in quarantine and isolation centres
- Provide adequate and functional WASH facilities in targeted schools of key vulnerable areas
- Ensure continuity of services for everyone

Utilities' Experiences from Around the World

The webinar brought together water sector actors and partners from all regions. The panel discussion comprised of the following five utility representatives:

Mr. Ednick Msweli
eThekweni Municipality
Durban, South Africa



Mr. Joaquin Buendia
EMASESA
Seville, Spain



Mr. Alejandro Barrio
AYSA
Buenos Aires, Argentina



Mr. Mujiaman Sukirno
PDAM Surya Sembada
Surabaya, Indonesia



Mr. Mark Barnett
NWC
Kingston, Jamaica



Utilities' key successes and challenges in managing WASH in informal settlements during COVID-19

- There has been a relatively rapid response by national government to the pandemic, with lockdowns and other measures which have helped contain the spread. Utilities have played a crucial effort in the context of this response, becoming an essential humanitarian actor. There has been extensive collaboration and coordination with different levels of government in areas such as awareness raising and campaigning, and in ensuring speed and continuity in procurement processes for essential supplies.
- Tremendous efforts have been made to increase access and ensure universal water supply to informal settlements. In the absence of piped water supply, other ways of supplying water have been put in place such as static tanks, temporary standpipes, plastic bags. Meeting the WHO guidelines for water quality is essential and some utilities are having to increase the use of disinfectants.
- Ensuring supply to informal settlements come with particular challenges, such as high population density, which make COVID19 strategies such as social distancing difficult, topography (some are situated on very steep land or in flood plains) and general vulnerabilities such as high levels of poverty and unemployment and high rates of infection of HIV2 and TB. An adapted approach to informal settlements needs to take their unique context into account.
- Community sanitation facilities have been successfully deployed, providing water supply and safe sanitation in informal settlements. Challenges include the lack of the space for these facilities due to overcrowding, frequent disruptions in water supply due to illegal connections and insufficient capacity, and slow procurement of health products such as

sanitizers and soap for the facilities. Workers in the facilities must be provided with PPE to reduce risk of exposure.

- Increased level of care for staff have been necessary during the crisis, such as flexible working arrangements, reduced working hours and health measures such as supply of lunch and nutritional supplements.
- Constant and careful systems monitoring is necessary to guarantee continuity and quality of supply, given the unusual circumstances and the higher-than-usual demand which potentially places additional stress on infrastructures.

Medium to long-term considerations

- Providing universal supply is a critical objective, where possible in the form of piped water supply. The access to water (level of coverage) has in fact increased in many service areas as a result of the efforts made and innovative modalities of supply.
- Different sector actors need to continue working together to resolve issues such as relocations (housing, land). While improvised coordination has yielded quick response in the interim basis, more efficient and agile cooperation strategies and tools are required to facilitate long term and sustained results.
- The impact on revenue is a key concern moving forward, as operators are required to abolish disconnection policies, and at the same time many customers are not able to pay e.g. because offices are closed, they are unable to afford due to loss of income or do not have access to electronic means of payment. Ways to maintain liquidity will need to be found in collaboration with government authorities, ensuring universality in service levels.
- There is a clear tendency to redirect and repurpose some staff capacity, as in the context of financial challenges, some areas of operation require more attention. Furthermore, some operators are reducing the use of contractors, and refocusing on developing inhouse capacity.
- Increasing screening of staff for COVID-19 symptoms and other mechanisms to reduce risk of infection in staff is being stepped up, including the provision of PPE for staff, particularly those working in direct contact with customers or as part of special efforts in communities. This is a priority issue for those who need to visit or work in informal settlements where the hygiene is inadequate or there may not be enough space to ensure physical distancing.

Key messages and recommendations

- The COVID-19 crisis has in several cases advanced strategies to increase services levels to informal settlements and vulnerable communities, given the necessity to provide for basic hygiene.
- New forms of coordination and governance have emerged, particularly in the area of procurement where systems have had to adapt in order to ensure continuity of essential supplies.
- Financial equity issues are rapidly arising for many operators
- International partners can help facilitate learning and enable utilities respond quicker to new and unexpected challenges.

Utilities' Actions in Informal Settlements

eThekweni Municipality, Durban, South Africa

Total population in the service area 3.7 M	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 85%	No of connections 520,000
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements 27%	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 75%	No of employees 520,000

Key challenges in informal settlements:

- High density levels, which make COVID19 strategies such as social distancing difficult
- Topography (situated on very steep land or in flood plains)
- General vulnerabilities such as high levels of poverty and unemployment and high rates of infection of HIV2 and TB

Key actions taken:

- Rolled out over 1,500 shared prefabricated community ablution blocks (CABs)
- Static tanks are being supplied to some areas while water tankers are supplying to areas without local potable supply
- Disconnection of illegal connections has been put on hold. The focus will be on the supply of free services and repair of faults rather than removal of illegal connections or disconnections due to non-payment
- Rigorous protection of workers, such as provision of soap and sanitizers are being provided to caretakers of CABs
- Communication material (mainly brochures and posters) has been sent to CAB caretakers so that they can monitor and control behavior and ensure surfaces are sanitized. The Municipality is also working with the National Department of Health and various NGOs to undertake awareness campaigns

EMASESA, Seville, Spain

Total population in the service area 1.1 M	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 100%	No of connections 70,000
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements 2%	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 100%	No of employees 850

Key challenges in informal settlements:

- Financial difficulties due to an income drop by 90%, which makes the goal to guarantee access to water more difficult

Key actions taken:

- The main goal has always been guarantee the continuity of the service and the supply, with special attention to vulnerable communities
- Adoption of contingency plan which guarantees that services are 100% active
- Halt cutoffs of the service
- Vulnerable families do not pay the water bills
- Following recommendations from the Health Ministry, the phone services are reinforced to 24 hours a day to respond to all the needs and calls from customers
- Ensuring the safety of staff by both implementing remote work by those employees whose position allows them to do so, and implementing all the security and hygienic measures
- Coordination with local, regional and national authorities to make decisions to have the best impact and the lower cost in order to optimize

AySA, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Total population in the service area 14.4 M	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 75%	No of connections 2.3 M
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements 10%	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation 62%	No of employees 7,900

Key challenges in informal settlements:

- In informal settlements, it is important to ensure that the network that the company operates reaches its perimeter, in the event that there is no formal Municipal layout (public streets). Internally, there are informal pipes, which are administered by the neighbourhood and / or the Municipality, so in many cases they need additional contribution
- The other challenge, equally important, is in the neighbourhoods and / or areas that do not yet have a potable water network service, that is, where the population is not yet served

Key actions taken:

- Minimum guards were scheduled, through strict security protocols, to ensure potable water service to the entire served area
- Public awareness campaigns on the importance of hygiene and hand washing
- As a first step, the needs in each area were coordinated with the governments of each of the 27 Municipalities
- A service with tanker trucks was implemented (26 trucks of between 15,000 to 25,000 liters each), which allows for the distribution of around 500,000 liters per route
- 3 bagging machines were put into operation at the General San Martin Water Treatment Plant: package drinking water in 1-liter sachets to distribute in specific areas
- Tanks were mounted for the distribution of water in the Delta Islands
- Chlorine drums delivery operation was implemented in the neighbourhoods

PDAM Surya Sembada, Surabaya, Indonesia

Total population in the service area 3,348,653	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 99.91%	No of connections 577,716
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements -	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation -	No of employees 1,491

Key challenges in informal settlements:

- Housing spaces, structural problems, construction density

Key actions taken:

- Provision of PPE to customers and staff
- SOP of the COVID-19 by local and central government of Indonesia
- Reduction by 20% of the working hours of the personnel, and promotion of remote work to employees
- Provision of vitamins and food to employees to ensure their health
- Deployment of handwashing tanks in public areas and in highly populated areas
- Free water bill for around 40% of its customers (poor communities)
- Maintenance of water supply and increase of quality of water by controls of biocide, making sure water is safe

NWC, Kingston, Jamaica

Total population in the service area 2.2 M	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for water 73%	No of connections 525,000
% of people in the service area living in informal settlements 30%	Coverage ratio (population served/total population) for sanitation -	No of employees 1,825

Key challenges in informal settlements:

- Limited infrastructure
- Revenue drop by 30-40% since March, and it is still declining
- Climate change challenges, longest annual drought period in Jamaica

Key actions taken:

- Once the government declared Jamaica as a disaster area, NWC switched to humanitarian role
- Implemented strategies to protect staff
- In order to mitigate the spread amongst customers, NWC closed its commercial offices since most of the customers who use these are part of vulnerable communities
- Immediately announced halt of disconnection of services
- Informal settlements: we have even Before COVID strategy, and with the support and funding of Jamaican authorities, a strategy for informal settlements was implemented to improve water and sanitation infrastructure to ensure reliable access to services
- Securing PPE to staff while they work on the field
- Consumption has increased by 20% in informal settlements, which means the actions underway are succeeding

Resources

Session Resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 webinar series](#)

[GWOPA YouTube channel](#)

[UN-Habitat/UNICEF Interim technical note on water, sanitation and hygiene for COVID-19 response in slums and informal urban settlements - May 2020](#)

Further resources

[GWOPA COVID-19 Updates](#)

[UN-Habitat COVID-19](#)

[WHO/UNICEF Interim Guidance on Water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management for the COVID-19 virus](#)

[Inter-Agency Standing Committee Interim Guidance on Public Health and Social Measures for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response in Low Capacity and Humanitarian Settings](#)

[WHO: Strengthening Preparedness for COVID-19 in Cities and Urban Settings](#)

Let the discussion continue!

Webinars often raise more questions than they can answer. To facilitate further discussion, exchange and learning among webinar participants and the audience, GWOPA/UN-Habitat has opened a Workplace group. If you would like to be invited to this group to exchange questions, ideas and resources with others about water utilities and COVID-19 challenges, please kindly send an email to info@gwopa.org



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