

Fighting COVID-19 Together – Are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?

Policy Brief



GWOPA
Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Fighting COVID-19 Together – Are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?

Policy Brief

Authors

Ivan Draganic | Senior Knowledge Management Consultant

Elisa Bernal | Communications Consultant

Lars Stordal | Programme Officer

UN-Habitat Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance

Table of Contents

About this Brief	4
Context	5
The Immediate Impact of the Pandemic: Operators Ensuring Continuity of and Access to Services	7
The Long-term Impact of the Pandemic: Operators' Financial Sustainability	10
The Scope of the 4 th Global WOPs Congress Session on "Fighting COVID-19 Together – Are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?"	16
Conclusions and Recommendations	17

About this Brief

This Policy Brief provides an overview of the current context and relevant initiatives implemented by water and sanitation operators from low-income to high-income countries in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the operators' tools and mechanisms aimed at securing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services for all consumer groups, including the governmental and regulatory measures that seek to secure long-term service sustainability by providing technical and financial support to the operators. Accordingly, these instruments are assessed considering both the positive and the negative impacts of the pandemic that triggered sectoral responses from the operators.

All the initiatives, analysed at the occasion of the 4th Global Water Operators' Partnership (WOPs) Congress, particularly the session titled "Fighting COVID-19 together – are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?", intend to raise awareness on the range of operators' responses to the current pandemic and support GWOPA's members and partners' understanding of the related issues. Finally, this Policy Brief is complemented and enhanced by several illustrative examples to highlight the operators' good practices and lessons learned, and experiences shared during the GWOPA/GIZ #UtilitiesFightCovid19 webinars. The Policy Brief also builds upon the importance of not-for-profit partnerships and knowledge exchange. It provides essential guidance and recommendations to its target audience, including water and sanitation decision makers, regulators, operators, and, in general, all practitioners and stakeholders, on how to improve their contribution to COVID-19 prevention and response strategy.



Context

Adequate and accessible WASH services are essential for protecting human health and preventing infectious disease outbreaks such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. From the early days of the pandemic, cities have been on the front line responding to COVID-19. The global spread of the virus through travel, trade and mobility meant that many of the first detected infections appeared in urban areas, prompting many to worry about their future. These concerns only deepened as restrictions to contain transmission, such as universal lockdowns and curfews, brought local economies to a standstill. Yet in the months that followed, as the challenges of the pandemic evolved, so too did our understanding of the disease and its complex relationship with cities.¹

Appropriate operator responses and practices applied during the lockdown and consequent emergency phases, could enable adequate WASH practices to serve as barriers to human-to-human transmission of the COVID-19 virus at homes and wherever people gather. Adequate delivery of WASH services is also critical during the recovery phase of a disease outbreak to mitigate the secondary impacts on community livelihoods and well-being. These secondary impacts – which could include disruptions to supply chains, inability to pay bills or panic-buying – have negative impacts on the continuity and quality of water and sanitation services, the ability of affected households to access and pay for WASH services and products and the ability of schools, workplaces and other public spaces to maintain effective hygiene protocols when they re-open.² Sustained by the operators, cities can manage the pandemic and emerge as the hubs of energy, resilience and innovation that make them such vibrant and appealing places to live.³

The coronavirus crisis cruelly reminds us of the crucial importance of access to safe water and sanitation. COVID-19 highlights the critical role local service providers play as front-line responders. According to a WHO-UNICEF technical brief on WASH and waste management for COVID-19:⁴

- Frequent and proper hand hygiene is one of the most important measures that can be used to prevent infection with the COVID-19 virus. WASH services should enable more frequent and regular hand hygiene by improving facilities and using proven behaviour change techniques.
- WHO guidance on the safe management of drinking water and sanitation services applies to the COVID-19 outbreak. Measures that go above and beyond these recommendations are not needed.

1 UN-Habitat (2021). Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future. Nairobi, Kenya. Available at unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/cities_and_pandemics-towards_a_more_just_green_and_healthy_future_un-habitat_2021.pdf.

2 See the “WASH and COVID-19 Brief” page of The World Bank, Available at www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/brief/wash-water-sanitation-hygiene-and-covid-19.

3 UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World, 2020, Available at www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20189.doc.htm

4 World Health Organization and UNICEF (2020). “Water, sanitation, hygiene, and waste management for the COVID-19 virus.” Available at wash.unhcr.org/download/covid-19-wash-technical-brief.

- Many co-benefits will be realized by safely managing WASH services and applying good hygiene practices. Such efforts will prevent other infectious diseases, which cause millions of deaths each year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely struck countries all over the world. Beyond the human tragedy, devastating economic impacts are anticipated in all countries and for society's most vulnerable and marginalized people. The UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response⁵ to COVID-19 warns that "The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: It is affecting societies and economies at their core. While the impact of the pandemic will vary from country to country, it will most likely increase poverty and inequalities on a global scale, making the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) even more urgent." This requires "assessing the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on societies, economies and vulnerable groups...to inform and tailor the responses of governments and partners to recover from the crisis and ensure that no one is left behind in this effort."

Human and economic costs are likely higher for fragile and lower-income countries, which generally have limited coverage and capacity of water supply and sanitation systems, lower health care capacity, larger informal sectors, shallower financial markets, limited fiscal space and weaker WASH regulation. Restricted mobility of workers and people, poor access to supplies coupled with a price increase for WASH services and commodities, and an acute financial crisis at all levels – from the household to the institutional, have hampered the delivery of safe water and sanitation for all and the ability to promote and maintain good hygiene practice. In many cities in fragile countries, from 30 to 70 per cent of all urban dwellers reside in some form of informal settlement that falls outside the city's water and sanitation service coverage areas.⁶

⁵ United Nations Sustainable Development Group (2020). A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. Available at unsdg.un.org/resources/un-framework-immediate-socio-economic-response-covid-19.

⁶ UN-Habitat and UNICEF (2020). "Interim technical note on water, sanitation and hygiene for COVID-19 response in slums and informal urban settlements." Available at unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/un-habitat-unicef_wash_technical_note_urban_wash_for_covid_in_informal_settlements.pdf.

The Immediate Impact of the Pandemic: Operators Ensuring Continuity of and Access to Services

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global WASH sector was facing several important challenges, including the uncertainties of a changing climate, greater demands for services from a rapidly growing and increasingly dense urban population, mushrooming informal settlements not connected to water grids or sewer systems, ageing infrastructure and the looming risk of wastewater pollution.⁷ Ever since the pandemic, the lack of maintenance and poor operation of WASH infrastructure has resulted in gaps in providing services, from partial disruption to irreparable deterioration or collapse. In part, interruption of services has been the consequence of supply chain disruptions, such as failures to purchase fuel for pumping stations and treatment plants or the increase in prices for chemicals, spare parts and WASH commodities.⁸ Water consumption and demand have changed in both domestic and non-domestic settings during universal lockdowns, which governments introduced closing non-essential activities and restricting other social activities.⁹

Within these emerging challenges, the top priority for public water operators around the globe during the COVID-19 crisis was to ensure the continuity of and access to services. Joaquín Buendía, from Empresa Metropolitana de Abastecimiento y Saneamiento de Aguas de Sevilla (EMASESA), Spain, reaffirmed that: “the main goal has always been to guarantee the continuity of the service and the supply, with special attention to vulnerable communities”.¹⁰

More specifically, the daily and systematic operation of water supply, sanitation services and sewerage installations have been affected by restricted or no movement of staff due to curfew and quarantine measures and the increased risk of contagion among the utility staff. This has hampered operations, maintenance, and construction works. Many governments have identified people working in the water and sewerage industry as essential workers, and thus, utilities were able to maintain the continuity of the services. However, for that, most operators provided appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to utility workers (such as gloves, safety goggles, face shields or masks, and similar) and developed new protocols for safety and security. Other measures taken by the operators have included organizing work

7 Butler, C., Adamowski, J., (2015). “Empowering marginalized communities in water resources management: Addressing inequitable practices in Participatory Model Building.” *Journal of Environmental Management*. vol. 153, pp. 153–162. Available at doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2015.02.010.

8 Global WASH Cluster et al., 2020; USAID, 2020 Available at pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XDMW.pdf.

9 Antwi, S.H., et al., [2021]. “COVID-19 water sector responses in Europe: A scoping review of preliminary governmental interventions.” *Science of the Total Environment*. vol. 762, number 143068. Available at doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.143068.

10 “Utilities’ Support to Inclusive WASH Access in Informal Settlements and Vulnerable Communities”. The Global Water Operators’ Partnerships Alliance, GWOPA/UN-Habitat. Webinar available at gwopa.org/covid-19/webinars.

crews, restricting visits to the water treatment plants, developing alternative channels for customer services and teleworking for non-technical staff.

Telework was promoted, and online communications were strengthened at the time of the pandemic. For example, with over 1,500 employees, Société Malienne de Gestion de l'eau Potable (SOMAGEP) communicates with its employees through its weekly journal Filet d'O. On Monday, 23 March, when no positive cases were yet reported in Mali, there was a special edition of the journal where the General Director, Boubacar Kane, communicated to the employees. The edition was a summary of the situation in Mali urging employees, especially the ones involved in the production, maintenance, distribution and quality control of the water department, to implement regular, proper handwashing with water and soap; to avoid close contact with other people; or, in case of illness, to stay at home.

Similar problems have been reported by utility staff when collecting mandatory routine compliance water quality samples or reading and replacing water meters. In both cases, customers have been reluctant to allow utility personnel to enter their homes because of the risk of contagion.¹¹ In rural areas, other problems encountered by community organizations related to their inability to meet due to restrictions and confinement policies, which severely affected the participants' decision-making processes.

Wastewater and drinking water treatment operators have faced operational challenges due to a shortage of treatment chemicals, critical supplies, and equipment resulting from disruptions in the supply chains and increased prices.¹² Supply chain problems and increased costs of hardware and chemicals also made the provision of sanitation products and services less profitable, with significant margin contraction among suppliers of both on-site sanitation and faecal sludge management services.¹³

At the same time, wastewater operators have become key actors in surveillance efforts to monitor the spread of COVID-19. Monitoring wastewater systems for viral loads has long been a common method to track infections in urban populations. Wastewater and faecal sludge monitoring are now serving as a cost-effective "early-warning" mechanism to identify COVID-19 hotspots as well as the occurrence and spread of new variants. Studies on COVID-19 have shown that the virus is shed in faeces and collected in city sewerage systems where such systems exist. Moreover, each sample comes from a wastewater network that serves a specific community, providing information about the populations from which the virus came.¹⁴

11 States, S., (2020). "Epidemic/Pandemic Emergency Planning for Water Utilities." Journal AWWA, vol. 112, pp. 26–33. Available at doi.org/10.1002/awwa.1631.

12 Global WASH Cluster (2020). "COVID-19 and WASH: Mitigating the socio-economic impacts on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Sector." Available at washcluster.net/sites/default/files/COVID_19_WASH_Advocacy_Final-GWC-SWA.pdf.

13 USAID (2020). Assessing the effects of COVID-19 on access to water, sanitation, and hygiene in USAID high priority and strategy-aligned countries: Synthesis report. Washington, D.C. Available at www.globalwaters.org/sites/default/files/covid_wash_trends_final_report_jan2021_1.22.21.pdf.

14 Gill, Victoria (2 July 2020). "Coronavirus: Testing sewage an 'easy win'." BBC News. Available at www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-53257101.

The National Institute of Health (ISS) in Italy found traces of the virus in December 2019, before the first clinical case was reported in February. These findings are similar to the Netherlands, France and Spain that showed the presence of the virus before the initial cases were reported in China.¹⁵

COWWID-19, a joint initiative by the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG) and the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, is monitoring SARS-CoV-2 in wastewater as an early warning system to track the spatio-temporal development of COVID-19. After collecting 500 samples of wastewater treatment plants spread across Switzerland, the findings suggested a correlation of SARS-CoV-2 load with COVID-19 infection rate over time.

The decline in the quality of humanitarian WASH responses hindered access to services by populations already affected by pre-COVID-19 humanitarian situations. The Global WASH Cluster and other NGOs warned about COVID-19's detrimental effects on WASH service provision, experienced particularly by those already affected by humanitarian crises, including refugees, migrants and internally displaced populations.¹⁶ Operators are essential humanitarian actors. There has been extensive collaboration and coordination with different levels of government, and tremendous efforts have been made to increase access and ensure a universal water supply to informal settlements. Other ways of supplying water have been used in the absence of piped water supply, such as static tanks, temporary standpipes and plastic bags.

While regular, vigorous handwashing is one of the most effective ways of preventing transmission of the COVID-19 virus, for one-third of people worldwide, it is impossible because they lack a reliable, safe water supply. Vulnerable communities are the most badly hit by the challenges of COVID-19. People living in informal settlements, homeless people, women, children, older adults, migrants, refugees, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups need continuous access to sufficient and affordable water.¹⁷

With almost 600,000 people, one-third of Durban's population – commonly known as eThekweni – lives in informal settlements. Durban's local government, eThekweni Municipality, is making sure the areas not connected to existing water articulation networks are covered by providing static water tanks to guarantee access to water. Like many utilities around the globe, eThekweni Water and Sanitation also decided to reconnect those households that had been disconnected due to unpaid bills.

15 Kitson, Hermione (19 July 2020). "Wastewater becoming a key tool in tracing COVID-19 in Italy." CGTN. Available at newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-19/Wastewater-becoming-a-key-tool-in-tracing-COVID-19-in-Italy-5eA86XQFGw/index.html.

16 Global WASH Cluster (2020). "COVID-19 and WASH: Mitigating the socio-economic impacts on the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Sector." Available at washcluster.net/sites/default/files/COVID_19_WASH_Advocacy_Final-GWC-SWA.pdf.

17 The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (23 March 2020). "COVID-19 will not be stopped without providing safe water to people living in vulnerability – UN experts." Available at www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25738.

The Long-term Impact of the Pandemic: Operators' Financial Sustainability

As the authorities in most of the cases suspended water billing for low-income consumers or users in general and prohibited operators from cutting off their service supply, these measures affected operators' revenues.¹⁸ In addition, water and wastewater utilities experienced budgetary problems due to a decline in access to and increase in prices for chemicals and supplies. Data collected by the International Benchmarking Network for Water and Sanitation Utilities reveals that global collection rates have fallen by 40 percentage points for the utilities monitored.¹⁹ While large WASH infrastructure projects generally remained undisturbed during pandemic lockdowns, primarily due to their classification as essential works, it is almost certain that future investments and capital expenditures (CAPEX) will be negatively affected in the short to medium term. This comes as the logical consequence of shifted priorities by national and local authorities towards emergency response and by utilities towards operational and maintenance costs. With most operators downgrading their investment forecast, the main question is how much such a decrease will be. Additional complexities such as allocation issues or anticipated delays in foreign investments suggest that the CAPEX may drop in most low- and middle-income countries by a double-digit percentage.²⁰

A webinar convened by the Global Water Operators' Partnership Alliance (GWOPA) / UN-Habitat concluded that in the context of COVID-19, water operators face three challenges: issues concerning staff management, followed by liquidity and cash flow constraints and ensuring open and continuous customer relations.²¹ In the same webinar, water utilities from around the world expressed that the increased subsidies with the new financial approaches are among the most needed resources to support and prepare for emergencies like COVID-19.

18 International Finance Corporation (2020). "The Impact of COVID-19 on the Water and Sanitation Sector." Available at www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/126b1a18-23d9-46f3-beb7-047c20885bf6/The+Impact+of+COVID+Water+Sanitation_finl_web.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CID=ncaG-hA.

19 The World Bank, (30 June 2020). "Supporting Water Utilities During COVID-19" Available at www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/30/supporting-water-utilities-during-covid-19 (accessed 17 April 2021).

20 Global Water Intelligence, (2020). "The Global Water Market Outlook: The Impact of COVID-19 in Emerging Markets." Webinar available at www.gwiwaterdata.com/webinars.

21 The Global Water Operators' Partnerships Alliance / UN-Habitat (2 June 2020). "Crisis Management: Strategy, Assessment and Decision-Making." Outcome Brief. Available at gwopa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Outcome-brief-emergency-planning.pdf.

COVID-19 Financial Impact Assessment Tool for Water and Sanitation Providers

One year after the COVID-19 pandemic began, most operators are downgrading their investment forecast because of the accumulated losses and the impact on their financial viability. To help the operators calculate the pandemic cost more accurately, the World Bank, through its Global Water Security and Sanitation Partnership (GWSP), has developed a Financial Diagnostic Tool. The tool assesses revenue, debt, operational expenditures such as wages and rent, and additional costs associated with the crisis such as chemicals, PPE, additional water points and tanker services. It can be updated monthly to present an ongoing picture. With informed inputs, it can help service providers to project the financial impact on their operations during the coming period. GWSP is also providing virtual training courses across multiple regions on these subjects.

For example, in Zambia, the World Bank is helping the Lusaka Water and Sewerage Company review and develop its emergency response plan. In Ethiopia, the Bank is helping the Addis Ababa Water and Sewerage Authority tap into expertise and experience from across the world and facilitating other local utilities to procure necessary chemicals and reagents. And in Ghana, the Bank has partnered with the Ghana Water Company Ltd. to prepare an action plan addressing the impacts of the pandemic, and recovery and modernization planning of the utility.²²

The much-needed news for the sector has come through increased earmarked funding for WASH, given that the pandemic generated weak fiscal space and lower capacities for future investments (CAPEX) in low- and middle-income countries. A range of additional funding from a variety of governmental and non-governmental sources has therefore helped the sector when it is needed most. Mostly benefiting from humanitarian appeals conducted by the Global WASH Cluster, low- and middle-income countries have advanced their public-private partnership financing mechanisms or moved towards privatization. An influx of private capital and consequent sectoral restructuring for the long term is even more visible in developed countries, with proposed mergers and acquisitions among some of its most prominent players. Finally, some interesting, innovative financing mechanisms have been put in place to sustain the long-term financial viability of systems and services.

ESAWAS receives additional earmarked funds for regulation from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

With the COVID-19 crisis, the WASH sector is increasingly attracting investments for the necessary soft skills related to various governance issues such as regulation or resilience capacity. A good example of such a trend is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has earmarked a \$3.8 million grant for the Eastern and Southern Africa Water and Sanitation Regulators Association (ESAWAS). Its main objective is to increase access to safely managed sanitation services for an estimated 50.76 million

²² The World Bank, [30 June 2020]. "Supporting Water Utilities During COVID-19". Available at: www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/06/30/supporting-water-utilities-during-covid-19.

of the urban population, particularly the urban poor, in the East and Southern African countries, by improving non-sewer sanitation service delivery through regulation.

Specifically, this project will help national regulators of Burundi, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zanzibar to include the informal urban sanitation providers within their regulatory frameworks. The project outcomes include country-level workshops, regulatory tools to support compliance and enforcement of decision-making, country and regional benchmarking performance reporting mechanisms, and the sectoral financing of capacity-building and regional awards. For example, Kenyan regulator, the Water Services Regulatory Board (WASREB), currently covering only urban areas while 50 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, aims to formalize rural area providers by introducing new indicators to match these areas' criteria, among other measures. Every informal provider will be licensed through a contract with another small urban provider and be delegated to monitor its performance on behalf of WASREB.

The COVID-19 response entailed a high political commitment along with improved participation and coordination by a range of stakeholders from different sectors. With many countries having established multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms, including integrating international and multilateral organizations and other stakeholders, the pandemic revealed that further collaboration and coordination are needed to address COVID-19 and build resilient WASH systems.²³

Maintaining constant communication with the customers is essential. However, many operators have decided to close their customer offices to protect both workers and customers. Utilities have adapted to the digitization of customer services. Channels of communications have been improved to match specific population categories, such as special phone applications to allow deaf and hard of hearing people to reach customer service²⁶. New forms of coordination and governance have emerged, particularly in procurement, where systems have had to adapt to ensure the continuity of essential supplies.

The pandemic inspired operators to identify innovative solutions and approaches, which, in many cases, proved to be essential tools for the effective response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in low-income and middle-income settings. As much as technological innovation is critical, the pandemic has revealed the social, organizational and financial dimensions and transformational, inclusive and empowering approaches to the checklist of remedies required to rethink and innovate the role of actors in service delivery.²⁴

23 Anim, D.O., Ofori-Asenso, R., (01 August 2020). "Water scarcity and COVID-19 in sub-Saharan Africa." *Journal of Infection*. vol. 81, issue 2, E108–E109. Available at doi.org/10.1016/j.jinf.2020.05.032.

24 Sharifi, A., Khavarian-Garmsir, A.R., (2020). "The COVID-19 pandemic: Impacts on cities and major lessons for urban planning, design, and management." *Science of the Total Environment*. vol. 749, number 142391. Available at doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.142391.

Facilitating working from home

During the UK lockdown, water professionals distributed a questionnaire to understand the experiences and perceptions of the organizational response. The findings were evaluated on the measures of mitigation, adaptation, coping and learning. Working from home (WFH) was the most prevalent theme in the survey responses, with a score of 771 individual mentions across 12 of the 14 open-response questions. Questions focused on the challenges employees had faced, what their organization had done to prepare for and mitigate the threat, how their organization might adapt in the medium term, as well as a longer-term outlook on future operations and what might become of the new normal.

The majority of survey respondents (58 per cent) did not expect a return to the pre-lockdown working practice. Consultants (12 per cent) and those working for water service providers (WSPs) (10 per cent) were twice as likely to think that normal working practices would return after the COVID-19 lockdown than regulators (6 per cent) or researchers (5 per cent). There was a perception that WFH would remain for a long time, with some regulators and consultants stating that it might become the norm or business as usual. Some discussed this adaptation further suggesting how this might be realized in practice: For instance, exploring alternative schedules that allow for employees to come into the office at different times without having everyone at the same time. Participants perceived that there would be a change in attitudes and perceptions regarding WFH, with it being considered more acceptable. This demonstrates that, generally, the workforce was able to adapt well to the new situation.

Another question was how the physical office environment might change. Participants perceived that, with the shift to WFH, offices would only be used for occasional and necessary face-to-face meetings. They suggested that there might be smaller offices, less staff, or the potential closure of office locations. When asked to reflect on the learning from the preparing for lockdown (Q15), participants again referred to WFH, suggesting that it was possible to work effectively from home and there should be more provision for this in the future. However, some stated that not everyone could adapt to WFH. More learning is required to ensure WFH is inclusive and does not exclude people who lack access to the necessary equipment (e.g., computer or smartphone).²⁵

The COVID-19 crisis has also revealed the conditional relation between water that is free of charge and increasingly unreliable water supplies.²⁶ It underlined that improved access to water must be more environmentally sustainable and thus accompanied by water conservation measures. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the necessity to rethink the water sector without delay to be prepared for future challenges such as climate change and other potential outbreaks.²⁷

25 Terill, S., et al., (2020). "COVID-19 and the water sector: Understanding impact, preparedness and resilience in the UK through a sector-wide survey." *Water and Environment Journal*. vol. 34, Issue 4. pp. 715–728. Available at doi.org/10.1111/wej.12649.

26 Cooper, R., (2020). "Water security beyond Covid-19." K4D Helpdesk Report 803. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. Available at opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15240.

27 Poch, M., et al., (2020). "When the fourth water and digital revolution encountered COVID-19." *Science of the Total Environment*. vol. 744, number 140980. Available at doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.140980.

Focus on creating livelihoods in response to COVID-19 and beyond in Pakistan

The Federal Ministry of Climate Change in Pakistan is responding to COVID-19 through a series of flagship initiatives such as the Clean Green Pakistan Index (CGPI), Clean Green Champions Programme and a recent Green Economic Stimulus package. These programmes are being used to mobilize resources to rapidly respond to this pandemic while protecting the environment and livelihoods of people. These flagship programmes were launched by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, thereby signaling a high-level mobilization on the issue.

The CGPI is the first-ever city-focused competition conceptualized for creating a mechanism of strengthening municipal service delivery by local governments for the five pillars of CGPI: water, sanitation, hygiene, solid waste management and tree plantation (green belts). The CGPI is being piloted in 12 cities of Punjab and 7 cities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The citizen engagement programme called Clean Green Champions has registered around 120,000 champions (volunteers). On a self-help basis, the registered volunteers assist in creating basic services, supporting local authorities, and promoting behavioural change under CGPI. The champions are also being engaged to advocate behaviour change among isolated communities to control the spread of COVID-19 in Pakistan. These programmes have led to increased budgetary allocations for the WASH sector. An overview of the overall WASH allocations for 2019–2020 and a comparison with earlier year trends reflect that there has been an increase in allocation of 57 per cent from the previous budgets.

Recently, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has approved the Green Economic Stimulus package as part of the Government's effort to extend green cover in the country, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. As an innovative livelihood creation initiative, the Green Economic Stimulus package will increase the daily wage job opportunities for clean and green initiatives primarily around forestry in rural areas and WASH in urban centres. For 2019–2020, the Green Stimulus package has generated a minimum of 65,000 jobs which will be scaled up to 200,000 by December 2020. Along with this, the Ministry of Climate Change has also launched a post-COVID response in two Union Councils of Rawalpindi (Dhook Hassoo and Dhook Syedan) to emphasize job creation around hygiene and sanitation, thereby ensuring people living in urban slums are reached with information and economic stimulus.

Source: Country Experiences on COVID-19 and WASH, Sanitation and Water for All ²⁸

Finally, perhaps the most encouraging positive impact of the pandemic is shifting attention to the human right to water and sanitation. An increased realization and acknowledgement of these rights came through a range of government priorities to ensure that all people have access to sufficient water.²⁹ They include free water initiatives, in various forms; direct provision of water (e.g., water trucks, water storage tanks, etc.)

²⁸ www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/news/country-experiences-covid-19-and-wash

²⁹ Cooper, R., (2020). "Water for the urban poor and Covid-19." K4D Helpdesk Report 826. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. Available at opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15298.

or opening of new water sources in underserved areas; and other measures to increase availability and affordability (e.g., partnerships with private sector providers, digital payments, etc.). While United Nations independent human rights experts are repeatedly calling on governments and utilities to supply free water to certain population groups,³⁰ the question is whether the political will of governments and institutions to sustain these measures beyond the pandemic will remain.

30 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (23 March 2020). "COVID-19 will not be stopped without providing safe water to people living in vulnerability." Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (19 Nov 2020). "COVID-19 pandemic and the human rights to water and sanitation." www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26510&LangID=E (accessed 15 February 2021).

The Scope of the 4th Global WOPs Congress Session on “Fighting COVID-19 Together – Are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?”

In times of a pandemic that affects everyone everywhere, water and sanitation operators around the globe are making unprecedented efforts to ensure the continuity and expansion of services. Their efforts include extending distribution networks, communicating about good hygiene, providing mobile service stations and procuring the critical materials. They often require immediate organizational and operational adjustments such as setting up crisis units, developing emergency strategies, and adapting to a permanently evolving, uncertain situation. Most urgent measures involve not only expanding service to vulnerable communities but also stopping disconnections and keeping staff safe. The WOPs Congress session on “Fighting COVID-19 Together – Are Utilities Getting the Support They Need?” intends to capture many relevant and efficient operators’ responses to the immediate effects of the pandemic, such as limited access to safe WASH services, ruptures in supply chains and interruptions of services, or a decline in the quality of response due to restricted or no movement of utility staff.

In addition, the session will assess the secondary effects of the pandemic. As most of the measures applied to address the primary effects of the pandemic add a substantial financial burden on water and sanitation operators, their ability to sustain public services in the long term is compromised. While working hard to secure continuous services, water operators are being affected by a loss of revenue that threatens future operational and capital expenditures, which will almost certainly result in fewer investments. Based on the estimates by the World Bank, many utilities lost from 20 to 40 per cent of their revenues (sometimes up to 80 per cent) in the months following the outbreak.³¹

The session will discuss these negative impacts that risk future water and sanitation services delivery, with a special focus on the most vulnerable segments of the population. However, the sessions will also aim to discover some of the positive effects that could support and accelerate progress towards safely managed services for all. They range from enhanced communication and innovation to earmarked financial resources and more climate change adapted responses and recovery measures to the pandemic crisis. Most importantly, it appears that the current crisis has contributed to increasingly realizing the human right to water and sanitation and the consequent approach being acknowledged and applied more systematically.

³¹ See the The World Bank “Financing Universal Water and Sanitation Services in the COVID Era” page available at www.worldbank.org/en/programs/global-water-security-sanitation-partnership/publication/financing-universal-water-and-sanitation-services-covid.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Water operators play an essential role in COVID-19 response, and the measures they applied challenged them to rethink how they deliver WASH services. Most operators had to reassess their management and operational service modalities when adapting to COVID-19. Many of them faced challenges related to the disruption in supply chains, restricted mobility of essential staff, and increased prices for WASH materials. Despite the immediate challenges, many operators managed to gain satisfaction and trust among their consumers. The continuity of water provision has been secured in many places thanks to the strong commitment of employees.³²

While most of the measures adopted by various governments included suspending water billing for low-income consumers or users in general and prohibition of cut-offs, operators are left with a financial gap in their revenues. Estimates from the World Bank show that revenue collections for water companies fell by 40 per cent due to the suspension of water charges as a strategy to cushion consumers from the personal financial effect of COVID-19. Consequently, most service operators, notably the informal and vulnerable ones, would require national or external compensation funding. As much as the financial resources could fill the revenue gap, all operators would also need a substantial resilience capacity in the future to better prepare for this kind of crisis. Tailored WOPs able to address this capacity gap should be fostered to create a more resilient GWOPA community.

While big WASH infrastructure projects, in general, remained in place by being classified as essential works, national and local authorities shifted priorities towards emergency response. Meanwhile, operational and maintenance costs for operators limit their potential capital expenditures. Some initial data suggests a two-digit percentage point drop in CAPEX in most of the low-income countries. As much as earmarked funds could recover some of their investment plans, operators should seize this opportunity to turn towards green, innovative and HRTWS focused projects. WOPs could help them fine-tune their proposals to match these outstanding priorities better.

Whether at building risk, resilience, or upgrading their future projects to match investors' strategic innovation, climate or HRTWS priorities, GWOPA played an important role in sharing experiences and lessons learned during the first phase of the pandemic. This 4th Congress session will serve as an important occasion for the Alliance to coherently articulate the financial implications of the COVID-19 crisis that is threatening the sustainability of many operators and WASH public service delivery. It will give them a stage to plan and anticipate the desired partnerships around the main axes of much-needed resilience and capacity-building.

32 Aqua Publica Europea, (June 2020). "Managing the unexpected – European Public Water Utilities facing the coronavirus emergency. Lessons learnt and good practices." Brussels, Belgium. Available at www.aquapublica.eu/sites/default/files/article/file/Final_Publication_European_Public_Water_Utilities_Facing_the_Coronavirus_Emergency.pdf.



Find out more

gwopa.org | [t](#) [i](#) [n](#) [f](#) [v](#)