



# COVID-19 Response and WASH Lessons learned in Bangladesh

## SUMMARY

- As of 14 November 2020, there have been 430,496 positive cases, 347,849 recoveries, and 6,173 deaths across the country.
- Since the start of the pandemic, UNICEF and the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) have ensured the continuity of safe water for **seven** million people (including **four** million women and girls) out of a target of 10 million people.
- Sustaining behavior-change programmes is necessary to continue good handwashing practices as well as scale up innovations in handwashing stations.
- Systematic monitoring and reporting on water quality and handwashing practices in rural and urban areas remains a constraint.

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic spread to Bangladesh when its index case in Dhaka was confirmed on 8 March 2020. As of 14 November 2020, there have been 430,496 positive cases, 347,849 recoveries, and 6,173 deaths across the country. The most-affected districts include Dhaka (136,343 cases), Chattogram (37,835 cases), and Sylhet (9,369 cases). UNICEF has supported an uninterrupted water supply all over the country (including the disinfection of water sources) and IEC materials on hand hygiene; government counterparts (including city corporations/municipalities, rural areas, and Health Care Facilities (HCFs)) as well as the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE); and has worked with religious leaders through Islamic Relief Bangladesh.

## Response

### *Strategy/Approach taken by Bangladesh Country Office:*

**Continuity of services:** DPHE and UNICEF worked to secure an uninterrupted water supply across all 64 districts of the country to ensure safe water was available for handwashing, as well as to protect against other waterborne diseases. Other support for WASH services included, the repair of handpumps, chlorination of piped water systems, disinfection of water point surroundings, distribution of bars of soap, and construction of handwashing devices in public places. UNICEF transferred funds to the DPHE for the prepositioning of bleaching powder, tools, and

spare parts for the operation and maintenance of tube wells. A series of interventions were supported which are highlighted below:

**Training:** UNICEF supported 35 personnel from 12 district-level service providers to access online trainings on the use of PPE and COVID-19 case management. UNICEF also supported districts and city corporations with online IPC training.

**Handwashing innovation:** The “EASY WASH” handwashing device is being piloted and tested in 40 schools in Bangladesh. This device can monitor functionality of handwashing facility, the handwashing behaviors of students independently, and provide an evidence base for further, targeted, behavior-change activities. UNICEF has also supported the development of a foot-operated handwashing station in health facilities to reduce the risk of contamination and spread of infection.

**Health Care Facilities:** UNICEF has been working with the Health and City Authority on medical waste management training for health care staff and the development of a medical waste management model.

#### ***Guidelines and strategy:***

**WASH issues:** UNICEF, DPHE, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology supported the Government to develop a sector-wide strategy, the “Bangladesh Strategic Paper to Respond to WASH Issues during and after the COVID-19 Outbreak.”

**Hand Hygiene:** Bangladesh developed a first draft of the Hand Hygiene for All (HH4A) Roadmap to ensure hand hygiene for all in Bangladesh by 2030.

**Water points:** UNICEF and DPHE jointly developed a guideline on the “Safe Use and Functional Community Water Points within the COVID-19 Pandemic.” The guideline meant for tube well mechanics were approved by DPHE and shared with stakeholders across the country. In the

upcoming months, 1.7 million public water points will be regularly disinfected as per this guideline.

**Schools:** UNICEF worked closely with DPE, DSHE, and DPHE in developing school reopening guidelines. UNICEF also helped in the translation of the Global Framework for School Reopening, jointly developed by WFP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank so that it could be used to guide the Bangladesh framework for school reopening.

**Health Care Facilities:** UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health to develop the Positive WASH Practices Guideline for Frontline Health Workers.

**Research:** A study is underway on waste water monitoring as an early warning model for COVID-19 with Oxford University and icddr,b.

**Water Supply:** Since the start of the pandemic, UNICEF and DPHE have ensured the continuity of safe water for seven million people (including four million women and girls) of a target of 10 million. In 10 districts under Rangpur, Rajshahi, and Barisal Divisions, UNICEF provided technical and financial support, including spare parts and the repair and disinfection of tube wells. These actions benefited 71,200 people. In addition, UNICEF partners disinfected water points, tube wells, tanks and reservoirs, and piped water systems.

**Soap and handwashing:** 1,000 newly constructed handwashing devices have been constructed in public places by DPHE and UNICEF. Unilever donated 1.6 million bars of soap to UNICEF, which were then handed over to DPHE to be distributed to people with little income living in urban and rural areas in support of handwashing. Furthermore, the regular disinfection of latrines and bathing facilities was promoted.

**Online training:** UNICEF provided online IPC trainings on COVID-19 management for health service providers targeting 2,000 staff from UNICEF-supported districts and City Corporations.

**Health Care Facilities:** UNICEF supported health facilities with hygiene kits, waste bins, handwashing stations, and the functionality of water sources and toilets.

**Monitoring:** UNICEF and DPHE monitor their activities on a weekly basis and have collected situation updates from 64 district engineers using virtual meetings.

## Learning

### **Challenges and constraints:**

**Cyclone Amphan** hit on 20 May 2020 when the entire country was in different phases of lockdown. This complicated emergency response efforts. Over 2.4 million people were evacuated and 100,000 people displaced due to Cyclone Amphan. The WASH Section focused on combined COVID-19 and Cyclone Amphan messaging. The ability to assist those affected by the cyclone was limited as resources were being used to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The limited availability of evacuation centers and sites made it difficult to ensure social distancing.

**The global PPE supply situation:** Insufficient PPE was a major challenge for the COVID-19 response in Bangladesh. A prepositioning and distribution plan was developed to supply essential commodities to all districts. As part of monsoon and cyclone disaster preparedness, UNICEF and DPHE routinely ensure field-level mobile water treatment plants are functional, and that spare parts and supplies are pre-positioned with emergency response teams ready to respond. However, this year the situation was complicated by the COVID-19 response.

**The zone-coded lockdown** across the country meant plans had to be changed at short notice if a zone became red, creating logistical difficulties in transporting supplies. Delays had knock-on consequences for the process of securing District Executive Engineers approval of the work.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- *A nationally endorsed and timely strategy with short, medium, and longer-term actions was a critical tool to attract strategic funding from donors.*
- *The pandemic highlighted the importance of Water Safety Plans to prioritize continuous access and functionality of water.*
- *Sustaining behavior-change programs is necessary to continue good handwashing practices as well as scale up innovations for handwashing.*
- *Online orientation/training has the potential to allow successful virtual planning meetings to connect the sub-national to national levels, which would improve value for money.*

**Frontline workers anxiety:** Personnel required enough and correct protective gear, which was not available, to safely reach the population and support their own psychosocial wellbeing.

**Systematic monitoring and reporting** on water quality and handwashing practices in rural and urban areas remains a constraint. Key challenges include the human resources, digital tools, and internet facilities required to conduct real-time monitoring. The Government has agreed to expand the Rapid Pro for real-time monitoring across the country.

**Challenges with online trainings**, particularly those with large numbers of participants, include unstable internet connections, limited interaction between the trainer and trainees, and limited interaction amongst the trainees themselves.

**People in rural and hard-to-reach areas** without access to radio, television, or newspapers were reached by the mosque megaphone with COVID-19 prevention messages. It was also used for reaching men and boys through *Jumma* (Friday) prayers. Imams, religious leaders, and Madrasa

female teachers are now disseminating information on handwashing using soap.

**Sanitation left behind:** A substantial number of households in Bangladesh are using shared latrines especially in densely populated slums but sanitation, as a thematic area, was left behind in the COVID-19 campaigns.

## Additional resources:

- “Classroom precautions during COVID-19” (<https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/classroom-precautions-during-covid-19>).
- “Rohingya children become hygiene promotion ambassadors during COVID-19 response in Cox’s Bazar” (<https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/stories/rohingya-children-become-hygiene-promotion-ambassadors-during-covid-19-response-coxs-bazar>).

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## About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

*Discussion Papers* explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

*Fact Sheets* summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

*Field Notes* share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

*Guidelines* describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

*Reference Guides* present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

*Technical Papers* present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

*WASH Diaries* explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

*WASH Results* show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

*COVID-19 WASH Responses* compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

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