



# How WASH Programming has Adapted to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Introduction

- WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020
- Hand hygiene put forward as ‘first line of defence against the disease’
- Unprecedented global focus on handwashing with soap
- Additional measures brought in, such as physical distancing, face masks, travel restrictions, lockdown



## Methodology

Review intended to give a snapshot of some of the current thinking across the WASH sector

- Key informant interviews: 14 participants with actors from Head Offices, Country Offices and in-country practitioners
- Group discussion: with members of the Sanitation Learning Hub to learn about their experiences in adapting to the pandemic
- Literature review: over 80 different articles were read, consisting of academic papers, reports, blogs, briefs, and websites





## Challenges

### Uncertainty around scientific and technical

#### issues

- Transmission via contact contamination (fomites) initially seen as main infection route
- 40 per cent of households do not have handwashing basins with soap
- Risks around use of shared facilities becoming COVID hotspots
- Rethinking traditional faecal-oral messaging around 'critical times' for handwashing
- Transmission via aerosolised droplets later understood to be more significant than first realized
- Face masks and physical distancing introduced; new to sector and added layer of complexity to programming

## Challenges



### Uncertainty around planning and

#### logistics

• Impact of lockdown, reduced travel, shifting deadlines

- Some people busier as pulled into response; others 'grounded' and more available
- Coordinating response was slow in some instances, seen as more of a health issue
- Constraints on supplies; struggles getting prototypes to market, uneven hygiene product distribution
- Misinformation about the virus spread; rumours around racial immunity and remedies
- Community-based programming slowed / paused – big impact on sanitation work



## Challenges

**COVID has hit the poorest the hardest, and made it more difficult to reach vulnerable people**

- Reaching vulnerable without access to internet, mobile phones, TV or radio has been more difficult
- Reliance on messages shared via word-of-mouth communication
- Re-evaluation of who is vulnerable – younger generations less at risk than older generations
- Economic downturn, job loss, financial struggles
- Household needs take priority over COVID prevention measures, where there isn't the luxury of both
- Sanitation workers more at risk due to COVID, and typically come from more marginalised communities

## Adaptations

### Rapid scale-up of hygiene activities

- Large-scale behaviour change communication campaigns
- Initial wave focused on educational messages, appealing to fear
- Later rounds more targeted towards behavioural determinants
- Technical support provided; guidance shared with partners and local actors
- ‘Contactless’ handwashing stations established in public spaces; hygiene products disseminated
- Water delivery subsidised in many countries to support handwashing activities
- Concerns around impact cheaper / free water may have on longer term sustainability





**‘What can do I remotely?’ is related to the question ‘how do I give up my power?’**

– Jan Willem Rosenboom

## **Adaptations**

### **Change in primary delivery**

#### **channels**

- Greater engagement online: video calls, online conferences, webinars
- Pros and cons: more can engage but quality of engagement is different / lessened
- Actors from higher income countries no longer travelling but providing support remotely
- ‘Parachute research teams’ unable to fly in and provide leadership and expertise
- Responsibility has instead fallen to local actors to lead programming effort – increase in localised response
- Shift in power dynamics; coincided with BLM protests – conversations around decolonising the sector



## Adaptations

### Monitoring, learning and coordination

- Monitoring activities limited by access to the field
- Few examples of monitoring occurring
- Handwashing a notoriously difficult activity to measure
- UNICEF, WHO and the World Bank seen as the organisations leading the global WASH response
- COVID-19 Hygiene Hub providing a learning platform to collate and share evidence
- Good coordination reported between government, civil society, researchers, faith groups, and other actors
- Examples of new actors getting involved in the sector response





## Looking forwards



### New ways of working

- Greater engagement online has led to more equitable exchange
- Actors from higher income countries providing support remotely

### Decolonising the sector

- Emphasis on localised response and appreciating local capability
- Opportunity to critically reassess the power dynamics and role actors play in WASH programming

### Addressing SDG6.2

- Heightened interest in hygiene provides an opportunity for the sector to build on momentum
- Sanitation needs to be re-prioritised



**Thank you for listening!**

