

Contribution to the Water for Health Theme, *UN Conference on the Midterm Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018–2028*

In preparing the concept note for the Water for Health Theme of the UN 2023 Water Conference, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office asks that the following points be considered:

1. There is compelling evidence that a ‘business as usual’ approach - largely based on donor driven projects - will not achieve SDG 6 WASH objectives. The most recent WHO - UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) reports conclude that the global rate of progress would need to be quadrupled to achieve universal access to safely managed WASH services. In fragile settings and least developed countries, even more work is needed.
2. Women and girls are hugely affected by this situation, and yet their needs, capacities, and leadership potential are frequently overlooked by a sector dominated by men.
3. Progress on sanitation and hygiene are particular concerns. 3.6m people lack access to safely managed sanitation, and 2.3m lack access to basic hygiene. This has a profound impact on SGD 3, noting that diarrhoeal diseases are responsible for more under-five child deaths than any other condition apart from acute respiratory illness – the transmission of which is also interrupted by regular handwashing. Limited progress on WASH is also evidenced by ongoing outbreaks of cholera in twenty-nine countries.
4. Climate change is making a dire situation worse. Drought and flood events are not only more frequent, but are also driving the spread of many infectious diseases, including diarrhoeal disease, cholera, and several neglected tropical diseases.
5. The poor sustainability of rural WASH services is a persistent problem. In a recent multi-country assessment, FCDO established that only 53% of rural water supplies implemented are functional after five or more years, and only a third of the household toilets promoted by FCDO remain in use. Of those toilets that are still being used, 40% are not thoroughly cleaned or maintained.
6. The situation of WASH in health facilities is particularly unacceptable, with JMP reporting that half of health facilities lack basic hygiene services, and 32% lack hygiene at the point of care. As a result, these facilities are sources of infection, not treatment. A substantial proportion of facility acquired infections are caused by lack of WASH facilities. This can result in sepsis, responsible for significant numbers of maternal and neonatal deaths, and contributes to the spread of Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR).
7. To address this situation, the UK has included WASH as a key component of its approach towards Ending the Preventable Deaths of mothers, babies, and children (EPD). As described in the related approach paper published in July 2022, the UK is moving away from project-based service delivery, and towards strengthening national systems that can establish reliable, resilient, and inclusive services at scale; services which can attract additional funding from users, from tax revenue, from private finance.

8. Adopting an effective systems-based approach will be challenging for all stakeholders. Resolving one bottleneck may simply result in others emerging, and so any action taken must consider the complex relationships between different elements comprising a system.
9. Government leadership, a willingness to drive change, and strengthened accountability to service users and the population are critical for success – whether this concerns domestic water and sanitation services or institutional WASH services in health facilities and schools. Leadership needs to be encouraged and supported by a coalition of development partners (donors, NGOs, and business) working in close collaboration. Inevitably, more time is needed for systemic change to take hold and results to appear on the ground compared to a conventional service focused approach, but the latter cannot deliver reliable, resilient, and sustainable services that reach whole populations in the long term.
10. Implementing a systems approach challenges the behaviour of all stakeholders. Donors will need to adopt a patient, adaptive and process focused approach, collaborating with other stakeholders in support of government leadership. Governments will need to establish a culture and systems that facilitate collaboration across sectors – Ethiopia’s National WASH Coordination Office being a good example.
11. How results are measured also needs to change, and be refocussed on contributions to a reliable, resilient, and inclusive service – one good enough to attract increased finance - rather than on community or household services that are unlikely to be sustained.
12. These changes in behaviour are well aligned with those promoted by the Sanitation and Water for All partnership that FCDO helped establish over a decade ago. As we look forward, it is imperative that we learn from lessons of the past and adapt our approach. If we do not, there is little chance that the ambition of SDG 6 and related SDGs will be realised.
13. Additional support will be needed to support governments to develop resilient, low carbon WASH services. FCDO is currently supporting UNICEF to provide this in a cluster of pilot countries – with activities that extend from risk assessment to data management and proposal preparation. Others are doing the same – but much more is needed.
14. In the light of these arguments, FCDO suggests that the following set of principals are embedded in the structure of the Water for Health theme:
 - Highlight the critical importance of government leadership and accountability, and political willingness to introduce and embed change – as well as the need for development partners to collaborate in support of this leadership.
 - Focus on the need to develop and reinforce systems that can deliver and sustain reliable, resilient, and inclusive WASH services.
 - Promote collaboration as a necessary condition to achieve SDG 6 WASH targets.

- Ensure a gender balance, noting the impacts of the theme on women and girls, and highlighting women’s leadership in driving progress.
- Integrate the challenges imposed by climate change and the opportunities associated with a shift to establishing low-carbon WASH services.
- Ensure that the event is based on the participation of key stakeholders – with representatives of governments, donors, NGOs, research community, and business.

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