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## UN 2023 Water Conference Side Event

*The case for SDG 6 in a post-Covid world: How investing in water and sanitation can boost resilience and tackle inequality*

Thursday 23 March, 9:30-10:45am

Organized by: Oxfam and Unilever

### Background

The Covid-19 pandemic was a new global challenge that emerged in a world of rising crises. Like climate change, it has tested resilience on many different levels and across systems – economic, public health and social protection. Countries' preparedness for, and resilience to, the impacts of the pandemic were influenced by countless factors, but hand hygiene, enabled by robust water and sanitation infrastructure and services, received unprecedented recognition as one of the core basic needs for human survival. Looking ahead, improving social and economic resilience to pandemics and the climate & inequality crises requires investment in WASH infrastructure/programming that's sustainable, effective and targeted.

Oxfam and Unilever came together to launch a [joint briefing paper](#) outlining the impacts of current underinvestment in WASH, lessons from country and programme case studies to show what good investment looks like, and recommendations for leaders and policy-makers. **At the UN 2023 Water Conference, Unilever and Oxfam call on leaders to urgently make a bold commitment for a resilient future, by reaffirming their commitment to SDG 6 through radical, new, long-term funding for systems level water and sanitation systems accompanied by effective hygiene behaviour change, with adaptive funding conditions.**

### Key Issues discussed (5- 8 bullet points)

Unilever's Chief Sustainability Officer, Rebecca Marmot, and Oxfam's Deputy Humanitarian Director, Michelle Farrington, were joined by moderator Abishek Narayan to discuss key findings and reflections from the briefing paper. In summary:

- Hygiene and handwashing with soap, enabled by reliable water and sanitation services, are indispensable foundations for building resilience to a range of societal stresses and hazards. Covid-19 confirmed the vital importance of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and its part in supporting resilience – both in the short and long term.
- Not all societies were affected by Covid-19 in the same way. An underlying lack of WASH resilience undermines efforts of disease control and prevention, and is also a significant concern for many businesses, exposing them to vulnerability and inhibiting economic growth.
- It could be assumed that Covid-19 and the threat of health crises to come might have been a global wake-up call, renewing commitment to SDG 6 through radical, new and targeted funding for WASH, but figures indicate this was not the case.

- UN data on the funding of global humanitarian response plans showed that during the Covid-19 peak of 2020-2022, overall funding was never more than 56% met in any given year, dropping to a current 9.2% in 2023.
- During the 2020-2022 peak of Covid-19, WASH needs were never more than 30% funded – in 2023 only 8.6% of funding needs have been met.
- The results of this chronic underfunding are clear: a UN/WHO 2022 analysis of WASH in 121 countries shows only 45% of countries are on track to achieve drinking water coverage and only 25% are on track for sanitation targets.
- Unilever, Oxfam and their partners are key players in this space – Unilever as a business leader with a century-long history working in hygiene and Oxfam a leading NGO working in WASH in disaster response and building resilience of vulnerable communities.
- Our research concludes that a renewed commitment is needed by governments to create an enabling environment for business and NGOs to contribute towards achieving the vision of SDG 6. This enabling environment must be one of strong, coordinated national plans and policies for long-term investment in sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene services and behaviour change programme.

### **Key recommendations for action (5 - 6 bullet points)**

*Recommendations to national leaders, donor governments and international institutions (UN, donors): A focus on long-term, predictable, adaptive funding for systems-level WASH and to close the chronic gaps in financing – particularly ODA*

- We call on Finance Ministers, Health Ministers, and Ministers of Water of all national governments to build and invest in coordinated national WASH plans and policies, alongside effective hygiene behaviour change programmes, to safeguard against future pandemics and other health crises and contribute to healthy populations.
- Donor countries should recognise their role and play their part in unlocking economic benefits and promoting economic resilience by increasing long-term, flexible and more predictable funding to WASH programmes, in line with national plans of recipient countries. This is particularly important where low- and middle-income countries are at great risk of WASH underinvestment but do not themselves have the revenues to put plans into action.
- Development donors must acknowledge that programming for resilience means allowing for long-term commitments to adaptive programming, reducing constraints so that frequent, quality data collection can inform changes to programming where risks arise and contexts change. Donors must be prepared to take on some of the risks, particularly in complex, fragile environments.
- All donors should understand that resilient WASH means robust, transparently governed, and climate-resilient water and sanitation infrastructure that will be more costly to fund at the outset. They should provide flexible, multi-year funding – particularly working within the nexus of humanitarian and development approaches – and look beyond programme costs per beneficiary to focus on robust system level programmes, where sustainably funded O&M plans and political and economic engagement will ensure sustainability.
- Donors must coordinate with national recipient governments and local actors to embed long term, locally relevant hygiene behaviour change programming, recognising hygiene practices as an essential pillar to sustainable and effective WASH responses.

*The [paper](#) also outlines recommendations for business, around improving collaboration and accountability with a wider group of stakeholders to make the case for WASH and resilience; and for NGOs, to make the case for robust systems-level WASH and be the voice of support for the localisation agenda.*