

**WATER, SANITATION  
AND HYGIENE IN FRAGILE AND  
CONFLICT AFFECTED STATES**

**HOW THE UK GOVERNMENT  
CAN TACKLE THE WATER CRISIS  
AND SAVE CHILDREN'S LIVES**

**FOR EVERY  
CHILD**

**unicef**   
UNITED KINGDOM

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- **More than 800 million children live in 58 fragile contexts,** including more than 220 million children in 15 extremely fragile contexts.<sup>1</sup>



- In 2018, around **four out of every 10 people who lacked access to improved sanitation lived in fragile and conflict-affected states.**<sup>2</sup>



- **Children under 5 living in conflict** are more than **20 times more likely to die** from diseases linked to **unsafe water and sanitation** than from direct violence.<sup>3</sup>



- **Poor WASH conditions account for nearly 40 per cent of deaths from diarrhoea** in refugee camp residents and **80 per cent of deaths in children under age two** – particularly in the immediate emergency phase.<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 has been spreading across the globe, paralysing countries, and causing an unprecedented public health crisis. The pandemic has unearthed the long-lasting and deep-rooted water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) crisis. Whilst handwashing hygiene is the first line of defence against COVID-19, in the 60 countries identified as having the highest risk of health and humanitarian crises due to the virus, 2 out of 3 people – 1 billion people in total – lack basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home.<sup>5</sup> Around half are children.<sup>6</sup>

COVID-19 poses direct threats and impacts to health, but it is the social and economic consequences of the pandemic that are having the greatest effects on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reversing progress in many critical areas for children, including health, nutrition and education.

Fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) are predicted to be the worst affected by COVID-19 in the medium and long term.<sup>7</sup> People living in extremely fragile contexts are four times as likely to lack basic sanitation services and eight times as likely to lack basic drinking water services.<sup>8</sup> With the prediction that more than 80 per cent of the world's poorest people could be living in fragile contexts by 2030, the WASH crisis in FCAS could lead to impacts of a devastating magnitude.

Before the pandemic, up to 82 per cent of FCAS were off track to meet the SDGs.<sup>9</sup> SDG 6 – ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation – is no exception.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, 60 per cent of fragile countries needed major progress to achieve universal access to sanitation, and six countries (10 per cent) – Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, Zimbabwe – needed to reverse course.<sup>11</sup> Projections also show that more than one in four people in FCAS will lack access to any improved sanitation services by 2030.<sup>12</sup>

WASH in FCAS remains chronically underfunded and deprioritised, and world leaders' efforts to respond to the pandemic to date have largely failed to leverage mobilisation and efforts to tackle the water crisis. Of the \$20.6 trillion committed to the COVID-19 global response so far, only 0.025 per cent has gone to WASH.<sup>13</sup> Even before COVID-19 hit, the WASH sector had already seen a decrease in its capacity to deliver quality responses to humanitarian emergencies.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, in FCAS, COVID-19 is exacerbating pressure on already weak and depleted WASH services. In a recent survey, half of all countries where UNICEF has active humanitarian operations reported a reduction in access to health care among displaced and refugee populations; and nearly a quarter of the same





© Unicef/Noorani

Isra, age 7, looks after her sisters Mozdelifa (age 2) and Heba (3) at a UNICEF-supported child-friendly at an IDP Camp in North Darfur, Sudan.

Isra is the main care provider for her younger sisters since they fled a violent attack on her village.

UNICEF, with support from UK Aid, has provided safe, clean water and sanitation for tens of thousands of people in Darfur.

countries described a disruption in water, hygiene and sanitation services in refugee or displacement camps.<sup>15</sup> The most vulnerable children – such as children living in informal settlements, displacement camps, poor urban neighbourhoods, and rural areas are especially at risk. Children living in extremely fragile contexts are on average more than eight times worse off across WASH indicators, and they fare just as badly in health, nutrition and education indicators.<sup>16</sup>

COVID-19 provides a unique opportunity to reframe the narrative on WASH by reiterating and promoting its critical role in addressing evolving and emerging challenges in FCAS. These include increases in violent conflicts, protracted crises and forced displacement, as well as climate change and endemic and chronic disease outbreaks – all of which affect children’s most basic rights.<sup>17</sup>

This report highlights the critical importance to move beyond a sole focus on delivery of WASH services in disease outbreaks and health-related humanitarian emergencies, towards a systems building, integrated and sustainable approach, that will increase the resilience and capacity of FCAS to prevent and mitigate future crises and shocks. It does so by using country case studies to emphasise the importance of WASH and to share success and lessons from UK Aid-funded, and UNICEF-led WASH programmes around the world.

Specifically, the first case study focuses on the war in Yemen and demonstrates the positive

impact of a humanitarian–development (“double nexus”) delivery approach to WASH interventions in protracted conflicts. It showcases a model that depends on flexible and predictable funding and which aims at strengthening health facilities to improve people’s access to WASH, while tackling acute needs in emergency situations, for example outbreaks of infectious disease.

The second case study examines a community-based WASH programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), with a focus on accelerating access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene in rural areas prone to Ebola, through the engagement and mobilisation of communities and local leaders towards healthy schools and villages.

Finally, the third case study considers a climate-resilient WASH programme in Myanmar, one of the countries most affected by climate change. The programme supports the installation of solar powered water systems in rural settings to provide communities with more resilient systems that can withstand extreme weather events.

The report then examines the opportunities afforded by COVID-19 and the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to leverage global mobilisation and action in defeating the pandemic. It also considers how the former Department for International Development’s (DFID) strong track record and legacy on WASH and global health can help the UK Government to tackle the water crisis in FCAS.

The UK Government has shown great leadership in the global response to coronavirus. It pledged £500 million to the COVAX facility that aims to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. It is also set to become the second largest national donor to the World Health Organization (WHO) after announcing a 30 per cent increase in funding to the UN agency.<sup>18</sup> In March 2020, DFID and Unilever also launched the Hygiene & Behaviour Change Coalition (HBCC),<sup>19</sup> a £100 million programme that aims to reach up to a billion people worldwide, with a focus on curbing the spread of COVID-19 in vulnerable countries with poor health systems.

However, the decision to cut the UK Aid budget from 0.7% to 0.5%<sup>20</sup> of Gross National Income (GNI), as well as the reduction due to 2020 economic performance will no doubt put huge pressure on the UK Government, and the FCDO in particular, to deliver the government’s global commitments. The Government must not lose sight of its 2019 Manifesto commitments on ending preventable deaths of mothers, newborn babies and children, ensuring every girl’s access to 12 years of quality education, and leading the world in tackling climate change. COVID-19 threatens to undermine all of these commitments, and none will be delivered without addressing the WASH crisis.

Over the course of this year, the UK’s presidency of the G7 and COP26 brings unique opportunities for the Government, and the FCDO in particular, to be a global leader in the pandemic response and initiate a recovery that goes beyond a sole focus on COVID-19 to turn the tide on the increasing deadly consequences of the water crisis in FCAS.





In driving a global response that promotes climate-resilient WASH services as critical life-saving interventions, and makes WASH in FCAS one of its priorities, the UK can advance its 2019 Manifesto pledges to end preventable deaths, ensure 12 years of quality education for every girls, and lead the world in tackling climate change.

## MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS (Detailed recommendations are included at the end of the report.)

In order to realise children’s rights to water and sanitation in FCAS, the FCDO must take the lead in ensuring that the global COVID-19 preparedness, response, and recovery strategy is used as leverage for strengthening life-saving WASH systems and building more resilient and adaptable solutions.

COVID-19 should not lead to the deprioritisation of the Government’s existing Manifesto’s commitments. Instead, it should serve as a catalyst to accelerate their delivery.

### To do so, the FCDO should:

- 
**COMMIT** To return to spending 0.7% of GNI on aid no later than 2022, and confirm that the cut will not affect the world’s most vulnerable children living in FCAS.
- 
**INVEST** In life-saving, essential and climate-resilient WASH and health services for the hardest to reach children – now and in the future.
- 
**DELIVER** The Leave No One Behind pledge and Manifesto commitments by targeting FCAS in its COVID-19 preparedness, response and recovery strategy.
- 
**CHAMPION** Increased leadership, support and investment for WASH programming in FCAS.

## NOTES

- 1 UNICEF, Water Under Fire Volume 1 Emergencies, development and peace in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/emergencies-development-peace-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-contexts-2019>
- 2 ODI, SDG Progress – Fragility, crisis and leaving no one behind, 2018, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12424.pdf>
- 3 UNICEF, Fast facts: WASH in conflict, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/stories/fast-facts-water-sanitation-hygiene-conflict>
- 4 WASH Cluster, Delivering Humanitarian WASH at scale, Anywhere and Any Time – Road Map for 2020 – 2025, 2020, <https://washcluster.net/sites/default/files/WASH%20Sector%20Roadmap%202020-2025.pdf>
- 5 UNICEF, Press Release, Lack of handwashing with soap puts millions at increased risk to COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, 14 October 2020, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/lack-of-handwashing-with-soap-puts-millions-at-increased-risk-to-covid-19-and-other-infectious-diseases/>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 UN, Press Release, Weakest, Most Fragile States Will Be Those Worst Affected by COVID-19 in Medium, Long Term, Humanitarian Chief Tells Security Council, 9 September 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14296.doc.htm>
- 8 UNICEF, Fast facts, 2019.
- 9 Mercy Corps, Covid-19 in Fragile Contexts – Reaching Breaking Point, 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19%20in%20Fragile%20Contexts\\_Mercy%20Corps\\_July%202020.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19%20in%20Fragile%20Contexts_Mercy%20Corps_July%202020.pdf)
- 10 UN Water, Press Release, UN reports that world is off track on water and sanitation goal, 5 July 2018, <https://www.unwater.org/un-reports-that-world-is-off-track-on-water-and-sanitation-goal/>
- 11 ODI, 2018.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 DEVEX, Funding the response to COVID-19, Analysis of funding opportunities, 1st January 2020 to 10th January 2021, 2021, <https://public.tableau.com/profile/devexdevdata#!/vizhome/COVIDFundingvisualisation/COVID-19funding>
- 14 WASH Cluster, 2020.
- 15 UNICEF, Press Release, 18 December 2020, Coronavirus pandemic has led to dramatic reduction in essential services and protection for migrant and displaced children in countries around the world, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/coronavirus-pandemic-has-led-to-dramatic-reduction-in-essential-services-and-protection-for-migrant-and-displaced-children-in-countries-around-the-world-unicef/>
- 16 UNICEF, Water Under Fire, Volume 1, 2019.
- 17 WASH Cluster, 2020.

# UNICEF WORKS TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD FOR **EVERY CHILD**, EVERYWHERE, EVERY DAY.

## Front cover

A girl drinks clean water from a tap outside a UNICEF-supported school in the village of Dafo, southern Djibouti.

Djibouti is one of the most arid countries on Earth. Temperatures sometimes reach as high as 47°C during the driest period from May to October. Water is as precious as it is scarce. Climate change has seen rainfall reduced by around 50% of previous levels. In rural areas, most people have to walk for more than 30 minutes to reach the nearest water source.

With UNICEF support, the village of Dafo now has its own water point and the school has solar-powered water and sanitation services. UNICEF is expanding this initiative to other regions with support from international aid.

© Unicef/Noorani

## UNICEF UK

**1 Westfield Avenue, London E20 1HZ**

The United Kingdom Committee for Unicef (UNICEF UK)

Registered Charity No 1072612 (England & Wales),  
SC043677 (Scotland)

**FOR EVERY  
CHILD**

unicef   
UNITED KINGDOM