



Opinion

After the pandemic: Building hope through water and sanitation

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The coronavirus has stopped the world in its tracks and while the pandemic threatens rich and poor alike, our ability to protect ourselves is far from equal.

While we wait for the development of a vaccine or effective medication, good hygiene is part of our best defence. But how do you clean your hands, and keep your family safe, without a reliable water supply or a decent toilet, not to mention access to soap or sanitizer?

As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, the consequences of chronic underinvestment in water and sanitation services for billions of people are becoming abundantly clear.

Right now, the global focus is on helping families to survive this disease outbreak. But even as we get on top of the pandemic and save as many lives as possible, we need to build resilience for the future. Without action, we remain dangerously vulnerable to a range of growing threats:

- Global demand for water is rocketing, while many water sources are becoming more polluted.
- Agriculture is getting thirstier, as is industry, manufacturing and energy generation.

- Climate change is making water scarcer and more unpredictable, wreaking havoc and displacing millions of people.

The United Nations Secretary-General has called for a comprehensive multilateral response amounting to a double-digit percentage of global gross domestic product (GDP). This is intended to address the financial shock of the recession.

But how can we use that investment to build the more inclusive and sustainable future we want and need? The economic case for investments in drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services is clear. In urban areas, every US dollar (USD) invested in basic sanitation returns USD 2.5 in saved medical costs and increased productivity. For drinking water, the average return is USD 3.0.

However, these investments must go beyond access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Benefits are maximized only if investments are part of longer-term plans to ensure the sustainable management of water resources. The OECD calculates around USD 6.7 trillion is needed in global financing for water infrastructure.



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Without strong water and sanitation systems and the integrated management of water resources we cannot make progress on health, education, food, energy, climate change and peace.

COVID-19 makes us acutely aware of our shared vulnerability and common destiny. Yet the extraordinary global disruption caused by the pandemic offers a unique opportunity, and a new hope, to “build back better”. With a shift in priorities, we can get the world on track to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, including SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all.

This is why the United Nations system is setting up a global framework to accelerate progress on SDG 6. This initiative will mobilize action across governments, civil society, private sector and the United Nations system. Together, we will better align efforts, optimize financing and drive transformational change in capacity and governance.

Through five accelerators, the framework will deliver fast results that will contribute to progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This includes targets for poverty reduction, food security, health, gender equality, peace, and sustainability and

climate resilience of communities, ecosystems and production systems.

The response to the COVID-19 emergency is rightly deploying attention and resources to save lives around the world. But we also need to redouble our efforts to reach the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Accelerating progress on SDG 6 will help us chart a course out of today's troubled waters and prevent more devastation of human life from potential future pandemics.

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