

UN-Water Joint Statement 31st Special Session of the General Assembly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

With global leaders gathering to coordinate action on the COVID-19 pandemic, UN-Water's Members and Partners call for an urgent response not just to contain this particular disease, but also to build resilience against future outbreaks. This deeply complex global shock and its cascading effects call for integrated and preventive action. While the world waits for an effective COVID-19 vaccine to be available globally, water and sanitation remain critical to containing the pandemic and will be key to 'building forward better'.

Water and sanitation: the first line of defence, but unavailable for billions of people

Poor people tend to get hit harder by the health and socio-economic consequences of COVID-19. This crisis has clearly revealed the dire inequalities that result from chronic underinvestment in a basic public health measure: water and sanitation services. For those with access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, stay-at-home orders and physical distancing have been disruptive but achievable. For those without these vital services, lockdown has been devastating.

For instance, the impact on health and income for the 3 billion people without access to safe water and soap for hand hygiene has been disastrous. Health care workers and educators have struggled to maintain a safe environment. Food insecurity has worsened. And the vulnerability of migrants and the 79.5 million displaced people around the world has deepened.

Achieving universal access to safe water and sanitation will bring huge health and socio-economic benefits for society at large, especially for women and girls. The costs of inaction will far outweigh the costs of investment, and will be borne disproportionately by the poorest people. Access to water and sanitation is a human right. 'Leave no one behind' is not just a slogan – it is a global commitment – a key part of which has to be tackling the public health crisis among vulnerable people living without their basic human rights.

Building forward better: water and sanitation is the place to start

Inadequate water and sanitation services in any part of the world can quickly become everyone's problem. As we grapple with recovery,



we must build future resilience through water and sanitation. Otherwise, we will remain perilously vulnerable to another pandemic.

As trillions of dollars are spent rebuilding economies around the globe, the case for investing in drinking water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure and services is clear. In urban areas, it is estimated that every US dollar (USD) invested in basic sanitation returns USD 2.5 in lower medical costs and higher productivity. For drinking water investments, the average return is USD 3.0.

Access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, however, is not enough. We face a combination of risks from rising demand from agriculture and growing cities, and from water source pollution and climate uncertainty. We need to pursue risk-informed development while sustainably managing water resources. Investments in critical water and sanitation infrastructure can help reduce the risk of future disasters, including global pandemics.

We must protect water supplies by equitably and sustainably managing these precious resources, and the ecosystems that generate them. At the same time, systems that encourage more efficient water use and the safe and sustainable reuse of treated wastewater will help us cope with predicted increased water scarcity and food insecurity.

Our commitment: the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework

COVID-19 makes clear our shared vulnerability and common destiny. This extraordinary event offers an invaluable chance to 'build forward better', including getting back on track to deliver Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation and all other the SDGs by 2030.

This is why the United Nations system has launched the Global Acceleration Framework to speed up progress on SDG 6, mobilizing governments, civil society, the private sector and the entire United Nations system. Together, we will align efforts, optimize financing and transform capacity and governance. The Framework's five accelerators will swiftly deliver concrete progress across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In this Framework, UN-Water Members and Partners are stepping up: launching new initiatives on hand hygiene and on climate change, spearheading novel approaches in wastewater, strengthening integrated water resources management and reinforcing the link between land and health. All these efforts and so many more take us closer to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Achieving this Agenda was critical before the pandemic. Now, it is our best hope for a healthy, equitable and more sustainable future.

While the world waits for an effective vaccine to be available to all, we call on governments, the United Nations system and all other stakeholders to take steps to bolster water and sanitation, including investment in governance, financing, capacity development, data, and innovation, as critical to containing the pandemic and to long term resilience as the world builds forward better.

Learn more about how UN-Water Members and Partners are working to contain the pandemic while building forward better [here](#).

