

## Water, sanitation and hygiene: world leaders call for action on COVID-19

Until there is a vaccine or treatment for COVID-19, there is no better cure than prevention.

Water, sanitation and hand hygiene, together with physical distancing, are central to preventing the spread of COVID-19, and a first line of defence against this serious threat to lives and health systems. Handwashing with water and soap kills the virus but requires access to running water in sufficient quantities.

Our response plans – at national, regional and global levels – must therefore prioritize water, sanitation and hygiene services.

Leaders that recognize the role of water, sanitation and hygiene in preventing the spread of COVID-19, will save lives. Leaders that prioritize international collaboration and support, will save lives. We are only as healthy as the most vulnerable members of society, no matter in which country they are.

Hence, we call on all national, regional and global leaders to join us in:

**Making water, sanitation and hygiene available to everyone, eliminating inequalities and leaving no one behind**, taking care of those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19. This includes the elderly, people with disabilities, women and girls, and those living in precarious situations, such as in informal settlements, refugee camps, detention centres, homeless people, as well as those people whose livelihoods are limited or destroyed by measures put in place to stop the spread of the virus, and women who shoulder the vast majority of unpaid care work in crisis. These measures are critical, not just to protect these vulnerable populations from COVID-19, but also to prevent other infectious diseases that can spread when water, sanitation and hygiene services are disrupted.

**Working collaboratively with all stakeholders in a coordinated manner** to improve water and sanitation services, as each actor, whether public, private, donor or civil society has something to offer to protect populations from COVID-19. Coordinated action is more effective, including urgent immediate action to establish handwashing facilities within health care facilities and at entrance points to public or private commercial buildings and public transport facilities. Partnerships such as Sanitation and Water for All are key platforms for national, regional and international cooperation and exchange of experiences.

**Ensuring that water and sanitation systems are resilient and sustainable** in order to protect people's health and support national health systems. Service providers for water, sanitation and hygiene including utilities and informal providers will have difficulties to maintain or expand services at a time of reduced financial flows restricted movement. This is both a short-term and a long-term requirement to save lives. Undisrupted global supply chains, including movement of goods and production capacity, for water, sanitation and hygiene commodities and services must be maintained at all costs. Water, sanitation and hygiene workers must also be granted sufficient protection to be able to provide us with such services without disruption.

**Prioritizing the mobilization of finance to support countries in their response to this crisis.** Any financing directed at supporting emergency interventions must have long-term solutions already in mind. Access to water, sanitation and hygiene must be affordable to all, and this may require additional funding to support service providers and help those who cannot afford it. Funding envelopes need to be maintained with no diversion away from the commitments and priorities set for the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. This includes avoiding any shifts in domestic funding allocations that support WASH services and sustained support by international donors for on-going water, sanitation and hygiene humanitarian responses, and broader Grand Bargain commitments.

**Delivering accurate information in a transparent manner.** Consistent and rational messaging based on scientific advice that is accessible to everyone will help people to understand the threat and enable everyone to act accordingly.

COVID-19 is not the first and will not be the last epidemic that countries will face. Resilience to future crises depends on actions taken now, as well as on policies, institutions and capacity put in place during normal times. Let us ensure this threat is not a missed opportunity to achieve our vision of universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene as fundamental human rights.

As leaders, this is our chance to save lives.