



AFGHANISTAN WASH on the Brink

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How an impending collapse of the WASH sector threatens children's health, development and survival.

The recent political upheaval and transition in Afghanistan have compounded the country's existing crisis, leaving its people devastated. The impact of years of conflict and insecurity, the worst drought in the last 27 years, displacement, economic collapse, natural disasters, multiple diseases outbreaks, and the COVID-19 pandemic have collided to create an unprecedented humanitarian emergency.

Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities has become more critical than ever, and without urgent action will only become more dire in the face of food insecurity and climate change. The vast majority of the people in Afghanistan drink unsafe water, often contaminated by sewage and deadly pathogens. Access to safe sanitation and hygiene, including basic toilets and handwashing supplies, is similarly limited.

The consequences for children are devastating – impacting not only their health and development, but also their nutrition, education, protection, and their very survival.

FAST FACTS

- Around **8** out of every **10** Afghan people drink unsafe water.
- **93%** of children in Afghanistan (15.6m children) live in areas of high, or extremely high, water vulnerability.
- Nearly **4.2** million people practice open defecation.
- **5** out of every **10** Afghan people don't have access to at least basic sanitation facilities.
- Over **6** out of every **10** Afghan people don't have access to basic hygiene facilities.
- Around **94%** of schools across Afghanistan lack access to basic handwashing facilities.
- Around **35%** of healthcare facilities lack access to at least basic drinking water supply.





Economic crisis leads to systems collapse

The current financial crisis in Afghanistan has debilitated an already fragile economy. Rapid reduction in international donor support, loss of access to offshore assets, and disruption to financial linkages have caused a major contraction of the economy, increasing poverty and instability. As a result of this economic collapse, the funds for maintaining basic services like WASH have effectively disappeared. For the WASH sector, which previously ran on a budget of around US\$124 million, this means essential personnel and supporting administration are no longer able to maintain water and sanitation systems in the country.

Essential personnel for the maintenance of water and sanitation services have not received salaries for several months. Given the technical nature of operating water and sanitation services, if employees in the sector vacate their jobs due to unpaid wages, services can falter or fail, leaving millions in cities and towns without water and sanitation. Similarly, if support to Community Development Councils responsible for WASH service delivery in rural areas fall short, around 70 per cent of Afghanistan's population will be affected.

Drought and water scarcity

In recent years, drought has exacerbated water scarcity in Afghanistan. As of December 2021, 53 per cent of water points across three provinces were drying up.

Decades of war and political instability compounded by climate change have decimated most of the hydrological infrastructure of the country. The breakdown of water services in urban settings has halved water availability and increased contamination from wastewater.

Besides damage to facilities and infrastructure, the country suffers greatly from institutional failures and poor capacity in the water resources management sector, further exacerbated by the economic crisis. Prior to the crisis, around 30 per cent of Afghans purchased drinking water from private vendors. But as the economic crisis deepens, fewer and fewer Afghans are able to afford this service, and are forced to rely on unsafe sources of drinking water.

Widespread impacts

Health

In Afghanistan, there are already worrying signs of infectious disease outbreaks linked to unsafe water. Immediately following the recent upheaval, an outbreak of acute watery diarrhoea started in Kabul and neighboring areas, and has since spread across five provinces. As of March 2022, the total number of cases has exceeded 5,000.

The impacts of unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene on children's health are harmful and widespread. Debilitating diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid, and polio are all linked to contaminated water sources, the impact of which may compromise efforts on other fronts, including malnutrition. For children, whose immune systems are still developing, these diseases can have severe health consequences or death. Globally, every day over 700 children under age 5 die from diarrhoea linked to unsafe water, sanitation and poor hygiene.

Lack of improved sanitation in Afghanistan is also hindering the fight to eradicate polio – it is one of only two countries in which the disease is still endemic. The poliovirus survives and spreads in human waste. Latest estimates show that nearly 30 per cent of households in Afghanistan do not have a toilet that hygienically separates waste from human contact; and nearly 11 per cent of people in Afghanistan still practice open defecation.

Inadequate WASH in healthcare facilities is also concerning. Around 35 per cent of healthcare facilities in Afghanistan do not have access to basic WASH facilities. As the health sector is further strained by acute watery diarrhoea, malnutrition, COVID-19 and other disease outbreaks, healthcare facilities may easily become points of infection and reinfection.

Nutrition

As a result of the worst drought in 27 years, together with a collapsing economy, Afghanistan now has the highest number of people facing emergency food insecurity in the world. If current trends continue without immediate action, UNICEF estimates that 1.1 million children under 5 in Afghanistan will suffer from severe acute malnutrition in 2022 and will be at risk of death.

Safe water is fundamental to addressing malnutrition. Even with emergency nutrition interventions, if children continue to drink contaminated water they will be unable to absorb the nutrients they need, further exacerbating their illness.





Education

Over the past several years, access to quality education for children in Afghanistan has improved significantly. School enrolment had increased tenfold from one million children in 2001, the vast majority of whom were boys, to almost 10 million children in 2019, including nearly four million girls.

But without safe water, these gains in education are threatened. In Afghanistan, nearly 40 per cent of schools do not have basic drinking water, and the remaining 60 per cent only have access to bacteriologically contaminated water. Similarly, 1 in 4 schools in Afghanistan do not have access to basic sanitation facilities and over 90 per cent of schools lack access to basic hygiene facilities.

When children do not have access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene in schools it disrupts their education. This is especially true for girls, who are less likely to attend school if it does not have adequate facilities to help them manage their periods. In Afghanistan, access to gender-specific facilities is deeply unequal: there is only 1 female toilet for every 200 male toilets in schools. Nearly one third of girls don't attend school during menstruation due to lack of menstrual hygiene facilities.

Protection

Available information suggests that around 27 per cent of water sources, where available, are over 0.5 km away from homes. When safe water is unavailable, children may be forced to miss school or drop out entirely to spend more time collecting water from sources that are farther away. Not only does this disrupt their schooling, it also places a great physical burden on children as they carry heavy loads of water.

This has an especially adverse effect on girls, as the task of collecting water most often falls on them. Not only does this cause them to miss school, or to drop out, but also potentially places them in harm's way when they are forced to walk long distances to water sources.

UNICEF's response

UNICEF's response to the WASH crisis in Afghanistan is manifold.

1 Immediate crisis response: Acute watery diarrhoea and cholera

- UNICEF's first priority is to respond to the ongoing acute watery diarrhoea outbreak to prevent further spread. This includes:
 - Temporary and long-term solutions to safe drinking water
 - Distribution of hygiene kits and other WASH items
 - Hygiene promotion programming
 - Emergency latrine construction
 - Restricted cash transfers

2 Stabilizing the WASH sector

- To prevent a collapse of the WASH sector and sustain basic human services, UNICEF is coordinating with de facto Authorities, civil society and the private sector to:
 - Support operation and maintenance of WASH infrastructure through provision of supplies, parts and fuel
 - Pay critical WASH technical staff for their services
 - Train new and junior WASH staff to bridge the capacity gap
 - Support to Community Development Councils in rural areas
 - Scale up open defecation eradication programmes

3 Supporting other sectors' humanitarian response and basic human services

- Health and nutrition: The lack of safe WASH is an underlying public health risk throughout the country. UNICEF is supporting by:
 - Improving the WASH conditions to contain the acute watery diarrhoea outbreak
 - Supporting work on nutrition by preventing diarrhoea
 - Improving WASH services and facilities in the most in-need healthcare facilities
 - Strengthening non-medical infection prevention and control
 - Scaling up open defecation eradication programmes and moving to safely managed sanitation
- Education: To ensure children still have a safe and quality learning environment, UNICEF is supporting by:
 - Strengthening basic WASH facilities in priority schools
- Protection: To make sure children and families safety are not put at risk to collect water, UNICEF is:
 - Bringing water sources closer to homes
 - Supporting restricted cash transfers to provide a lifeline quantity of water

4 Medium-term recovery and development

- In order to sustain the progress made through the current humanitarian response, UNICEF is prioritizing the issues of water scarcity and capacity development in the WASH sector. This includes:
 - Understanding groundwater supply through a nationwide hydrogeological study
 - Implementing an integrated Water Resources Management plan to regulate water usage among competing sectors, and to allocate sufficient drinking water supplies for the population
 - Advocating for improved, sustainable and climate-resilient surface water infrastructure to bring Afghanistan's water resources to homes and families and ensure durability in the face of climate change
 - Developing a costed WASH masterplan and institutional study to map out the current workings of the WASH sector, and determine the best ways to reach the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 targets



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OUR CALL TO ACTION

To avoid an imminent collapse of the WASH sector and move towards a stable recovery, UNICEF is calling on donor and government actors for:

- 1** Immediate flexible funding: UNICEF estimates the total cost for its WASH humanitarian response plan at US\$769 million, and an additional cost for medium and long term recovery efforts at US\$931 million, for a total cost of \$US1.7 billion.
- 2** Reinstitution of National Water Affairs Regulation Authority and Water Law to regulate water usage among competing sectors and to allocate sufficient drinking water supplies for the population.
- 3** Invest in surface water infrastructure to address water scarcity in the country and make efficient use of available resources now and in the long term.
- 4** Enable immediate humanitarian assistance and support to basic human services, including payment of essential water and sanitation personnel, and supporting administration.



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