



6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



MODERATORS

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The 17 Rooms initiative is convened by the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to stimulate near-term cooperative actions to advance the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This document summarizes insights and actions that emerged from the working group discussions in Room 6 during the 17 Rooms 2020 flagship process. The text was independently prepared by the Room's Moderators and participants, in response to the common question asked of all Rooms in 2020: "In light of recent crises linked to COVID-19, systemic racism, and other urgent challenges, what are 1 to 3 actionable priorities over the coming 12-18 months that address near term needs while also making a decisive contribution to protecting or advancing your Goal's 2030 results? What actions can members of your Room take to advance these priorities?" Corresponding documents prepared by all the other Rooms are available [here](#), alongside a synthesis report prepared by the 17 Rooms secretariat.

Access to water and sanitation connects to health, education, inequality, productivity and other key areas

- **Neonatal fatalities:** Handwashing interventions result in a [41% drop in neonatal fatality](#).
- **Child mortality:** Diarrhea caused by dirty water and poor toilets kills a child under 5 roughly [every 2 minutes](#).
- **Fatalities:** In 2016, diarrheal diseases were [the second leading cause of death](#) in low-income countries.
- **Gender inequality:** Women in Africa, born during rainfall deficiencies are more likely to [grow up stunted](#).
- **Education:** Globally, [31% of schools](#) don't have clean water and [34% lack decent toilets](#).
- **Education and inequality:** [25% of girls in India](#) skip school during menstruation due to lack of sanitation.
- **Productivity:** Every \$1 invested in water and toilets [returns an average of \\$4](#) in increased productivity.

Background

The COVID-19 crisis has brought home forcibly a major – and unnecessary – tragedy that is unfolding before our eyes: lack of access to water and soap for handwashing is thwarting COVID-19 pandemic mitigation efforts around the world. Water is a key “PPE” (Personal Protective Equipment), yet [2 out of 5 people](#) do not have access to a basic handwashing facility with soap at home. Progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6, “Ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”, is way off track. Water is needed – by people, for production, and for the planet – and yet it is limited and compromised. At the same time, water is generally taken for granted, and those that need it direly tend to often focus their action and demands on other seemingly more pressing sectoral needs, like schoolbooks, nurses, food, housing, or jobs.

Action opportunities going forward

From the perspective of organizations and professional fields that *use water* or are *impacted* by the people-dimension of

water use and accessibility, namely education, health, industry, youth, and trade unions, several Action Opportunities offer themselves up that could be taken on by leaders around the world, collaborating with each other and leveraging the convening power, delivery capacities, energy, and can-do attitude of their organizations.

Global advocacy: Mobilizing funding through a “WASH is the best PPE” campaign

Background

There is a need for more and new advocacy at different levels. Encouraging leadership by Heads of State would ensure that strong commitment could “trickle down” to policy makers and increase financial flows. Encouraging leadership among companies and civil society organizations active in fields that need or use water can also go a long way. Action-oriented advocacy can focus on convergent points between political agendas to which water can add, bringing greater understanding and motivation for people who are not “typical” actors in the water space themselves but have means and motivation to bring about change.

Action

An immediate imperative for global access exists right now in that access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is critical for the prevention of the further spread of COVID-19; in fact, WASH can be considered one of the best, possibly THE best, “Personal Protective Equipment” (PPE). Yet, the provision of WASH has not gained adequate traction. Providing WASH for all would amount to [US\\$115 billion per year](#) and, at the same time, create millions of jobs, oftentimes for unskilled workers and positively impact incomes and economic development. A campaign to raise awareness of and funding for “*WASH as a PPE in the fight against COVID-19*” could have a huge positive impact on people’s lives. A way forward would include, as part of such a campaign, the ongoing engagements with Ministers of Finance (e. g. through Sustainable Water and Sanitation for All (SWA) Partners), the Heads of States COVID-19 committee, globally operating companies, philanthropy, and the World Economic Forum (WEF), as well as work to mobilize action to identify and invest in specific and cost effective water-focused steps to limit the spread of COVID-19 and other communicable diseases.

Education and schools as agents of change: Mobilizing pupils to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 by investing in hygiene and sanitation in school buildings

Background

Where local communities are empowered especially with respect to water and sanitation services, and improved hygiene practices, and where Governments listen to these communities, schools can be a good place for community engagement and to coordinate for the common benefit. Handwashing can be promoted in schools – for COVID-19 prevention and hygiene – but only if WASH facilities are available. Schools are the right place for WASH interventions as they help younger generations adopt good habits which they can then influence their parents to adopt. Funding such programs has been a challenge in the past but could see new opportunities in the COVID-19 prevention and rebuilding context. A true “social contract” with and between communities would be important, reinforcing the sense of responsibilities amongst all parties. High-level advocacy on the linkages between WASH and Education is a powerful tool for making progress in this area.

Action

Opportunities for action may exist in many countries, including, for example, Ecuador. Ecuador, a country committed to providing universal education to all its citizens, including and in particular to those in rural and remote areas, faces huge challenges in providing water and sanitation to the schools that are located in remote areas. The majority of these schools have no or little access to adequate sanitation services. At the same time, [Ecuador aims to provide breakfasts every day for schoolchildren in need](#), a goal that the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have rendered impossible to meet right now. Noting the connections between healthy meals, clean water, and hygiene, and the link between the provision of water and sanitation and COVID-19 prevention, Ecuador is considering a new initiative that would mobilize actors across various sectors to provide water and soap to primary schools, in particular in remote areas.

Action

At the global level, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education had decided to include, in her July [2020 Report](#) to the General Assembly on the state of education, a particular focus on the interrelations between the right to education and the rights to water and sanitation. She committed to further communicate the link between education and access to water and sanitation in other interactions at the UN level, in particular the value of WASH for COVID-19 prevention. Furthermore, as a member of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), a specialized organization that brings together, amongst others, some 50+ members states, and in particular their education ministers, she committed to also leverage this forum for highlighting the value of WASH for COVID-19 prevention and as a protective “device” for individuals.

Global as well as local action: mobilizing the health sector for COVID-19 prevention by providing WASH facilities

Background

Much of the current COVID-19 related briefings do not include WASH; the necessity of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene appears to often be considered a detail. There are opportunities to change this. It should be possible to include – in various upcoming briefings for Heads of States and other health leaders, including Sector Ministers – the importance of WASH as PPE for their staff and their sectors; and to include promotion of WASH in immunization campaigns.

Even in the current context within which much attention is paid to limiting the spread of COVID-19 and the need for medical facilities, there is often little systematic attention paid to the fact that even health facilities in many parts of the world struggle to access clean water. One possible step could be to set up in-country coalitions that would bring together the public and the private sector around the goal of ensuring that all health facilities in a particular area or country have sustainable access to clean water and sanitation, working with local/in-country enterprises and through local/in-country chambers of commerce.

Livable water: mobilizing global corporates to invest in water, sanitation, and hygiene in the communities their employees live in

Background

The private sector's commitments typically focus on the situation of its employees themselves, such as commitments to provide livable wages and to respect ILO labor standards. To this end, the private sector has so far remained mostly silent on whether or not the communities their employees live in are able to provide safe water, sanitation, and hygiene – but the context of the spread of COVID-19 could be a reason for changing this.

Action

Existing commitments could be taken a step further – towards building a coalition of companies that would seek to build on pledges to provide access to water and sanitation to employees in the workplace and to also work with the communities in which employees and their families live to ensure WASH provision there.¹ Initiatives like this may well also have other positive side-effects, e.g. in terms of employment generation. Furthermore, such initiatives could instill new energy in the broader in-country community and political set-up responsible for WASH provision.

Focus on inequality: A new way of mobilizing stronger voices for access to water and sanitation, including by Women leaders

Background

COVID-19 has brought to light many persistent inequalities – in access to social services, health, education, jobs, protecting FMM – including, very visibly, inequality in accessing water and sanitation. In many countries, inequality has been growing over the past years, becoming also a major political factor and emerging as a concern also for businesses around the world.

Action

One specific way of building a thrust for concrete action would be to engage current and future women leaders – within and beyond the water sector – to promote access to water, sanitation, and hygiene for gender equality, COVID-19 response for families and communities, and reducing inequality.

¹ This commitment would go beyond the [2015] WBSCD launched “WASH Pledge” that invites companies to sign up to providing clean water and sanitation to their [employees in the workplace](#).

APPENDIX: MODERATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

Co-Moderators:

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Participants:

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