

**Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WES Network) Qadri House Area 3 –**

 **Behind NBS Bank, P.O Box 3210, Lilongwe, Malawi**

**COVID-19 PRESS CONFERENCE TALKING BRIEF**

In response to the threat of COVID-19, Malawi was declared a state of disaster on 20th March 2020. This was at a time when there was no reported case of COVID-19. Malawi registered its first COVID-19 case on 2nd April 2020 and as of yesterday we had registered 481 cases, with 65 recovered, 4 total deaths and 412 active cases out of 6785 tests conducted.

According to instructions from the World Health Organization (WHO), washing hands regularly with clean water and soap kills the virus. Therefore, the pandemic is 100% Water, Hygiene and Sanitation (WASH) related. This is why as a sector we are greatly involved in the fight against the pandemic. This is the kind of fight where all war fare strategies must be put to use, otherwise, we do not want to wake up one day to many COVID-19 deaths as though we have been taken by surprise. Let me also point out that what works in USA might not work in Malawi, and therefore, in whatever we are doing we need to consider what suits us as Malawians for us to win this fight.

As a sector, we are hereby deeply concerned about the following:

1. Low political prioritization of WASH in the country, evident in budgetary allocations that fail to meet locally & internationally prescribed bench marks e.g. 5% of total national budget as per the eThekwini Declaration which Malawi is a signatory to.
2. Low prominence of WASH in Health Care Facilities (HCFs), yet HCFs are critical in the fight against the pandemic & in preventing health care workers, patients, clients & guardians from healthcare acquired infections
3. Lack of sense of urgency by Government to repair strategic non-functional boreholes in rural areas and restoration of water supply for markets and strategically-placed kiosks in low income areas to ensure continued handwashing practice.
4. Lack of sense of urgency by Government to settle all unpaid bills owed by Ministries, Departments and Agencies and come up with rescue/ support packages for the country’s water utilities to enable them fulfil their obligation of providing potable water to Malawians. Currently, the owes 30 billion to the Water Utilities.

The appeal to the government is that it should lead by example in ensuring that it honors all the bills that it owes to the Water Utilities. We also appeal for collaborative efforts from all the Stakeholders, including donors. Let us complement each other! Let’s work in an emergency mode! Let’s invest in the right things.

We are fortunate that we are not starting from zero as a country, we already have structures in place that just need efficient utilization. Let us move from a country well known of putting policies, strategies and guidelines on paper but failing to implement them.

Consequently, WES Network is requesting the Malawi Government to do the following as a matter of priority:

1. Immediately increase national budget allocation to WASH from an average of 1% over the past 3-5 years towards a minimum threshold of 5% of total national budget[[1]](#footnote-1). This is in keeping with Malawi’s Water Sector Investment Plan (WSIP) 2012 allocation estimates, the SDG costing tool projections & numerous commitments & declarations that Malawi is party to, such as those under the global Sanitation & Water for All partnership.
2. Ensure that WASH in HCFs is prominent in Malawi’s COVID-19 response, particularly in the health cluster’s fundraising efforts to minimise the risk of health care acquired infections & ensure that all health care facilities and Covid-19 emergency treatment units are provided with adequate access to water, handwashing facilities and hygiene supplies such as chlorine, soap and mops, to enable effective infection prevention and control
3. Repair strategic non-functional boreholes, fitted with hand-pump in rural districts using data from district water development offices as informed by the most recent water points mapping exercise as the basis for prioritization;
4. Institute a moratorium on household water disconnections by Water Boards during the State of National Disaster and arrange for a payment plan for arrears with water users;
5. Lower water tariffs, lower new connection fee, reconnect those who are disconnected during this Covid Pandemic Period, and remove VAT on WASH products (soap, mops, chlorine and handwashing buckets). Arrange for a payment plan for payment of arrears. If possible, institute **targeted subsidies** that would cover the poor in urban, peri-urban and rural areas.
6. Meanwhile, provide water to under-served urban and peri-urban populations using available water bowsers already within the Government’s possessions & following a schedule that is well-publicized
7. Support water utilities through government financing, through payment of arrears owed to the water utilities by Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). And ensure that Grants and other Covid 19 rescue packages are directed towards managing the extra demand for water and income loss from waived disconnections.

8. Support district-level Water, Sanitation and Hygiene plans on COVID-19 preparedness and response through disbursement of funds to districts to enable intensification of preventive activities such as water quality monitoring, testing, & chlorination;

9. Ensure full involvement of WASH CSOs in the government implementation and coordination of the COVID-19 national response plan at the department of disaster management affairs (DODMA).

8. Facilitate access to soap for the poor through private sector partnerships and social cash transfers

10. Continue to strengthen enforcement of handwashing in public places.

As a Network, we are very happy to note that some government entities like the Blantyre Water Board are cooperating and positively responding to the needs of Covid 19 response at this time. As one way of fighting the pandemic, Blantyre Water Board has introduced a promotion where the connection fee has been reduced from MK50 000 to MK15,000 up to June 30 2020. This is highly commendable. The other Water Utilities are urged to emulate the initiative by BWB. They may also introduce their response initiatives. We need more and long-term initiatives to win this fight.

**Opening of Schools amid Covid 19 Prevalence**.

With the announcement of opening of schools by the State President; Professor Arthur Peter Muntharika, there is need for more resources and greater preventive measures than before, in all the schools. We, therefore, humbly request the Malawi government, and of course other stakeholders to consider this and put in place proper measures and adequate resources to ensure that we don’t put the lives of our children in danger of contracting the Corona virus in schools.

**Menstrual Hygiene Management amid Covid 19**

As a network we are also championing Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM), and it is also not doubtful that the COVID-19 pandemic will have secondary impacts on girls and women`s ability to manage their menstruation and their health. The most affected will be the poorest and most vulnerable to economic and social shocks.

Globally an estimated 1.8 billion girls, women and gender non-binary persons menstruate, yet millions of menstruators across the world cannot manage their monthly cycle in a dignified and health way. Even in the best of times, gender inequality, discriminatory social norms, cultural taboos, poverty and the lack of basic services often cause menstrual health and hygiene needs to go unmet. In emergencies like: internally displaced camps, emergency treatment units and refugee camps, these deprivations can be exacerbated. The result is far reaching negative impacts on the lives of those who menstruate: **restricting mobility, freedom and choices, reducing participation in school, work and community life, compromising safety and causing stress and anxiety**. WES Network, therefore, calls upon the Malawi government and all stakeholders during this covid-19 pandemic to;

1. Remove tax on menstrual hygiene products to make them affordable and accessible to all women and girls.
2. Ensure that Menstrual hygiene absorbents are in place for female health care workers and COVID-19 patients.
3. Mitigate the impact of lack of access to menstrual hygiene materials and WASH facilities by providing menstrual materials for girls and women with limited movement or in camps or institutions
4. Provide basic Water and Sanitation Hygiene (WASH) facilities and services in: communities, camps and institutional settings
5. Ensure that all stakeholders apply gender sensitive and inclusive approaches by identifying and reaching out to those who are mostly marginalized and live in hard to reach areas. Monitor whether such approached and measures are effective in reaching out to all deserving the services, include: girls and women with disabilities, those in camps, and those in remote/rural communities.
6. Ensure that change rooms have adequate clean water and soap, and that they are female friendly, including those who are differently able. Also ensure that systems for menstrual waste are in place in all the change rooms.
7. Ensuring that caretakers have adequate skills to assist girls and women with personal hygiene in the face of Covid 19.
8. Ensure that COVID-19 information include aspects of Menstrual hygiene management

WES Network would like to commend the Government of Malawi and all stakeholders for the following initiatives and measures

1. Putting in place various COVID-19 response coordination mechanisms such as the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster which is a gathering of all WASH actors in the country who meet on a weekly basis to share reports of various interventions, to assess and to bridge available gaps.
2. Closure of schools and restrictions of gatherings of more than 100 people,
3. Banning travel to Malawi from countries highly affected by the disease
4. Directing institutions except those providing essential services, to roll-out employee rosters to decongest work-spaces
5. Spreading awareness messages

But like mentioned earlier, Let’s do it the right way! Invest in the right things!

With membership of over 100 across the country, our members are also doing a very good job both at district and national level. Just to mention a few:

* Welt Hunger Hilfe and Inter Aid are renovating and rehabilitating water points
* United Purpose are constructing and renovating treatment units thus Kameza and Mwanza emergence treatment Units

We have also embarked on LNOB (Leaving No one Behind) campaign where we are ensuring that every Malawian regardless of gender, economic status, ability etc. is taken on board in our various programming systems and we are utilizing all available platforms to achieve this. There are a lot of examples on this but I am only going to point out one activity that is being facilitated by one of our members Campaign for Health Education, Sanitation and Hygiene (CAHESH). CAHESH have translated COVID 19 messages in braille books just to ensure the visually impaired also have access to information

With Me are some of WESNetwork members: WaterAid, World Vision and WASAMA

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)