

Please champion water, sanitation and hygiene at the 2021 World Health Assembly (WHA74)



The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed global gaps in health systems and the basic services required for people to be able to protect themselves against the spread of the virus. Good water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in homes, public spaces and healthcare facilities is the first line of defence against COVID-19 and essential to resilient health systems that can weather future pandemics and other health crises – including the rising threat of antimicrobial resistance. Yet, globally, **3 billion people lack access to soap and water at home to wash their hands**,¹ and **1.8 billion people are at higher risk of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases** because they use or work in a healthcare facility which lacks basic water services.²

According to the Global Progress Report on WASH in HCFs (WHO/UNICEF, 2020), 76% of HCFs in Malawi had basic water services in 2019 and 68% had hand hygiene facilities at points of care. This means that while Government continues to make efforts to safeguard and improve the health of all living in Malawi, there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure 100% coverage of both basic water services and hand hygiene facilities at points of care.

Good public health is impossible without clean water and soap, and hygienic, safe and dignified healthcare can only be achieved through WASH in healthcare facilities. Solving the crisis of WASH in healthcare facilities is an important, cost-effective contribution, with multiplier effects that will help protect against many global health threats. But even the global COVID-19 pandemic, and [clear guidance from the WHO](#) to prioritise these areas, has yet to inspire significant increases in attention or funding for handwashing, or for WASH in healthcare facilities.

The gaps in safe healthcare provision through WASH in healthcare facilities are stark. Globally, **one in three healthcare facilities do not have readily available access to handwashing facilities** – and almost **half of healthcare facilities in least developed countries lack basic water services**.² This deprives them of a fundamental tool in the fight against COVID-19, significantly contributes to preventable deaths, and undermines efforts to achieve pandemic preparedness and global health security.

WHA74 will see a formal ‘Progress report’ on the WHA72 [resolution on WASH in healthcare facilities](#),³ which will be an urgent call to action for Health Ministers to keep the promises they made by adopting the 2019 resolution. COVID-19, as well as the recent re-emergence of Ebola cases in West Africa, demonstrates the need for investment in this critical element of pandemic preparedness without further delay.

We urge Heads of Government and Health Ministers to take the following critical actions, in line with WHO guidance, ensuring that urgent investment in hygiene and public health is central to a COVID-19 response and rebuild strategy.

- 1.** End the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting equal access to vaccines, embedded within a wider commitment to equity and long-term pandemic preparedness, including strengthening health systems and improving quality of care through WASH. Capitalise on the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines to integrate nationwide hygiene promotion, thereby strengthening community resilience to future outbreaks.
- 2.** Build resilience of the most vulnerable health workers and patients by rapidly implementing your commitments as outlined in the WHA72 resolution on WASH in healthcare facilities. Invest in services, infrastructure, supplies and training for all frontline health workers – 70% of whom are women – including cleaners and auxiliary staff.

During the World Health Assembly:

- Report back on national progress for the WHA72.7 resolution on WASH in healthcare facilities.
- Make a statement on WASH in healthcare facilities and hand hygiene as core pillars of COVID-19 response and pandemic preparedness.
- Make a public commitment to develop and implement a costed national hand hygiene roadmap for your country.
- Champion the importance of WASH in healthcare facilities and hand hygiene as part of your delegation's contributions during formal and informal proceedings. For example, on Universal Health Coverage, tackling antimicrobial resistance, progress on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, empowering the health workforce, improving child nutrition and women's health.
- Encourage bilateral and multilateral donors to invest in a coordinated funding drive committing at least **US \$1.2 billion** by the end of 2021 towards meeting the financial costs of delivering universal WASH services in all healthcare facilities.
- Call for the inclusion of WASH in an 'International Treaty on Pandemic Preparedness' (led by the WHO and G7/G20) – ensuring international health regulations include access to WASH as part of collective commitments, strengthening essential services to protect everyone ahead of the next global pandemic.
- Propose a 2022 WHA resolution on 'Hand Hygiene for All' for adoption at WHA75.

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References

¹ WHO/UNICEF (2017). *Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) Progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2017 update and SDG Baselines*. Available at: who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/jmp-2017/en/ (accessed 16 Apr 2021).

² WHO (2020). *Global progress report on water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities: Fundamentals first*. Available at: who.int/publications/i/item/9789240017542 (accessed 16 Apr 2021).

³ *Seventy-second World Health Assembly WHA72.7 Agenda item 12.5 28 May 2019 Water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities*. Available at: apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72/A72_R7-en.pdf (accessed 16 Apr 2021).

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