



European  
Commission

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## European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

# Water, sanitation, and hygiene

### What is it?

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is one of the main sectors of humanitarian aid, alongside food assistance, nutrition, health, and shelter.

Providing access to safe drinking water in sufficient quantities is essential in emergencies and crises. Basic sanitation and hygiene education are important for a healthy living environment.

### Why is this important?

Access to safe water and sanitation is a basic human right. Unfortunately, at present, 2 billion people (1/4 of the global population) uses unsafe drinking water sources.

Some 3.6 billion people (half of humanity) lives without safely managed sanitation. In addition, 2.3 billion people (or 1 in 3) lack basic handwashing facilities at home.

During emergencies, displaced people, especially for the most vulnerable (women, children, and persons with disabilities), often lack access to safe water, adequate sanitation, and hygiene. The reason is that water supply and sanitation systems are damaged, destroyed, or inexistent.

Water is a fundamental part of all aspects of life. It is closely linked to sustainable development and various areas such as food security, public health, poverty reduction, gender equality, climate, and the environment. Therefore, water helps achieve many Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Climate change and urbanisation worsen water scarcity. They make it even more challenging to ensure that everyone has access to safe drinking water and sanitation, which is a human right.

Lack of access to clean water, basic sanitation, and low hygiene standards, increase the vulnerability to epidemic outbreaks.

According to the United Nations, over 700 children under 5 years die of diarrhoea every day due to unsafe water or poor sanitation.

### How are we helping?

The EU is one of the largest humanitarian donors of WASH assistance worldwide. It contributes around €200 million each year.

WASH has become a growing sector in development cooperation and action, as well as in humanitarian assistance.

EU humanitarian funding ensures timely and dignified access to sufficient and safe water services for people caught in humanitarian crises.

We are applying a human-rights based approach which can be summarised with the so-called AAAQ criteria: availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, and quality. It is applied together with our member states, and in line with the UN human rights framework for water and sanitation.

We base our interventions on the commitment that no one is left behind and the services and facilities provided are sustainable to remain available for future generations.

The EU increasingly supports projects incorporating WASH components within other humanitarian sectors such as health, nutrition, food assistance, shelter, and education.

Whenever possible, sanitation and hygiene promotion activities are integrated into water supply interventions to reduce the risk of water contamination and water-borne diseases.

This approach also ensures that projects are community-led and promote self-sufficiency, placing special emphasis on:

- enabling quick access to clean water, decent sanitation, and hygiene services during a crisis
- helping to build resilience and recovering capacities of the affected populations against crises
- taking preventive action against water-borne diseases.

The EU's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department draws its expertise in this area from a network of national, regional and global WASH and shelter and settlements experts, as well as NGOs, the United Nations, and Red Cross and Crescent partners.

The EU prioritises 3 areas in the field of WASH:

- **speed of response:** the increasing frequency and scale of sudden-onset disasters require better reaction capacities. The EU improves logistical support for the humanitarian community to facilitate experts and equipment on site as early as possible.
- **coordination:** a fast response also depends on good coordination, which is essential for assessing and prioritising needs. The EU is working closely with the Global WASH Cluster - the main international platform led by UNICEF to coordinate humanitarian operations in WASH assistance.
- **working with civil protection actors:** the complementary roles of humanitarian aid and civil protection are key in the WASH sector. For example, growing WASH needs in urban humanitarian crises often require a technically adapted response. This can be provided through civil protection actions (e.g., setting up large-scale water pumps and purification systems to replace water infrastructure damaged in a natural hazard)

## EU at UN Water Conference

The UN Water Conference on 22-24 March 2023 is an opportunity to put water higher on the global agenda and accelerate action to reach the goal of clean water and sanitation for all by 2030. The EU is committed to playing an active role.

The EU priorities for the conference are:

- as an essential human right, ensure access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene
- secure clean and healthy water-related ecosystems for sustainable development and climate mitigation and adaptation
- promote circularity across the water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus by increasing water efficiency and reuse, and reduce pollution
- strengthen water governance and cooperation at all levels and across boundaries as catalysts for peace and security
- support implementation by mobilising both public and private finance, research and innovation and knowledge-sharing.



The conference will be an opportunity for the EU, Member States, private sector, and science and civil society to commit to actions.

The event will also help showcase innovations in policy approaches, research, water technology, financing and governance to achieve sustainable water management.

## Facts & figures

The number of people without access to safe water is expected to reach **2 billion** by 2025.

By 2050, demand for water is expected to increase by **55%**.

Every day, more than **700** children under the age of 5 die of diarrhoea caused by unsafe water or poor sanitation.

Around **4 billion** people are hit by severe water scarcity during at least one month of the year

(United Nations)