Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Recommendations & Actions

The administration and Congress should prioritize and integrate sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in their overall approach to international development. In particular, foreign policy objectives must be realigned to address the sanitation and hygiene crisis. This includes: creating a multiyear WASH strategy that targets programs based on need; fully implementing WASH elements in the administration’s development initiatives, in particular the Global Health Initiative and the Child Survival Call to Action; and improving the ability of USAID and the State Department to implement WASH programs at the headquarters and mission levels.

• The administration should ensure that its yet to be completed comprehensive, multiyear WASH strategy is integrated within a wider water strategy that includes measurable water resource management and water productivity indicators, benchmarks, timetables and an identification of the resources needed to meet set goals. The strategy is six years overdue, pursuant to the Water for the Poor Act, and should be released immediately.

• Congress and White House officials should work together to ensure that robust funding is provided for WASH initiatives within the various Global Health and Development Assistance accounts, as well as ensure that the objectives of the Water for the Poor Act are implemented as intended by Congress.

• Communities of greatest need should be targeted for WASH programming; however, in fiscal year 2010, only 33 percent of U.S. government WASH programs was targeted at low-income countries.4

• USAID should continue training personnel in WASH to develop long-term expertise.

• Congress should codify existing senior WASH coordinator positions at the State Department and USAID to improve interagency coordination, ensure predictable expertise in WASH in these agencies, and demonstrate a U.S. priority for WASH.

• The administration should continue its support of the Sanitation and Water for All partnership to address gaps in policy, planning, financing and technical assistance.

• USAID should have a transparent, web-based monitoring dashboard for WASH work.

• Congress should urgently pass the Senator Paul Simon Water for the World Act, in order to rectify many of the above concerns without significant funding increases.

Results

A strong water strategy integrated across all development programs will give the U.S. government the tools it needs to lead the developed world in improving access to safe, affordable and sustainable water and sanitation. Improved coordination among donors will help recipient governments achieve universal WASH access and ultimately healthier, more stable societies with stronger economies.
Background

Lack of clean water and sanitation is perhaps the world’s largest single cause of disease. More than 25 diseases are caused by inadequate water and sanitation services, creating nearly 10 percent of the global public health burden, killing more than 2 million people each year (including more children than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined) and causing up to half of the world’s malnutrition. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are crucial building blocks for improving quality of life and health, advancing education, reducing poverty and malnutrition, increasing child and maternal survival, driving economic growth and contributing to gender equality and dignity.

The facts:

- **For every dollar invested in water and sanitation, an estimated $4 is returned.**
- **Annually, $260 billion in economic losses are associated with inadequate water and sanitation services.**
- **Each year, children lose 443 million school days due to water-related illness.**
- **Collectively, women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa spend an estimated 200 million hours per day and 40 billion hours per year collecting and transporting water.** Access to clean water and sanitation would allow women to earn a living and girls to attend school.
- **WASH programming has been found to reduce the number of child deaths related to diarrheal diseases by about 65 percent.**
- **Access to improved sanitation and clean water is essential to the overall health of people living with HIV/AIDS, whose compromised immune systems are more prone to diseases such as diarrhea and who need adequate nutrition in order to respond to antiretroviral therapy.**
- **Water scarcity affects more than 500 million people in more than 30 countries and can lead to instability and violence, a challenge recently highlighted in a 2012 Intelligence Community Assessment.**

The good news is that the work of donor nations has paid off. Some 87 percent of the world’s population has access to safe, affordable and sustainable drinking water and 61 percent has access to improved sanitation. These numbers show that effective and appropriate solutions to global WASH issues are available. Effective solutions address water supply issues (e.g., boreholes, rainwater harvesting), sanitation provision (e.g., pit latrines) and hygiene training (hand washing).

The biggest challenges to achieving universal access to WASH are a lack of global awareness of the issue and a lack of political will, particularly from heads of state and relevant ministers, to channel the necessary financial, human and technical resources. These gaps create opportunities for the United States to take leadership and provide support that leverages funds from developing nations and the private sector. Other significant challenges include developing culturally-appropriate strategies to encourage behavior changes, such as good hygiene and food safety, as well as improved management systems and governance to ensure WASH programming addresses the issues facing rural, urban and slum areas. By 2050, 70 percent of the world’s population will be living in urban areas, and sustainable WASH services must keep up with this growing demand. Donors must also support WASH programming that considers long-term sustainability, including protecting freshwater ecosystems that provide the underpinning for WASH services. Although developing countries should fund the majority of their water and sanitation improvement projects, the developed world and Congress can and should offer financial, human and technical assistance to support and speed up this ongoing process.

Congress showed strong leadership on WASH issues when it enacted the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act in 2005. This act passed with overwhelming bipartisan support and made the provision of safe drinking water and sanitation in countries of greatest need a priority of U.S. foreign policy. Congress continued its support of WASH issues in the 112th Congress by introducing updated water legislation, the Water for the World Act.

As the international community builds upon its success in meeting the Millennium Development Goal on water, the sanitation goal remains unmet by a gap of 580 million people. Both developing and developed countries must prioritize WASH services. Safe drinking water and sanitation are not a luxury; progress on other development priorities cannot be sustained without them.

5 http://www.wateradvocates.org/hidden/media/nytimesads/Sources.pdf.
7,8,16 Hutton, Guy. 2012. “Global costs and benefits of drinking-water supply and sanitation interventions to reach the MDG target and universal coverage”, WHO. Geneva.
15 “World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 revision”, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Populations Division, 2012.