

# Water Security & Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Recommendations for the Biden-Harris Administration

## Context

Increasing water security and sustainable access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is essential for maintaining public health, addressing inequality, conserving biodiversity, creating sustainable poverty reduction outcomes, responding to the climate crisis, and ensuring a productive workforce. Yet, **one in three people** in the world do not have access to safe drinking water, more than half of the world's population do not have access to safely managed sanitation, and nearly 40% of people cannot wash their hands at home. Many of the world's schools and hospitals also lack access to WASH. Meanwhile, water insecurity is **on the rise** globally, as freshwater resources are experiencing increased demand, including from COVID-19, while being increasingly threatened by climate change, nature loss, and unsustainable agricultural and infrastructure development.

Lack of sustainable access to WASH leaves the most marginalized populations vulnerable to death from diarrheal diseases, unable to participate in the formal economy or achieve education, at greater risk of gender-based violence, and susceptible to undernutrition, debilitating neglected tropical diseases (NTDs), and hospital-acquired infections (HAIs). Lack of sustainable WASH is not just a symptom of poverty. It is a driver of poverty and loss of life.

U.S. investments have helped tens of millions of people gain access to sustainable water and sanitation services and reduce mortality and morbidity from WASH-related illnesses and other infections. Expansion of sustainable WASH contributes to the achievement of other U.S. global anti-poverty priorities, builds more sustainable and resilient communities, and plays a key role in delivering global health priorities. If leveraged alongside sufficient funding from donors and national governments, U.S. investments can result in positive, interconnected outcomes with fewer children and vulnerable populations sick from dirty water or poor sanitation, fewer missed days of school and work, increased income and productivity, and accrued household savings that benefit entire families.

COVID-19 emphasizes the critical role of WASH for global health security, pandemic response, and economic recovery. Challenges in accessing soap and water at the household level, maintaining utility services, and the safe handling of human waste have all come to the forefront in this pandemic. Until a COVID-19 vaccine is widely distributed, WASH, including handwashing and hygienic workspaces, is essential. The pandemic and other stressors such as climate change also signal how urgent it is to build resilience and sustainable natural resource management throughout food and water systems.

Americans across the country believe that improving access to clean water **should be a top U.S. global health priority**. In the fall of 2020, the bipartisan International Water and Sanitation Caucus was formed in the House of Representatives to educate and build support for sustainable WASH within U.S. foreign assistance. The Biden Administration can build on this momentum and elevate international WASH sustainability and water security issues, which will help the U.S. reestablish its leadership role in the world.

## Recommendations

Elevate the importance of water security and sustainable WASH interventions in U.S. defense, diplomatic, and development priorities.

- **Quickly appoint professionals with a background in water security and WASH**, and ensure the legally mandated posts of the Global Water Coordinator at USAID and the Special Advisor for Water Resources at the



Department of State are filled. Additional leadership positions at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other agencies are encouraged. Empower the interagency process through staffing and provision of resources for the Interagency Water Working Group.

- **Prioritize and integrate sustainable WASH and global water security issues**, such as resource management and access to water, across U.S. defense, diplomatic, and development priorities to serve as a catalyst for peace, promote national security, and mitigate humanitarian emergencies.
- **Scale-up evidence collection, analysis, and learning** to support the expansion of proven WASH interventions to enhance resilience, sustainability, and self-reliance by building local, long-term capacity; strengthening institutions and the rule of law; and sharing best practices and lessons learned.

### Elevate the cross-cutting role of WASH and improve integration and coordination with other development and humanitarian efforts across the U.S. government.

- **Elevate the role of sustainable WASH within U.S. strategies and initiatives**, including on global health (including pandemic prevention and response and health systems strengthening), food security, climate change, nutrition, education, livelihoods, economic development, disability and inclusive development, gender, resilience, and environment, and natural resource management
- **Elevate sustainable WASH as a means to fight and recover from COVID-19** by allocating resources to ensure people have sustainable access to clean water and soap, hygiene information, and appropriate sanitation in schools, healthcare facilities, workplaces, transportation hubs, and homes. Prioritize WASH strategies to prevent disease outbreak, combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and build resilient health systems to build resilient communities and provide quality primary health care.
- **Support and expand global WASH programs at USAID** that reduce inequitable access, promote economic recovery, integrate sustainable resource management, and contribute to climate resiliency.
- **Continue to invest in WASH infrastructure**, particularly in fragile contexts, while providing more incentives for its sustainable management.
- **Ensure that water security expertise at USAID is fully engaged and integrated in WASH policy decisions.**

### Improve data and evidence on water security and WASH programming at USAID and Department of State.

- **Analyze and adopt tools and protocols** to measure WASH-related vulnerabilities in order to inform operational and financial decision making and evidence-based advocacy needs for WASH in humanitarian contexts.
- **Work with Congress and USAID to develop new indicators** in addition to the traditional hardware indicators to show long term improvements in the WASH enabling environment for local systems led by host governments for providing sustainable WASH services.
- **Direct State Department and USAID leadership to improve coordination** via Leadership Councils and interagency mechanisms, use of data and evidence, and transparency regarding water security, resource management, and WASH policies, programs, and funding.

### Recommit to and advance U.S. leadership on multilateral engagement on WASH through the Sustainable Development Goals and other multilateral processes and agencies.



- **Recommit to the achievement of SDG6** to ensure the availability and sustainable management of sanitation and water for all, and reaffirm support for SDG6 targets, with a focus on improving sanitation management, which was in danger of not being met even before COVID-19.
- **Strengthen engagement and coordination with global WASH stakeholders** at the U.N. (such as UNICEF, WHO, and U.N. Water), the World Bank, and other bilateral and multilateral global development partners.

## About the WASH Working Group

InterAction's Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Working Group seeks to improve U.S. government policies related to WASH issues in order to increase sustainable access to these basic services in the developing world, improve the integration of WASH across development sectors, and prioritize service access to communities most in need. The group encourages partnerships among private, public, and non-profit organizations in the water sector.

**Point of Contact:** Kelsey Harris, Policy and Advocacy Coordinator, InterAction, [kharris@interaction.org](mailto:kharris@interaction.org).

## About InterAction

InterAction is a convener, thought leader, and voice for NGOs working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.

