

INTERACTION WASH WORKING GROUP'S FEEDBACK FOR NSC'S POTENTIAL GLOBAL WATER SECURITY ACTION PLAN

On April 25, 2022, the InterAction WASH Working Group convened a listening session with the National Security Council (NSC) surrounding potential plans for a White House Action Plan on Global Water Security. This listening session provided a space for WASH Working Group Members to give specific feedback on how the NSC should develop such an action plan and how the plan should interact with and build off of the U.S. Government (USG) Global Water Strategy. **This paper is the product of that discussion and additional recommendations by the WASH Working Group.**

The InterAction WASH Working Group welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on a potential U.S. Global Water Security Action Plan. By elevating water security through an action plan, the U.S. addresses the critical role that water plays across sectors like industry and agriculture; in improving livelihoods and health; and in national security.

Global water security is a key component of national security. The world already struggles to maintain global water security due to unsustainable practices. **Four billion people** live in areas suffering from water scarcity at least one month per year and 1.42 billion people, including 450 million children, live in areas of high or extremely high water vulnerability year-round. As demand for water rises, climate change is putting further stress on this precious resource. A changing climate means **more severe and frequent droughts and floods, rising sea levels, and a more uncertain water supply**, further increasing demand. These impacts can damage vital water and sanitation infrastructure and services in homes, communities, schools, and healthcare facilities, as well as impact food supplies. Water scarcity can also exacerbate existing humanitarian crises and both **drive and negatively impact** conflict and migration. Water scarcity can even be used to **forecast potential violent conflicts**.

Access to good quality, climate-resilient water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services—alongside other basic services such as education and health—can enable communities living in poverty to withstand longer dry seasons and flooding. The combined benefits of safe water supply, decent toilets, and good hygiene reduce the overall disease burden on communities living in poverty—with knock-on effects on health, education, productivity, and livelihoods. Water and WASH interventions related to climate adaptation and mitigation can have significant impacts and strengthen communities proactively before a disaster or conflict occurs.

Recommendations for the NSC White House Action Plan on Global Water Security

Elevate and align water security across existing and future U.S. diplomacy and development policies. We recommend that the Action Plan should emphasize the connections between climate water resources management, conflicts, and national security. From a water security standpoint, this should include addressing threats to water and sanitation in the context of climate risk through national climate analyses, monitoring, and early warning systems, and plans

at regional, national, sub-national, and local levels. Institutional access for WASH—such as in schools and healthcare facilities—must also be considered a key target for resilient and adaptive communities. Approaches to addressing climate adaptation and resilience in WASH must be gender-responsive and leverage the needs and expertise of Indigenous populations, girls, and women—all of whom are often on the front lines of climate impacts.

Incorporate intersectional issue areas into the Action Plan. Global water security is a key example of the threat and call to action coming from climate change—a threat in that many climate change effects will be experienced through water (more severe floods and droughts, more variable precipitation), and a call to action in that integrated, sustainable water management can achieve both adaptation and mitigation goals (e.g., via preserving mangroves and wetlands). Smart water infrastructure can contribute to health, environment, and climate goals.

- ▶ In conflict or other fragile situations, water and sanitation systems are often vulnerable to attack, making displaced populations—especially children already suffering from malnutrition and weakened immune systems—more susceptible to water-borne diseases. WASH services in homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and other public spaces are critical during times of crisis to help prevent and control infections and public health emergencies.
- ▶ There is a substantial gap between the objectives and approaches of humanitarian and development WASH programming related to water security and water resource management (WRM)—partly on account of global humanitarian principles and partly due to the nature and inflexibility of donor Request for Applications/Request for Proposals (RFAs/RFPs). Functionally, this results in significant incoherence among humanitarian and development actors, and a lack of meaningful progress toward water security and prevention of recurrent humanitarian needs. The White House and NSC actors may be able to offer vision and concrete ideas on how to break this stalemate. For example, operationalizing the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) Early Recovery, Risk Reduction, and Resilience Programs (ER4) framework, funding, and indicators for Water Security and Resilience may be catalytic.

Integrate the Action Plan with existing and future USAID climate strategies, water security, and WASH initiatives.

Currently, the USG's WASH, national security, and climate change activities are fragmented. Better coordination and communication through the implementation of the new Action Plan in coordination with the Global Water Strategy and Climate Strategy would improve transparency and make USAID and NSC policies more effective. As part of this, it is important to not only communicate how national security is impacted by water security and climate change but also how [addressing global water security can be part of the solution to international conflicts](#). To ensure integration with the Global Water Strategy, the Climate Strategy, and future initiatives, the Action Plan should:

- ▶ Promote integration with existing priorities as defined by the Water for the World Act as well as the forthcoming process to update the USG's Global Water Strategy.
- ▶ Ensure consistent integration and interagency collaboration with water security and climate resilience components in the Action Plan and other USAID and USG strategies and policies, including but not limited to: the Global Food Security Strategy, Gender Policy, and the whole government strategy (through the Gender

Policy Council), the Resilience Policy, and strategies and policies related to global health security. This extends to both strategy development and implementation.

- ▶ Incorporate a holistic definition and understanding of climate impacts, climate adaptation, climate resilience, and water security and improve integration of those definitions across NSC pillars.
- ▶ Additionally, the U.S. Government Global Water Strategy notes the relationship between shared waters and conflict (Strategic Objective 3), and the link between WRM (Water Resource Management) and food security is reflected in Strategic Objective 2. However, it may be useful in the NSC Action Plan and revised Global Water Strategy to reflect the centrality of water and water security in achieving the multitude of other whole-of-government strategies and priorities (e.g., food security, conflict, climate adaptation, peace, security, and stability). For example, in many chronic and protracted humanitarian settings, food insecurity is driven in large part by water insecurity, recurrent drought, and inequitable water resource allocations. In many contexts and settings, climate adaptation measures amount to water resource planning, stormwater management, and water system redundancy. A more strategic, whole-of-government approach to water security would have a number of synergies across the climate, food security, and resilience goals of the USG's foreign investments.

Strengthen linkages to global health, including health systems strengthening and pandemic preparedness. Access to WASH services is critical to meeting many of the U.S. commitments in global health—including ending preventable maternal and child health, improving nutrition, preventing acute undernutrition, and preventing the spread of novel viruses, antimicrobial-resistant diseases, and neglected tropical diseases.

- ▶ The Action Plan should strengthen the linkages between WASH and global health outcomes and global health security.
- ▶ The Action Plan should incorporate lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on the role of WASH in pandemic preparedness—including strengthening health systems, strengthening the resilience of utility providers, elevating infection prevention and control (IPC) interventions, and sustaining hand hygiene promotion and behavior change.
- ▶ Sanitation professionals should be considered essential workers who must be protected from infection and supported for service continuity to elevate the prioritization of the role of the sanitation sector in response to global health crises.

Improve data on water and climate change. Water security and WASH have historically not been a focus of the USG's climate strategies and policies. As these issues are more integrated into climate adaptation, resilience, and mitigation efforts, it is important to ensure that this integration is based on evidence and analysis. Specifically, NSC should:

- ▶ Improve data collection on water-related indicators at the national, local, and hyper-local levels to better estimate how climate change impacts water security and WASH. Gathering this data proactively would allow the sector to project potential issues and react better when disasters occur.
- ▶ Prioritize better measurement of hydrological data—including hydro-meteorological systems—to increase data-driven decision-making.

- ▶ Ensure that existing climate, weather, and hydrological data are available in formats or developed into knowledge products that can be put to practical use to address water security, as well as programming.

Consult with and build on lessons learned from partners. Many WASH partners recognize the need to engage more fully with government and quasi-government climate actors in the climate and water resource space like the U.S. Geological Survey, Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), and intelligence actors. However, there often isn't a clear mechanism for this type of NGO-USG coordination and meaningful engagement. There is a need for USG support to foster these partnerships and to facilitate the uptake of such climate tools and data to inform WASH programming.

As noted by other partners during the White House consultations, there is a need to draw on the expertise of U.S. actors, particularly from the Southwest and drought-prone regions, to foster innovative thinking around drought resilience and preparedness—in both infrastructure and governance approaches. The NSC Action Plan and White House engagement may be able to support this type of domestic-to-global connection (e.g., with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers technical actors, regional watershed authorities, and domestic engineering and environmental firms).

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.

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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.

