

Name and Acronym of the organisation: WaterAid

Date and title of the meeting: 24th -26th August. 71st session of the WHO Africa Region

Agenda item (title and number): Special event on the Covid 19 Response in the WHO Africa Region

Statement:

The WHO guidelines for prevention of Covid 19, and the global response has been on promoting hand hygiene and strengthening infection prevention and control (IPC). Governments across the globe introduced a range of measures designed to keep WASH services running, including emergency financial support to utilities, essential industries and vulnerable households.

Rigorous hygiene, including handwashing, is crucial in reducing transmission of outbreak-related pathogens; it helps prevent the spread of cholera, Ebola, shigellosis, SARS, hepatitis E, neglected tropical diseases and COVID-19. Further, by cutting incidence of diarrhoeal disease and respiratory infections, handwashing contributes to reducing undernutrition and improves overall health of individuals and populations making them less susceptible to other diseases. Handwashing with soap is one of the most cost-effective public health interventions in reducing the global infectious diseases burden, costing just US\$3 per disability-adjusted life year (DALY) averted.

Hand hygiene is a critical component of disease prevention, preparedness and response, and yet consistent handwashing practice is often hindered by poor access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in health and non-health settings such as households, schools and public spaces, combined with inadequate hygiene behaviour change interventions.

Building health systems resilience and strengthening pandemic preparedness and response is unachievable without adequately addressing the most fundamental pillars of public health – handwashing, alongside comprehensive WASH services.

The current pandemic illustrates the vital importance of continued investment in comprehensive disease prevention measures, which are critical to strengthening preparedness and response to other diseases including cholera and neglected tropical diseases, as well as emerging health threats such as antimicrobial resistance.

In 2020 75% of the population of Sub-Saharan Africa did not have basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at home. Although more people may currently be practising good hand hygiene because of their fear of COVID-19, past experience and evidence shows that this may only be a temporary stimulus.

Similarly, 43% of healthcare facilities don't have basic handwashing facilities with soap and water at points of care, and 47% of schools in developing countries lack handwashing facilities. That means 900 million students do not have anywhere to wash their hands with soap while at school which is at least for 6 hours of the day.

Call to action:

Political action and investment in hand hygiene is fundamental to building healthy populations and remains at the forefront of public health. We must take this opportunity to act together to change people's hygiene behaviours, for a generation and on a massive scale.

We urge prioritisation of long-term, sustainable behaviour change programmes at all levels, to minimise the impact of COVID-19, prevent other communicable diseases including diarrhoeal diseases, and minimise the impact of any future pandemics and health threats.

We call on all governments to develop, finance and implement costed national roadmaps for sustainable hand hygiene as an integral part of public health investments, including rigorous and sustained behaviour change communications.

We call on Donor governments to increase and sustain financing for hygiene as part of COVID-19 responses and long-term public health investments.

We call on International Non-Governmental Organisations and Civil Society Organisations to prioritise and engage communities in hygiene behaviour change until good hygiene behaviour and facilities are normal for everyone, everywhere.

By seizing the opportunity of heightened awareness and priority of hand hygiene catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Member States, WHO and partners have a unique opportunity to promote concrete action and secure investment to accelerate the scale up of hygiene behaviours globally. We urge Member States and WHO in the region to champion hygiene, including through supporting a new resolution on hygiene at next year's World Health Assembly.

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