



SANITATION
AND WATER
FOR ALL

REACH OUT
AND
REACH UP:

Insights
into Global
Perspectives on
Water, Sanitation
and Hygiene

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– INTRODUCTION

Effective communications and advocacy are grounded in formative research. This document is informed by a research project commissioned by Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) and undertaken by Browning Environmental Communications (BEC) during 2021. The objective of the research was to understand how different ‘external’ audiences perceive the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector, and to explore what messages resonate with them. [Read full research.](#)

The research follows a formative SWA paper in 2020, called A Proposal for Repositioning Water, Sanitation & Hygiene, which found that messaging on WASH is “sometimes too broad to create the impact we need it to.” The study also builds on other relevant research. This includes IRC research from 2019, which sought to better understand how high-level decision makers view WASH, and UN-Water’s Listening Exercise for World Water Day 2021, which illustrated how conversations in the water sector frequently branch out into other policy areas such as climate and human rights. It also builds on SIWI’s Communications Initiative, which seeks to create better sector communication that utilize linkages with other global issues, resulting in ‘greater public awareness and understanding of the centrality of water’. All of these endeavours have indicated there is a growing demand for more effective communications about water, sanitation and hygiene issues with audiences that may be considered ‘external’ to the sector – such as health or climate professionals, or political leaders.

The findings and suggestions in this document are not designed to be directive or exhaustive. Rather, they can help shape how WASH communications are framed, particularly when engaging other sectors and political leaders at the highest levels of decision making. This document distills information from the SWA research project, first presenting eight key findings that WASH communicators can use to inform their engagement with audiences ‘outside’ the sector. It then considers some specific insights for six sectors – economic development, health, education, humanitarian response, human rights, and climate change, and concludes with some insights into how WASH is viewed by other sectors in different regions of the world, and what that can mean for communications messaging and strategies.



“Water, sanitation and hygiene is the key that unlocks almost every development ambition. It improves so many aspects of communities’ lives everywhere, and yet we often lack the language and knowledge to engage those outside our sector.

This research helps bridge those divides. If we can learn how to show others how our sector can deliver their aspirations for the future, we harness their expertise and their passion, to help us to deliver ours.”

Catarina de Albuquerque
CEO, Sanitation and Water for All

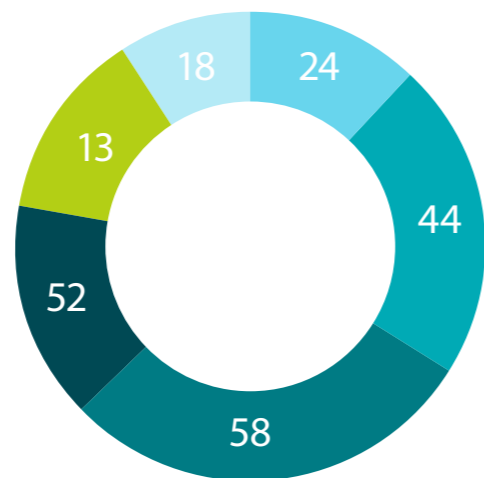
– RESEARCH

The research was a perception study built around ‘structured interviews’ with experts in several different fields, from 90 countries which were divided into four broad global regions: Africa, Asia, Europe & North America, and Latin America.

The primary survey was of 200 professionals working across six ‘non-WASH’ sectors: economic development, health, education, humanitarian response, human rights, and climate change. The information from this survey was supplemented by interviews with government advisors from each of the regions.

Interviewees were from senior levels in their respective fields. They included heads of government departments, commissioners and directors of public bodies, CEOs, former and current heads of inter-governmental agencies, leaders of international NGOs, senior academics, and international activists.

More detail on the research, including extended results, findings, methodology and survey questions can be found in the main research document, Reach Out and Reach Up: A Study of Global Views on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene.



58% - Economic Development 52% - Human Rights
13% - Humanitarian Response 18% - Education
12% - Health 22% - Climate

– KEY FINDINGS

This section distills the research into 8 key insights from the research study into global views on water, sanitation and hygiene. They are designed to inspire and strengthen WASH communications, to help engage audiences outside the WASH sector.

Each finding first considers what the research found, and then offers some specific suggestions for what this might mean for WASH communications.





– 1

WASH is perceived by many outside the sector as high cost

What the research found

When professionals from other sectors were asked about what was holding back WASH from being prioritized, around one fifth of all those interviewed mentioned the high costs of improving WASH services – and for water and sanitation in particular. Perceptions of high costs were mentioned most as the biggest barrier to prioritizing WASH.

This also came up when professionals were asked what messages, arguments or data might motivate their sector to give higher priority to water, sanitation and hygiene. Many professionals stressed the use of messaging that shows the cost benefits (or ‘return on investment’) that WASH delivers. Nearly half (44%) of all education professionals and 50% of health professionals in Africa recommended including clear cost-benefit analyses for WASH investment. One climate change professional stressed that any such cost-benefit analysis should focus on WASH links to specific areas of interest for other sectors or ministries.

Recommendations were also made to highlight WASH as a potential engine for economic growth, and that there should be clear financial arguments for the economic and social benefits of investing in WASH.

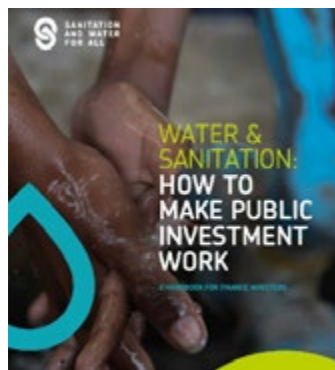
What this means for communications around WASH

Keep in mind that when other sectors think of WASH investment, one of their first thoughts could be that it is ‘too expensive’. If this is not addressed, this perception could drown out any other messaging you are trying to deliver.

To counter the perception of WASH being high cost, consider commissioning a cost benefit analysis that will clearly demonstrate the medium to longer term benefits of investing in WASH. These could be fiscal benefits or social benefits, but such analysis should provide numbers that clearly demonstrate the long-term benefits of WASH investment.

Such messaging will vary according to your audience. If you need to make a fiscal case (for example, perhaps engaging a minister, or the economic development sector), then examples of this are: ‘For every \$ spent on WASH, \$ is saved on xxx’ or ‘Investing in WASH services to increase climate resilience pays for itself within 10 years’. If you need to make a case for community / social benefits, then tailor it to audience: ‘Investing in WASH now means improved community health, with averted costs and reduced pressure on health services within x years’.

Further Resource



SWA's "A Handbook for Finance Ministers – How to make public investment work" explores how to make better use of public funding and mobilize new financing sources, and includes several inspirational case studies.

“Messages need to demonstrate economic profitability, including explaining why investing in WASH can make investors earn money, to show them that WASH is not a sub-sector but a sector with many economic opportunities.”

Economic development professional, Africa

“Water is an essential pre-requisite for good sanitation and hygiene, but it costs more to deliver.”

Economic development professional, Asia

“Data that shows the cost/ benefit of WASH promotion on public health outcomes, malnutrition and human capital promotion should be aimed at ministers of finance.

Climate change professional, Europe & North America

– 2

The risks of inaction can provide a powerful message

What the research found

Many participants in the survey recommended messaging that communicates the consequences of not acting to improve water, sanitation and hygiene services. Interviewees suggested underlining the risks that poor WASH services present to other sectors’ wider ambitions, as well as the financial risks and costs that are caused by a failure to provide adequate water, sanitation and hygiene services.

Perceptions of risk varied between sectors. Economic development professionals suggested that explaining how poor WASH delivery undermines ambitions for economic growth would be an effective message. Professionals from sectors that work more closely with communities, however – such as education and health – recommended messages that show the risks of poor services on people, highlighting the human costs. Climate change professionals stressed their sector’s priorities to mitigate the risks posed by climate change and increase resilience – a clear area where WASH communications can offer a powerful message of help to act now, before it is too late.

Some professionals mentioned risk timescales. Humanitarian response and health professionals recommended messaging emphasizing poor WASH as an imminent risk, while some human rights and economic development professionals suggested that highlighting the long-term risks of poor WASH was important.

What this means for communications around WASH

Understanding the human and financial risks of poor WASH service delivery is important. Thinking about and framing communications around the risks of inaction can help to increase the relevance for a given sector or target audience.

Perceived ‘risks’, and the most serious consequences of inaction are likely to differ depending on the audience. It is therefore also crucial that WASH communications consider and reflect the nature of the target audience’s work, and their top priorities. Applying that information to the context of intended communications activity is likely to be highly effective at increasing engagement with external audiences.

It can also be effective to think about shifting the timescale of an audience’s usual perception of risk (from the immediate or short-term to the medium-term, for example) to highlight risks to their priorities of not addressing WASH, which they may not have considered.



“The private sector tends to focus on short-term risks but WASH-related issues generate medium-term risks, which will be far more damaging and cause even more financial losses.”

Economic development professional, Africa

“You should say that poor WASH is as much of a risk to children’s development as gang violence or other issues in the community.”

Education professional, Latin America

“The message is that, unless we tackle issues of clean water, and clean surroundings, every other scheme in the context of nutrition and health won’t be useful. Without WASH, all efforts otherwise would be a waste.”

Economic development professional, Asia



– 3

Framing WASH as aspirational resonates well

What the research found

Many professionals recommended that messaging on WASH should be aspirational and illustrate how enhanced WASH can change communities' and families' lives for the better.

This sentiment was strongest among education and health professionals. One health professional in Asia, for example, recommended that messages should "not be medical in themselves but communicate how WASH will meet (people's) medical goals". Messaging that articulates how WASH helps communities thrive was recommended by half of all health professionals, and a similarly high proportion of education professionals in Latin America.

Some education professionals recommended specifically connecting WASH to higher household income. Nearly half (45%) of education professionals in Europe and North America, for example, recommended messaging framed around aspirations for better services of those with potentially higher levels of disposable income.

What this means for communications around WASH

Considering the aspirations of communities and families when developing WASH messaging and strategic communications can be effective. Messages that focus on the transformative power of WASH to realize these ambitions are likely to resonate well.

This could mean framing WASH services themselves as something that communities desire and demand. Equally, it could mean focusing on other stated goals, such as improved health or economic productivity, and illustrating how WASH can help to deliver them.

By framing better access to WASH in terms of what communities aspire to, and as something that can deliver those ambitions, demand for better services increases – and other sectors are exposed to perspectives that can increase their understanding of the WASH sector's wide-ranging benefits.

The increased aspirations and ability to pay of any expanding economic groups could also be an area for opportunity. WASH communications that build on and embed the idea that improved, safer WASH is something families want as a priority if and when they see their income rise prosper.



"Communities should feel inspired to want better WASH and be sold the idea of how they can be living a better, healthier, and more enhanced life with improved WASH."

Health professional, Africa

"The [WASH sector's] main emphasis has been on supplying WASH facilities and not enough on channelling higher demand from families as they get richer."

Education professional, Asia

"The relationship between sanitation and health should move from a scientific discussion to one of community aspiration. WASH comms should therefore shift from a science perspective, to an aspirational perspective."

Health professional, Africa

– 4

Sectors often focus on one element of WASH

What the research found

The research indicated that other sectors often had a focus on (or an increased knowledge of) one or more certain elements of WASH, rather than WASH as a whole.

Some sectors – particularly climate change and humanitarian response – recommended that messaging should emphasize water over sanitation and hygiene to effectively engage their colleagues with WASH. Humanitarian response professionals often described how a secure supply of clean water in crisis zones is a more pressing need than sanitation and hygiene. Climate change professionals in every region recommended messages that relate to water usage, such as the damaging effects of water wastage. Over half (56%) of climate change professionals in Latin America recommended messages that exclusively focused on water.

Economic development professionals also indicated certain elements had more importance to their sector, viewing hygiene as less important or relevant to their work. By contrast, nearly every education professional considered hygiene as a highly important element of their work – by far the highest importance of any sector.

What this means for communications around WASH

Understand and reflect the importance given to certain elements of WASH, where appropriate. It is perfectly acceptable – indeed sometimes necessary – to focus on a particular element of WASH. Such focused communications can often provide an opportunity for engagement on broader aspects of WASH in the future.

The 'traditional' focus of sectors on specific elements of WASH also suggests there are many areas of opportunity for increasing understanding and engagement between sectors. In humanitarian response, for example, targeted WASH communications clearly explaining the wide benefits of improving both sanitation and hygiene, could help inspire broader action that both enhances that response, and increases access to WASH services for some of the most vulnerable communities.

Understand your audience and consider there might be novel areas for engagement based on relative areas where the sector may be less knowledgeable. Knowing which elements of WASH are less prioritized by specific sectors does not mean ignore it – exploring links between better hygiene and economic growth (through improved health), for example, could be an effective area for engagement. Communications that focus on increasing knowledge, and highlighting the advantages of a less familiar aspect of WASH, tailored to sector priorities, are likely to be more effective than more complex communications that rely on any assumed knowledge.



"A separation of WASH into the three... components is somewhat artificial and detracts from the need for a... holistic, demand-led movement led by communication, behavioural and political scientists."

Economic development professional, Asia

"We must insist on [highlighting] the consequences: when there is no clean water, there are more diseases. More diseases means more suffering in crisis zones."

Humanitarian response professional, Latin America

"You need to speak in terms of carbon footprint and emissions reductions to have cut through with my colleagues. It's clear this starts with messages on water and how it must be conserved."

Economic development professional, Asia



– 5

The power of WASH to increase security and help especially vulnerable groups is seen as a key strength

What the research found

Many people in the survey – particularly those working in education, human rights and humanitarian response – recommended that WASH should be communicated as a protection or security issue, focusing on how it can help particularly vulnerable groups. These sectors recommended messages that connect improving WASH with protecting peoples' personal security and providing safe spaces.

Human rights professionals in Asia recommended messages that illustrate WASH as a way to protect women. Humanitarian response professionals recommended messages that show how WASH makes societies safer. Climate change professionals said their sector was focused on climate change mitigation and resilience – key areas where better WASH services can help vulnerable communities.

Security or safety was also mentioned by people who have worked closely with heads of state in countries experiencing conflict or extreme poverty, including advisors from countries in Latin America and Africa. They suggested presenting WASH as a security issue in order to help engage governments with the protection of marginalized groups, such as women and vulnerable communities.

However, while vulnerable groups are impacted most by poor WASH, the research also suggested that a lack of 'means of redress' for these groups and low 'political returns' were key reasons holding back WASH progress.

What this means for communications around WASH

WASH communications highlighting the plight of underserved communities offer a chance to give voice to the powerless/poor. WASH communications present a dual benefit – it resonates well as a means of addressing inequality, and can also help address a key reason given globally for inaction – an absence of political priority. WASH communications can therefore be highly effective as a means of redress for vulnerable communities, and increasing engagement with decision makers.

WASH communications can also be effective at engaging governments by focusing on WASH as a security issue, as a way of increasing the safety of communities and improving the stability of populations. For example, countries and regions are already affected by clashes over natural resources, including water; targeted communications in such regions about improving water security could be highly effective.



"[Improved access to services] reduces conflict and violence, while improving health, and therefore overall community resilience".

Humanitarian response professional, Africa

"There is a need to frame WASH as an issue of safety and public security..."

Human rights professional, Asia

"When a state's presence is felt more strongly in communities, this can help to improve a state's overall security. WASH enhancements become evidence of the state positively contributing to the development of the country and to the stability of the region."

Human rights professional, Africa

– 6

Consider legacy when engaging high-level decision makers

What the research found

The research suggested that political leaders could be engaged by exploring how WASH can be part of establishing a political legacy, by drawing on and illustrating the long-term benefits of WASH.

Such messaging was recommended most by the economic development sector globally, and was particularly popular with humanitarian response professionals in Europe & North America (6 in 10 interviewed mentioned considering political legacy if trying to engage high-level decision makers on WASH).

What this means for communications around WASH

Messages should communicate what the long-term political gains of WASH investment can be, and how this can translate to being remembered as a historically significant achievement of their tenure in office.

Communications and associated advocacy strategies that confer a sense of the political opportunities of better WASH provision are important.

Increasing the profile of WASH as a priority election issue, for example through the development of WASH compacts, can shift perceptions of political leaders to consider improved WASH as something they will be associated with long after they have left office.

Understand and engage politically strategic groups that may influence leaders' perceptions of areas of electoral and political importance. This may mean engaging those that are more likely to vote, to increase the profile of WASH as a political issue.



"It will leave you with a positive legacy as WASH infrastructure is long-lasting."

Humanitarian response professional, Latin America

"Political leaders want to leave a legacy and concrete, long-lasting WASH schemes are a great way to ensure this. Water provision strengthens democracy as it allows people to see the government cares for them and gives them a stake in the future."

Human rights professional, Asia

"The stake of WASH enhancements should be tied to political gains for politicians."

Economic development professional, Africa

"Governments that make the investment in WASH today can reap the political rewards tomorrow".

Former advisor to a European government



– 7

WASH communications should align with political cycles

What the research found

Many professionals recommended messages that aligned WASH to political lifecycles, where appropriate – using three-to-five-year timeframes for planning WASH communications. They suggested this would help engage governments, by mirroring the political terms of office. This recommendation was particularly popular those working in health, economic development, and humanitarian response.

In particular, many of those interviewed recommended that WASH is depicted as a voter issue and is something that could influence peoples' decisions at the polls.

Similar views were often echoed by those who have worked closely with heads of states.



“The government is governed by a national planning and budgeting cycle. This cycle is aligned to the five-year political cycle. This arrangement allows for effective execution of political aspirations of the government in power.”

Advisor to an African government

“WASH-specific targets should be broken down into shorter time frames (three or five years) to coincide with terms in office of political leaders.”

Economic development professional, Africa

“It is extremely important to define concrete measurable WASH targets for three-to-five-year timeframes, to coincide with politicians' terms in office, so they can use the progress achieved in their terms as arguments for re-election.”

Human rights professional, Africa

What this means for communications around WASH

Framing communications strategies and messaging with an eye on the relevant political cycles of the country is important. Where you are in the political cycle will determine the shape of WASH communications, if they are to be effective. Towards the end of a political term, communications may be focused on electoral opportunities or ‘quick wins’ (popular promises to increase access to services, for example) that WASH presents. At the start of political term, it may be more strategic, with an eye on the opportunities presented by what can be achieved during an entire term of office.

Prepare for the prospect of a new government. This could mean preparing strategies for engaging new and relatively inexperienced ministers, as well as engaging seasoned decision makers at the start of a new term of office.

This also means considering strategies that can help prioritize WASH as an electoral issue, where appropriate – galvanizing communities, and developing electoral compacts between government and the electorate. Such communications can create a sense of political commitment – and accountability, measuring how well those commitments have been delivered at the ballot box.

The advice to consider alignment with political cycles is not solely aimed at WASH communications directly engaging leaders and decision makers – it is to help ensure that there is broader space and momentum to build advocacy and communications campaigns and strategies. If the political cycle is not considered, any carefully crafted messaging or strategy can easily be overtaken by political events.

– 8

Frame WASH in the context of wider political and global agendas

What the research found

The research found that while it is sometimes necessary to focus on just one element of WASH, it is also necessary to consider a broader perspective: how WASH fits in with other priorities of leaders, government, or other sectors.

The research found that other sectors often viewed the WASH sector as insular, taking a ‘silo’ approach, and that WASH was seen as complex or technical. As a counter to this, it was recommended that WASH communications should broaden its scope – that it would benefit from considering a ‘systems approach’ in messaging and strategy – particularly to political leaders. This was particularly highlighted by those working in the human rights and humanitarian response sectors.

Those who had worked for or close to heads of state specified that WASH must be connected to governments' priorities of the day, rather than as a standalone issue, in order to cut through and gain attention.

What this means for communications around WASH

Simply trying to ‘shout the loudest’ or have the most effective slogan is not likely to be a successful communications strategy for engaging audiences external to WASH. Instead, those audiences are more likely to notice or engage with WASH communications if they are set in the context of wider current political and global agendas (such as climate change, the global pandemic, child malnutrition, or gender equity).

The most effective context or linked agenda will vary; but WASH should be framed as an essential component for delivering the agenda that resonates most with the relevant audience, in order to be most effective at motivating that audience to prioritize WASH.

Keep in mind that political leaders in particular must share their attention and time between several priority areas. This can limit the prioritization they give to WASH. Understanding these competing priorities and considering how WASH be framed in those terms can help cut through and raise WASH higher up the political agenda.



“Try to depict or visualize a systems approach: showing linkages between WASH and other government priorities, such as climate change and reducing inequalities, then show the entry points that you can make progress on.”

Climate change professional, Europe & North America

“We need to ‘piggy-back’ WASH promotion on to bigger political agendas, such as, climate change or tackling COVID-19.”

Humanitarian response professional, Europe & North America

“Prioritization by the current government has been based on national indicators of governance, inclusion (education, empowerment), and other indicators such as nutrition.”

Advisor to an African government

SECTOR INSIGHTS

This section offers some specific insights into the different sectors questioned.

It explains how different sectors said they perceive WASH, what their sector priorities are, and what messaging may be likely to resonate for WASH communications when trying to engage each sector.



– 1 Economic Development

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all economic development professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Sustainable economic development
2. Financial inclusion
3. Access to education and skills development

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Improve health of workforce
2. Improve workplace conditions
3. Improve gender equity and foster a more inclusive workforce

Key take-aways

Economic development professionals:

- Value robust, recent data that show the fiscal benefits of investing in WASH.
- Are likely to respond to messaging that focuses on the risk of inaction of improving WASH services (the financial costs of inaction, particularly).
- View the hygiene element of WASH as relatively less important to their work. Communications and analysis that explains how improved hygiene services can increase economic productivity could therefore be an area of opportunity.



"Enhancements in WASH would contribute to a safer work environment, help address employee health issues and improve employee retention whilst increasing overall workforce productivity. Having healthy employees helps avoid operational delays and makes it easier to recruit quality workers locally and abroad."

Economic development professional, Africa

"I would want to see hard data on the relationship between lack of hygiene and certain diseases and how these diseases lead to poor educational outcomes and... poor economic performance."

Economic development professional, Europe & North America

"Clean water is crucial as so many diseases are linked to access to clean water. It is critical for the cycle of life as without decent healthcare, you can't have people working at their best so it's vital for economic development."

Economic development professional, Asia



– 2 Health

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all health professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Disease prevention
2. Access to WASH
3. Equitable access to healthcare

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Preventing disease
2. Protecting marginalized groups
3. Enhancing nutrition

Key take-aways

Health professionals:

- Primarily recommended emphasizing the short-term risks of poor access to WASH services, as well as aspirational messaging.
- Were the only sector putting access to WASH as a top-three sector priority. Their top priority (disease prevention) also relies on the provision of adequate WASH services. They are likely to be the highly receptive to tailored communications that understand and target the benefits of WASH to their sector.
- See hygiene and sanitation as slightly more important to their work than water, and nearly half indicated these were both poorly prioritized compared to water. Health professionals may respond well to communications that focus on what they see as these relatively neglected elements of WASH.
- Offered very similar views to each other on how WASH could advance their sector. This high level of concurrence suggests the top three perceptions of WASH above are particularly likely to resonate well across the sector.



"Thus far, the main emphasis has been on supplying WASH facilities. Promoting household demand for WASH will also contribute to better maintenance of WASH facilities, due to a sense of ownership."

Health professional, Asia

"The relationship between sanitation and health should move from a scientific discussion to one of community aspiration. Communities should feel inspired to...be living a better, healthier, and more enhanced life with improved WASH. WASH comms should therefore shift from a science perspective, to an aspirational perspective."

Health professional, Africa

– 3 Education

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all education professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Quality of education
2. Access to education for all
3. Gender equity

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Improve gender equity in schools
2. Improved educational attainment
3. Improve educational attendance

Key take-aways

Education professionals:

- Recommended a focus on aspirational messaging.
- Stressed that communications should explain the cost benefits that WASH investment delivers, for communities and their sector. Nearly half said messaging should include clear cost benefit analysis.
- Recommended messages that highlight the risks of poor WASH services for people, focusing on the human costs of inadequate service provision.
- Gave a very high importance for hygiene (nearly 95% said hygiene was important or very important to their work)



"One of the key lessons learnt from the pandemic is that education will not be of quality if WASH is not good. The education sector agrees that it needs to make sure WASH resources are available to ensure education can be delivered in a COVID and post-COVID world."

Education professional, Africa

"It is not as simple to discuss sanitation issues, such as proper sewage disposal and ending open defecation."

Education professional, Africa

"Communicate on the links between taxes and WASH public services. This requires campaigns explaining to citizens how the taxes they pay are being used and how it contributes to the country's development."

Education professional, Africa

"You should say that poor WASH is as much of a risk to children's development as gang violence or other issues in the community."

Education professional, Latin America



– 4

Humanitarian response

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all humanitarian response professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Protecting human rights
2. Public health in crisis zones
3. Climate change resilience

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Disease prevention
2. Protection of vulnerable groups in crisis scenarios
3. Stronger community resilience

Key take-aways

Humanitarian response professionals:

- Primarily suggested messaging that emphasizes the near-term risks of poor access to WASH services, and the connection between WASH and safety.
- Already perceive their sector as cross-cutting, with their top priorities linking to human rights, health and climate, reflecting the intersecting nature of their work.
- Indicated a preference for messaging focused on water as a priority need. But communications explaining the value of hygiene and sanitation in crisis contexts could be an area of opportunity.
- Recommended taking a systems approach perspective, particularly to engage political leaders.



“WASH is fundamental to ensure the survival and development of people who have been displaced from their original communities. The availability of water close to the home has a dramatic impact on reducing the incidence of water related diseases.”

Humanitarian response professional, Asia

“We must insist on the consequences: when there is no clean water there are more diseases. More diseases means more suffering in crisis zones.”

Humanitarian response professional, Latin America

“It is extremely important to define concrete measurable WASH targets for three-to-five-year timeframes, to coincide with politicians' terms in office, so they can use the progress achieved in their terms as arguments for re-election.”

Humanitarian response professional, Asia

– 5

Human rights

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all human rights professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Gender equity
2. Children's rights
3. Inclusive sustainable development

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Elevate the rights of marginalized groups
2. Ensuring the right to healthy life / SDG 3
3. Build inclusive communities

Key take-aways

Human rights professionals:

- Recommended messaging on how WASH helps create safer societies, particularly for marginalized groups. They were the most likely sector to consider framing WASH messages around gender and the safety of women.
- Often referred to WASH as a way to deliver the health and wellbeing objectives of the SDGs.
- Suggested considering risk timescale, particularly by highlighting the long-term risks of poor WASH services.
- Recommended that WASH should be framed as a security issue when engaging governments.



“Peace and security are often undermined by lack of WASH, but this fact is not being explained and publicized.”

Human rights professional, Europe & North America

“The patriarchal nature of many societies results in men underestimating the importance of better hygiene as an essential contributor to women's rights maximization.”

Human rights professional, Asia

“Sanitation and hygiene together are not prioritized because they are complicated to deliver and to sustain as the effort is multisectoral.”

Human rights professional, Asia

– 6

Climate change

Below are the sector's top priorities, and the perceived benefits of improved WASH services for their sector, according to all climate change professionals interviewed for the research.

TOP 3 SECTOR PRIORITIES:

1. Resilience to climate change
2. Ecosystem conservation
3. Climate change mitigation

TOP 3 SECTOR PERCEPTIONS OF WASH BENEFITS:

1. Improving the health of communities and ecosystems
2. Improving food security
3. Helping vulnerable communities adapt to climate risks

Key take-aways

Climate change professionals:

- Gave top three priorities which can ALL be improved through enhancements to WASH.
- Did not indicate that they perceived the link between improved WASH and delivery of their sector's priorities. Only 15% highlighted that improved WASH could help vulnerable communities adapt to climate risks, for example. The direct beneficial link between WASH improvements and climate resilience or mitigation is therefore a clear area for WASH communications to explore.
- Recommended that WASH communications should focus on or emphasize water, for example as a finite resource.



"You need to speak in terms of carbon footprint and emissions reductions to have cut through with my colleagues. It's clear this starts with messages on water and how it must be conserved."

Climate change professional, Africa

"Water is a central piece in the climate story – rising sea levels, disappearing glaciers, reduction in freshwater availability. While water is more directly linked to climate, sanitation and hygiene are linked to the consumption of water."

Climate change professional, Asia

"Use data that shows the cost/ benefit of WASH promotion on public health outcomes, malnutrition and human capital promotion should be aimed at ministers of finance. Gender disaggregated data on the links between water and education results should be targeted to Ministers of Education and politicians promoting gender equity. Links between WASH and COVID-19 transmissions and infectious diseases should be aimed at ministers of health."

Climate change professional, Europe & North America

REGIONAL INSIGHTS

This section offers some specific insights into how professionals from different regions of the world responded.

It shows how each region perceives the benefits of WASH for each sector, and offers some insights based on the responses that may be useful to consider when engaging external audiences in different regions of the world.





– Latin America

Top perceived benefits of WASH by sector:

Economic development	Improving education attainment	14%
	Improve environmental health	14%
	Improve population health and wellbeing	14%
Health	Protection of marginalized groups	100%
	Improved public health and wellbeing	100%
Education	Improve health of students and staff	33%
	Enhance gender equity	33%
	Improve educational performance	33%
Humanitarian response	Help alleviate poverty	75%
	Improve health & wellbeing in crisis zones	50%
	Reduce pollution levels in crisis zones	25%
Human rights	Delivery of SDG 3	37.5%
	Build inclusive communities	25%
	Safeguard vulnerable groups	25%
Climate change	Improve community wellbeing	31%
	Food security	18%
	Help vulnerable communities adapt to climate risks	13%

Latin America insights

- Respondents often focused on community and human benefits of WASH as opposed to financial. For example, Latin America economic development professionals recommended linking WASH investments with community benefits, as well as financial.
- They saw WASH as a way to protect and support vulnerable groups. Every single health professional interviewed in Latin America said enhanced WASH would benefit their work by protecting marginalized groups, compared to 10% and 25% saying protection of marginalized groups in Asia and Africa, respectively.
- They had a relatively low perception of the benefits of improved WASH for addressing climate change compared to other regions, suggesting a possible area for WASH communications to explore.
- Respondents were particularly focused on water. Climate professionals in Latin America only made messaging recommendations about water, and 80% of humanitarian response professionals from the region said messaging should focus solely on water.



“Enhancements in WASH would improve menstrual hygiene for girls and teenagers in schools.”

Education professional, Latin America

– Asia

Top perceived benefits of WASH by sector:

Economic development	Improve population health and wellbeing	28%
	Improve gender equity	17%
	Reduce financial burden of health bills	17%
Health	Improved nutrition	40%
	Disease prevention	20%
	Protection of marginalized groups	10%
Education	Enhance gender equity	33%
	Improve educational performance	25%
Humanitarian response	Protect marginalized groups from harm	75%
	Improve community health & wellbeing	38%
	Enhance resilience to future humanitarian crises	25%
Human rights	Delivery of SDG 3	39%
	Build inclusive communities	31%
	Alleviate poverty	23%
Climate change	Improve ecosystem health	29%
	Build resilient communities	29%
	Improve community wellbeing	14%

Asia insights

- Respondents often focused on community wellbeing, protection and safety aspects of WASH, as opposed to financial. For example, particularly high numbers of humanitarian response professionals from Asia saw the benefits of WASH as protecting marginalized groups from harm.
- They often linked WASH with human rights issues and gender inequalities. Close to a third (30.7%) of human rights professionals in Asia, for example, recommended messages that illustrate WASH as a way to protect women.
- They were most likely to link climate resilience and improvements in WASH.
- Respondents suggested that robust data was particularly important – especially those from the health and education sectors.



“What people don’t realize is the impact of poor sanitation, or un-clean water. Any kind of messaging is essentially about impact - how does something affect my life if I don’t invest? We should talk about the risks associated with not having access to clean water, decent sanitation. We don’t hear about this.”

Economic development professional, Asia

– Africa

Top perceived benefits of WASH by sector:

Economic development	Improve population health and wellbeing	28%
	Deliver stable employment/ job security	24%
	Reduce pollution	20%
Health	Disease prevention	50%
	Improved nutrition	25%
	Protection of marginalized groups	25%
Education	Improve educational performance	44%
	Enhance gender equity	33%
	Increase educational attendance	33%
Humanitarian response	Improve health & wellbeing in crisis zones	67%
	Enhance resilience to future humanitarian crises	56%
	Protect marginalized groups from harm	56%
Human rights	Alleviate poverty	25%
	Safeguard vulnerable groups	25%
	Build inclusive communities	25%
Climate change	Improve ecosystem health	39%
	Food security	25%
	Build resilient communities	15%

Africa insights

- Respondents in Africa indicated a strong link between improved WASH and disease prevention, compared to other regions, with half of all health professionals mentioning this as a benefit of improved WASH.
- They also indicated a strong link between improved WASH and educational performance compared to other regions, with nearly half of all education professionals highlighting this as a benefit of improved WASH. They were also more likely to link improved WASH to better education attendance.
- They were particularly focused on water. A third of humanitarian professionals in Africa recommended messages focused solely on water rather than sanitation and hygiene.
- Respondents were relatively less likely to see benefits of improved WASH for building community resilience to climate change compared to other regions, suggesting a possible area for WASH communications to explore.



“It’s important to link WASH back to protecting vulnerable groups and women and their improved personal security as a result... [In African states] most people do not feel the presence of the government at all, and states are fragile... WASH enhancements become evidence of the state positively contributing to the development of the country and to the stability of the region.”

Human rights professional, Africa



– Europe & North America

Top perceived benefits of WASH by sector:

Economic development	Improve population health and wellbeing	44%
	Improve gender equity	33%
	Improve child development	11%
Health	Disease prevention	44%
	Improved nutrition	22%
	Reduced pollution	11%
Education	Enhance gender equity	67%
	Increase educational attendance	67%
Humanitarian response	Enhance resilience to future humanitarian crises	71%
	Protect marginalized groups from harm	57%
	Improve health & wellbeing in crisis zones	57%
Human rights	Safeguard vulnerable groups	60%
	Delivery of SDG 3 (particularly for children)	40%
	Build inclusive communities	40%
Climate change	Help vulnerable communities adapt to climate risks	25%
	Improve community wellbeing	25%
	Food security	25%

Europe & North America insights

- Many respondents recommended messaging that communicates financial risks of inaction. Over half (52%) of economic development professionals in Europe & North America suggested messaging that shows how poor delivery on WASH can undermine economic progress.
- They were particularly focused on the need for hard data to show the investment potential of WASH. Recommendations for messaging included understanding and addressing investor appetites for risk, the benefits of WASH to the private sector, and explicit use of the word ‘profitability’.
- They were likely to stress the need for a broad perspective, or a ‘systems approach’, often with particular reference to realizing numerous other human rights. Close to half (43%) of humanitarian response professionals in Europe & North America recommended communicating WASH in this way.
- Respondents were highly likely to view WASH as a way to tackle gender inequities in education – with two thirds seeing this as a key benefit of improved WASH.



“WASH is of central importance to ensure that the rights of all children are met, especially the most marginalized. Rights to health, education, good nutrition and to maximize human potential can only be met if WASH is available.”

Human rights professional, Europe & North America

– CONCLUSIONS

This document presents just a snapshot of the perceptions of those working outside the WASH sector. However, it highlights the critical importance for WASH communicators of stepping back and avoiding the assumed knowledge, parlance and technical perspectives of our sector.

None of the information contained in this document is directive. Nor should it be assumed to apply in blanket fashion to a given situation. Rather, it should be viewed as offering insights, suggestions and advice. As with all good communications, it remains imperative to understand your target audience, whether that is the leadership of a climate NGO or a new minister for education.

Some key conclusions:

- Understand what the mutual benefits are for any non-sector actor.
- Every audience is different, but always avoid assumed knowledge or priorities, or generic communications.
- Tailor your message to either appeal to established priorities, or target important yet perhaps poorly

understood links to water, sanitation and hygiene that can help realize mutual goals.

- It is important to consider what the research did not find: that the climate sector did not mention WASH as a way to deliver one of their top global priorities – climate resilience – suggests they are yet to understand (or be convinced of) how WASH can contribute. This suggests there are vast areas of untapped opportunity for WASH communications and advocacy.

As communicators in the WASH sector, we must realize there is even less of a one-size-fits-all approach when trying to engage those outside our sector – and that if we make the effort to understand our audience, and get it right, it has potential to tap into vast resource of talent and expertise.



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