

Technical Guidance Note on Urban WASH



Afghan Red Crescent Society installed 10 solar water pumping stations in Herat and Samangan provinces for 4000 families in 2024 as part of a urban community resilience project.

INTERNATIONAL



FEDERATION

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1: Background (the challenge)

WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) is crucial to human dignity, it is a vital element of preventive and public health and can contribute significantly to poverty reduction.

Key facts about Urban WASH

Every second, the urban population grows by 2 people.

828 million people live in informal settlements or slums around the world.

140 million people in urban areas still use an **unimproved water** source. This number is **rising**, not falling.

The number of people **without improved sanitation** in urban areas has **grown** by **183 million** since 1990.

Diarrhoea kills more young people per year than HIV/AIDS, malaria and measles combined.

88% of diarrhoea cases worldwide are attributable to **inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene**.

Lack of access to water and sanitation combined with poor hygiene are among the principal causes of preventable death and disease globally. It also leads to loss of productivity and forms a major barrier to development efforts and sustainable growth. Traditionally, WASH in development has focused on the need of communities in rural settings, but with 54% of the population living in urban areas, there is a need to expand the focus.¹

Although great strides were made globally within the framework of the MDGs, many countries fell short of targets and significant gaps exist both thematically and geographically. Enabling environments for increased sustainable and equitable WASH access gains are still a challenge across the globe, but especially in fragile states where underlying poverty and lack of investment and implementation capacities are weak, and where policy and legislative frameworks are not in place or applied. The new SDG 6 (focusing on WASH specifically) and other related SDGs will all rely in some part on WASH gains, and increasingly on WASH gains in the urban context.

It is in those scenarios that the Red Cross and Red Crescent membership is most commonly targeting those in need and will continue to do so in years to come and in both emergency and developmental contexts. However, the Federation and its membership has the potential to accomplish much more in scale, impact and quality than at present.

There are also opportunities to demonstrate a greater degree of social inclusion and innovation while being better positioned to respond to current and evolving global demands and needs in a more integrated fashion.

It is also recognised that our efforts in the Urban WASH context are limited at present although the increasing demand and need for WASH services for the urban poor and the most vulnerable is widely acknowledged. Furthermore, it will be important to engage with internal and external groups working in the same area.

The Federation and its membership have a formally adopted WASH policy² and a Global Strategic Direction for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. This guidance note is intended to build upon those documents, define more clearly the Urban WASH agenda for the IFRC and its membership, and provide operational guidance.



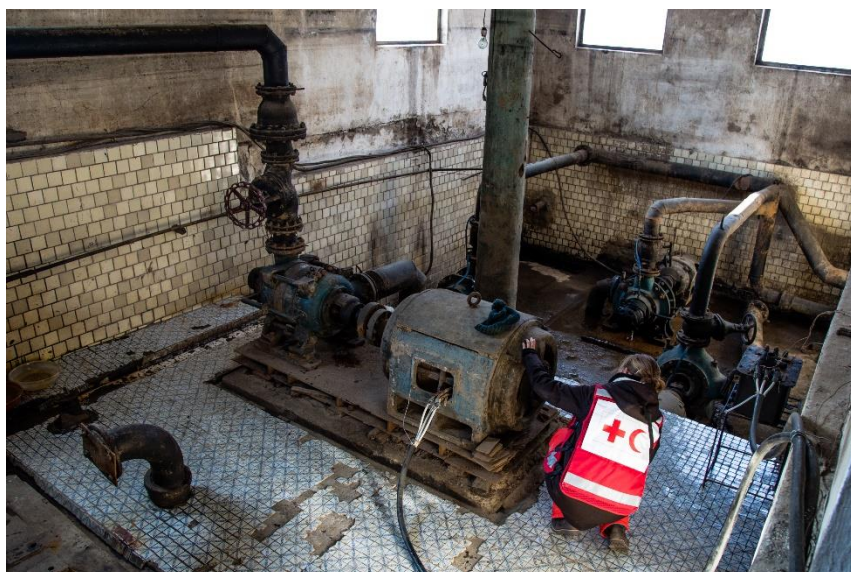
Syrian Arab Red Crescent rehabilitated a water pumping station in Tartous, Syria, in 2021, where many internally displaced people have settled down, adding pressure on the resources in the area.

¹ The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>

² Adopted by the IFRC Governing Board in 2003.

2: WASH in an urban setting

For those urban residents, whose housing ranges from tin sheds or brick-walled houses to shacks or plastic sheet tents on sidewalks, environmental hygiene is a key problem. They often live in polluted environments, with no sewage or drainage systems, and often with no proper water supply. The high concentration of people living in small dwellings with poor ventilation, near garbage sites and polluted water bodies, increases the risk of diseases transmission. Health problems, such as diarrhoea, cholera, malaria, dysentery, schistosomiasis, dengue fever, typhoid fever, gastroenteritis hepatitis A, and malnutrition are common due to the lack of both adequate prevention and treatment facilities. It is also common that the poorest urban dwellers often pay the highest prices for WASH services which are often unregulated.



DPRK Red Cross and IFRC rehabilitated a water pumping station damaged by the floods in Musan County, North Hamgyong Province in the northeast of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2016.

WASH interventions in urban and peri-urban areas aiming to provide city dwellers with safe access to affordable and sustainable water of sufficient quality and quantity, good quality sanitation and improved hygiene practices are therefore a public health priority so that urban communities may ultimately protect themselves from existing and new emerging diseases.

Analysis of how to accelerate progress in urban WASH must start with consideration of the barriers and how to overcome them. It is important to acknowledge that there are barriers encountered in both provision of 'hardware' or infrastructure and 'software' such as influencing behaviour change that vary significantly between

rural and urban contexts that therefore require different approaches and resultant skill sets among practitioners and partners.

To achieve lasting improvements in the provision of water and sanitation services will therefore require consideration of the whole sector; the financing requirements; the political and social challenges; and, not least, the ability of urban WASH service providers to be able to improve significantly their capacity to deliver services at scale.

Urban populations, generally exposed to a rapid flow of health and hygiene information through multiple communication channels, might be better informed than rural populations in terms of the benefits of handwashing and toilet use. However, knowledge is no guarantee that individuals will wash their hands or use a toilet. A large number of studies, including the vast grey literature in the sector, show there is an enormous gap between what people know and what people practice, even when they have access to the means to perform the practice (water, soap, toilet). The failure showed by many large toilet construction programmes during the last 20 years in developing countries, some of them targeting extensive urban areas, indicates that the practice of using a toilet is triggered by motivational factors associated with the need for privacy, security and most frequently social status, rather than just health gains or access to the facility itself. This is particularly relevant in urban contexts where competing priorities within city households may push key hygiene-related decisions and related health benefits into the background.

3: Strengths of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in Urban WASH

Through a process of consultation³ with a range of NSs, IFRC and some external stakeholders the following notable strengths and advantages were identified that the Red Cross and Red Crescent can build on in order to develop its role further in urban WASH.

Our position and structure:

- As an auxiliary to governments in many locations this provides National Societies with privileged access to government and ministries.
- The membership has a unique global spread which also makes it very attractive to corporates looking for partners.
- it is present for the long term and is therefore present before, during and after disasters.

Ability to deliver programmes:

- Many have a strong volunteer base and are very well connected to communities and consequently can be very good at community mobilisation and promotional activities. This can also make NSs attractive to other organisations looking for partners with whom to implement programmes.
- National Societies can be fast and more cost efficient than commercial consultants engaged on development programmes.
- National Societies are able to lobby government.

General:

- Is a very well-known credible organisation with an excellent reputation and a proven track record in multi-partner/stakeholder management and coordination.
- Knows how to work in fragile states and complex settings where politics, security and corruption can be major barriers.
- Is a recognised contributor to global debates on WASH.
- Has a strong commonality of vision to serve the poor and vulnerable wherever they are, which provides added impetus to be engaging in urban contexts as that is where the poor and vulnerable increasingly are.



Somali Red Crescent and IFRC rehabilitated peri-urban water systems in 2022, in Puntland Somalia, as part of a food security programme.

³ Conducted by WSUP in November 2016 on behalf of IFRC.

4: Our potential roles in urban WASH

Identified below are some further areas where the Red Cross and Red Crescent could potentially play a role in urban WASH in either development or disaster response programmes. There are four elements that these roles may focus on; community, service providers, disaster relief and others.

Community

- National Societies are uniquely placed to be the voice of the most vulnerable and to broker relationships between government, service providers and communities
- Advocate national and local pro-poor policy and practice
- Promote safe hygiene and sanitation practices that are specifically adapted to the urban context through emphasis on, for example, water safety from point of collection (PoC) and point of use (PoU)

Service providers

- Support and guidance to the private sector so that services are both affordable and financially sustainable.
- Support to water utilities to manage Non-Revenue Water which will lead to reduced water losses and increased revenue for the utility thus enabling the utility to provide better levels of service to low income communities.
- Support to private sector operators of Faecal Sludge Management (FSM) services and guidance to local government in the development of regulations and operator licencing systems that ensure a good quality of affordable services while minimising risks to public health.
- Development of water utility customer relations policies.
- Engagement with regulators to influence tariff policies so that they truly serve the interests of low income communities.
- Improving disaster response training for service providers, assisting with simulation exercises, focused training and engagement with disaster coordination structures and bodies.
- NRW is a measure of the water that a utility produces but it does not bill to a customer due to either physical losses, such as leakage and illegal connections, or administrative losses arising from, for example, meter reading errors or poor customer databases.

Disaster relief

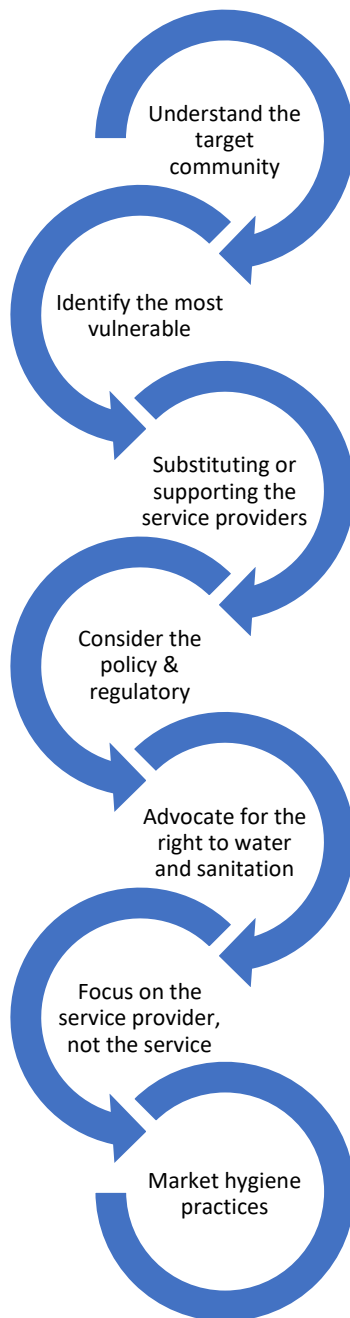
- Through development programmes In disaster prone locations NSs can establish positions from which they are well placed to respond to disasters and emergencies when they occur.
- Engage with governments, authorities and service providers on contingency planning for urban disasters.
- Influencing sector developments in disaster response in areas such as market based programming and cash for relief.

Other

- NSs could take on the provision of WASH services on a for-profit basis. However, it would be essential to consider the long term financial viability of the services and also any potential reputational risks. It might be more appropriate to envisage a transitional role from service provision to service support and to act as a catalyst.
- Engage with multiple stakeholders on collective efforts for technology innovation and development.
- Influencing the design and implementation of major bilateral and multilateral funded urban WASH development projects to ensure that the interests of low income communities are recognised and their needs are met.
- There is scope for NSs to encourage and facilitate contingency planning, especially as part of disaster preparedness and risk management efforts with urban authorities and service providers.

4: Reconsider key elements of WASH programs in the urban context

Before embarking on an urban WASH project, there are up to 13 elements to (re)consider compared to a WASH projects in rural settings:



There must be a full and proper understanding of the target community – the wishes, aspirations and needs of urban communities may be very different to that of rural communities.

Identifying the most vulnerable might not be easy because it cannot be assumed that every family living in a slum is extremely poor and vulnerable. This issue makes the identification of beneficiaries or the targeting of groups with particular needs quite difficult.

A clear understanding must exist of when to substitute the role of the **service providers** (either private or public sector) in the provision of WASH services and **when to support service providers**.⁴

Due consideration must be given to the policy and regulatory environment – before improvements are made to a water network to increase coverage and access, a water tariff structure should be in place that truly benefits low income consumers and incentivises service providers to actually serve them.

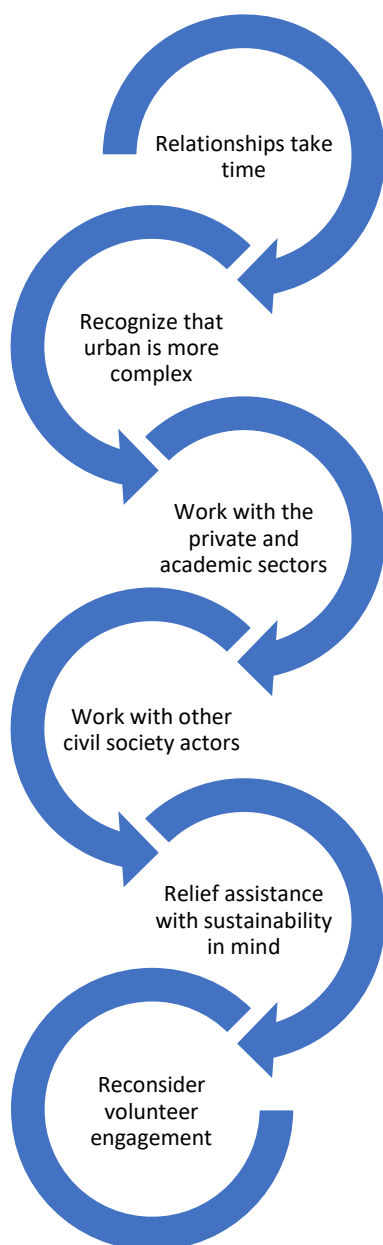
Upholding the right to water and sanitation – advocate on the importance of access to water and sanitation as a human right through the use of National Societies' unique position in society and with government.

Focus on the service provider and not the service – learn to understand the challenges from the perspective of the service provider (either public or private sector). Identify the barriers they face in providing a sustainable, affordable, and good quality of service to everyone and then identify ways in which the NS can support them to improve.

Hygiene practices should be marketed, not just promoted – developing hygiene promotion campaigns based on a strong urban social marketing strategy that responds to a consumer, rather than a health or environmental problem, is more likely to be successful.

Collaborative relationships take time – it can take many years to build up the required level of understanding and trust with utilities and municipalities to be able to tackle the underlying issues and to see real sustainable change.

⁴ In emergency situations it may be necessary as the “agency of last resort”. When it is necessary, there should be a clear understanding from the beginning of the programme of what will be required for that service to be managed sustainably, by either the public or private sector.



This requirement will have to be reflected in the time scale of funding and the length of commitment that a NS should be intending to make.

Recognise that urban is more complex – there is a much more complex web of stakeholders in urban than in rural contexts and many more people will be interested and want to have a say in what is happening. Pay special attention to networking with the right people in the right places, the different structure of urban communities and technical challenges.

Learn to work with the private and academic sector – private sector providers of services (e.g. small-scale water systems or pit latrine emptying services) must be recognised as an essential part of the urban WASH sector. Academic and learning are useful collaborators to extend the coverage of hygiene promotion and WASH services and conduct formative research, base- and endline surveys.

Learn to work with other civil society actors – community-based organisations (CBOs) might help to fill the gap between government and NGOs who support immediate and long-term needs, acting as interlocutors and encouraging community participation.

Deliver relief assistance with sustainability in mind – avoid placing undue risk on the sustainability of longer term development programmes during relief operations. For example, the delivery of free water can undermine the future willingness to pay of affected populations and place a considerable burden on service providers.

Engagement with volunteers may need to be reconsidered – a pre-existing volunteer base may not be available in urban areas in the way that it often is in rural areas. It may be necessary adapt and reconsider the mode of recruitment, incentive and retention of volunteers when working in urban areas.

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