

## WaterAid Bangladesh COVID-19 Response:

# WASH during and beyond the crisis

### Policy Brief

The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as a global issue as more than 3 million people in 210 countries have been infected as of end of April 2020, and the number is fast rising.

On 14 April 2020, WHO issued [COVID-19 strategy](#) update which intends to help guide the public health response to COVID-19 at national and sub-national levels. The document highlights that whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategic action is needed to meet the challenges posed by COVID-19, including the coordinated support from the international community. WaterAid believes that to flatten the curve of coronavirus there is an urgent and critical need of solidarity and concerted effort.

### Bangladesh COVID-19 situation

Bangladesh reported its first case through [Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research \(IEDCR\)](#) on 8 March 2020. Bangladesh reached its first 1,000 cases in 37 days and the next 1,000 cases in only 4 days, a rapid surge compared to other Southeast Asia region countries. As of 27 April 2020 [situation report](#), IEDCR informed WHO that there are 5,913 confirmed COVID-19 cases in Bangladesh, including 131 patients who have recovered and 152 deaths. The Case Fatality Rate (CFR) in Bangladesh is currently at 2.57% with a modest testing coverage (296 per million) but the death rate on closed cases is 54% which is higher than the 19.9% global rate. These evidences suggest that the months ahead are critical and a looming catastrophe awaits. On 16 April 2020 Bangladesh was declared at risk of the coronavirus pandemic

according to the section 11(1) of Infectious Disease (Prevention, Control and Elimination) Act 2018 by the DGHS/MOHFW, as the infection had now spread across the country.

### Challenges that make the crisis unique

Although Bangladesh has an impressive track record of responding to national emergencies such as natural disasters, the scale and nature of this pandemic presents a unique and unprecedented situation. In particular, the preventive measures that needs to be adopted by individuals and households pose significant challenges in Bangladesh's socioeconomic context.<sup>[1]</sup> The concept of maintaining 'social distance' and 'homestay' is difficult in developing countries like Bangladesh where people living in rural areas or those living in slums represent a big chunk of the entire population. Lack of awareness and the prevalence of shared facilities, including water points and toilets, amongst people in villages and densely populated slum areas pose a greater threat.

### Bangladesh government actions

The national response in Bangladesh is led by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), [Directorate General Health Services \(DGHS\)](#) and the IEDCR in close coordination with World Health Organisation (WHO). DGHS has developed a National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 in line with WHO recommendations.



"We can surely afford to proceed more methodically and address this evolving crisis in a holistic manner. It would also be necessary to ensure that the good practices developed during this crisis do not fade away once the crisis is over."

**Hasin Jahan,**  
Country Director  
WaterAid Bangladesh



[1] Zachary Barnett-Howell and Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak. April 2020. Should Low-Income Countries Impose the Same Social Distancing Guidelines as Europe and North America to Halt the Spread of COVID-19.

The plan identifies six different 'country levels' based on the scale of infection and lays out a mechanism for implementing activities through committees from the national up to the sub-district level. DGHS has further identified six priority activities:

- i) coordination and planning;
- ii) surveillance, laboratory, and points of entry;
- iii) case finding, contact tracing, and quarantine;
- iv) clinical case management;
- v) infection prevention and control (IPC); and
- vi) risk communication and public awareness.

The accountability of COVID-19 verified information is maintained by a regularly **updated website** co-created by the government's ICT division and other development partners.

## WaterAid's position in COVID-19 response

The link between good hygiene and COVID-19 response makes it incumbent for WaterAid as a WASH agency to be engaged in various awareness raising and preventive measures to limit further spread. WaterAid having more than 30 years' experience in hygiene behaviour change is well positioned to leverage its expertise in supporting COVID-19 response. It has been focusing on handwashing and hygiene as a first line of defense and helping individual and communities take preventive measures since the beginning of the crisis. It strongly believes there is a need to instill these good hygiene habits permanently in the longer-term. There is a lack of tailored messaging and interventions catering to these communities, especially, vulnerable groups who face higher risks. WaterAid emphasises on addressing this gap by promoting tailored messaging, facilitating context-specific hygiene promotion interventions, protecting those facing greater risks, integrating WASH and strengthening the overall institutional response to ensure that no one is left behind.

WaterAid in partnership with WHO, IEDCR, DGHS, DPHE and others continue to work to enhance sector capacity and facilitate knowledge sharing for COVID-19 response. It will undertake research to understand the impacts of COVID-19, linkages with WASH and initiate policy dialogues. Relevant policy and technical briefs will be prepared for policy makers with aims to influence their decisions.

WaterAid supported Disease Control Cell (CDC) of DGHS with emergency spray machines and disinfectants that helped us to strengthen collaboration with the government agencies.

WaterAid worked with Al-Markazul Islam at MOHFW's request to categorically review the guideline developed by Islamic Foundation and ensure the safety and preventive approaches for staff assigned to burial service of COVID-19 dead bodies.

WaterAid also responded to a request from IEDCR, provided safety equipment to the health care professionals providing treatments to COVID-19 patients.

### Coordination with the government is the key

WaterAid prioritised coordinating with the national government extending its technical support. WaterAid secured strategic partnerships with WHO Bangladesh, DGHS and IEDCR. It is also working closely with MOHFW, CDC and hospital service providers to strengthen their efforts with different technical and knowledge inputs. Amplifying the concerted effort to COVID-19 response led by WaterAid, the endorsed messages by WHO, government and DPHE secured the trust of general people on the authenticity of the messages; which were largely aligned to WHO and IEDCR avoiding overlap.

WaterAid plays a vital role in WASH Cluster meetings as an important member of technical working groups with its expertise in water and sanitation, solid waste management, gender and social inclusion and comprehensive message development.

### Supporting the government with technological innovations

Despite the launch of several mobile-based apps on coronavirus situation by the government, none of them are catering exclusively to slum dwellers – who are one of the most vulnerable in the fight against corona. To assist Bangladesh government, WaterAid has planned an innovative digital solution especially designed to addressing the needs of slum dwellers, in partnerships with WHO, IEDCR, **a2i**, DGHS and UNDP. This App will help early detection of suspected patients, linking them with health services and; equip slum dwellers with relevant pictorial messages and essential WASH information.

## Building stronger connections with development partners

WaterAid believes in collaboration. As one of the fundamental prerequisites to succeed and respond to this crisis. It is maintaining relationship with the World Bank, UNICEF, BMGF, ADB, DFID, SDC, SIDA, USAID, academia and other UN agencies for COVID-19 response. This pandemic has blurred the boundaries between sectors. The interdependencies is more pronounced than ever. WaterAid believes that all the stakeholders need to be able to find a common ground in benefiting from the each other's expertises, resources and capacities. It is constantly advocating for emergency investments and exploring newer avenues for funding to ensure accessible WASH services for poor and marginalised communities, including much needed facilities at the healthcare centres. While maintaining the existing donor liaison on current grants, it is also looking for flexibilities and exploring possibilities of rescheduling activities, and repurposing to emergency COVID-19 response.

## Collaboration with Civil Society & Non-State Actors

We are working with **Citizens platform for SDGs Bangladesh**, a civil society platform which actively advocate to reach marginalised and disadvantaged groups of people of the country, to amplify our call during COVID-19. WaterAid has committed to launch few research with the **Department of Disaster Science and Management** of the University of Dhaka and **ICCCAD** which will be instrumental for the policy makers for future actions.

As existing consortium member, WaterAid is pro-actively collaborating with FSM Network, MHM Platform and CSA SUN to co-create and co-design the responses from the networks to address different aspects of COVID-19.

## Private sector engagement

WaterAid realized partnership with Unilever-Lifebuoy and Robi- a reputed cell phone company to reach out to mass people with hygiene promotion messages and facilities capitalizing combined resources and expertise.

## Social media driving change through engagement

WaterAid is rolling out mass awareness campaign in a systematic way targeting the wide range of audiences through different mode and medias. It has already established a vibrant social media presence connecting varied range of target audiences ranging from youth to the policy

makers. With aims to sensitiise and drive action from of individuals and institutions in the plight of COVID-19 through **#FightCoronaUnited** campaign, with an intent to reach 60 million (one third of the population) in next six months.

As of 20 April, we reached nearly 190,000 people in 67 slums of four city corporations and 4,320 households in 4 upazilas in rural Bangladesh with coronavirus prevention messages. 3,500 factory workers and 3,800 students in 140 primary and secondary schools in our project areas also received our hygiene messages.



WaterAid provided online orientation/training on preventive approaches of COVID-19 to WASH promoters and through campaigning in-front of public toilets they reached over 22,000 people, while Unilever provided them with liquid soaps.

Collaborated with Robi in motivational messaging in handwashing center across 10 rail stations and were able to reach over 35,000 people.

Also developed social media contents jointly with Unilever and Robi 10 Minute School to take the leverage of their consumer insights in hygiene messaging.

WaterAid already undertook a joint initiative of capturing qualitative research to understand how COVID-19 affecting WASH in selected climate impacted rural areas in Bangladesh particularly on women to prepare a knowledge and learning piece.

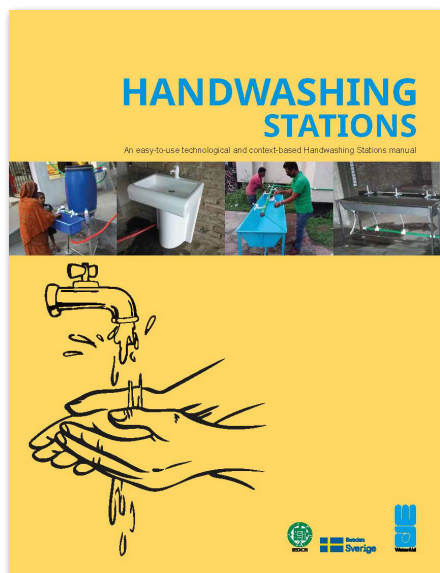


WaterAid was able to have 17 million combined reach through until 3rd week of April through its **#FightCoronaUnited** campaign. Dissemination of exclusive message for persons with disabilities, Water Safety Plan (WSP) and Sanitation Safety Plan (SSP) in the context of COVID-19 is mentionable.



## Reaching the unreachable

WaterAid targets the people living in slums, poverty prone and climate vulnerable areas. We already have developed 22 different types of context-specific handwashing devices and contactless handwashing stations to facilitate to serve people of different socio-economic groups, homeless people and pedestrians. Alongside reaching out to the remotest areas through the support of community radios.



Find **contactless paddle-type handwashing device** by wateraid bangladesh to fight covid-19

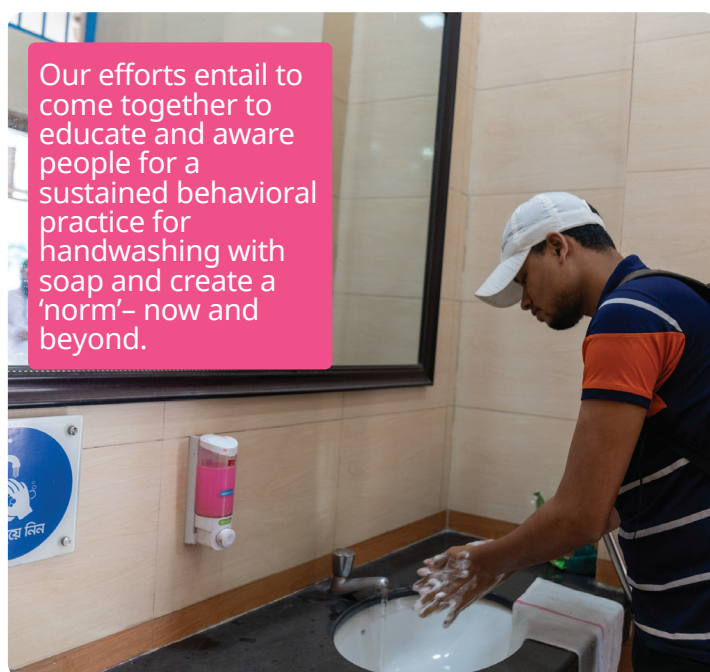
## Valuing partner organisations

In any kind of project implementation and policy development, WaterAid values the contribution of its partners. In current situation, we are prioritising it more than ever. It is continuously engaging the partners in all kinds of coordination, planning, training and knowledge dissemination. Synergy, mutual respect, accountability and equity are crucial at this moment to maintain to deliver our rapid response of COVID-19. WaterAid is regularly providing timely and accurate information to partners about its position and plans that might have implications on them. It has initiated discussion on adjustments in workplans where needed, changing activities to focus on hygiene along with best ways to ensure security for staff and assets while operations are suspended, based on WaterAid's security guidance. WaterAid is also pursuing donors to include the partner staff in recurrent costs, if they are willing to support a pause in activities in relevant cases.

## Preparing before the crisis intensifies

WaterAid is working through community volunteers, community based organisations at slums, and rural areas through partners even at the situation when the country is in lockdown since 25 March 2020. It is committed to extend its

efforts through partners and collaborators and most importantly with the LGIs, municipal authorities and utility agencies. Their wholehearted supports also help WaterAid to continue its response during lockdown. Moreover, WaterAid is immediately prioritizing health and safety for household sanitation workers to treatment plant solid waste management workers. In preventing the spread of the virus, it is needed that those who are exposed to most risk are staying safe.

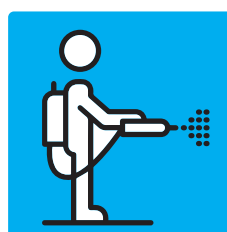


WaterAid has taken initiatives for disinfecting water points in households and community clinics our project areas.

We are also supporting local governments and mayors with disinfectants to clean public places, markets and residential areas.

We have already started promoting water and sanitation safety planning with further collaborating with Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE) for countrywide multiplication.

WaterAid engaged youth volunteers in educating people on hand washing in public toilet premises and through the Youth for SDG6 platform, we envisioned to create and share knowledges on aspects of COVID-19 nationwide.





Next six months WaterAid will prioritise continual access and functionality of water and sanitation facilities in rural and urban areas including community clinics/HCF in our project areas with relevant hygiene messaging.

Scale up behaviour change programmes in an integrated way including all the relevant sectors such as health and education to ensure sustainability.

We will support the Local Government Division (LGD) to update/revise the National Hygiene Promotion Strategy 2012 incorporating the contents on epidemic outbreak related initiatives.

### Thinking long term: making handwashing a 'norm'

WaterAid is looking beyond COVID-19 crisis to ensure handwashing habit is sustained and is not limited to the fears of corona. It has been continuing to advocate and campaign that handwashing with soap at critical times has a lifetime health benefit. It is one of the most cost-effective preventive health interventions.

A need for collective approach that engages not only the government, but all other institutions and everyone in the society for making handwashing a norm forever is a demand of the time. WaterAid will have to pursue the Government and other development partners to support individuals, communities and institutions with the motivation, guidance and funding for creating and enabling environments which includes facilities of handwashing stations, soap and water to ensure that it becomes a social norm everywhere even beyond COVID-19.

### The last mile is too far but not invisible

Bangladesh needs to accelerate the fight against COVID-19 holistically and prepare for its next wave in the future. Currently, 47.9% population in Bangladesh have access to of safely managed drinking water services, only 64.4% have access to basic sanitation services and 74.8% have access

to handwashing facility with water and soap.<sup>[2]</sup> To confront the deeply ingrained inequalities in WASH sector which will exacerbate after this pandemic, there is a salient need to accelerate efforts in making water and soap available and easily accessible for all during COVID-19 and beyond.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 is unpredictable. So is the degree of uncertainty and dynamics of the future factors that may affect WaterAid's work. Despite the odds, WaterAid is trying its best to respond and create evidences through different research and studies for supporting the policy makers to determine and define strategies post-COVID-19. WaterAid has already taken initiative to develop a Response Plan for Bangladesh. WaterAid forecasts that a nationwide coordinated response for six months and a recovery plan onwards for one and a years is vital for the country programme to ensure that the most vulnerable people receive targeted supports.

For further contact:

**Dr Abdullah Al-Muyeed**

Head of Policy and Advocacy

[abdullahalmuyeed@wateraid.org](mailto:abdullahalmuyeed@wateraid.org)

[2] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2019. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. Dhaka, Bangladesh