

# HALTING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 AND OTHER INFECTIOUS DISEASES IN NIGERIA THROUGH UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO WATER, SANITATION AND GOOD HYGIENE

## INTRODUCTION

Handwashing with soap and clean water is one of the simplest and most cost-effective interventions for high-burden diseases in low- and middle-income countries. It is a crucial element of primary healthcare, a key barrier to disease transmission and fundamental to infection prevention, control and the management of diseases. It has been shown to reduce cases of acute respiratory infection by 16-23%,<sup>i</sup> pneumonia by 50%<sup>ii</sup> and the risk of endemic diarrhoea by up to 48%.<sup>iii</sup> Thorough handwashing with soap and clean water at critical times is therefore the first line of defence against highly contagious diseases, including the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. Yet millions of people across Nigeria do not have access to a clean source of water in their homes, schools or health centres to protect themselves from the spread of these diseases and confront pandemics.

A lack of clean water, decent toilets and handwashing facilities in homes, communities, public places, schools and healthcare facilities makes people vulnerable to potentially fatal diseases. It contributes to the spread of infections and make it very difficult for people to protect themselves and others from the spread of diseases and for nations to control disease outbreaks and pandemics such as COVID-19.

## COUNTRY CONTEXT: A REALITY CHECK

Despite evidence of the effectiveness of good hygiene practices as the first line of defence in the prevention of infectious diseases:



**60 million (32%)**  
people lack access  
to clean water  
in Nigeria



**150 million (79%)**  
people lack basic  
handwashing facilities  
with soap and water



**70,000**  
number of children  
under 5 that die from  
diseases every year

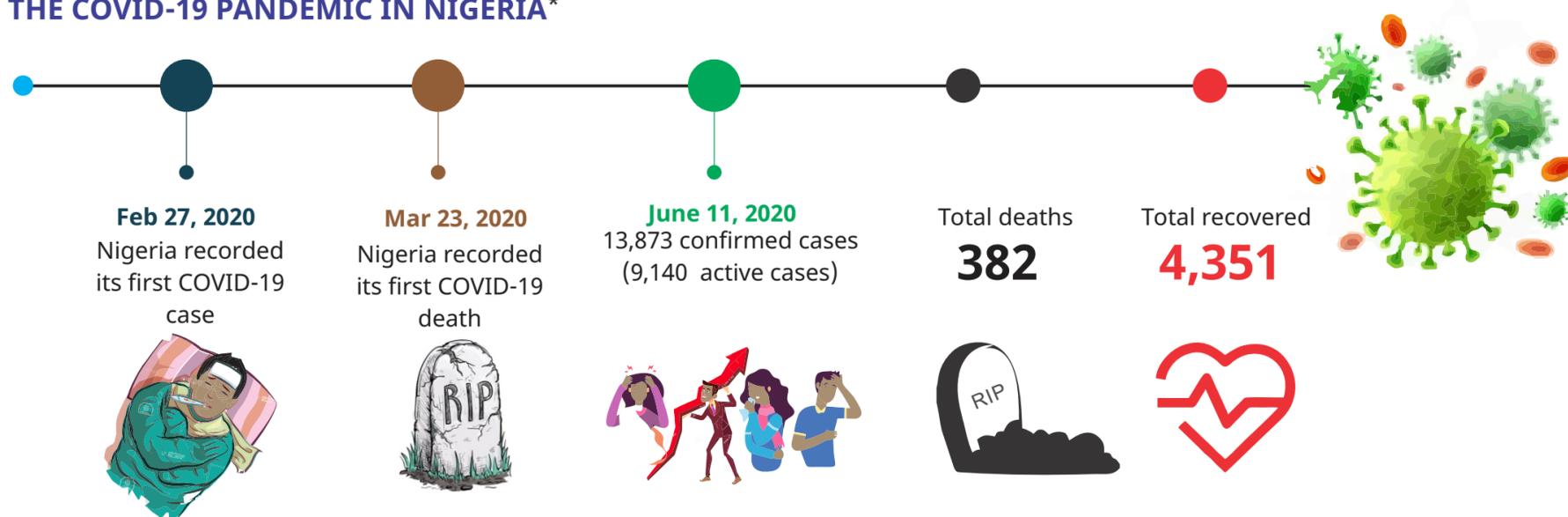


Only **7% of schools** and **5% of health facilities** in the country have combined basic water, sanitation and hygiene facilities<sup>iv</sup>

Against this backdrop, millions are unable to practice frequent handwashing with soap and clean water, increasing their risk of being susceptible to infectious diseases such as COVID-19. The situation poses a huge risk for healthcare workers, frontline staff and patients, significantly increasing their chances of getting infected and spreading infections. This gruesome reality limits the effectiveness of frequent handwashing with soap and clean water as a crucial first line of defence against the spread of the coronavirus disease and other infectious diseases.

Access to basic water and sanitation services are considered basic human rights but a lack of adequate capacity, financing, institutional arrangements, accountability mechanisms and national policies prevent effective and sustainable provision of these services and continue to be a major blockage to improvements that could drastically change the lives of millions of people in Nigeria. At current rates of progress, Nigeria is still a long way from achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 and ensuring universal access to these basic life-saving services. The country's efforts, though encouraging, still fall dramatically short of what it needs to ensure everyone has access to clean water and good hygiene services to help them practice the crucial hygiene behaviours that will help curb the spread of COVID-19.

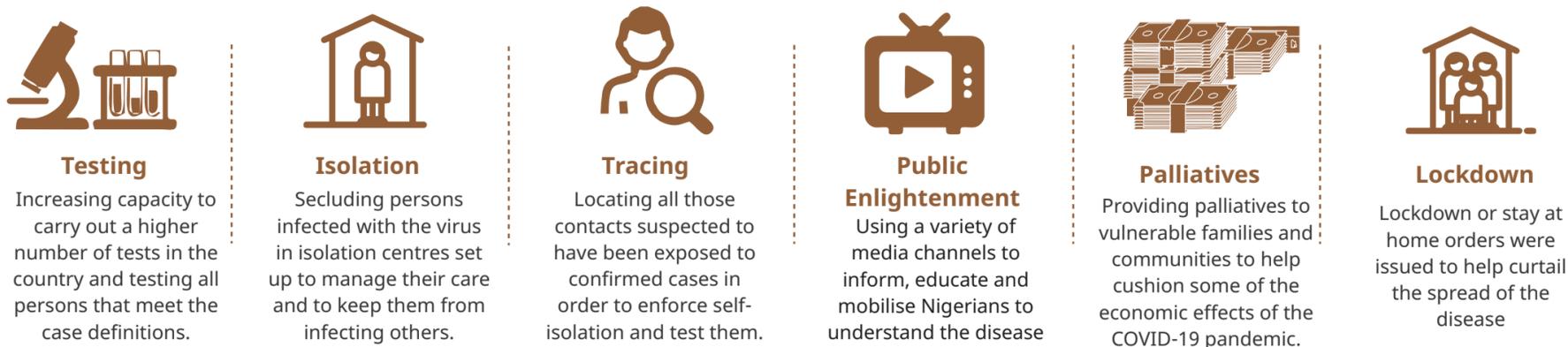
### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA\*



Lagos – the economic capital of the nation, and Abuja – the Federal Capital Territory, are recording the highest cases. Though the disease was initially imported, Nigeria is now experiencing growing community transmission. Nigeria's current low level of testing in comparison with several other countries, the probability is high that there could be far more cases in the country than have been confirmed. This presents a worrisome picture and demands for urgent action to prevent an escalation of the pandemic to unmanageable levels in the country.

### THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In recognition that prevention remains Nigeria's best line of action, the government has put measures in place to curtail the spread of COVID-19. These actions, which are centrally coordinated by the Presidential Task Force for the control of COVID-19, include:



WaterAid appreciates and champions the extraordinary efforts that healthcare workers and carers are making across the world and in Nigeria to tackle this crisis to the best of their abilities. We commend the Federal Government of Nigeria, states, local governments, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control, National Health Authorities, media networks, the private sector, the civil society and non-governmental organisations for the tireless work being delivered to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, curb the spread of the disease and allay public anxiety at this time. We applaud the many businesses and individuals who have contributed much needed resources to help fight this pandemic and its spread. While these efforts made by the Nigerian government to curtail the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria are commendable, a lot still needs to be done.

\* Get the latest Nigeria COVID-19 figures at Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (ncdc.gov.ng) and World Health Organization

## POSSIBLE COVID-19 SCENARIOS IN NIGERIA

### Best Case Scenario

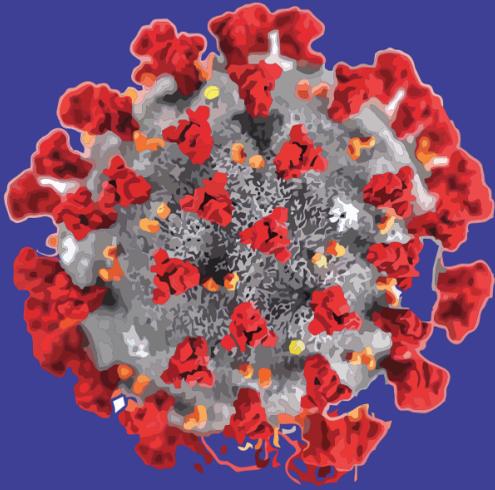
A small number of cases identified in the country, spread is effectively contained with minimal fatalities and impact on social and economic life. Life, governance and business continue as usual as Nigerian authorities take proactive steps to insulate the country from the ravaging effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Medium Case Scenario

An increase beyond 50 cases and across states is recorded, with the risk of massive spread not effectively contained. Number of cases eventually intensify into the hundreds and across more states with a rising number of deaths. Government is forced to restrict movement of people to curtail spread with dire consequences for livelihoods and the economy and the threat of civil unrest.

### Worst case scenario

Massive community transmission of the disease with Nigeria recording cases in the thousands and reporting high numbers of new cases and deaths. Nigeria becomes a hotspot and epicentre of the disease in Africa or globally and healthcare systems too fragile to handle the situation, become overwhelmed. There is seeming inability of government to contain the spread. Government, Private and Development sector actors close down their operations with major negative consequences for governance, social and economic activities. Efforts to manage the spread require further restriction of movement, with social tensions escalating and resulting in violence. The Nigerian economy goes into recession.



To avoid the worst case scenario such as those being seen with Italy, Spain and the USA, Nigeria must take precautions by aggressively pursuing proactive preventive measures and intensifying those already in place by the federal and state governments. Global and national health authorities all continue to emphasise that basic hygiene behaviour practices especially frequent and thorough handwashing with soap and clean water are crucial for preventing and drastically curtailing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic and many other infectious diseases in the country. However, the effectiveness of the messaging on handwashing with soap and water to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria is highly dependent upon government adoption of the right policies and investments for reversing the current water, sanitation and hygiene statistics that represents the reality for millions.

## WATERAID NIGERIA RECOMMENDATIONS

Clean water, decent sanitation and good hygiene together form the foundation that underpins almost all of the Sustainable Development Goals, from health to education, to nutrition and the environment, to gender equity, poverty and economic empowerment. Sustainable and equitable universal water, sanitation and hygiene services are an indispensable element in the current efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Strong partnerships and collaborative actions are needed to make this a reality. Nigeria needs an urgent step change in the journey towards realising the goal of universal access. By declaring a State of Emergency in the WASH sector and launching a National WASH Action Plan to revitalise the sector, the Nigerian government has demonstrated political will to lead on the step change required. The Federal Government must now as a matter of urgency fast-track the implementation of concrete activities laid out in the National WASH Action Plan, including leveraging on the Clean Nigeria: Use the Toilet campaign to drive and champion handwashing with soap and water as a key hygiene behaviour change crucial to preventing the spread of COVID19.

All stakeholders must recognise and commit to prioritising access to clean water and decent toilets as basic human rights and must intensify efforts to ensure the provision of these services at this most critical time when they have proven to be crucial in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. A failure to invest in the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene services for all, and to promote hygiene behaviour change on a massive scale will mean that an alarming increase of COVID-19 cases in Nigeria becomes inevitable with the country battling the scourge of this deadly pandemic for a long time to come. It will also mean the country remains vulnerable and not able to adequately protect itself against other outbreaks in the future. In light of all of this, WaterAid recommends the following to help curb the spread of COVID-19 and end the pandemic:

### Government at all levels

- The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 should ensure that all isolation, testing and treatment centres have safely managed, reliable and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene facilities to meet worker and patient needs in the fight against this pandemic. Key attention should also be paid to the management and safe disposal of waste, especially infectious medical waste generated in these facilities for comprehensive infection prevention and control.
- Statistics indicate that only 5% of healthcare institutions in Nigeria have access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. This poses a huge risk to efforts to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Urgent efforts must be made to ensure that all healthcare facilities across the country are provided with inclusive and equitable Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities.
- The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 should include representation from the Federal Ministry of Water Resources to ensure effective coordination and fast action around water, sanitation and hygiene measures that need to be deployed to curb the spread of the virus across the country.
- State governments must be encouraged to devise committed budget lines to make water and sanitation universal. Ministries of Water Resources across the states should be quickly supported to immediately provide emergency water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and services to vulnerable and marginalised groups such as Internally Displaced Persons, urban slum dwellers and rural communities. Already Nigeria's WASH poverty reality urgently calls for the need to increase investments and scale-up provision of water, sanitation and hygiene services to households, communities, healthcare facilities and schools. This really is the time to increase investment in the operation and maintenance of existing water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure alongside building new infrastructure to reach more people.
- The Federal and State governments must urgently invest in nationwide hygiene promotion and behaviour change campaigns as a key priority in the efforts to prevent and control COVID-19. This large scale national hygiene behaviour change campaigns can be embedded within the 'Clean Nigeria: Use the Toilet Campaign' for easy scale up and massive reach. In this regard, Federal and State Ministries of Health should coordinate with Ministries of Water Resources and Information as well as the National Orientation Agencies at all levels to establish dedicated sections that will undertake sustained hygiene education to compliment the provision of services to achieve behavioural change and promote a handwashing culture among citizens.
- The Federal Government needs to increase budget allocation to water, sanitation and hygiene and the Federal Ministry of Water Resources also needs to urgently, within the next few weeks, activate and utilise the WASH Fund in support of the COVID-19 response, growing it to attain a similar status and relevance as the TETFund has to the education sector.
- The Federal and State Governments must have and utilise dedicated and effective channels for the dissemination and flow of credible information to the Nigerian public, co-opting religious and traditional leaders, key public figures, celebrities, bloggers, social media platforms amongst others. Concrete efforts must also be made to counter the spread of false information that sabotage efforts to properly educate and empower the public to play their role to halt the spread of the pandemic.
- Federal and State governments must ensure that palliatives given to the poor and vulnerable to cushion the economic effects of the lockdown are adequate to avert social tension and crisis. It is only through this that the effectiveness of the movement restriction can be assured to enable tracing, isolation and treatment to halt the spread of the virus. Palliatives should also include hygiene resource packs with contextual and simple to understand information materials on key hygiene practices to ensure the masses practice adequate hygiene and stay safe.

## **Bilateral and Multilateral Donor Agencies**

- Provide rapid, flexible funding and technical assistance to government-led efforts to promote good hygiene behaviour and build water, sanitation and hygiene systems that will support immediate emergency interventions to halt the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Step up investment in water, sanitation and hygiene services and behaviour change as a core priority of global health security to prevent future pandemics.
- Ensure Nigeria is a part of and contributes to a coordinated global response that enables clear documentation of learning from the responses of various countries. Platforms for international collaboration and learning must therefore be put in place to allow Nigeria receive much needed support and take learning from other countries. This will support cross learning and better coordinated approaches for a sustainable global eradication of the pandemic across countries.

## **WASH Development Sector Actors and Partners**

- Continue to provide technical and financial support to water and sanitation service providers and Civil Society to be able to increase their capacity to make emergency WASH facilities and services available and accessible to densely inhabited communities and to the poor and most vulnerable population.
- Further a globally coordinated response that enables eradication of the pandemic by sustaining and not diverting existing grants from countries in dire need of this support back to their home countries in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Private Sector Actors**

- Continue to provide financial and technical support to relevant government agencies and civil society to provide emergency water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. Deploy their efficiency, effectiveness and innovations to the service of efforts by various stakeholders to combat the spread of COVID-19.
- Develop promotional materials to conduct hygiene behaviour change campaigns. Sponsor advertorials that contribute to educating employees in their organisations, including organisations in their supply chains as well as the general public, to empower them with valid, correct information to effectively play their roles as individuals and communities of people towards curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Establish functional water, sanitation and hygiene facilities within their organisational premises and in strategic locations where citizens can access them at no cost and encourage this across their production and distribution chains

## **Civil Society & Non-State Actors**

- Utilise existing CSO platforms, networks and spheres of influence to intensify awareness creation, communicate accurate and timely messages and carry out hygiene behaviour change campaigns especially among vulnerable and rural communities. Also act as a bridge of information between government and these communities to the benefit of all in the efforts to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus.
- Promote government responsibility and transparency by demanding accountability in the deployment of resources budgeted / voted / donated / contributed by various stakeholders towards the COVID-19 emergency response to ensure the most vulnerable are reached and resources accounted for. In effect, follow the money, monitoring the distribution of palliatives to the poor to ensure efficiency, equity and effectiveness of the programme.
- Ensure accountability for any violations of citizens' rights especially by security forces especially in the enforcement of the lockdown in the COVID-19 response.

## The Nigerian Public

- **It is important for everyone to wash their hands at all critical times to prevent and reduce the spread of COVID-19. Critical times for handwashing with soap include: after toilet use, before cooking or preparing food, before eating, and before feeding someone, including before breastfeeding; after handling money, touching animals, being out in public or sneezing and coughing.**
- Practice other good hygiene behaviours to prevent and reduce the spread of COVID-19:
  - Covering mouth when coughing and sneezing and doing so into your elbow or a disposable tissue which must be thrown into a covered bin afterward
  - Maintaining a social distance of at least 2m (6 feet) from people and particularly from anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19
  - Thoroughly cooking meat and washing vegetables and fruits with clean water before eating

## CONCLUSION

The impacts on health and wellbeing of a lack of water, sanitation and hygiene in homes, communities, public places, schools and healthcare facilities are devastating. The emergency situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, while exacerbating the impact of this situation also provides an opportunity to mitigate existing risks and build effective and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene systems. This will support improved hygiene behaviours – like handwashing with soap and clean water – which will help tackle the spread of COVID 19 and other highly contagious diseases.

Nigeria needs to accelerate the very recent trend of the high political will it demonstrated when it declared a state of emergency in its water, sanitation and hygiene sector. Only by accelerating the implementation of the National WASH Action Plan it instituted for the sector's revitalisation and fast-tracking the implementation of its recently launched national 'Clean Nigeria: Use the Toilet Campaign', can it make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene a reality for everyone, everywhere. This emergency is also an opportunity to lay the foundation of a viable and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector focus on eliminating the death of hundreds of children every day from waterborne diseases including diarrhoea in Nigeria. WASH must be at the front and centre of this and future efforts to prevent future pandemics.

The current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, and with an alarming increasing number of cases in Nigeria, highlights more than ever before the need for the Nigerian government, at all levels, to take urgent action to implement key recommendations and commitments for the provision of inclusive and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services. It also stresses the need for a deepened integration of water, sanitation and hygiene in national policies and programmes as well as for strong collaboration across relevant sectors and actors. Now, more than ever, there is need for partnerships, collaboration and urgent collective action to build resilient water, sanitation and hygiene systems, to control and overcome COVID-19, prevent the next pandemic, and build sustainable, resilience services that can deliver health and dignity for all.

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