

# THE WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SECTOR AND ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19: INITIATIVES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Measures adopted in Latin American countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Last update:

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The health emergency caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has affected all countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region since February, albeit to a different extent and in different ways. Hygiene—particularly washing hands with soap and clean water—has been one of the most efficient measures for infection prevention and control (IPC). Governments must therefore set up conventional and alternative measures to guarantee continuous access to a minimum volume of drinking Water, basic Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for all people; in particular, for workers and users of health and isolation centers, schools, public places (markets, transport hubs, etc.), and people living outside a home<sup>1</sup>.

In recent weeks, different WASH sector stakeholders—governments and decision makers, regulators, utilities, users, etc.—have proposed and implemented different types of measures against the pandemic. This document shares experiences and good practices by providing a summary of initiatives implemented in the region to i) ensure that all people have access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene during the emergency; and ii) support and strengthen the role of utilities in continuously and safely providing these basic services. The measures listed below are structured and synthesized around two main actors: the user and the service provider. It is important to emphasize that many of the measures require political willpower at the highest level and the committed participation of policy makers

<sup>1</sup> Homeless people, people in shelters, shelters for the elderly, refugee/returnee centres, youth and adult detention centres, etc.

and regulators. Intersectoral collaboration is also important in ensuring the correct implementation of many of these measures.

### **Users: Guarantee continued access to water, sanitation and hygiene services**

1. Preserve the health and well-being of all people, including the most vulnerable, by meeting their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs.
  - Guaranteeing that all people have access to a minimum amount of drinking water and basic sanitation to ensure the necessary hygiene measures for infection prevention and control. This entails, among others, not cutting off the supply to households who cannot afford to pay, immediately reconnecting all households that have been disconnected due to non-payment, adopting additional measures to ensure hygiene, and providing alternative supply solutions to households not connected to the water networks, vulnerable groups and homeless people. Specific measures must be also promoted to address the needs of women and girls in relation to water, sanitation and hygiene.
  - Facilitating payment of services for households in financial difficulty by creating and/or improving appropriate financial instruments (e.g. by implementing subsidy systems, freezing bill collection, writing off debts for non-payment, exempting households from reconnection costs, etc.) or by establishing a minimum basic consumption for families (anticipating an increase in water consumption due to improved hygiene and the confinement of many people to their homes).
  - Ensuring the availability of basic hygiene products (soap, menstrual hygiene products, etc.) and products for household water treatment (chlorine tablets, water filters, etc.) through direct distribution, cash-based interventions or market control mechanisms.

2. Intensify awareness-raising campaigns for infection prevention and control (IPC) and the efficient use of water in the home and in public spaces.

- Encouraging the immediate restoration or new construction of handwashing points in exposed collective sites and public spaces, such as schools, health care facilities, markets, detention centers, transport hubs, transit centers, etc., reducing waiting time and guaranteeing physical distancing.
- Promoting appropriate infection prevention and control measures at the household and in institutions, for example: washing hands with soap and water, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, isolating symptomatic people and people at risk, and not sharing personal items such as glasses, cutlery, towels, etc.
- Combating misinformation and fake news campaigns. Promoting water-saving and efficient water use, as well as correct water treatment in homes if there is no access to piped water.

### **Utilities: Guarantee the provision and proper operation of water, sanitation and hygiene services, while ensuring the financial sustainability of the utilities**

3. Ensure the continuity and safety of water and sanitation services.
  - Securing the quality and continuity of water and sanitation services in health care facilities to ensure frequent hand hygiene and support regular cleaning and disinfection practices with chlorine-based products. Securing the continuity and quality of water and sanitation services in isolation centers and in social care institutions. Planning for the reopening of schools to provide these basic services in all schools.

- Guaranteeing the supply of drinking water and proper operation of sanitation services at all stages. Planning preventive maintenance tasks at all critical points of the networks. Monitoring residual chlorine at strategic points in the distribution network and for key users such as health care facilities, nursing homes and schools. Expanding infrastructure and extending coverage of water and sanitation services to unconnected areas.
  - Guaranteeing water and wastewater utilities access to electricity, to ensure the operation of services. Strengthening the supply chain of critical goods (chemicals, disinfectants, spare parts, etc.) for both rural, small-scale systems and urban, large-scale systems. Ensure proper waste management (e.g. sludge from wastewater treatment plants).
  - Ensuring proper waste management, at all stages: collection, separation, transportation, processing and treatment, and disposal. Promote good practices for quarantined households.
  - Ensuring availability and access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for sanitation workers with risk of exposure to excreta or cleaning agents in health care facilities. Distributing personal protective equipment to informal sanitation workers.
4. Provide technical and financial support to utilities.
- Ensuring utilities (urban and rural) receive the necessary support and technical assistance for administration, planning, operation and maintenance, etc. Establishing coordination platforms between government and utilities for the exchange of experiences, good practices, crossover learning processes, etc.
  - Ensuring utilities (urban and rural) receive the necessary financial support to guarantee the correct operation of services, to avoid non-payment or delays in the payment of bills causing a liquidity problem and damaging the operation and maintenance of services. Developing medium-term economic viability plans for the utilities.
  - Launching special funds for the improvement, restoration and expansion of water and sanitation infrastructure to meet any needs arising from the pandemic.
  - Establishing multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms.

Based on this structure, the following table lists a number of measures and initiatives that countries from the LAC region have adopted and implemented in the COVID-19 response to assure WASH services for all. The table includes the actors involved in the implementation of each initiative and the estimated implementation period. This list is meant to be informative rather than exhaustive, but it provides water and sanitation decision-makers, practitioners, and operators with a good starting point to prepare the overarching plan and strategy for implementing the WASH response. In addition, annexes to this note will be prepared fortnightly to present and discuss the set of initiatives that each country has approved or is implementing. They will provide an overview of how the WASH sector is responding over time to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Annexes to this note identify and map WASH initiatives and measures adopted by countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region in response to the impacts of COVID-19. They are prepared based on web searches of initiatives and measures taken by governments, utilities and bilateral and multilateral cooperation agents in the region. Therefore, the main sources of information used are the official websites of governments (national and/or provincial in the case of federal countries), websites of utilities and their national and international associations, news stories published in the media, references on Twitter and other social networks, and interviews with UNICEF staff, regulators and local stakeholders.





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**Table 1: Adopted measures during the WASH response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

AREA/ACTIVITY	ACTORS INVOLVED	TIME FRAME
<b>1. Preserve the health and well-being of all people, including the most vulnerable, by meeting their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs</b>		
<b>Identifying priority intervention areas</b> , supporting national multi-sector mapping of the <b>areas most at risk from COVID-19 ("hotspots")</b> <sup>3</sup> with data from the water and sanitation sector.	Water and sanitation sector	Immediate
<b>Not cutting off the water supply to households who are unable to pay</b> bills, under any circumstances.	Utility	Immediate
Immediately <b>reconnecting</b> free of charge all <b>households disconnected</b> for non-payment that <b>do not currently receive water services</b> .	Utility	Immediate
<b>Ensuring a minimum daily volume</b> of drinking water for all <b>households classed as vulnerable or not connected to the mains network</b> , through infrastructure expansion and/or unconventional solutions (e.g. distribution of water to households or at specific community points, water trucks, water kiosks, etc.), respecting social distancing (at least, one-metre spacing between taps).	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring provision of services to all groups <sup>4</sup> living outside a home.	Municipality	Immediate
Ensuring that there are specific measures aimed at addressing the needs of women and girls in relation to water, sanitation and hygiene (e.g., sanitation facilities in isolation centers with gender sensitive safety measures and privacy, targeted awareness raising on handwashing and hygiene promotion, ensuring menstrual hygiene and health management, sex-disaggregated data are considered in WASH response plans)	Central Government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Establishing, maintaining and/or extending (in collaboration with social protection services) the <b>financial instruments</b> needed to <b>facilitate service payments for vulnerable households</b> : implementing some form of subsidy system, social bonus, freezing bill collection, writing off debts for non-payment, exempting households from reconnection costs, postponement of tariff adjustments, etc.	Government Utility	Immediate, medium-term
Evaluating the possibility of introducing a free <b>minimum basic consumption</b> for families anticipating an increase in consumption due to better hygiene and the confinement of many people to their homes.	Government Utility	Immediate, short-term
Providing non-centralized basic sanitation solutions (e.g. compact toilets, latrine emptying and faecal sludge management, etc.), through unconventional technologies when needed, to all <b>households not connected to the sewerage system</b> , in order to prevent open defecation.	Municipality / local government Utility	Medium-term
<b>Ensuring public or community bathrooms are open, available, and accessible free of charge</b> to people who do not have them at home and/or are doing essential work outside. Guarantee that public toilets are properly maintained, cleaned, and disinfected daily.	Municipality / local government Utility	Immediate, short-term
Ensuring the <b>availability of basic products</b> for family hygiene (soap, hand sanitizing gels, menstrual hygiene products, toilet paper, etc.) and domestic water treatment (chlorine tablets, water filters, etc.), either through direct distribution, cash-based interventions or market control mechanisms (e.g., by controlling prices fluctuations for WASH commodities).	Government Private sector	Immediate
Guaranteeing access to <b>electricity and communications</b> for users so they can communicate with service providers and authorities, receive information, make online payments, etc.	Government Private sector	Immediate
Establishing <b>communication channels between utilities and users</b> , such as dedicated webpages for COVID-19, hotlines, etc. Real-time information collection and advice (queries or concerns consumers may have about bills or service).	Utility	Immediate
<b>2. Intensify awareness-raising campaigns for handwashing with soap and water and efficient water use in the home</b>		
<b>Rehabilitating or constructing new handwashing stations in exposed collective sites and public spaces</b> , including schools, health care facilities, markets, prisons, transport locations and other public places. The quantity of hand hygiene stations should consider the number of users to better encourage use, reduce waiting time and guarantee physical distancing.	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Promoting <b>improved cleaning and disinfection in public spaces and high-risk areas</b> (e.g., public fountains, recreational areas, schools, public places, institutions offices, etc.)	Local government	Immediate, short-term

<sup>3</sup> Consider: 1) the multiple risk factors for maintaining basic preventive hygiene and social distancing (population density, average age, percentage living in the informal economy and day-to-day wage, etc.); and 2) the multiple risk factors in the context of partial/total quarantine and current and potential outbreaks of COVID-19 and other diseases. Areas of high population density and low levels of WASH services must be especially considered, both at household and at the community level (few public toilets, etc.), with cases of COVID-19. The presence of health care facilities, markets, shelters for the elderly, prisons, detention centers for minors of age and centers of agglomeration of people with special needs in relation to water and sanitation should also be taken into account.

<sup>4</sup> Homeless people, people in shelters, shelters for the elderly, refugee/returnee centres, youth and adult detention centres, etc.

<b>Promoting handwashing with soap and water and safe behaviors</b> through population-wide initiatives seeking lasting results, using adequate communication channels and messages to reach all population segments, with a special emphasis on the most vulnerable groups.	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
<b>Promoting other IPC measures at the household</b> , such as wearing masks, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, isolating people with symptoms and people at a higher risk, and not sharing personal items such as glasses, cutlery, towels, etc. Special attention to confined households and most vulnerable groups. Make content available in the different languages used in countries, and use nudging techniques to encourage good practices.	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
<b>Identifying and training community leaders</b> in prioritized rural areas to promote proper handwashing and other IPC measures in their respective communities and participation in monitoring.	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Combating <b>misinformation and fake news campaigns</b> on COVID-19 (e.g. in relation to mechanisms of spreading of the virus, symptoms, treatments, etc.).	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Promoting <b>home water treatment</b> if there is no access to safe water (e.g. boiling water, chlorine tablets, filters, etc.) and communicate instructions on preparing, handling and storing a chlorine solution using local products.	Central government / local government / civil society / NGOs / media / private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Introducing measures and campaigns for <b>water-saving and efficiency</b> .	Central government / local government / civil society / media / private sector / users	Immediate, short- and medium-term
<b>3. Guarantee the continuity and safety of water and sanitation services</b>		
<b>Identifying critical intervention areas</b> ("hotspots") in the utility's service area to prioritize COVID-19 response interventions. <sup>5</sup>	Utility	Immediate
Conducting <b>regular monitoring of WASH supplies and services access and prices</b> , and take corrective measures when needed.	Central government / local government / Utility / civil society / private sector / users	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Conducting rapid assessments <sup>6</sup> of the <b>WASH situation in hospitals and health care facilities</b> , securing the continuity and quality of water and sanitation services (24*7) in health care facilities, including engaging in frequent hand hygiene using appropriate techniques, implementing regular cleaning and disinfection practices with chlorine-based products, and safely managing health care waste. Adopt alternative and decentralized mechanisms, if needed..	Utility	Immediate
Securing the continuity and quality of <b>water and sanitation services in isolation centers and in social care institutions</b> (for elderlies, disabled, homeless, childcare centers, etc.), including engaging in frequent hand hygiene using appropriate techniques and implementing regular cleaning and disinfection practices.	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring <b>proper operation of drinking water systems</b> at all stages: collection, production, treatment and distribution to the final consumer. Planning preventive maintenance tasks at all critical points of the system (e.g. at the intake, mains, in the treatment plant and in the distribution network). Monitoring residual chlorine at specific key points and for strategic users (e.g., health care facilities, nursing homes and schools).	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring <b>proper operation of the sewerage system</b> and <b>non-centralized sanitation solutions</b> at all stages: emptying of latrines and septic tanks and transport, treatment and final disposal of faecal sludge.	Utility	Immediate
Expanding <b>infrastructure and extending coverage</b> of water and sanitation services to unconnected areas.	Utility	Short- and medium-term
Securing <b>access to energy / electricity</b> for utilities, to ensure the operation of water and sanitation services.	Electricity company	Immediate

<sup>5</sup> Criteria for identifying these areas include (but are not limited to) areas of high population density with low levels of WASH services at both the individual and community levels (few public toilets, etc.) with cases of COVID-19. The presence of health care facilities, markets, nursing homes, prisons, youth detention centres and other places where there are many people in need of access to water and sanitation should be taken into account.

<sup>6</sup> One particular methodology proposed for this purpose is the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Health Care Facilities Improvement Tool (WASH FIT): [www.washfit.org](http://www.washfit.org)

Advocating for <b>reliable regional and national WASH supply chains</b> , while sustaining, strengthening and diversifying the supply chains of all products and materials needed to operate water and sanitation services (chlorine-based products and disinfectants, chemicals, spare parts, etc.), ranging from rural small-scale systems to urban, large-scale systems. This might include from support to local production to exemptions for sanctions or special clearances for materials and equipment based on humanitarian need.	Private sector Utility	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring the availability, quality and continuity of <b>water and sanitation and handwashing services in schools</b> , using unconventional mechanisms if necessary, in anticipation of reopening.	Utility Ministry of Education	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring <b>availability and access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)</b> for sanitation workers with risk of exposure to excreta or cleaning agents in health care facilities. Adoption of other protection measures, including remote working and duty roster, body temperature measurements, reduction of visits to consumers, etc. Developing protocols in cases of contagion among operational personnel.	Utility Private sector	Immediate
Distributing <b>protective equipment to informal sanitation workers</b> .	Government / local government, informal utility	Immediate
Ensuring <b>proper waste management</b> , at all stages: collection, separation, transportation, processing and treatment, and disposal. Promote good practices for quarantined households	Local government	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Introducing online payment services if they do not already exist.	Utility	Short-term
<b>4. Provide technical and financial support to utilities</b>		
Providing <b>technical assistance</b> to utilities for management, financing, planning, operation and maintenance, etc. Supporting the creation/updating and implementation of emergency response plans or contingency plans.	Government Strategic partners	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Activating <b>special funds to guarantee the operation of and to improve, upgrade and expand water and sanitation infrastructure</b> to meet the specific needs of the pandemic.	Government Financial institutions	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring urban utilities receive the <b>necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment)</b> to guarantee the proper operation of services.	Government Financial institutions	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring <b>rural and community operators</b> (both formal and informal) receive the necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment) and technical assistance to ensure continuity of service.	Government / local government	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Promoting correct <b>monitoring of the utilities and smaller operators. Developing a simple monitoring system</b> to facilitate early detection of service delivery failures and promote corrective action.	Government Regulators Utilities' associations	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Establishing a <b>coordination platform</b> and/or <b>communication channels between government and utilities/operators</b> and their associations for the exchange of experiences, good practices, crossover learning processes, etc. Real-time information collection and advice (queries, concerns about technical, financial, legal, and administrative issues).	Government Providers	Short- and medium-term
Developing business plans for service providers to analyze economic viability of the utility in the short and mid-term.	Government Financial institutions	Short- and medium-term
Establishing <b>multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms</b> , including international and multilateral organizations and other actors.	Government Strategic partners	Immediate, short- and medium-term

