

Evaluation of WHO's contribution to Water, Sanitation, Hygiene (WASH) and Health: **The WHO Global WASH Strategy 2018-2025**



World Health Organization

BACKGROUND

The WHO WASH Strategy (2018–2025) focuses on improving health through safe water, sanitation and hygiene services. The Strategy guides WHO's efforts in developing evidence-based guidelines and norms, monitoring progress, providing technical support and developing partnerships in different priority areas, as well as addressing global challenges like climate change and public health emergencies. It aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and seeks to close significant gaps in WASH access, quality and coverage to achieve SDG 6 water and sanitation targets. Through partnerships, particularly with UNICEF, WHO promotes equitable WASH access, supports universal health coverage, and strengthens systems despite resource constraints, emphasizing stakeholder engagement and political commitment.

PURPOSE

The evaluation assessed the effectiveness and added value of WHO's WASH Strategy for health and its interventions, with findings and recommendations intended to guide the development of a new strategy. The evaluation aims to ensure accountability and promote learning by identifying good practices and areas for improvement. It examined the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Strategy from 2018 to August 2024, focusing on priority intervention areas globally and the extent to which they have influenced operations at the country level.

METHODS

This evaluation combined summative and formative elements, using a theory-based, utilization-focused approach responsive to gender, equity, and social inclusion. It assessed relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, and sustainability through 174 key informant interviews, focus groups (48% female participants), an online survey with 213 respondents, two country case studies in Ethiopia and the Philippines and a review of over 600 documents.

KEY FINDINGS

Relevance

The WHO WASH Strategy aligns well with WHO's mandate and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, addressing critical global needs and promoting health for all. Its normative guidance and tools effectively support country

needs, though the Strategy does not explicitly prioritize specific geographies or populations beyond annual workplans. Accountability for implementation at the country level is limited as it is influenced by governance processes. Emerging issues like climate resilience, which are incorporated in WHO's 14th General Programme of Work (GPW14), should also be mirrored in the next WASH Strategy. Similarly, Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) principles are not fully articulated, despite efforts to integrate them into global monitoring and risk management tools.

Effectiveness

The Strategy has achieved most objectives and is seen as highly influential in contributing to the global WASH agenda. WHO's normative guidance and monitoring efforts are valued globally, though in-country prioritization of WASH varies depending on national government focus. Climate resilience has become a mainstream concern within WASH guidance. The COVID-19 pandemic both advanced initiatives like the Hand Hygiene for All partnership and disrupted interventions. Strengthened results frameworks and monitoring processes would enhance tracking of progress and outcomes.

Efficiency

WHO has managed to optimize its limited financial and human resources, with strong internal cooperation and strategic partnerships, especially with UNICEF. However, declining and earmarked funding has limited flexibility for addressing priorities. Key initiatives such as GLAAS and JMP receive the most resources, but broader funding predictability would enhance effectiveness. Opportunities exist to improve coordination across WHO levels, better align financial reporting, and refine activity scaling in response to emerging and ongoing needs.

Coherence with the Global WASH Architecture

WHO plays a vital role in the global WASH sector, providing leadership and normative guidance that complements the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework. Its partnerships at the global level are robust, while collaboration at regional and country levels is more variable. Clearer role definitions with partners and enhanced integration of WASH into broader health strategies at the country level could improve coherence and effectiveness.

Sustainability

WHO has strengthened advocacy, training, and capacity-building activities to support sustainable WASH efforts, with notable progress in embedding WASH approaches into national policies. Its global knowledge products are well-regarded and used, but resource limitations often constrain in-country support to the implementation of WASH guidance. Continued integration of WASH into national systems and partner approaches, along with enhanced communication and advocacy within WHO, will further reinforce sustainability and long-term health gains.

WHO tracks the integration of key WASH standards and guidance into national policies effectively, yet there is scope to embed WASH approaches and tools more deeply into national strategies and systems in collaboration with WASH partners.

CONCLUSIONS

Relevance

WHO's WASH Strategy aligns with global health priorities, including the SDGs, and is vital for improving health outcomes. It aligns well with country needs and WHO normative guidance is widely valued. The future strategy should clarify country-level roles, strengthen linkages with the GPW14 and expand its focus on climate change, emergencies, and primary health care, while integrating GEDSI.

Effectiveness

The Strategy has been effectively implemented despite funding and staffing constraints and a challenging global context, achieving high-quality outputs and strong global leadership. A clearer results monitoring framework is needed to track progress.

Efficiency

WHO maximizes resources through internal collaboration and partnerships but relies heavily on project funding. Improved core funding, a resource mobilization strategy, results framework and financial reporting would enhance efficiency and alignment with priorities.

Coherence

WHO leads effectively at the global level but more needs to be done to translate this role at the regional and country-level more consistently. Reinforcing already strong global partnerships and clarifying roles at the regional and country levels would improve WASH integration and effectiveness.

Sustainability

Advocacy, training and knowledge dissemination have supported sustainability, but resource limitations constrain support for implementation at the country level. Clearer delineation of the extent of WHO's comparative advantage in supporting contextualisation and implementation of guidance and monitoring, enhanced capacity building, and targeted advocacy are needed to sustain progress.

Recommendation 1 – Develop a new WASH strategy based on WHO established core areas of work in WASH (including setting standards, guidelines, strengthening WASH systems at country level, monitoring, and promoting evidence-based

policy and research), while integrating newly identified priority areas where WHO contributions add significant value (e.g. climate change resilience, WASH in emergencies including cholera, antimicrobial resistance, primary health care, infection prevention and control, vector-borne diseases, cholera, neglected tropical diseases, and GEDSI). The new Strategy should enhance intersectoral engagement and be aligned with both internal and external strategies of key WASH actors (including UNICEF), primarily the GPW14 and the UN System-wide Water and Sanitation Strategy.

Timeframe: Next six months. Action: WHO

Recommendation 2 – To implement the new strategy, develop an operational plan anchored in the GPW14. This plan should be accompanied by a results (monitoring and evaluation) framework that outlines clear accountabilities and defines specific roles for headquarters, regional and country offices.

Timeframe: Next 12 months. Action: WHO

Recommendation 3 – To position the WHO WASH programme of work more strategically within and beyond WHO, expand and capitalize on internal and external partnerships, leveraging and strengthening awareness, and understanding of its utility. This will also support joint advocacy and fundraising efforts.

Timeframe: Next 12 months - Action: WHO (across its three levels), and in collaboration with UNICEF, development banks, global health initiatives and partnerships with other key implementation stakeholders.

Recommendation 4 – Enhance the sustainability of WHO's WASH and health interventions at the country level by working with key partners to develop strategies and foster country-level partnerships that progressively integrate WASH standards, guidance, and tools into national policies and regulatory frameworks. Additionally, clarify WHO's comparative advantage vis a vis other stakeholders and partners.

Timeframe: Next 12 months - Action: WHO (across its three levels) and in collaboration with UNICEF and other key partners.

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