

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP  
60th MEETING**

**21-22 March 2005  
WFP Rome**

**Health, Water and Sanitation in Crises**

**Circulated: 10 March 2005**

**Context.** Human survival and health are central to any humanitarian response, especially for the poorest and the most vulnerable. A crucial element of people's health is access to adequate quantity and quality of water, as well as sanitation, complete with proper attention to hygiene. Personal and household hygiene is one of the first casualties in crises: only hygiene education and the provision of hygienic necessities such as soap, can optimize the use of water and sanitation facilities. There are proven standards for water and sanitation in crises. They may be adapted or improved in different settings, but the key requirement is that they are inclusive. Participation in hygiene, water and sanitation work can be made easier by using unambiguous language that is technically sound.

**Challenges.** People's access to clean water and sanitation is always *critical*. Whenever restricted or jeopardized, it can trigger a crisis just by itself. Sudden disasters, as well as complex emergencies or economic downturns are characterized by system breakdowns. Water and sanitation are basic needs: when they cannot be satisfied, people experience high rates of disease resulting in excessive deaths.

**Ways forward:** Agreeing on principles and procedures, and acting together to address these difficult problems are the keys to success. To satisfy needs in water and sanitation, especially in settings marked by instability and volatility, strict synergies are needed between different disciplines, sectors and agencies. Only by working together can we reduce the risk and bring forward better health outcomes.

In order to improve **coordination**, a clear definition of labour must be matched by greater investment in the coordination function, i.e. ensuring that strategies are agreed, programmes are jointly implemented and coordination works. This means (1) dedicated coordination positions and (2) improved information management. Better understanding by local humanitarian staff of UN/NGO coordination mechanisms and responsibilities, possibly through preparedness training, is essential.

In the context of **safe water supply**, *water quality* is increasingly recognized as a critical element along with *water quantity* for ensuring public health in affected populations. The

emergence of a problem with Hepatitis E in Darfur highlighted how all contaminants also require surveillance attention. WHO takes the lead in water quality control.

**Rapid implementation** of sanitation and hygiene promotion activities are critical in crises to help prevent large scale disease outbreaks. All too often there are delays in developing and implementing these interventions. To this end, provision of documentation and dissemination of emergency sanitation experiences and appropriate solutions (eg. manual on Excreta Disposal in Emergencies being prepared by WEDC for Oxfam, UNICEF, IFRC, etc.) is essential. Assessment of specific lessons on emergency sanitation provided by tsunami responses in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Maldives, where technical and cultural constraints hampered the sanitation response, could help fine tune response activities.

**Training and orientation** need to become routine to enhance the timely and effective response in crises. Development and implementation of country and regional training in emergency preparedness and response and wider dissemination and use of training modules for prevention of diarrhoeal disease and cholera in emergency situations, including hygiene promotion methodologies, represent important steps to be taken. WHO is currently preparing a training package on water and sanitation in emergencies in partnership with a wide variety of stakeholders.

**Proposed Actions by the IASC WG members:**

- Agree that:
  - Communicable diseases are a major threat to survival during humanitarian emergencies
  - To avoid increased mortality and morbidity levels, special attention must be given to health, water and sanitation in crises
  - Local capacity is key to rapid and effective interventions in water and sanitation: communities can prepare by building capacities at the local level
- Commit to ensuring a capacity building component in their activities in each crisis situation
- Develop and maintain regional pools of trained staff, since rapid deployment of trained staff is critical
- Ensure training not only for technical staff but also for those responsible for planning and managing operations, as sound management is fundamental for the success of any field operation
- Agencies active in the water and sanitation sector and charged with coordination responsibilities should ensure dedicated coordination positions

- Adhere to SPHERE standards for safe water supply and quality assurance
- Draw attention to the under funding of the water and sanitation sector to help ensure adequate funding
- Set-up appropriate light follow-up mechanism to report back to the IASC WG at a future meeting

Prepared by: WHO and UNICEF, March 2005