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The role of the World Health Organization in drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, and updated publications

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are crucial to human health and wellbeing. Safe WASH is not only a prerequisite to health, but contributes to livelihoods, school attendance and dignity and helps to create resilient communities living in healthy environments.

Historically, the World Health Organization (WHO) work has included WASH components since the inception of the Organization in 1948. WHO has played a long-standing and significant role in promoting WASH as an objective and respected source of international guidelines, standards and normative information. The WHO vision for WASH is: “*To substantially improve health through the safe management of water, sanitation and hygiene services in all settings*”.

WASH is enshrined in the WHO constitution. WHO takes on board the need for progressive realization of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, adopted by the UN General Assembly in July 2010. It has consistently issued health-based guidelines and good practice publications on WASH, which are designed to assist countries in developing national standards, informing regulations and establishing effective surveillance systems. For decades, WHO has monitored global and country access to water and sanitation. While the Organization has had various flagship priorities over the years, technical work on WASH issues has been a constant and is often included in broader initiatives.

WHO assists countries in improving policy, governance and monitoring towards the achievement of

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) beyond the WASH-focused SDG 6, e.g. SDG 3 on health and SDG 13 on climate change, which cannot be met without meaningful progress on Goal 6.

The WHO WASH 2018–2025 Strategy is underpinned by the following principles:

- Prioritize actions with the highest public health benefit;
- Strengthen health sector capacities in promoting safe WASH and taking up its public health oversight role in WASH, including effective outbreak response systems;
- Align with the SDGs, specifically targets relating to WASH, health, climate change and nutrition, as well as human rights principles;
- Employ the highest quality science including through collection, review and use of evidence about WASH impacts on health and a full range of practical experiences when developing norms and good practice procedures;
- Promote a contextual, incremental improvement approach when supporting countries to set national WASH standards and ambitious but achievable national targets;
- Capitalize on existing regional policy frameworks that promote WASH and stipulate national target setting;

- Stimulate sustainable change by strengthening government institutions and systems charged with implementation, oversight and regulation of WASH service delivery; and
- Engage with partners and positively influence partnerships to ensure health issues are considered and addressed by the WASH sector and to also ensure that WASH issues, notably in health care facilities, are addressed by the health sector as prerequisites to providing quality care.

Key WHO partners and stakeholders for WASH include Member States, practitioners, institutions for research and development, WASH partners, etc.

Some of WHO's priority intervention areas and recent publications are as follows:

- **Drinking-water quality and safety:** Guidelines for drinking-water quality (2022), Guidelines for drinking water quality: small water supplies and the Sanitary inspection packages (2024), the WHO/IWA updated Water Safety Plan manual (2023), Lead in drinking-water: Health risks, monitoring and corrective actions (2022), State of the world's drinking water: An urgent call to action to accelerate progress on ensuring safe drinking water for all (2022), Toxic cyanobacteria in water — 2nd edition (2021), Guidelines on recreational water quality: Volume 1 Coastal and fresh waters (2021), Domestic water quantity, service level and health (2020), Microplastics in drinking-water (2019), A guide to equitable water safety planning: Ensuring no one is left behind (2019), Management of radioactivity in drinking-water (2018).
- **Improving safety of sanitation and wastewater management:** WASH and health working together: a 'how-to' guide for neglected tropical disease programmes, second edition (2023), Sanitation safety planning — 2nd edition (2022), Global research agenda for improving the health safety and dignity of sanitation workers (2022), State of the world's sanitation: An urgent call to transform sanitation for better health, environments, economies and societies (2021), Guidelines on sanitation and health (2018), Guidelines for the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater — Volume 1 (2013). WHO is a member of the Climate Resilient Sanitation Coalition.
- **WASH in health care facilities (including healthcare waste management):** Progress on WASH in health care facilities 2000–2021: Special focus on WASH and infection prevention and control (2023), Water, sanitation, hygiene, waste and electricity services in health care facilities: progress on the fundamentals (2023), Energizing health: accelerating electricity access in healthcare facilities (2023), WASH FIT: A practical guide for improving quality of care through water, sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities. Second edition (2022), Global analysis of health care waste in the context of COVID-19 (2022), Overview of technologies for the treatment of infectious and sharp waste from health care facilities (2019), Safe management of wastes from health-care activities (2014) and the summary (2017).
- **Monitoring via the Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS), WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) and Burden of Disease:** Burden of disease attributable to unsafe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene: 2019 update (2023), Progress on household drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022: Special focus on gender (2023), Strong systems and sound investments: Evidence on and key insights into accelerating progress on sanitation, drinking-water and hygiene: GLAAS 2022 report, Progress on drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: 2000–2021 Data update (2022).
- **Integration of WASH with health and other programmes such as AMR, cholera, climate change and emergencies:** Technical brief on water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH) and wastewater management to prevent infections and reduce the spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) (2020), Safer water, better health (2019).

Despite the extensive technical support provided by WHO, populations are facing several challenges globally and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Emergencies are increasingly becoming more complex and affecting more populations than ever before. Climate change, natural disasters, and conflict are some of the few hurdles faced. Whether a natural disaster, a conflict, migration/refugee-related or a disease outbreak, and in many cases a combination of the above, WASH is an important element in both the provision of health care and reducing health risks during an emergency and in the future preparedness planning.

The keynote will mention some of the above WHO publications and will refer to the training session on Sanitation Safety Planning on Day 2 of the conference. Keywords: WHO, Sanitation Safety Planning (SSP), Sanitation and health, Public health protection, Risk-based sanitation management and Incremental improvements in sanitation.

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