

NUTRITION QUICK TIPS SERIES



WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH) AND NUTRITION

‘The human right to safe drinking water entitles everyone to have equitable access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic use. The human right to sanitation entitles everyone, without discrimination, to have physical, equitable and affordable access to sanitation, in all spheres of life, that is safe, hygienic, secure, socially and culturally acceptable and that provides privacy and ensures dignity.’ (EU Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation¹)

WASH interventions include those related to water supply (e.g. improving water quantity and quality), sanitation (e.g. safe excreta disposal) and hygiene promotion and education (e.g. handwashing, food, personal and environmental hygiene). WASH can inherently address crucial underlying drivers of child malnutrition and development, and even more so when focusing WASH interventions on nutrition outcomes².

The global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seeks to end all forms of malnutrition and provide safe access to WASH for all by 2030. Sustainable growth and development cannot be achieved without universal and equitable access to public services including WASH. Increasing the

equitable access to and use of safe water and basic sanitation services and improved hygiene practices can improve health and nutrition outcomes and contribute to improved education³, reduced poverty and sustainable development as a whole⁴.

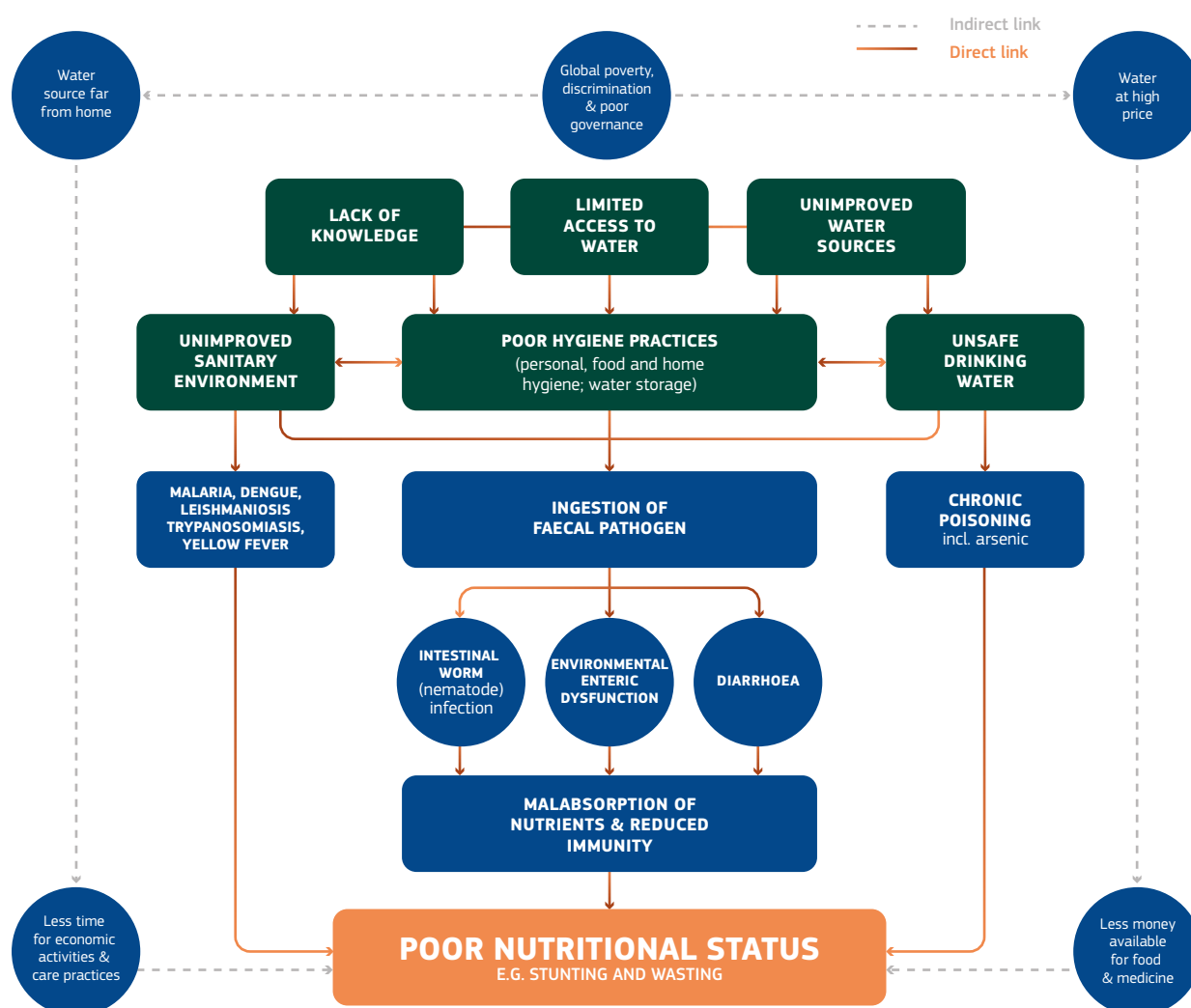
1 EU Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. [st10145-en19.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:st10145-en19.pdf)

2 Global Nutrition Report, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2016. Global Nutrition Report 2016: From Promise to Impact: Ending Malnutrition by 2030. Washington, DC.

3 Refer to Education and Nutrition Quick Tips for further information.

4 [Sustainable Sanitation Alliance, 2014.](#)

Figure 1: Relationship between poor WASH and child undernutrition



Source: [WASH'NUTRITION](#), a practical guidebook. ACF, 2017.

Contaminated water and poor sanitation and hygiene conditions cause diarrhoeal disease, environmental enteric dysfunction (EED⁵) and worm infestations, and consequently are strongly associated with malnutrition due to poor appetite, reduced food intake, nutrient malabsorption, weight loss and slowed physical growth and cognitive development in children (Figure 1). Poor nutritional status further increases susceptibility to infection, thereby creating a vicious cycle. For women and adolescent girls, a lack of privacy and dignity to practise sanitation and hygiene can have adverse impacts on health and safety, access to education and well-being. Women and girls are also affected disproportionately by lack of access to clean water and workload by time spent fetching water, which can indirectly affect child health and nutrition⁶, and is also manifested in school absences of young women and girls due to limited access to menstrual hygiene.

Climate change, by increasing the number and scale of natural disasters, has a growing and significant impact on WASH. This can be illustrated, for example, by the contamination of drinking water sources during flooding, the increased use of unsafe water sources during droughts and climate-induced migration, and an increase in vectors for water-related diseases such as malaria. Vulnerable people are particularly susceptible. Additionally, rapid population growth adds to pressure on natural resources, affecting water availability and accessibility.⁷ Equitable access to adequate, safe and affordable water and sanitation is critical in the face of such challenges and escalating needs. The strong causal link between poor WASH conditions and malnutrition calls for cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration to ensure that WASH is mainstreamed in policies to improve populations' nutritional status and integrate nutrition outcomes in the design and targeting of WASH interventions.

⁵ EED is a syndrome of inflammation, reduced absorptive capacity and reduced barrier function in the small intestine.

⁶ European Union. Gender Action Plan III.

⁷ European Commission DG ECHO, 2014. DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document No. 2. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. Meeting the challenge of rapidly increasing humanitarian needs in WASH.

The European Union

As outlined in its Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, the EU is committed to these rights as components of the right to an adequate standard of living. Recognition of WASH's role in improving development, health and nutrition outcomes has led to its rapid growth as a sector in the field of development cooperation and action⁸. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted still further the critical role of safe water, sanitation and waste management and hygienic conditions in protecting human health. Safe access to water and good hygiene

practices are fundamental to protect vulnerable populations at high risk of contracting the disease. This is why integrating WASH into nutrition programmes or coordinating efforts to increase access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and services in nutrition programme areas could be key in mitigating the multiple negative effects of the pandemic. In fact, the inclusion of WASH measures is a key part of the EU's global response to the pandemic.

Strategies to support nutrition-sensitive WASH

WASH interventions can be leveraged to maximise their contribution to improved nutrition outcomes, through the incorporation of specific nutrition goals and objectives.



Support nutrition-sensitive WASH interventions

- **Prioritise WASH actions for nutritionally vulnerable populations.** Nutrition survey data could be used to identify and prioritise regions/districts/communities and/or households for intervention.
- **Provide integrated WASH-nutrition activities in institutional settings such as healthcare facilities and schools.** Use institutional settings such as schools, early childhood development centres, maternity wards and healthcare facilities as entry points for integrated programmes.

Interventions that address poor hygiene practices through:

- **Social and behaviour change communication strategies.** Behavioural change interventions are central to both WASH and nutrition programmes. Collaboration, joint targeting, convergence of activities and coherence of messaging between these two sectors can enhance effectiveness and coverage while pooling expertise and resources.

Interventions that improve access to safe water through:

- **Investment in WASH service delivery and infrastructure.** Improve and protect drinking water through water treatment and safe storage or by improving water sources to protect them from external contamination. Improved water sources include piped domestic water on-site or shared, public taps in venues such as markets, schools or clinics, treated boreholes with protected wells, protected springs and rainwater harvesting systems.

Interventions that improve the sanitary environment through:

- **Investment in WASH service delivery and infrastructure.** Improved sanitation facilities are those that hygienically separate human excreta from human contact and include flush or pour-flush toilets to piped sewer systems, septic tanks or pits, ventilated improved pit latrines, pit latrines with slabs and composting toilets.
- **Investment in solid waste management practices, service delivery and infrastructure.** Solid waste management involves the collection and management of solid material, including animal waste, from domestic activity (food preparation), commercial (local business, agriculture) or industrial (large-scale agriculture, mining ...) settings and ranges from household-level practices to community-based programmes, municipal collection facilities and industrial protocols and government regulations. Solid waste management not only prevents contamination of soil and water but also limits the environments conducive for disease vectors such as insects and rodents.
- **Support good WASH practices in food and agricultural systems.** Reducing animal waste contamination in the community is a very specific and important aspect of solid waste management which is essential to protect infants and young children from ingesting pathogens at a critical growth and developmental stage. It is important to separate water resources for humans from those for animals, particularly in communities that depend significantly on livestock for their livelihoods. Livestock may be kept in separate areas from where children play to reduce animal faecal exposure.

⁸ The Sphere Minimum Standards for WASH are a practical expression of the right to access water and sanitation in humanitarian contexts. Further information on the standards (hygiene promotion, water supply, excreta disposal, vector control, solid waste management, drainage) are available at <https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch006>.



Ensure that an integrated approach to WASH and nutrition is a fundamental element of planning, strategies and policies for nutrition

- **Support national and local governments to ensure policies and financing can be mobilised to strengthen WASH and nutrition coordination and collaboration.** A comprehensive set of WASH interventions should be incorporated into any national (or sub-national) plan of action for nutrition. Relevant ministries/departments (for example, water, environment, sanitation, etc.) should be involved in the design of these plans and their implementation.
- **Prioritise and consult women and girls.** The provision of WASH facilities and services within households, healthcare facilities and/or schools can facilitate the participation of women and girls in education and/or employment, reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based marginalisation or even violence, and through this empowerment improve child health and nutritional status⁹.
- **WASH sector requirements to improve child development outcomes.** Three main concepts/approaches are emerging as relevant for tackling WASH in a more comprehensive way for child development outcomes: 'Transformative WASH'; 'One Health'; and 'Baby WASH' (Figure 2). These three concepts have distinct considerations. Baby WASH is a set of interventions and approaches to target the WASH needs of young children; One Health is an approach that tackles animal, environmental and human health jointly, and Transformative WASH is an aspiration for comprehensive WASH services and practices that minimise environmental contamination and pathogen transmission¹⁰.
- **Ensure geographical and programmatic integration of WASH and nutrition programmes** by, for example, focusing on areas with lowest WASH access and high undernutrition prevalence.

Figure 2: The interrelatedness of Baby WASH, Transformative WASH and One Health



Source: Nossal Institute for Global Health (Frontiers of Sanitation, November 2021)



Support capacity strengthening in the delivery of nutrition-sensitive WASH

- **Strengthen the capacity** of frontline health and agriculture extension, teachers and caregivers in the intersection between health, agriculture, nutrition education and WASH.
- **Integrate nutrition and WASH** into relevant higher education and technical and vocational education and training curricula and programmes.
- **Integrate nutrition and WASH modules into tertiary education for extension workers** (especially agriculture, health and WASH, including community-based delivery of interventions).

9 WaterAid Canada, 2019. [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene – a pathway to realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls](#).

10 *Frontiers of sanitation*, Issue 19, November 2021. 'Sanitation, Hygiene and Environmental Cleanliness for Child Development'. Alison Macintyre and Clare Strachan (Nossal Institute for Global Health, The University of Melbourne).



Support monitoring and evaluation, research and learning

- **Establish indicators for nutrition-sensitive WASH interventions**, to reinforce co-responsibility of participants of different sectors, and coherence in approaches¹¹.
- **Incorporate research, including operational research**, into design and planning of nutrition-sensitive WASH programmes.
- **Document programmatic experience and share lessons nationally, regionally and globally**. Consider partnerships such as the joint Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) to share learning and facilitate country-level collaborations.



Further information and support

- [Nutrition-WASH Toolkit – guide for practical joint actions](#), UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2016.
- [2 + 6 = 17 – linking WASH and nutrition – a blueprint for living – SDG 17](#), German WASH Network, 2017.
- Council of the European Union, 2019. EU Human Rights Guidelines on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. [st10145-en19.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)
- WaterAid, SHARE, ACF, 2017. [The recipe for success](#): how policy-makers can integrate water, sanitation and hygiene into actions to end malnutrition.
- ACF, WaterAid, 2019. Practical pathways to integrate nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene. [practical-pathways-to-integrate-nutrition-and-water-sanitation-and-hygiene.pdf \(wateraid.org\)](#)
- The Council Conclusion on EU Water Diplomacy (2018).
- EU Tool-box: A rights-based approach, encompassing all human rights for EU development cooperation (2014).
- European Commission: DG ECHO Thematic Policy Document no 2 “Water, Sanitation and Hygiene – Meeting the challenges of rapidly increasing humanitarian needs in WASH”, May 2014.
- Dangour, A.D., et al., 2013. Interventions to improve water quality and supply, sanitation and hygiene practices, and their effects on the nutritional status of children. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013(8).
- UNICEF, 2018. Gender and WASH. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/gender/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash/>
- Prendergast, A.J., et al., 2019. Putting the « A » into WASH: a call for integrated management of water, animals, sanitation, and hygiene. The Lancet 3(8), E336-E337.
- WASH in Schools. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/water-and-sanitation/wash-in-schools/>
- Macintyre, A and Strachan, C. (2021) ‘Sanitation, Hygiene and Environmental Cleanliness for Child Development’ Frontiers of Sanitation: Innovations and Insights 19, Brighton IDS. [Frontiers19_HealthChildDevelopment-FINAL.pdf \(ids.ac.uk\)](#)

Relevant EU-funded actions that represent case studies for WASH and nutrition.

- PROMOVE-Nutrição, Mozambique
- [Rural Village Water Resources Management Project](#), Nepal.

The project without a link can be studied further in the annex of the [6th Progress Report on the Action Plan on Nutrition](#).

The new OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) policy marker on nutrition was approved by the DAC for official development assistance reporting in 2019 with the support of the European Commission and Member States. According to this marker, ‘a project should be identified as nutrition related when it is intended to address the immediate or underlying determinants of malnutrition.’ An [OECD-DAC Nutrition Policy Marker Handbook](#) is available.

The EU is a global leader in promoting gender equality as a key political objective of its external action and common foreign policy, aimed at accelerating progress towards the SDGs. By 2025, 85% of new EU actions should contribute to achieving the objective of gender equality and women’s empowerment, with more actions including it as a main objective. Please refer to [Quick Tips: Nutrition, gender equality and women’s empowerment](#).

¹¹ EU Nutrition Causal Framework (pending revision in 2022).

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