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CASE STUDY

The Evolution of Emergency WASH in Humanitarian Action

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Executive Summary

An emergency WASH gap exists – there is little disagreement on this point within the humanitarian sector. There is a paucity of emergency WASH capacity, but a surplus of complacency. This report provides an overview of both historical trends and current challenges in emergency WASH programming. Some ways forward are suggested and can be summarised as three key take-home points.

The first is that, as much as possible, organisations should not work in silos – this will solidify the problem. Tensions remain between emergency and development-focused strategies and perspectives. More actors need to be encouraged and supported to work in the emergency phase, and emergency actors must be more open to handing over sustainable programmes. The second point follows from this – the transition from the emergency phase to longer-term programming is the weak link between the silos, and both ends have the responsibility to build bridges. This is partly a clash of approaches, but also a structural problem with how the humanitarian system has developed, a system which has become polarised. And third, technical capacity needs boosting. This relates to human resources, research and support functions – within organisations and between peers. Urban WASH needs, as well as the link between WASH programming and health outcomes, deserve special research attention.

The populations living amidst humanitarian crises deserve WASH assistance. The current humanitarian system is not fit for purpose to provide it. This situation must be addressed and the emergency WASH gap closed.

Introduction

This research has focused on emergency WASH programming – that is, the very first period of an intervention. It is in this initial period where the emergency gap is most pronounced

The MSF OCBA Emergency Gap project aims to unpack the drivers of the loss of emergency response capacity in the traditional humanitarian system, by analysing the enablers and obstacles to provision of effective assistance in the acute phase of conflicts. This study reflects on one specific aspect of humanitarian assistance, that of emergency WASH¹ programming.

In many humanitarian contexts, MSF has expanded its operational scope to include WASH activities in the absence of other actors willing or capable of implementing such programming. MSF implements a WASH strategy that commits the organisation to intervening with water and sanitation programmes in the first three to six months of a humanitarian crisis, if other WASH actors are not present or able to engage in emergency WASH programming. The exit strategy is to hand over programmes to organisations with a longer-term perspective at the end of the initial emergency phase. The goal is to hand over programmes in a state that is easily sustainable. It should be emphasised that this research has focused on emergency WASH programming – that is, the very first period of an intervention. It is in this initial period where the emergency gap is most pronounced.

The overall purpose of the study was to conduct a retrospective analysis of how emergency WASH programming has evolved in the broader humanitarian system generally, so as to better understand the current emergency WASH challenges in the humanitarian sector. There were three specific objectives. First, to understand how the humanitarian sector has arrived at the point where there is a gap in emergency WASH capacity, and why and how did this gap emerge? Second, to analyse the current emergency WASH gap. And third, to set out the ambitions – within MSF and the sector as a whole – to fill this gap.

The research for this study constituted three parts. First, interviews were conducted with WASH experts at IFRC, ICRC, UNHCR, UNICEF (the WASH Cluster lead), Oxfam, Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), Solidarites, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and ECHO. Second, discussions were held with MSF personnel (from all five operational centres). And third, a literature review was conducted. The literature review included examination of policy documents from Solidarities, ACF, IRC, WSUP, The Global Sanitation and Water Initiative

¹ The acronym 'WASH' stands for water, sanitation, and hygiene, and is the most common way of referring to such activities in the humanitarian sector.

(GSWI), the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS), and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). It should be mentioned that there is a paucity of literature tracing the historical development of emergency WASH programming. In addition, data collected by Cecile Renaudin for an internal MSF water and sanitation working group on MSF's WASH capacity was reviewed, and this included additional information from interviews with staff at World Vision, Acted and ACF. Finally, as a former WASH specialist myself, my own reflections on developments in the sector in the 1990s were included in this analysis.

This report is comprised of three parts. The first part briefly reviews the emergence of the emergency WASH gap, by tracing milestones in the development of WASH programming in the humanitarian sector since the late 1980s. These historical developments of policy and practice are then analysed, and discussed as enablers and obstacles to the provision of emergency WASH programming. The second part describes current WASH capacity and challenges in the humanitarian sector. Finally, the third part explores ways to meet these challenges.

There may be debate about how to move forward, but conclusions about what has gone on in the past and where we stand now are broadly uncontroversial

In the presentation of findings, it should be noted that there was near consensus in the input provided by the respondents and in the literature. There may be debate about how to move forward, but conclusions about what has gone on in the past and where we stand now are broadly uncontroversial. This review is a summary of the research findings and does not go into details of the experiences of individual agencies; rather, it explores the general mindset in the humanitarian sector.

The emergence of the emergency WASH gap

Much was learned from the Rwandan refugee crisis response about how to provide WASH services to massive refugee camps, where INGOs became responsible for comprehensive service delivery for hundreds of thousands of people

In the 1990s the 'WASH' concept was developed, that is, the grouping together of water, sanitation and hygiene programming

Historical perspective

Based on the expert interviews conducted, this review highlights the most salient milestones since the 1980s related to policy and practice within the humanitarian sector to better understand how current challenges have developed. It should be noted that this historical review is not limited to emergency WASH programming and covers humanitarian WASH programming in general.

As early as 1979, Oxfam introduced water and sanitation-related kits to their programmes in line with an effort to increase technical capacity, and went on to establish a dedicated technical unit in 1984. This was in response to a felt need to improve both technical capacity and support functions. In the 1990s, logistical capacity continued to be increased throughout the sector and much was learned from the Rwandan refugee crisis response about how to provide WASH services to massive refugee camps, where INGOs became responsible for comprehensive service delivery for hundreds of thousands of people.

In the 1990s the 'WASH' concept was developed, that is, the grouping together of water, sanitation and hygiene programming. Although vector control was for a period integrated into standard WASH programming this has since changed. Thus, there was an increased focus placed on hygiene and the 'softer side' of public health engineering. Where the WASH sector had previously been dominated by engineers, now within WASH there was more space for a hygiene-related public health approach. This trend has continued until the present day.

Also in the 1990s, urban WASH issues became more important to humanitarian actors and developed their own trajectory. For the ICRC, major interest in urban needs began with Iraq during the first Gulf War, and then in operations in Lebanon and Gaza. The ICRC has continued to invest in urban WASH programming, but it should be noted that their focus is on water provision. The ICRC will implement emergency sanitation programmes if needed, but that is not their preferred area of intervention. As a comparison, for MSF there was interest in urban issues in the late 1990s, but then it dropped off in the early 2000s. MSF will implement urban interventions if needed, but it has not been a priority and the organisation has not invested substantially in such capacity. However, since the Ebola outbreak response in 2014, urban WASH issues are being put back on the MSF agenda.

Moving into the 2000s, the UN clusters system helped with coordination between WASH actors and the Sphere standards assisted some organisations with accountability, monitoring and evaluation

This focus on a 'development' approach, even in humanitarian programming, has had an impact on reactivity, especially for multi-mandate agencies

Moving into the 2000s, the UN clusters system helped with coordination between WASH actors and the Sphere standards assisted some organisations with accountability, monitoring and evaluation. The UN clusters have encouraged an integrated strategy which encourages a multi-sectoral approach and one which links together humanitarian and development programming. As part of this, a dominant trend has been the desire to work with, or through, partners. This has aligned with the general trend towards approaches focusing on resilience, localisation, community participation, and the encouragement of sustainability, a more utilitarian approach. This focus on a 'development' approach, even in humanitarian programming, has had an impact on reactivity, especially for multi-mandate agencies. The results of this trend will be discussed further below.

Another common view developed in the last decade is that security challenges have increased and humanitarian contexts have become more complex. It is not for this study to debate this view; other Emergency Gap reports should be consulted for a comprehensive review of the security question.² But it should be mentioned here that the view of increasing insecurity and complexity is a perception, and not one which is applicable to all contexts in equal measure. Regardless, this perception – and the narrative used to justify and frame the argument – has become the working assumption for most organisations. Whether perception or objective reality, insecurity continues to limit the ability of humanitarian organisations to access many contexts.

Throughout the period covered in this review, adequate scientific operational research has also been lacking concerning linkages between WASH programming and health outcomes. It was a common reflection by those interviewed that a proper evidence base is lacking when considering the impact of WASH programming on human health, especially outside the response to outbreaks of diarrhoea. Proper sanitation and the provision of clean water has a wider and more nuanced beneficial impact on human health than is often acknowledged by operational agencies or examined in the scientific literature. The role of WASH programming in public health engineering and medical programming is clearly a gap.³

² See: 'Emergency Gap: Insecurity – Always an Insurmountable Obstacle?', Pete Buth, January 2017. <https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap-papers-aid-environment/emergency-gap-insecurity-always-insurmountable-obstacle>

³ See: 'Editorial: Keeping Sanitation in the International Spotlight', *The Lancet*, vol. 371:1045, 29 March 2008

Certain of these trends can be considered enablers, yet some have been obstacles to the provision of emergency WASH programming

Clearly, developments in logistical and technical capacity and the introduction of kits have had a beneficial impact over the years. This capacity, though, needs constant reinforcement which is resource intensive

In summary, certain of these trends can be considered enablers, yet some have been obstacles to the provision of emergency WASH programming. These categories, reviewed below, are meant to give broad indications about how the above-described trends are considered by the actors interviewed. But, as will be seen, these are not closed sets – enablers do not always enable and obstacles do not always disable action; rather, there are always two sides to the coin.

Enablers and obstacles

Enablers to WASH programming have included improved coordination mechanisms and standards setting. The cluster system has provided a platform for information sharing and coordination, and provides an agency of last resort ultimately responsible for the provision of emergency WASH programming (UNICEF). Coordination mechanisms fail, though, when there are few actors willing or able to provide adequate levels of resources or have the will to intervene in the first few months of a crisis, a view held by all respondents. Coordination should also be led by people with sufficient experience. Coordination can too easily become a forum for resource distribution rather than priority setting.

Related to coordination mechanisms, standards such as the Sphere standards have helped organisations develop those of their own and have improved the sector's monitoring capacity through benchmarking. However, the arguments remain against emphasis being put on meeting 'minimum' standards, rather than on striving for ever better quality. In many contexts, it should be noted, even the minimum standards are not met and it should not be assumed that the presence of standards equates to adequate humanitarian assistance in emergency situations. A focus on quantity can also mask inadequacies in quality. Water trucking is a good example – sometimes the focus is on quantity in order to meet targets but without considering the quality of the water delivered.

Clearly, developments in logistical and technical capacity and the introduction of kits have had a beneficial impact over the years. This capacity, though, needs constant reinforcement which is resource intensive. Organisations must maintain a certain level of engagement with WASH programming to retain response capacity and expertise. This applies to political will, to human resources and to technical support capacity.⁴

⁴ See: 'Gap Analysis in Emergency Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion', Andy Bastable and Lucy Russell, ELRHA, July 2013

To many external actors, the perception of increasing insecurity has created a prohibitive environment for action

The biggest set of obstacles relate to the negative consequences of focusing on the 'development' side of WASH programming

Many of the trends described above have clearly been obstacles to the provision of emergency WASH interventions. Obstacles include insecurity, increased complexity of crises and interventions, and the policy emphasis on the development approach.

To many external actors, the perception of increasing insecurity has created a prohibitive environment for action. Yet it is widely viewed that risk aversion has also increased within agencies.⁵ The message from many actors is that increasingly humanitarian crises have become too dangerous to allow the implementation of emergency WASH interventions. Directly related to this is the perception that humanitarian emergencies have become so complex that traditional types of humanitarian interventions are no longer feasible. Some actors wonder if they are capable of intervening in such complex political environments. A valuable question to ask, however, is how much this perception is valid and how often insecurity is used as an excuse not to intervene or as a justification for lack of reactivity. Not all contexts are highly insecure contexts, yet a lack of reactivity pervades most types of crises. Also, past crises, such as the Great Lakes and the Balkans of the 1990s, were also highly insecure and thus insecurity is not a new phenomenon.

The biggest set of obstacles relate to the negative consequences of focusing on the 'development' side of WASH programming. This approach has led to several strategies evolving. One is to increasingly ground programmes in a participatory approach rather than the direct payment of labour by organisations. A second is to put less emphasis on infrastructure construction or development. And a third is to put emphasis on working with and through local partners. A development approach has progressively taken over WASH activities. It should be noted that this is not a negative judgement of these approaches, but a critique of their role and function in emergency WASH programming.

Finally, a few words about how MSF has differed in responding to these trends. MSF has remained short-term focused and not supportive of development/longer-term intervention strategies. Most importantly, immediate disease control and life-saving activities have remained the priority. The result has been less concern for the size and complexity of infrastructure constructed – sustainability has not been the

⁵ See: 'To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments', UNOCHA, 2011



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What this general review has shown is that there has emerged a polarisation of approaches in the humanitarian sector related to how these enablers and obstacles have been managed

primary criteria used in programme decisions, nor has cost efficiency. MSF often uses directly paid staff instead of utilising a participatory approach.

What this general review has shown is that there has emerged a polarisation of approaches in the humanitarian sector related to how these enablers and obstacles have been managed. Each organisation has supported the development of enablers and confronted the challenges of the obstacles in their own way. It is not for this review to delve into the specifics of individual agencies, but to use these themes as a starting point to come to grips with the current emergency WASH capacity gap within the humanitarian sector. The goal is to try to shatter the complacency around these gaps – both structurally and by individual agencies.

Current emergency WASH capacity

There are, in fact, many organisations in the humanitarian sector with the capacity to implement WASH activities

Funding issues also play a role in creating this WASH emergency gap

The above set of trends have contributed to a gap in the ability of the sector to implement emergency WASH programming, especially at the very start of an emergency – within the first three months. The current environment can be characterised through the examination of three statements.

1. There are not fewer WASH actors, but they are less able to intervene in emergencies.

There are, in fact, many organisations in the humanitarian sector with the capacity to implement WASH activities. The question is whether this capacity can be utilised in complex humanitarian emergencies, especially in insecure contexts. There was a clear consensus by all respondents that the answer is negative – fewer organisations are willing or able to respond in the first three months of an emergency.

As discussed above, the perception of increasing insecurity has had a pernicious effect on how many organisations approach insecure contexts, and has expanded the number of contexts which are perceived to be insecure. Regardless of the truth of the matter as to how much security has actually worsened for humanitarian organisations, many organisations have lost their ability to manage insecurity and have become risk adverse. Once this capacity has been lost it is difficult for an organisation to regain such capacity – it requires sustained structural support and investment.

Funding issues also play a role in creating this WASH emergency gap. Humanitarian organisations that are dependent on institutional donor funding must wait for funding to arrive before commencing operations. Therefore, it is difficult for most organisations to react to the initial phases of emergencies. Clearly, there is a structural issue in humanitarian financing that must be addressed.⁶ Donors, however, turn the question back to INGOs and ask why they are not themselves more reactive. Organisations must also analyse their own limitations. Reactivity starts from within – it is not only about waiting for funding, it is also about the ability and willingness of organisations to be reactive, adaptable and flexible. It is about mindset. The quicker an organisation can organise itself, the quicker it can obtain the necessary resources to start implementing programmes.

⁶ See: 'Humanitarian financing: is it all about money?', Velina Stoianova, April 2017. https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap/humanitarian_financing_is_it_all_about_money

A lack of technical capacity also pervades the sector

A lack of technical capacity also pervades the sector. Even with the will to intervene and the funding, if an organisation does not have the technical competency to implement quality programming, then the results will not be to the benefit of the populations. Again, if organisations do not have ongoing engagement with emergency operations it is difficult to retain capacity. This applies for both human resources and support functions. Water trucking especially has been routinely criticised as an overused and expensive response option that is implemented poorly and is difficult to hand over.

The development agenda of many organisations is also a major factor and will be discussed below.

The development approach implies sustainability, community participation, resilience, working with local partners and localisation, amongst other approaches

2. The development approach does not always align with the emergency response approach.

The development approach implies sustainability, community participation, resilience, working with local partners and localisation, amongst other approaches. In this approach, the 'soft' side is as important as the logistical and infrastructure development side. Again, this is not a criticism of this approach, as in a development context this general approach has many advantages, and community engagement in the very early stages of an emergency can make a positive contribution to sanitation programming. The point is that this focus has created a situation where WASH actors, multi-mandate organisations especially, have geared their activities around a programmatic approach that is not always well suited to emergency interventions.

Fewer experienced WASH experts are available to implement and oversee field activities in emergency situations

This situation has lessened the technical and logistical capacity within the sector to respond to emergencies. Fewer experienced WASH experts are available to implement and oversee field activities in emergency situations. Fewer organisations have the ready capacity to respond to, or even take over, WASH activities in the emergency phase of a crisis. This is partly a result of the different approaches taken and the cost and complexity of emergency operations. The lack of field experience has created its own gap in capacity to understand conflict dynamics. Capacity and programme design follow the general policy trends within the sector, which is clearly away from emergency response.



3. Every organisation uses its own lens.

All organisations see WASH activities through their own lenses: WASH activities in support of nutrition programming; WASH activities as part of a longer-term and sustainable programming objective; WASH activities as a variable in balancing preventive and curative services; WASH programming as part of a response to a specific vulnerable group, such as children; or WASH activities as a form of protection. MSF, of course, implements WASH activities in support of disease control and as one type of emergency life-saving programming.

All organisations see WASH activities through their own lenses

No organisation has as its sole focus the provision of emergency WASH programming

The net result of this situation is that no organisation has as its sole focus the provision of emergency WASH programming. There is a diffusion of responsibility and a mish-mash of actors implementing sometimes overlapping WASH activities.

Ways forward

This section reviews the challenges currently facing the humanitarian sector and reflects on how to move forward. Five themes are explored: the expansion of emergency WASH capacity; tensions between development and emergency approaches; the emergency to longer-term programming transition; human resources and technical capacity building; and research needs.

- **Obviously, emergency WASH capacity needs expansion**

This expansion can either be done through the creation of a specialised WASH actor or, barring this, the capacity of a small set of WASH actors must be developed. A dominant WASH organisation supported by auxiliary WASH agencies with specialised skills may be the best option, but given the current lack of such an actor, a new entity would have to be created, and this would take substantial time.

In the meantime, those organisations which have expressed a desire to develop their WASH capacities should be encouraged and supported. What needs to be developed are internal organisational capacity (e.g. planning, human resources, technical capacity), structural funding mechanisms to quicken funding distribution, and coordination between WASH actors to ensure minimal overlap and lessen gaps. The current situation with a multitude of organisations all doing little bits poorly resourced and coordinated is not the best state of play. Establishing a smaller set of reliable actors with a global reach, each with the capacity to contribute meaningfully, is a worthy ambition.

To facilitate this development, new and innovative ways of sharing know-how, inclusive of human resources and technical and logistical capacity, should be explored. It is not only a question of funding; it is also about encouraging and supporting organisations to turn ambition into reality, through facilitating the sharing of knowledge and capacity, a process MSF itself must work on improving. Again, it is about mindset.

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Differing approaches should be complementary rather than in tension, and need better coordination

The transition period from emergency phase to longer-term programming is a major issue for all WASH actors

- **Tensions between development and emergency approaches must be better managed**

Humanitarian WASH programming is not provided solely in emergencies or by emergency actors. Humanitarian crises often last for many years. Refugee camps, for example, typically remain in existence for more than a decade. Many actors are involved in humanitarian assistance and will use different approaches depending on the situation. This can be both a strength as well as a weakness in times of emergencies. These differing approaches should be complementary rather than in tension, and need better coordination.

The consequences of the development approach on the capacity to implement emergency WASH should be better managed. Currently, localisation (supporting local actors to respond to emergencies rather than depending on international actors) is of special interest in the sector. Some organisations are also concerned with market-based approaches and cash programming as tools to be used in WASH programming. But it is debatable how much these approaches add to emergency responses. There needs to be a teasing out of approaches and those used should be fit for purpose. This is not to say that development approaches are never suitable to emergencies – innovation is good. However, the dominance of one approach should not stop another one from being considered. The goal is to save lives and alleviate suffering by the best means available, and sometime this necessitates a short-term and unsustainable approach.

This situation also points to the need for a better way to manage the transition from emergency to longer-term programming.

- **Difficulties surrounding the transition from emergency to longer-term programming are a major issue to be addressed**

Even with complementarity in approaches, there will always be situations where an emergency actor needs to hand over to a longer-term actor. Within the sector, it is hoped that collective action and coordination may assist with the transition. Transitions are best handled quickly so as not to jeopardise the success of long-term intervention, but also allowing space for immediate problems to be solved.

The transition period from emergency phase to longer-term programming is a major issue for all WASH actors. The sector must figure out how to ensure that emergency responses do not end without a proper and timely handover. Clear exit strategies must be outlined in advance by emergency

actors, and longer-term actors must be more flexible in their approaches to transitions. Even if the emergency gap is filled by the involvement of more WASH actors, without the capacity to smoothly and predictably hand over to longer-term agencies, the humanitarian system is underserving the populations living amidst humanitarian crises.

- **Human resources and technical expertise need boosting throughout the sector**

Increased qualified staff must be made available to implement and oversee field operations that cover both the humanitarian and the development span. It is not enough for experienced people to be involved with HQ- or capital-level support – experienced staff must also be in the field managing operations. Moreover, years of experience are not enough if the type of experience is not relevant to the task at hand. For example, an emergency intervention to provide water to a vulnerable population in a middle-income urban environment will demand a certain type and level of expertise.

Adequate technical expertise is also often lacking in WASH interventions, which affects the quality of programming. This is partly a result of the minor role WASH activities play in many organisations (affecting their support capacity), partly a result of human resources constraints, and partly a result of the lack of investment in research and technical development within the sector. More actors being involved with WASH programming is counter-productive if the quality of their programming is poor.

- **Research needs**

More scientific and operational research should be conducted on the link between WASH programming and health outcomes, such as the linkages between WASH activities and other morbidities besides diarrhoea. Are WASH interventions being used to their full advantage as part of public health programming? Are WASH activities the correct ones, implemented in the proper way? Is the balance between looking at WASH interventions as a logistical activity or as a public health/medical activity correct?

Urban WASH technical capacity within the sector also needs improving. Urban WASH needs are often highly specific and involve a scope and types of interventions different than in rural areas. What is the investment to be made? Urban WASH needs are a growing issue, but the sector has been slow to develop policies and practice. More research and innovation is needed to better prepare the sector for these challenges.

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Is the balance between looking at WASH interventions as a logistical activity or as a public health/medical activity correct?

