

COVID-19 Pandemic Highlights Need for Universal Access to Safe Water and Sanitation

By Joan B. Rose, PhD and Heather Murphy, PhD

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In a nutshell...

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need for universal access to safely managed drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. Acutely aware of a lack of progress toward achieving the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pre-pandemic, and new impediments resulting from the pandemic, innovative projects around the globe can help inspire further actions needed to achieve these goals by 2030.

One of the most consequential aspects of the UN's 2030 Agenda, [“a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity,”](#) is [SDG #6](#), the achievement of universal safely managed drinking water and sanitation by 2030. Access to safe water and sanitation has profound consequences on people's lives, helping to meet related goals, such as “No Poverty” ([SDG #1](#)), “Good Health and Well-being” ([SDG #3](#)), “Quality Education” ([SDG #4](#)), “Gender Equality” ([SDG #5](#)), “Decent Work, Economic Growth” ([SDG #8](#)), and “Sustainable Cities and Communities” ([SDG #11](#)). Given the current COVID-19 pandemic, where does the world stand with respect to achieving globally available safe water and sanitation?

Getting Back on Track

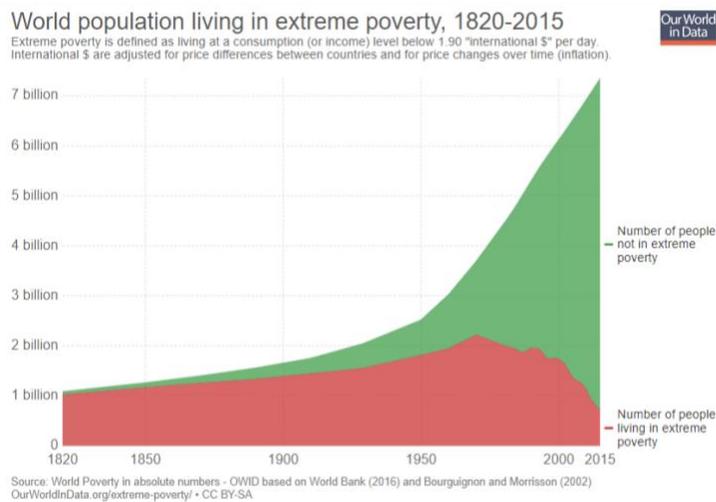
Each of the 17 SDGs is associated with several more detailed targets. The raw truth is that the world *was not on track to meet most of the SDG targets before the pandemic started*. According to [a report](#) on a January 2020 UN-Water meeting, the Chair of the Expert Group on the 2030 Agenda, “noted that most SDG targets are off track and highlighted that action during the next few years will be critical to the 2030 Agenda's success.” In the months following that meeting, global public health was assaulted by a quickly spreading, novel



A safe water project of [Water Engineers for the Americas](#) in Yamaranguila, Honduras includes local residents' help in constructing a drinking water chlorination tank. Photo courtesy of Andrew Robertson, WEFTA

coronavirus. A [World Bank analysis](#) of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic concluded the event could push 71–100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020. This represents roughly a 10% increase in global poverty, unfortunately reversing the decreasing trend from 2 billion to 1 billion people since the mid-1990s (see figure below). It would represent, according to the World Bank, “the first increase in global extreme poverty since 1998, effectively wiping out progress made since 2017.”

The bleak realization pre-pandemic that there was insufficient progress to achieve the 17 SDGs catalyzed the “Decade of Action and Delivery” for sustainable development (2020-2030). Previously, the UN also had declared a [Water Action Decade \(2018-2028\)](#), reinforcing the significance of SDG #6 in achieving so much of the 2030 Agenda.



The Role of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

The pandemic has intensified the need around the world for safely managed drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene. As the [UN webpage on SDG #6](#) notes, “Availability and access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services is fundamental to fighting the virus and preserving the health and well-being of millions.” Hand hygiene, in particular, is critical in the fight against the spread of

COVID-19, yet, as [the World Bank Group reports](#), of the 7.8 billion people in the world, three billion (38%) lack access to clean water and soap. In particular, 47% of schools worldwide lack handwashing facilities with water and soap, a public health liability for some 900 million school-age children. Additionally, in 16% of health care facilities, there are no handwashing facilities in areas where patients receive care or use toilets. The World Bank supports several projects in communities around the globe that would raise awareness of the importance of handwashing while increasing access to handwashing facilities (fixed and portable), soap or alcohol-based hand rubs, and reliable water supplies.

A Global Acceleration Framework

To help highlight actions and projects that will propel us closer to achieving the SDGs, the UN launched a Global Acceleration Framework at the July [High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development](#). As of October 21, there were over 5,200 acceleration actions logged, [70 of which](#) will help achieve SDG #6. One recent action uploaded, for example, describes a [project to be carried out by the Water Engineers for the Americas \(WEFTA\) and World Vision](#) with a \$10,000 grant from the Chlorine Chemistry Foundation, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization established by the American Chemistry Council. The project will, by 2022, provide safe, chlorinated drinking water to over 2,000 people in five rural communities in Honduras on a sustained basis. Residents are required to contribute funding and, according to the uploaded text, “perform the vast majority of the construction labor; in so doing, they learn how the water system works and how to fix it when something goes wrong. This hands-on learning is essential to ensuring the project is properly maintained in the future and will thereby be sustainable

for years to come.” As we know, good water quality is essential for healthful drinking, cooking, washing, bathing, and effective handwashing, especially as household members strive to avoid COVID-19 and other infectious illnesses.

Sharpening Our Focus

Given our high-tech world, it is difficult to comprehend that there are still 2.2 billion people, 28% of the global population, for whom access to safe and abundant drinking water is an unrealized dream. Even more, 4.2 billion people (54%), lack access to safely managed sanitation services. Impressive progress has been made since the [Millennium Development Goals](#) were first introduced in the late 1990s, but many WASH projects accomplished using typical engineering solutions, the “low hanging fruit,” have been completed, leaving more complex projects to be addressed. The challenge of meeting our WASH goals grows more difficult the closer we get to completing them, particularly in the face of a pandemic. With that overview, we congratulate the World Bank, WEFTA, World Vision, and the many other dedicated safe water partners working to accelerate achievement of SDG #6 and in doing so, important associated goals. The pandemic has only helped to put the need to achieve these goals in sharper focus.

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