



**OXFAM**  
Australia



# **ACCESS TO DRINKING WATER IN CRISIS SITUATIONS**

The issues behind a fundamental right

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Democratic Republic of Congo: Lumbumba uses an Oxfam hand-washing stand at the Kikumbe camp for internally displaced people.

Photo: Arlette Bashizi/Oxfam.

# INTRODUCTION

Running taps with clean, safe drinking water and working toilets with sinks to wash our hands in. In Australia, they're things we take for granted. Yet millions of people get sick or die each year because they lack these basic necessities.

It's all too easy to forget what a miracle water is. With a ready water supply on tap, food can grow and people can thrive. Water is Life.

For many people, access to water is not just a luxury but an unattainable goal. Ensuring access to drinking water can be a major logistical challenge.

## Unclean water

### An urgent and high-risk health issue

While most people living in economically developed countries can access water by turning on a tap, this ease of access is not so simple for everyone:

- 2.1 billion people (almost a third of the world's population) do not have access to drinking water directly in their homes
- 844 million people have no easy access to safe drinking water due to a combination of factors.

These can include unclean water, poor sanitation and unsafe hygiene practices, which can be exacerbated by drought or distance from water sources. In fact, these issues have claimed more lives over the past century than any other cause.<sup>1</sup> As this dire situation continues in many developing countries, the availability of clean water for all is one of the world's most urgent health issues.

Whether looking at crises in Asia Pacific, Africa, the Middle East or the Mediterranean region, people facing challenges posed by these crises all have one goal in common – meeting their most basic needs of access to clean water and sanitation. Sadly, all too often this turns out to be impossible.

## WHAT IS THE EXTENT OF THE GLOBAL PROBLEM?



**900 MILLION PEOPLE**

**– ONE IN EIGHT –**

**DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER**



**2.6 BILLION PEOPLE**

**LIVE WITHOUT BASIC SANITATION**



**6,000 PEOPLE DIE**

**EACH DAY FROM DISEASES CAUSED BY DIRTY WATER. TRAGICALLY, TWO-THIRDS ARE CHILDREN**

Source: World Health Organization.

1. Australian Red Cross, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/lack-access-clean-water-and-sanitation-worldwide-killer-claiming-millions-lives>

## Oxfam's work

At Oxfam, we believe that everyone should have access to clean water.

From our humanitarian responses, our campaigns and our long-term initiatives to help families improve their incomes, reduce their vulnerability to disasters and defend their rights - water is central to almost every aspect of Oxfam's work.

Working alongside partners on the ground, we are committed to developing innovative, long-term and cost-effective solutions that are tailored to each community's unique needs and can reduce levels of poverty and disease.

Through this work, we are ensuring:

- equitable access to water, which prevents disease and sustains lives and livelihoods;
- reduced environmental health risks by managing sanitation safely and with dignity; and
- communities are involved in managing water and sanitation resources and safe hygiene practices.

## What is WASH?

WASH stands for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. The WASH strategy works on long-term prevention and control measures for improving health, reducing poverty and improving socio-economic development, as well as responding to global emergencies and outbreaks of life-threatening illnesses.



## Clean water reduces poverty

Low income families are particularly affected by the problem of tainted water and lack of sanitation, which reduces access to affordable, nutritious food and limits educational opportunities and work prospects. This is especially so for women and girls, who spend many hours each day fetching water over long distances.

For Oxfam, tackling the root causes of poverty often means working with communities to overcome these water-related injustices. Our WASH programs support long-term collaboration with local communities to come up with sustainable solutions for safe water and sanitation, and to reduce water scarcity.

## Access to water

### A vital and precious resource for the planet

Water is one of our most valuable assets. It is critical to life on the planet and a basic necessity for every living being.

- 97% of the earth's water is oceanic and therefore salty.
- Fresh water represents only 3% of the earth's total water.
- The earth holds 1.4 billion cubic kilometres of water, of which only 42 million cubic kilometres is fresh water.
- Of the total volume of fresh water available on the planet, 77.6% is snow and ice and 21.8% is groundwater. Only 0.6% is surface water.

Water plays a key role in farming and industrial activities, driving economic growth within the global economic system. It is also vital for a healthy ecosystem. Water is closely linked with almost all of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. These goals were adopted in 2015 and are "a universal call to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity".<sup>2</sup>

2. <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

## Water as a central resource

Historically, and also today, communities have built their towns and villages near water sources such as rivers and wells. This is because people have always understood how critical it is for their life and livelihood to have ongoing access to safe drinking water.

Water is a key determinant for the health of individuals and communities. Only through access to clean, non-contaminated water will mortality and morbidity be reduced, especially among children, who are the most vulnerable to diseases caused by drinking contaminated water.

School children are often taught about the 'water cycle' and how this remarkable natural resource has the capacity to renew itself. However, this system is not limitless. And water is becoming scarcer for the communities that depend on it the most.

## The dangers of a lack of clean drinking water

An Oxfam study in collaboration with Tufts University in Boston, USA, shows that lack of access to drinking water promotes the spread of bacteria responsible for diseases that cause diarrhoea. In developing countries, 80% of diseases - including diarrhoea, cholera and typhus - are linked to the consumption of dirty or contaminated water.

Each year diarrhoea kills around 525,000 children under five.<sup>3</sup> This is around 10% of all deaths of children in this age group, most in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.



## Women, girls and water collection

Water collection is mostly done by women and children, particularly girls, who devote an average of five hours a day to fetching drinking water. Walking miles to collect water and carrying heavy loads becomes the major activity of the day, severely limiting their ability to attend school or to work. As a result, women and girls all over the world are unable to reach their full potential, which in turn impacts the long-term prosperity of their families and communities.

## Water scarcity and water stress

Water scarcity can be understood as a long-term shortage in water or safe water supplies, while water stress usually refers to a more limited period of shortage.

According to the UN, 844 million people in 43 different countries currently suffer from water scarcity. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 300 million people live in conditions of water scarcity with much of the available water contaminated or unsafe to drink.

3. World Health Organization - <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>

## **"WE FEEL LIKE OUR LIFE IS STARTING AGAIN" AMINA'S STORY**

Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest concentration of water-stressed countries in the world, where the demand for water is much higher than its supply.

Amina, a mother of 12, was forced to leave her home in Ethiopia after the 2017 drought killed her livestock and a cholera outbreak endangered her family.

Oxfam helped Amina by installing a water tap and providing soap, water and shelter materials.

"We feel like our life is starting again," said Amina.



Gunagado camp, Ethiopia: Drought forced Amina and her family to leave their home.

Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam International.

## **WATER SCARCITY – SOME STATISTICS**



**844 MILLION PEOPLE IN  
43 COUNTRIES**

**CURRENTLY EXPERIENCE  
WATER SCARCITY EVERY DAY**



**115 PEOPLE DIE  
EVERY HOUR**

**IN AFRICA FROM ILLNESSES  
LINKED TO POOR SANITATION  
OR HYGIENE, OR BY DRINKING  
CONTAMINATED WATER**



**BY 2030,  
700 MILLION PEOPLE  
COULD BE DISPLACED BY  
WATER SCARCITY**

Source: United Nations

## WASH in national emergencies

Thanks to our wonderful supporters, Oxfam has become a global leader in WASH projects. Our projects integrate sustainable and local innovation to meet the needs of the most affected people in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas. Our work encompasses responses to public health emergencies in humanitarian crises.

WASH programs are a critical component of Oxfam's response to disasters like earthquakes, floods, tropical cyclones and hurricanes, as well as disease outbreaks like cholera, Ebola and COVID-19; slow onset emergencies such as drought; conflict crises; and even urban slums.

After a disaster, people are often traumatised, hungry, dehydrated and exhausted, and as a result more prone to diseases. Oxfam WASH teams work with communities to reduce public health risks and ensure the safety and dignity of communities affected by emergencies.

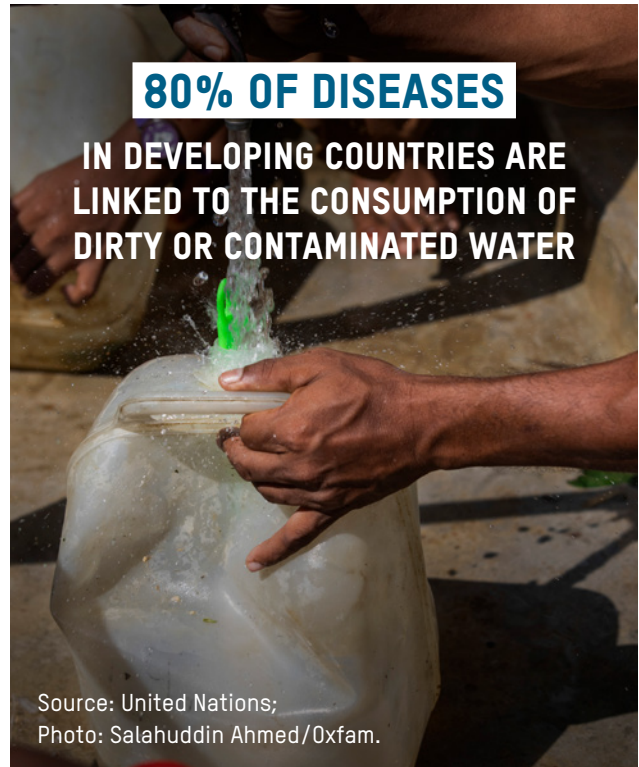
By providing clean water, an environment free from contamination from faeces, and knowledge of good hygiene practices, WASH activities reduce exposure to transmissible diseases. We particularly work with local communities to find solutions that are most appropriate to their context and situation.

### How do we work?



#### Supply of drinking water

The rapid supply of drinking water to affected populations is vital. Oxfam transports water by tanker trucks at the beginning of an emergency response and sets to work repairing and constructing boreholes, wells, spring catchments, treatment plants and water distribution networks. Oxfam can also collect and store water safely, ensuring there are facilities for showering and washing clothes.



#### Safe disposal of waste and faeces

Effective disposal of faeces is the first hurdle in reducing the transmission of diseases that cause diarrhoea. Oxfam supports the construction and rehabilitation of latrines in schools and health centres, as well as in camps for internally displaced people that accommodate people who flee to safety while remaining in their own country. Oxfam WASH teams work with communities towards long-term sustainability.



#### Solid waste management, drainage and pest control

Poor waste management contaminates water sources and creates mosquito breeding sites. Oxfam works with communities to improve the collection and management of waste, fix drainage to avoid stagnant water and promote clean-up campaigns.



#### Raising awareness of public health risks and preventive practices

To be effective, public health messaging must be adapted to the language and cultural contexts of local communities. Raising awareness through culturally appropriate means of communication is vital.



## Community mobilisation

To have the greatest impact, it's vital that the communities affected are part of the solution. Oxfam works with local agencies and communities from the beginning of the decision-making process. This helps communities drive the long-term changes they need to improve health outcomes and build better lives for themselves.



## Distribution of essential health and hygiene items

During crisis situations, hygiene kits help keep people healthy. They can include soap, hand-washing facilities, containers of clean water, washing powder and sanitary napkins.



## How you can make a difference

Unsafe water, poor sanitation and poor hygiene practices have led to more deaths over the past century than any other cause, and in many countries nothing has changed.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the world's most pressing health issues.

Oxfam relies on the support of passionate individuals around the world to ensure equal access to clean water, allowing us to intervene quickly and to prevent an emergency situation from becoming a tragic health crisis. This generosity enables us to implement sustainable solutions that can effectively reduce poverty and disease.

## Menstrual hygiene needs in emergencies: hygiene kits

Unfortunately, menstrual hygiene is not always given enough attention in many girls' education programs, and women and girls frequently feel too embarrassed to discuss female hygiene with aid workers. In some parts of the world, menstruation is a taboo subject. During menstruation, women and girls can be impacted by several days of reduced mobility, shame, physical discomfort and the disruption of essential daily activities, as well as health and safety risks. It is important to approach discussions around menstrual hygiene sensitively and to make sure female public health workers are part of the conversation.

Menstrual hygiene needs in emergencies are an essential component of Oxfam's WASH programs. To properly respond to the needs of women and girls, public health messaging needs to be culturally appropriate. Oxfam teams understand the importance of good, basic education in menstrual hygiene, access to menstrual materials such as sanitary napkins, cloths and underwear, as well as clean water and sanitation facilities.

This basic and fundamental support for women's and girls' hygiene also makes it possible to address other important issues, such as gender equality, women's participation, dignity and privacy.

4. Australian Red Cross - <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/lack-access-clean-water-and-sanitation-worldwide-killer-claiming-millions-lives>

## **“I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO LOSE MY LITTLE GIRL” JOANA’S STORY**

In Guatemala, the loss of families’ crops due to the effects of climate change is impacting communities already living in poverty.

As a result, 46.5% of children under five years of age live with chronic malnutrition – the highest prevalence in Latin America and the sixth highest in the world. In 2019, 1.3 million people required food assistance.

In Quebrada Seca, Jocotan – one of the driest areas in the district – a lack of rain means water is scarce. Villagers must dig in the ground near small puddles in the canyon to get their water for drinking, laundry, washing and cooking.

Joana lives here with her husband and three children, in a house built with plantain leaves and wood. Her daughter suffered from severe malnutrition and was hospitalised for 15 days.

“If you have money, you do well, but if you don’t, you suffer and struggle to find just enough food for your children,” Joana said.

Jocotan, Guatemala: Joana and her daughter, at home.

Photo: Pablo Tosco/Oxfam Intermón.



# OXFAM'S WASH ACTIONS IN THE FIELD

Access to drinking water is essential for combating the spread of epidemics. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam teams implemented WASH programs across the Pacific.

- In **Papua New Guinea & Solomon Islands** our COVID-19 response included improving communities' access to WASH. We paid particular attention to women, children and people living with disabilities.
- In **Fiji**, we worked closely with partners to amplify public health messaging and distribute hygiene kits.
- In **Papua New Guinea**, we increased our hygiene awareness work and scaled up delivery of clean water, soap and sanitation supplies.
- In **Timor-Leste**, a specially approved cargo plane delivered hundreds of hand-washing kits and public health information packs.
- In **Vanuatu**, we worked with our local partner organisations to identify locally appropriate ways to share COVID-19 preparedness messages.
- In **Indonesia**, we distributed hygiene kits, installed public hand-washing facilities, and provided clean water by restoring or protecting existing water sources.

At any given time, hundreds of Oxfam workers are setting up WASH programs to support people across the world, enabling access to drinking water and dignified hygiene conditions.

These workers include our water engineers, who provide large-scale water supplies and disease-preventing sanitation facilities to millions of people, even in the most challenging environments.



Oecusse, Timor-Leste: Paulino helps protect his family and community from COVID-19 by using a new hand-washing station provided by Oxfam in Timor-Leste.

Photo: Freddy Carlos da Cruz/Oxfam in Timor-Leste.

## WASH program innovation across the globe

Washing hands with soap is the most effective way to prevent diarrhoea and respiratory tract infections. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world that the first step in fighting an epidemic is hand washing. However, this requires access to clean water and soap.

Through WASH, Oxfam has introduced a set of minimum standards in all public health programs, including widely available hand-washing facilities at latrines as well as monitoring how well people understand the importance of washing their hands. Oxfam is constantly working to improve water dispensers and washing stations to make them easier to transport – an essential factor in the event of an emergency – as well as being more durable and able to be adapted to different situations.

## Innovation

- Oxfam has developed “contactless” hand-washing stations activated by foot pedals. These have been distributed in the Rohingya refugee camp of Cox’s Bazaar in Bangladesh.
- In South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Oxfam is building the largest drinking water pipeline ever built by an NGO. Although the DRC is one of the most water-rich countries in Africa, millions of people in the country still lack access to safe water. In the highly inaccessible territory of Fizi in the South Kivu region, population growth has put additional pressure on the area’s few water facilities.

## Rapid response

- Rapid response can prevent an emergency from becoming a crisis. A full month after Cyclone Idai swept through southern Africa, Oxfam and its local partner organisations in Mozambique still found thousands of people isolated, cut off from aid or relief. Almost all water sources had been contaminated and latrines destroyed.

Faced with cholera outbreaks in other parts of the country, we knew we had to act quickly to provide clean water to the community. However, given the difficult terrain, it was impossible to transport the water by truck.

Oxfam discovered an ideal solution: LifeSaver canisters are jerry cans that transform the dirtiest water into drinking water by using an integrated hand pump. Both practical and light, the containers are easily transported (in this case by car, canoe and motorbike) to hard-to-reach areas, thus saving lives.

- In September 2018, following the severe earthquake and tsunami that hit the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia, drinking water supply infrastructure was severely damaged. The city of Palu became dependent on tanker trucks which struggled to meet demand.

Oxfam’s water and sanitation team responded to the disaster by installing an innovative and long-term water purifying system that provides a cost-effective solution. SkyHydrant can turn groundwater into drinking water without electricity or chemicals. One unit produces 1,200 litres of drinking water per hour from a well, serving around 500 people per day.



Gentivo, Mozambique: Oxfam and its local partner organisations deliver LifeSaver cubes by motorbike to isolated communities in Mozambique after Cyclone Idai.

Photo: Misozi Tembo/Oxfam.

# WHAT CAN YOU DO TO REDUCE WATER CONSUMPTION?

We often think that it's up to someone else to take action to solve big problems. But the truth is that even small steps by each of us can add up to make a difference.

## Here are some tips:

1. Install flow restrictors on older style taps to lower water consumption.
2. Take a shower rather than a bath and limit your shower time.
3. Turn off the tap while brushing your teeth.
4. Check that there are no leaks or dripping taps.
5. Use a filled basin to wash vegetables and use running water only for the final rinse.
6. Use your washing machine and dishwasher only with a full load.
7. Install rainwater harvesting systems for uses such as car washing and watering.
8. Use a pool cover to prevent evaporation.
9. Replace old household appliances with energy-efficient models. Newer washing machines and dishwashers are able to adjust the amount of water according to the load.
10. Producing a pair of jeans requires more than 8,000 litres of water. Buy second-hand clothes or try to buy new garments only when necessary.
11. Set up a layer of mulch around the trees and plants in your garden to keep the soil moist.
12. Check your water bills to be aware of your consumption.

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