

WATER & SANITATION



Women and children often bear the burden of collecting water in refugee camps; Dakhla, Algeria. © UNHCR/D. Shrestha

Access to water and sanitation is a fundamental human right and are essential to life, health and dignity. Timely and adequate provision of clean water and sanitation services to refugees are of special importance given that they have traditionally faced difficulties in fully exercising their rights and are very prone to exploitation. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2002, Article 2, further elaborated on this and drew specific attention to UNHCR persons of concern and urged state parties to ensure that:

"Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons and returnees have access to adequate drinking water whether they stay in camps or in urban area. ... should be granted the right to water in the same conditions as nationals."

Of equal importance is the provision of adequate sanitation services. Proper disposal of human excreta, garbage, medical waste and waste-water as well as control of vectors of communicable

diseases including mosquitoes, rats, mice and flies is crucial to mitigate health-risks and prevent potential outbreak of diseases. Moreover, optimum benefit from water and sanitation interventions can only be achieved provided that communities and individuals are made aware of the links between inadequate hygiene practices and disease associated with poor water and sanitation services, and accordingly motivate them to change their behavior. UNHCR and its partners must be fully aware of such issues and the consequences of insufficient water and sanitation service provision, which is especially crucial in emergency situations.

Information gathered in the last five years implied that over half of the refugee camps still do not meet the minimum daily water requirement of 20 liters/person/day, over one-fifth of the camps had water supply facilities located beyond the stipulated maximum distance of 200m and almost one-third of the camps do not meet minimum excreta disposal standard, i.e. ≤ 20 persons per latrine. UNHCR through its different monitoring mechanisms continues to assess the level of water and sanitation services and to analyze their impacts on the health and well-being of its persons of concern to enable better planning in these sectors.

Water and sanitation activities are normally capital intensive and therefore significant funds are needed during the initial phase of an emergency. In the case of protracted operations, major rehabilitation of dilapidated infrastructure is also periodically required, besides routine maintenance and operation of the facilities, in the absence of which reliability of system is drastically reduced and quality of the services compromised.

In refugee camps, mostly women and children have to bear the burden of collecting water. Children are often diverted from schools to collect water, thus affecting their academic performance. The long walking distance to collect water and excessive queuing time at water points can have high social costs in the form of lost opportunities for productive works, adversely impacting their health and exposing to potential risks from being attacked or harassed.

UNHCR has made considerable effort in addressing these critical aspects through various measures that have attempted to improve the minimum standard of services and mainstream issues related to gender, age and diversity into our programme. Additional funds secured through private sector and more recently through special initiative of the High Commissioner are already yielding visible impacts in the delivery of water and sanitation services in several operations. This is continuing in 2009 in 17 operations in Africa, Asia and MENA, and is aimed at rehabilitation and/or upgrading of existing water and sanitation facilities, provision of non food items, enhancing technical capacity to monitor and improve quality of services and implementation of hygiene promotion activities.

Global climate change will have even deeper impact on the already vulnerable population like refugees, and will further intensify the situation of displacement and migration, within and beyond the state borders. Climate-induced degradation of fresh water resources, increased in extreme weather events (e.g. floods and droughts), and decline in food production are already having an impact on many of UNHCR's operations across Asia, Africa and MENA regions.

The overall objective of the water and sanitation programmes is to minimize avoidable mortality and morbidity and to minimize the resulting impact on the local environment, including the fresh water. UNHCR has overall responsibility to coordinate and ensure delivery of water and sanitation services in accordance with the international humanitarian standards. In doing so, the Office works closely with partners to plan and implement these activities with active participation of beneficiaries in the planning, monitoring, operation and maintenance of the services.

Key resources:



Guiding Principles and Strategic Plans 2008-2012

UNHCR's guiding principles and five strategic plans for 2008-2012 represent an effort by UNHCR to clearly outline its principles and strategies in the five sectors of HIV and AIDS, malaria control, nutrition and food security, reproductive health, water and sanitation.



Water Manual for Refugee Situations, 1992

The manual explains technical characteristics and functioning of refugee water supply system. (pdf, 0.6Mb)



A Guidance for UNHCR Field Operations on Water and Sanitation Services, 2008 (pdf, Eng 1Mb/Fre 1Mb)

Excreta Disposal in Emergencies, 2007

A field manual for engineers and non-technical staff responsible for sanitation planning, management and intervention in emergencies, this is an inter-agency publication, led by Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), Loughborough University, UK. (pdf, 16.2Mb)

Vector and Pest Control in Refugee Situations, 1997

A joint collaboration between UNHCR and WHO, the manual provides information to vector control personnel focusing on operations in East Africa. (pdf, Eng 4.3Mb/Fre 4.8Mb)

Emergency Water Sources, 1997

The guidelines for assessment, selection and treatment of emergency water sources, this is an inter-agency publication, led by Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), Loughborough University, UK. (pdf, 3.7Mb)

Emergency Sanitation, 2002

The guidelines for assessment and design of emergency sanitation programmes, this is an inter-agency publication, led by Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), Loughborough University, UK. (pdf, 30.3Mb)



Large Ferro-Cement Water Tanks – Design Parameters and Construction Details, 2006 (pdf, 1.1Mb)

Guidelines for Selecting and using Disinfectants, 1997 (pdf, Eng 0.2Mb/Fre 2.2Mb)

Related websites:

The WELL resource centre for water, sanitation and environmental health: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/well/index.htm>

The IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre:
<http://www.irc.nl/docsearch/search>

Environmental Health at USAID: <http://www.ehproject.org/>

The World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org/watsan/>

SKAT- Swiss Resources Centre and Consultancies for Development:
http://www.skat.ch/publications/prarticle_view

GTZ: <http://www2.gtz.de/ecosan/english/links-international.htm>

WHO – Water, Sanitation & Health
http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/en/

UNICEF – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
<http://www.unicef.org/wes/index.html>

IASC - Global WASH Cluster
<http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Default.aspx?tabid=76>