

Dalberg

WASH & COVID-19 in India: Risks & Opportunities

**Outcomes of the Online Roundtable by ISC & Dalberg
April 2020**

The challenge: COVID-19 & INDIA

The spread of the novel coronavirus has been an unexpected but crippling phenomenon globally with more than 1.2 million cases and 69,000+ deaths as of 6th April 2020¹. The number of COVID-19 cases crossed 4,300 in India on 6th April 2020 with the death toll rising to 118². Maharashtra is the worst-hit state and has reported 690 coronavirus positive cases, followed by Tamil Nadu at 571³.

Although it is hoped that the spread will get contained with low-no levels of community transmission due to the 21-day nationwide lockdown, if examples of other countries provide guidance, it is quite likely that India might slip into community transmission (at least limited) soon.

Coronavirus is thus likely to have crippling effects on health systems, the economic system, as well as the “development sector” across different SDG verticals such as water, sanitation, nutrition, agriculture, education, etc. within India. Comparisons have already been made to the effects of the Second World War or the Great Depression of 1929-1930 by very credible voices including the PM and industry leaders.

The current levels of risk, the anticipation of much worse to come, the uncertainty around both the extent and timelines for the situation on the one hand and the need to implement measures such as managing social distance, avoid large gatherings, self-quarantining has led to a situation where many development sector organizations have started feeling tangible effects. Programs have been paused, there is uncertainty around planned spending, work from home measures have been introduced, and interaction with grassroots communities is likely to be curtailed if not cut back entirely.

¹ Worldometers

² Business Standard

³ Livemint

The WASH ecosystem faces four categories of risks due to COVID

WASH (or Watsan, WaSH) is an acronym that stands for "water, sanitation, and hygiene" and access to WASH includes safe water, adequate sanitation, and hygiene education.

Sanitation in India has been a key focus area for development activity over the last few years on the back of programs such as SBM. There has been a slew of public and private initiatives put in place including incenting the construction of toilets, improving access to finance, behavior change campaigns, protecting sanitation worker rights, better private sector engagement, handwashing with soap, waste management, policy development at both the Centre and the State levels. After India accomplished, formally, most of its coverage goals last year, the focus within sanitation has been gradually shifting to ODF+ outcomes which have important activities such as community engagement, behavior change drives. Programs that protect sanitation workers have also seen an uptick.

However, sanitation, water, and hygiene-related programs and services have a high instance of human interaction and face four categories of COVID-related risks outlined below:

- **COVID-related health risks:** Given the nature of work, frontline workers come close to hundreds of people. Without proper protective gear, there is a risk of infection of the workers working on sanitation programs and of transmission to the community. Even office employees might have faced the disease themselves or have close family members and families with them.
- **Service delivery risks:** There exists a risk of organizations not being able to provide WASH services due to lockdowns and fear of the spread of COVID. This may lead to a reduction or complete shutdown of critical WASH services provided to both urban and rural communities in India.
- **Operational disruptions and risks:** Organizations may witness a breakage of backward and forward linkages, which will affect their ability to provide services. For example, with an increased risk of infection, organizations may face high absenteeism of employees if the employees become ill with the virus or have to care for someone else who is ill or have their schedules affected by childcare needs due to school and daycare closures.
- **Funding risks for service providers:** Donors, funders and governments are triaging resources away from WASH to COVID response which could lead to uncertainty around future resources as well as models that rely on revenue from customers. This may happen as several individuals may be unable to pay for services, and the demand from industries may reduce. Additionally, there is a risk of reduced financing from donors and philanthropies as funds may be redirected towards COVID related initiatives.

Objectives & Structure of The Dalberg-ISC COVID-WASH Online Roundtable

The ISC-Dalberg online roundtable was seeking to get perspectives from WASH leaders across the country around COVID-related effects within the WASH sector. The two-hour roundtable was divided into three segments:

- **Segment 1:** COVID-related effects being experienced by organizations and programs and reactive measures being put in place by organizations
- **Segment 2:** Anticipated scenarios of COVID over the next 1-6 months and what it might mean for the sector
- **Segment 3:** Suggestions/recommendations for initiatives that could be put in place within India to make sure that essential WASH services and programming continue while minimizing health risks

Through the roundtable, we hoped to create an open space for dialogue and potential collaboration and the discussion focused on different categories of challenges including WASH service delivery risks, financing and resource risks, operational risks, and health risks for people.

Anecdotes & Points of View

All the organizations seemed to be facing challenges due to COVID ranging from budget reallocations away from WASH for funders to programs being put on pause for implementing partners. Also, most participants agreed that the WASH-COVID connection was not being given due attention and that crucial resources were being diverted away.

There were varying opinions on how COVID would impact projects long term

Participants agreed that a slowdown in WASH progress was inevitable, but the burning worry was related to the availability of resources for on-ground implementation. Participants also voiced the need to recalibrate program design for a COVID world. They also pointed to a need for greater innovative thinking and efficiency in WASH programs.

The figure below captures some statements shared by participants.

How do you think this will impact your projects long term?

Mentimeter

Expecting the reduction on the cash flow in the economy and it will affect the projects. But it will be better when it comes to normal condition.

it will change the way we work: Innovative thinking in resource constraints context, emergency response planning, multi-sectoral coordination with livelihoods, health, financial services, will be the need of the hour.

It will lead to delays and certain projects will need to be recalibrated

The financial resources challenge will be the biggest deterrent to take forward projects. The interconnect between WASH and Covid is not well understood neither at the government or corporate level and hence focus on WSH is minimal.

1.lack of funds so strategies spends to get maxm impact, development work will stop 2.no new projects or scaling up , just maintain the multi year projects 3. convergence from govt will reduce 4. NGO growth and development will reduce

It will definitely slowdown the overall progress, but the major concern is availability of resources to continue the ground level interventions.

These are challenging times that will require strategic thinking and my sense is we will come up with more innovative and impactful work.

I am foreseeing a greater focus on WASH interventions than ever before however with a different approach which is more in unison with the core public health initiatives that WASH in isolation

Some other comments made by participants included:

- The importance of ensuring that WASH is seen as a critical component to fight the COVID-19 crisis
- Ensuring good and consistently applied WASH management practices especially in urban slums
- BCC/communication on safety measures related to water-handling & sanitation in multiple languages
- Researching impact on groundwater resources from a drinking water and agricultural perspective
- Showcasing COVID-proof WASH innovations for urban poor and slum inhabitants
- Ensuring sewage and septage management and surveillance to predict the COVID-19 outbreak
- Initiatives to protect sanitation workers health
- Dashboards & analytics to pinpoint areas of biggest need and the most important impact
- Prioritizing access to safe and secure water for drinking water and hygiene, including at Primary Health Centers
- The need to support groundwater recharge interventions through MGNREGA
- The need to focus on malnutrition, particularly for women and children
- The need to manage proper waste disposal in urban areas.

Outlook

Most participants felt that the COVID situation would get worse for at least 4-6 months before coming back to a new “normal” in about 6-12 months (September 2020 – Q1 2021). This validated the assessment that the “COVID situation” would require prolonged efforts and targeted initiatives to address challenges.

Outcomes of the session: Summary

Diagnosing Challenges

The following problems were identified

- **Resource crunches:** Most participants on the donor side admitted that a) Resources were being diverted to COVID response and because of this, their allocations for WASH were shrinking substantially.
- **Program operations:** Several organizations said that WASH programming had been paused indefinitely in their organizations
- **Staffing morale and risk:** Most organizations had staff members working from home and were finding it a challenge to manage operations due to low levels of remote-working experience and the levels of digitization in the operations
- **Associated risks related to water:** Many participants indicated that with the onset of summers, water supply would reduce significantly and this would not only have effects in terms of access to safe water but would also affect sanitation outcomes and also inhibit behaviors such as handwashing with soap which are deemed critical to managing COVID
- **Associated risks related to nutrition:** Several participants also talked about the link with nutrition due to reduced incomes and access to food
- **Urban slum sanitation and health:** Finally, several participants spoke about how sanitation in urban slums was likely to be a significant challenge in terms of social distancing efforts and how efforts were needed to manage this.

Identifying Solutions

Participants gravitated towards five categories of solutions as indicated below.

- **The setting up of national & state-level multidisciplinary WASH-COVID taskforces** to identify challenges, develop solutions and then support the public, private sector, and philanthropic sector actors in implementing these. Each of these task forces would have sub-taskforces looking at specific categories of issues as outlined below
- **Develop a few high-quality and targeted whitepapers and analyses** looking at financing, capacity building/digitization, water, urban, and behavior change in the time of COVID
- **Potentially developing an emergency WASH fund** to help organizations tide this challenge through a mix of debt and grant instruments

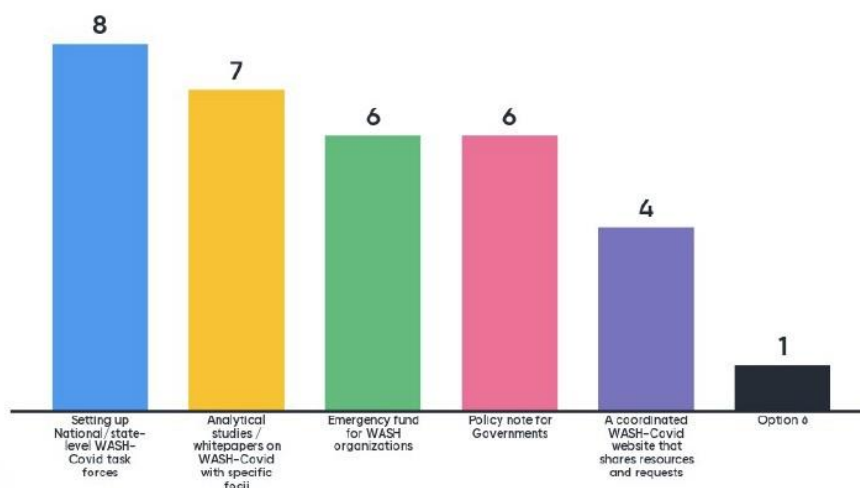
- **A targeted policy note for the Government** to help them address COVID within the WASH sector in both urban and rural
- **A web-portal to collate data, news, and resources for WASH organizations** to help them address the COVID challenge more effectively. As part of this, ISC agreed to create a best- practices document on tackling COVID challenges or sustaining operations in the time of COVID

In addition, two other ideas discussed were:

- Diffusion of WaterAid’s 8-point program for COVID across the ecosystem
- A policy brief for MDWS with recommendations to optimize the use of the PM-Cares Fund for WASH in India

Which of these would be the most useful for the WASH sector in India?

Mentimeter



Task Forces For COVID-WASH in India

The discussion concluded with agreement on the need to institutionalize four sub-taskforces – focusing on Financing, Water, Capacity Building, Behavior Change – enable a coordinated response to COVID for the WASH sector.

The taskforces would be co-anchored by Dalberg & ISC, with participation from other organizations, and would carry out the following kinds of functions.

Research, Analytics, & Strategy

- **Create common knowledge & analytical resources for the WASH sector:** Collating important datasets, knowledge resources, and even writing short whitepapers
- **Bespoke analysis:** Carrying out bespoke analysis focused on important COVID-related problems in the sector including detailed surveys and related reports
- **Facilitate knowledge sharing internally:** The team can create and disseminate repositories of best practices and strategies adopted by different members.

Advocacy and partnerships

- **Facilitate partnerships between players in the ecosystem:** The team can facilitate partnerships between different members in the ecosystem for a coordinated response. It can also help in the forging of partnerships between members and other technical experts in the sector.
- **Conduct advocacy with the government:** The team can work closely with the members to identify areas that need government intervention and conduct related advocacy. By providing a unified voice to the sector, the team can advocate for a conducive policy environment and nation-wide implementation of best practices.

Capacity Building

- **Provide capacity building support:** The team can conduct capacity building exercises with service providers, donors and philanthropists to ensure successful implementation of recommendations made by the Analytics and Strategy sub-team. It can also assist them in areas such as digitization of processes, human resource management as per their needs.