



Water, sanitation and hygiene—an essential part of Australia's overseas aid program

This submission has been prepared for the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee in light of the Government's announcement that they will make \$4.5 billion in cuts to the projected growth of Australia's overseas aid program over the next four years. It stresses the importance of investing in a historically neglected, yet crucially important area of this country's aid program—water, sanitation and hygiene—if Australian aid is to deliver against stated policy objectives and international commitments.

Lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene is a global crisis. Worldwide, 768 million people live without access to safe water and 2.5 billion live without improved sanitation.¹ The impacts of this lack of access are numerous and catastrophic. Close to 2,000 children under five die every day from preventable diarrhoea linked to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene.² This figure is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the health-related impacts of this crisis.

These lives could be saved. The solutions to this crisis already exist, and they are proven and cost-effective. The importance of access to water, sanitation and hygiene for sustainable development has been clearly demonstrated by the available evidence. Water, sanitation and hygiene programs save lives, drive economic growth, promote better health, keep boys and girls in school and enable women and girls to be more productive members of society.

Included are four recommendations to the Government that will enable it to play its part in international efforts to address the global water, sanitation and hygiene crisis. Investing in water, sanitation and hygiene is a pre-condition to meaningful outcomes in health, education and in advancing the interests of women and children. Government action with respect to these recommendations will maximise the effectiveness of Australia's aid and ensure success in promoting sustainable development and economic growth within our region.

Impacts of the global water, sanitation and hygiene crisis

Access to safe water, improved sanitation³ and good hygiene is fundamental to breaking the cycle of poverty, yet it is too often overlooked in aid programming. Without these essential services improvements in living standards stall, economic growth is slowed and countries remain dependent on external aid, unable to move from dependency to self-sufficiency.

Beyond the direct health impacts, lack of water, sanitation and hygiene is detrimental to other areas of human development. It reduces educational outcomes, with repeated bouts of illness stunting mental and physical development, but also by keeping children, particularly girls, out of school due to the time needed to collect water for their families, or to manage their menstrual hygiene. Sick people are unable to study or work, which results in stalled economic growth and frustrates poverty reduction efforts. In total inadequate water supply and sanitation are associated with global economic losses estimated at \$260 billion USD annually.⁴

In 2000, the international community set out a roadmap, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that aimed to dramatically reduce global poverty and improve the lives of the world's poorest people by 2015. One target was to halve the proportion of people living without sustainable access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation. The drinking water target was met in 2010, but the sanitation target will be missed by a wide margin. Despite the progress made at least 768 million people worldwide (1 in 10) still live without access to safe water and 2.5 billion people live without improved sanitation. At current rates of progress the sanitation target will not be reached until 2026, 11 years behind schedule.⁵ Given the challenges a lack of access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene pose for sustainable development the continuing scale of this crisis presents a serious threat to both lives and livelihoods. For Australian aid to serve its purpose of saving lives, promoting sustainable development and accelerating economic growth, the Government must elevate the importance given to water, sanitation and hygiene in its future decisions around aid allocations.

How water, sanitation and hygiene underpin human development

Australia is a global leader in terms of the quality of our water, sanitation and hygiene standards. But we need only to look back into our recent history to understand how closely water, sanitation and hygiene are linked to sustainable development. A century ago Australia was facing a crisis similar to that currently occurring in the developing world. A severe lack of clean water and an absence of sanitation was a significant contributor to high rates of child deaths in the late 19th century. In the 1870s and early 1880s, one-quarter of the children born in Sydney died before their fifth birthday from water and sanitation-related illnesses such as enteritis, typhoid fever and diarrhoea. Social change, political will and investment in infrastructure precipitated significant improvements in public health and child survival.⁶ More recently, South Korea and Thailand have undergone similar transformations. Australia's successes can be replicated overseas.

Globally there is a wealth of additional recent evidence that reinforces the transformational benefits of access to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Health

Water, sanitation and hygiene dramatically improve population-wide health outcomes. Access to these services save lives, lower instances of undernutrition and reduce pressure on stressed public healthcare systems. Available evidence shows that:

- Universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene could halve the number of patients in hospitals in developing countries,⁷ and halve cases of global child undernutrition.⁸
- Handwashing with soap reduces the risk of diarrhoea by 48%.⁹

Economic growth

Water, sanitation and hygiene are an essential investment for any donor seeking to accelerate economic growth. A healthier, better educated workforce is also a more productive workforce, one that drives economic growth and ultimately builds people's self-reliance and capacity to stand on their own. We know that:

- For every dollar invested in water, sanitation and hygiene, more than \$4 is returned to national economies in increased productivity.¹⁰
- Achieving universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene would deliver minimum global economic benefits of \$170 billion USD annually.¹¹
- In Cambodia and Laos poor sanitation and hygiene result in respective economic losses equivalent to 7.2%¹² and 5.6%¹³ of each countries' gross domestic product (GDP).

Education

Australia rightly recognises access to a quality education as a long-term investment in helping people move from poverty to self-sufficiency. Access to water, sanitation and hygiene, both within and outside schools, transform educational outcomes by getting more children into school more often.

- When sanitation facilities are available girls' school attendance by increases by 11%.¹⁴
- The reduction in water-related diseases associated with achieving universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene would see children worldwide spend a combined 443 million more days in school each year.¹⁵

Gender empowerment

The benefits of access to water, sanitation and hygiene are particularly pronounced for women and girls. The burden of water collection remains largely the responsibility of women, forcing them to spend hours each day fetching water for their household. Private, secure toilets, especially ones that take into account menstrual hygiene needs, improve the status of women and girls, helping to break down restrictive customs and taboos attached to menstruation, as well as protecting women from harassment and violence.

- With easy access to water women in sub-Saharan Africa would regain the 16 million hours they spend every day collecting water, time they could spend getting an education or earning a living.¹⁶
- Evidence from Timor-Leste suggests that increased access to safe water has led to improved domestic harmony and precipitated a shift in gender roles, with men helping more with tasks traditionally considered the domain of women, including water collection, childcare and assisting in the kitchen.¹⁷
- Access to improved sanitation would free the 1 in 3 women and girls worldwide currently without a toilet from the threat of harassment, violence or sexual assault that they face on long journeys to find a place to relieve themselves.¹⁸

The history of water, sanitation and hygiene in Australia's aid program

Water, sanitation and hygiene has until recently comprised a small component of Australia's aid program. In 2008 only 0.5% of Australia's aid budget was allocated to water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives. At the same time the average among members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) was 4.5%.¹⁹

Since this time funding has increased significantly, but Australia's financial performance still lags behind sectoral leaders. In 2012 (the latest year for which global statistics are available), Australia allocated just 3.56% of its aid budget to water, sanitation and hygiene projects, putting it below the DAC average of 4.2%. Of the 27 donor nations that comprise the DAC, Australia ranked only 11th in terms of the proportion of its overseas aid allocated to water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives.²⁰

This trend towards increasing prioritisation of water, sanitation and hygiene has been repeated among other donor countries. The United States' commitment to water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives as part of its aid program for this financial year is 21% higher than the previous financial year's allocation.²¹ A 2012 review by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) found 'strong evidence' that water, sanitation and hygiene interventions have a demonstrable impact on health outcomes,²² a belief that has been instrumental to the UK's annual aid expenditure on water, sanitation and hygiene rising from £148 million GBP in 2006-07 to £245.2 million GBP in 2010-11.²³ If Australian aid is to be successful in saving lives and accelerating economic growth in the region, the Government will need to show leadership and continue the existing momentum towards greater prioritisation of water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives within Australia's aid program.

Recommendations: what the Government can do

Evidence of the benefits of access to water, sanitation and hygiene is clear and compelling. If the new Government wants to maximise the effectiveness of Australian aid they will need to increase the priority given to water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives within our overseas aid program.

The four recommendations presented below offer the Government clear, concrete steps they can take to ensure that Australia's aid program is successful against its stated objective of driving sustainable development within our region, as well as ensuring Australia play its part in addressing the global water, sanitation and hygiene crisis.

1. Allocate a minimum of 5% of Australia's overall program to water, sanitation and hygiene, with a particular focus on sanitation and hygiene, especially in schools and health centres

We know that water, sanitation and hygiene are effective in reducing poverty—they accelerate economic growth, save lives, protect people's health, keep kids in school and empower women and girls. As one of the worst-performing regions globally in terms of people's access to water, sanitation and hygiene, strong investment in initiatives focused on increasing access to these essential services should be central to Australia's strategy for reducing regional poverty and driving economic growth. Given the slow pace of progress on increasing sanitation coverage, there is a particular need for funding to be made available for projects focused specifically on improving sanitation and hygiene.

2. Champion a goal on universal access to sanitation, water and hygiene in the Post-2015 framework

As the MDG era draws to a close and we look ahead to how the global community will reduce poverty post-2015, there is a growing consensus among sector professionals that, for the first time in history, universal access to sanitation, water and hygiene is within reach. It will not be easy, but with sufficient political commitment, innovative partnerships and integrated approaches, underpinned by sound financial investment, it could be achieved by 2030.

Australia's growing international standing means that we are well-placed over the next two years to play a leadership role in discussions on the shape of the post-2015 framework. We can help generate momentum among the international community to be bold and set an ambitious timeline for achieving universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene. We cannot eradicate poverty without doing so.

3. Target Australia's efforts at the most vulnerable communities in our region

Over the last 20 years great strides have been made in increasing access to water, sanitation and hygiene. Two billion people have been provided with clean drinking water and 1.8 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation.²⁴ However this progress has been uneven and massive gaps in coverage remain. Donor funding has often failed to reach the most vulnerable. Real results will only be delivered if water, sanitation and hygiene reach the countries, communities and individuals that need them most.

Aggregating global progress has hidden significant disparities between regions. The Pacific is one of just three regions—Sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia being the others—that will miss the MDG targets for both water and sanitation.²⁵ Papua New Guinea has one of the lowest rates of access to water and sanitation of anywhere in the world—just 1 in 5 people have access to improved sanitation and only 2 in 5 have access to safe water.²⁶ As Australia's aid program shifts its focus to our nearest neighbours, dramatic improvements must be made to water, sanitation and hygiene access if we are to sustainably raise living standards and build prosperity in our region.

4. Integrate water, sanitation and hygiene into international health and education work

People need access to these services not just in their homes, but also throughout their communities. Water, sanitation and hygiene are crucial in schools and health centres. Without drinking water, improved sanitation and good hygiene students don't learn as effectively. Health facilities without water, proper sanitation practices and strict hygiene procedures spread infection and put lives at risk. Stringent sanitation and hygiene practices are essential in health care settings as it is these facilities that are frequented by people with infectious conditions and with restricted mobility. Ensuring adequate facilities and practices are in place will protect the wellbeing of staff and patients, and help prevent the spread of dangerous epidemics. The presence of these facilities in both schools and health centres also serve as important models for communities.

Each year Australian aid supports the construction of thousands of schools and health facilities. Integrating and prioritising water, sanitation and hygiene services into Australia's education and health programs will maximise value for money and ultimately improve the effectiveness of our aid program to deliver against stated objectives, preventing the spread of deadly diseases and infections and ensuring children receive a quality education.

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About WaterAid

WaterAid is an international non-governmental organisation focused exclusively on improving poor people's access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation. Together with improved hygiene, access to water and sanitation underpin health, education and livelihoods, forming the first essential step in overcoming poverty.

WaterAid Australia focuses our efforts on the Asia-Pacific region, managing country programs in Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Cambodia. We work with local partners, who understand local issues, and provide them with the skills and support to help communities set up and manage practical and sustainable projects that meet their real needs.

We also use the knowledge we've gained from our work on-the-ground to campaign locally and internationally to change policy and practice to ensure safe water, hygiene and sanitation's vital role in reducing poverty is recognised.

For more information visit: www.wateraid.org/au

Endnotes

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- ¹⁶ WHO/UNICEF, *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2012 update*, 31.
- ¹⁷ Di Kilsby, *Now we Feel like Respected Adults: Positive Change in Gender Roles and Relations in a Timor-Leste WASH program* (Australian Council For International Development: Canberra, 2012), 14–15.
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- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ WaterAid America, "WaterAid hails largest ever US commitment to water and toilets," last updated 17 January 2014, <http://www.wateraid.org/us/news/news/wateraid-hails-largest-ever-us-commitment-to-water-and-toilets>
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- ²⁵ United Nations (UN), *Millennium Development Goals: 2013 Progress Chart* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA): New York, 2013), http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/2013_progress_english.pdf
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