

THE WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SECTOR AND ITS RESPONSE TO COVID-19: INITIATIVES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

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The health emergency caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has affected all countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region to varying degrees since February. Hygiene –most importantly washing hands with soap and clean water– has been one of the most efficient measures for infection prevention and control. One of the responses that all governments must therefore provide is to guarantee continuous access to a minimum volume of drinking Water, basic Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for all people; in particular, for workers and users of health and nutrition facilities, schools, public places (markets, transport hubs, etc.), and people⁴ living outside a home.

In recent weeks, various actors in the sector –governments and decision makers, regulators, utilities,

users, etc.– have proposed and implemented different types of measures to tackle the pandemic. This document shares experience and good practices by providing a summary of initiatives implemented in the region to i) ensure that all people have access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene during the emergency; and ii) support and strengthen the role of utilities in continuously and safely providing these basic services. The measures listed below are structured and synthesized around two main actors: the user and the service provider. It is important to emphasize that many of the measures require political willpower at the highest level and the committed participation of policy makers and regulators. Intersectoral collaboration is also important in ensuring the correct implementation of many of these measures.

⁴ Homeless people, people in shelters, shelters for the elderly, refugee/returnee centres, youth and adult detention centres, etc.

Users: Guarantee continued access to water, sanitation and hygiene services

1. Preserve the health and well-being of all people, including the most vulnerable, by meeting their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs.

- Guaranteeing that all people have access to a minimum amount of drinking water and basic sanitation to permit the necessary hygiene measures for infection prevention and control. This means not discontinuing the supply to households who cannot afford to pay, immediately reconnecting all households that have been disconnected due to non-payment, adopting additional measures to ensure hygiene and providing unconventional and emergency supply alternatives to households not connected to the water networks, vulnerable groups and homeless people.
- Facilitating payment of services for households in financial difficulty by creating and/or improving appropriate financial instruments (e.g. by implementing subsidy systems, freezing bill collection, writing off debts for non-payment, exempting households from reconnection costs, etc.) or by establishing a minimum basic consumption for families (anticipating an increase in water consumption due to improved hygiene and the confinement of many people to their homes).
- Ensuring the availability of basic hygiene products (soap, menstrual hygiene products, etc.) and products for household water treatment (chlorine tablets, water filters, etc.) through direct distribution, cash-based interventions or market control mechanisms.

2. Intensify awareness-raising campaigns for infection prevention and control (IPC) and the efficient use of water in the home and in public spaces.

- Encouraging the immediate restoration or new construction of handwashing points in schools, health care facilities, markets, detention centres, transport hubs, transit centres and other busy public places (respecting recommended safe distances).
- Promoting appropriate infection prevention and control measures in the home, for example: washing hands with soap and water, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, isolating people with symptoms and people at a higher risk, changing clothes when entering the home and not sharing personal items such as glasses, cutlery, towels, etc.
- Combating misinformation and fake news campaigns. Promoting water-saving and efficient water use, as well as correct water treatment in homes if there is no access to piped water.

Utilities: Guarantee the provision and proper operation of water, sanitation and hygiene services, while ensuring the financial sustainability of the utilities

3. Ensure the continuity and safety of water and sanitation services.

- Ensuring the quality and continuity of water and sanitation services in health care facilities to support the cleaning and disinfection for the prevention and control of COVID-19. Planning for the reopening of schools to provide these basic services in all schools.
- Guaranteeing the supply of drinking water and proper operation of sanitation services at every stage. Planning preventive maintenance tasks at all critical points of the networks. Increasing monitoring for the presence of residual chlorine at strategic points in the distribution network and specifically for key users such as health

care facilities, nursing homes and schools. Expanding infrastructure and extending coverage of water and sanitation services to unconnected areas.

- Guaranteeing water and wastewater utilities access to electricity to ensure the operation of services. Strengthening the supply chain of critical goods (chemicals, disinfectants, spare parts, etc.) and ensuring proper management of generated waste (e.g. sludge from wastewater treatment plants).
- Ensuring the safety of all workers, facilitating access to protective equipment and promoting its correct and continuous use during operation and maintenance tasks. Distributing protective equipment to informal workers in the sector.

4. Provide technical and financial support to utilities.

- Ensuring utilities (urban and rural) receive the necessary support and technical assistance for administration, planning, operation and maintenance, etc. Establishing coordination platforms between government and utilities for the exchange of experiences, good practices, crossover learning processes, etc.
- Ensuring utilities (urban and rural) receive the necessary financial support to guarantee the



correct operation of services, to avoid non-payment or delays in the payment of bills causing a liquidity problem and damaging the operation and maintenance of services. Developing medium-term economic viability plans for the utilities.

- Launching special funds for the improvement, restoration and expansion of water and sanitation infrastructure to meet any needs arising from the pandemic.
- Establishing multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms.

Based on this structure, table #1 lists the actors involved in the implementation of each initiative and the time frame for implementation and table #2 below set out the initiatives that each country has approved or is implementing. This provides an overview of how the WASH sector is responding to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean⁵.

⁵ This note is a preliminary mapping of the measures that the water, sanitation and hygiene sector in Latin American and Caribbean countries have implemented in response to the impacts of COVID-19. The note was prepared using the following methodology: online research of the initiatives and measures taken by governments, utilities and bilateral and multilateral cooperation agents in Latin America and the Caribbean, as of the last week of March 2020. Therefore, the main sources of information used were the official websites of governments (national and/or provincial in the case of federal countries), websites of utilities and their national and international associations, news stories published in the media, references on Twitter and other social networks, and interviews with UNICEF staff, regulators and local stakeholders. As the situation in all countries is dynamic and continuously changing, it is likely that new measures will arise on a daily basis over the coming weeks.

Table 1: Proposed strategic measures to be adopted by the WASH sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

AREA/ACTIVITY	ACTORS INVOLVED	TIME FRAME
1. Preserve the health and well-being of all people, including the most vulnerable, by meeting their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs		
Identifying priority intervention areas , supporting national multi-sector mapping of the areas most at risk from COVID-19 (“hotspots”) ⁶ with data from the water and sanitation sector.	Water and sanitation sector	Immediate
Not cutting off the water supply to households who are unable to pay bills, under any circumstances.	Utility	Immediate
Immediately reconnecting free of charge all households disconnected for non-payment that do not currently receive water services .	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring a minimum daily volume of drinking water for all households classed as vulnerable or not connected to the mains network , through infrastructure expansion and/or unconventional solutions (e.g. distribution of water to households or at specific community points, water trucks, water kiosks, etc.), respecting social distancing (one-metre spacing between taps).	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring provision of services to all groups ⁷ living outside a home.	Municipality	Immediate
Establishing, maintaining and/or extending (in collaboration with social protection services) the financial instruments needed to facilitate service payments for vulnerable households : implementing some form of subsidy system, freezing bill collection, writing off debts for non-payment, exempting households from reconnection costs, etc.	Government Utility	Immediate, medium-term
Evaluating the possibility of introducing a free minimum basic consumption for families anticipating an increase in consumption due to better hygiene and the confinement of many people to their homes.	Government Utility	Immediate, short-term
Providing non-centralized basic sanitation solutions using unconventional technologies (e.g. compact toilets, latrine emptying and faecal sludge management, etc.) to all households not connected to the sewerage system , in order to prevent the open defecation practices.	Municipality/local government Utility	Medium-term
Ensuring public or community bathrooms are open, available and accessible free of charge to people who do not have them at home and/or are doing essential work outside.	Municipality/local government Utility	Immediate, short-term
Ensuring the availability of basic products for family hygiene (soap, hand sanitizing gels, menstrual hygiene products, toilet paper, etc.) and domestic water treatment (chlorine tablets, water filters, etc.), either through direct distribution, cash-based interventions or market control mechanisms.	Government Private sector	Immediate
Guaranteeing access to electricity and communications for users so they can communicate with service providers and authorities, receive information, make online payments, etc.	Government Private sector	Immediate
Establishing communication channels between utilities and users .	Utility	Immediate
2. Intensify awareness-raising campaigns for handwashing with soap and water and efficient water use in the home		
Encouraging the immediate restoration or new construction of handwashing points in priority sites or “hotspots”, including schools, health care facilities, markets, prisons, stations and other public places, respecting social distancing (one-metre spacing between taps).	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ NGOs/ media/ private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Strategies to promote handwashing with soap and water to the entire the population and different age groups, focusing on the most vulnerable groups, making content available in the different languages used in countries, and using nudging techniques to encourage good practices.	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ NGOs/ media/ private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Identifying and training community leaders in prioritized areas to promote handwashing with soap and water in their respective communities and participation in monitoring.	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ NGOs/ media	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Combating misinformation and fake news campaigns on COVID-19 (e.g. in relation to mechanisms of contagion of the COVID-19, symptoms, treatments, etc.).	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ NGOs/ media/ private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Promoting domestic water treatment if there is no access to safe drinking water (e.g. boiling water, chlorine tablets, filters, etc.) and giving clear instructions on how to prepare, handle and store drinking water.	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ NGOs/ media/ private sector	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Introducing measures and campaigns for water-saving and efficiency .	Central government/ local government/ civil society/ media/ private sector/ users	Immediate, short- and medium-term

⁶ Consider: 1) the multiple risk factors for maintaining basic preventive hygiene and social distancing (population density, average age, percentage living in the informal economy and on daily wage, etc.); and 2) the multiple risk factors in the context of partial/total quarantine and current and potential outbreaks of COVID-19 and other diseases. Areas of high population density and low levels of WASH services must be especially considered, both at household and at the community level (few public toilets, etc.), with cases of COVID-19. The presence of health care facilities, markets, shelters for the elderly, prisons, detention centers for minors of age and centers of agglomeration of people with special needs in relation to water and sanitation should also be taken into account.

⁷ Homeless people, people in shelters, shelters for the elderly, refugee/returnee centres, youth and adult detention centres, etc.

3. Guarantee the continuity and safety of water and sanitation services

Identifying critical intervention areas (“hotspots”) in the utility’s service area to prioritize COVID-19 response interventions. ⁸	Utility	Immediate
Conducting a rapid assessment ⁹ of the WASH situation in health care facilities prioritized to deal with COVID-19 to ensure quality and continuity of water and sanitation services 24/7 in health care facilities , using unconventional mechanisms if necessary and ensuring the cleaning and disinfection needs of the facilities are met.	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring proper operation of drinking water systems at all stages: collection, production, treatment and distribution to the final consumer. Planning preventive maintenance tasks at all critical points of the system (e.g. at the intake, mains, in the treatment plant and in the distribution network). Monitoring residual chlorine at specific key points.	Utility	Immediate
Ensuring proper operation of the sewerage system and non-centralized sanitation solutions at all stages: emptying of latrines and septic tanks and transport, treatment and final disposal of faecal sludge.	Utility	Immediate
Expanding infrastructure and extending coverage of water and sanitation services to unconnected areas.	Utility	Short- and medium-term
Advocacy to ensure the government guarantees access to electricity for utilities to ensure the operation of water and sanitation services.	Electricity company	Immediate
Strengthening the supply chain of all products and materials needed to operate water and sanitation services (disinfectants, chemicals, spare parts, etc.). Ensuring the correct management of waste generated in the process of water purification and wastewater treatment (e.g. sewage sludge). Given that international supplies will be difficult to obtain in the coming months, optimizing and prioritizing the use of domestic products.	Private sector Utility	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring the availability, quality and continuity of water and sanitation and handwashing services in schools , using unconventional mechanisms if necessary, in anticipation of reopening.	Utility Ministry of Education	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring access to protective equipment for workers of service suppliers who may need it during operation and maintenance tasks. Developing protocols in cases of contagion among operational personnel.	Utility Private sector	Immediate
Distributing protective equipment to informal workers in the sanitation sector.	Government/local government, informal utility	Immediate
Introducing online payment services if they do not already exist.	Utility	Short-term

4. Provide technical and financial support to utilities

Providing technical assistance to utilities for management, financing, planning, operation and maintenance, etc. Supporting the creation/updating and implementation of emergency response plans or contingency plans.	Government Strategic partners	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Activating special funds to guarantee the operation of and to improve, upgrade and expand water and sanitation infrastructure to meet the specific needs of the pandemic.	Government Financial institutions	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring urban utilities receive the necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment) to guarantee the proper operation of services.	Government Financial institutions	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Ensuring rural and community operators (both formal and informal) receive the necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment) and technical assistance to ensure continuity of service.	Government/local government	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Promoting correct monitoring of the utilities and middle to small-scale operators . Developing a simple monitoring system to facilitate early detection of service delivery failures and promote corrective action.	Government Regulators Utilities’ associations	Immediate, short- and medium-term
Establishing a coordination platform between government and utilities/operators and their associations for the exchange of experiences, good practices, crossover learning processes, etc.	Government Providers	Short- and medium-term
Developing short- and medium-term economic viability plans for utilities.	Government Financial institutions	Short- and medium-term
Establishing multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms , including international and multilateral organizations and other actors.	Government Strategic partners	Immediate, short- and medium-term

⁸ Criteria for identifying these areas include (but are not limited to) areas of high population density with low levels of WASH services at both the individual and community levels (few public toilets, etc.) with cases of COVID-19. The presence of health care facilities, markets, nursing homes, prisons, youth detention centres and other places where there are many people in need of access to water and sanitation should be taken into account.

⁹ One particular methodology proposed for this purpose is the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Health Care Facilities Improvement Tool (WASH FIT): www.washfit.org

Table 2: Strategic measures adopted in Latin American countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as per 15th April 2020

Area/Activity	LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES														
	ARG	BRA	PAN	CHL	PRY	GTM	ECU	HND	CRI	PER	COL	BOL	ELS	VEN	MEX
<p>1. Preserve the ability of all people, including the most vulnerable, to meet their basic water, sanitation and hygiene needs.</p>															
<p>Identifying priority intervention areas, supporting national multi-sector mapping of the areas most at risk from COVID-19 (“hotspots”) with data from the water and sanitation sector.</p>	x							x		x	x				x
<p>Not cutting off the water supply to households who are unable to pay bills, under any circumstances.</p>	x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<p>Immediately reconnecting free of charge all households disconnected for non-payment that do not currently receive water services.</p>			x					x	x	x	x				
<p>Ensuring a minimum daily volume of drinking water for all households classed as vulnerable or not connected to the mains network, through infrastructure expansion and/or unconventional solutions (e.g. distribution of water to households or at specific community points, water trucks, water kiosks, etc.), respecting social distancing (one-metre spacing of taps).</p>		x	x				x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
<p>Ensuring provision of services to all groups living outside a home.</p>							x		x					x	
<p>Establishing, maintaining and/or extending (in collaboration with social protection services) the financial instruments needed to facilitate service payments for vulnerable households: implementing some form of subsidy system, freezing bill collection, writing off debts for non-payment, exempting households from reconnection costs, etc.</p>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		
<p>Evaluating the possibility of introducing a free minimum basic consumption for families in anticipation of an increase in consumption due to better hygiene and the confinement of many people to their homes.</p>				x	x						x	x			
<p>Providing non-centralized basic sanitation solutions using unconventional technologies (e.g. compact toilets, latrine emptying and faecal sludge management, etc.) to all households not connected to the sewerage system, preventing the need to practice open defecation.</p>															
<p>Ensuring public or community bathrooms are open, available and accessible free of charge to people who do not have them at home and/or are doing essential work outside.</p>											x				
<p>Ensuring the availability of basic products for family hygiene (soap, hand sanitizing gels, menstrual hygiene products, toilet paper, etc.) and domestic water treatment (chlorine tablets, water filters, etc.), either through direct distribution, cash-based interventions or market control mechanisms.</p>	x	x	x		x			x			x		x	x	
<p>Guaranteeing access to electricity and communications for users so they can communicate with suppliers and authorities, receive information, make online payments, etc.</p>	x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
<p>Establishing communication channels between utilities and users.</p>	x			x				x		x	x	x		x	
<p>2. Intensify awareness-raising campaigns for handwashing with soap and water and efficient water use in the home</p>															
<p>Encouraging the immediate restoration or new construction of handwashing points in priority sites or “hotspots” including schools, health facilities, markets, prisons, stations and other public places, respecting social distancing (one-metre spacing of taps).</p>							x	x	x		x	x		x	x
<p>Strategies to promote handwashing with soap and water to the entire the population and different age groups, focusing on the most vulnerable groups, making content available in the different languages used in countries, and using nudging techniques to encourage good practices.</p>	x	x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<p>Identifying and training community leaders in prioritized areas to promote handwashing with soap and water in their respective communities and participation in monitoring.</p>		x										x		x	
<p>Combating misinformation and fake news campaigns on COVID-19 (e.g. in relation to mechanisms of spreading of the COVI=19, symptoms, treatments, etc.).</p>	x		x			x		x		x				x	
<p>Promoting home water treatment if there is no access to safe water (e.g. boiling water, chlorine tablets, filters, etc.).</p>							x			x		x		x	
<p>Introducing measures and campaigns for water-saving and efficiency.</p>			x				x		x	x	x			x	x

	ARG	BRA	PAN	CHL	PRY	GTM	ECU	HND	CRI	PER	COL	BOL	ELS	VEN	MEX
3. Guarantee the continuity and safety of water and sanitation services															
Identifying critical intervention areas ("hotspots") in the utility's service area to prioritize COVID-19 response interventions.	x													x	
Conducting a rapid assessment of the WASH situation in health care facilities prioritized to deal with COVID-19 to ensure quality and continuity of water and sanitation services 24/7 in health care facilities , using unconventional mechanisms if necessary and ensuring the cleaning and disinfection needs of the facilities are met.	x		x				x		x					x	x
Ensuring proper operation of drinking water systems at all stages: collection, production, treatment and distribution to the final consumer. Planning preventive maintenance tasks at all critical points of the system (e.g. at the intake, in the pipeline, in the treatment plant and in the distribution network). Monitoring residual chlorine at specific key points.			x		x		x	x	x				x		x
Ensuring proper operation of the sewerage system and non-centralized sanitation solutions at all stages: emptying of latrines and septic tanks and transport, treatment and disposal of faecal sludge.					x		x				x				
Expanding infrastructure and extending coverage of water and sanitation services to unconnected areas	x								x		x				x
Advocacy to ensure the government guarantees access to electricity for utilities to ensure the operation of water and sanitation services.							x								x
Strengthening the supply chain of all products and materials needed to operate water and sanitation services (disinfectants, chemicals, spare parts, etc.).			x					x		x	x	x		x	x
Ensuring correct management of waste generated in the process of water purification and wastewater treatment (e.g. sewage sludge). Given that international supplies will be difficult to obtain in the coming months, optimizing and prioritizing the use of domestic products.												x			
Ensuring the availability, quality and continuity of water and sanitation and handwashing services in schools , using unconventional mechanisms if necessary, in anticipation of reopening.					x			x			x	x			
Ensuring access to protective equipment for workers of service suppliers who may need it during operation and maintenance tasks. Developing protocols for action in cases of contagion among operational personnel.				x	x		x	x	x					x	
Distributing protective equipment to informal workers in the sanitation sector.							x			x	x				
Introducing online payment services if they do not already exist.				x							x				x
4. Provide technical and financial support to utilities															
Providing technical assistance to utilities for management, financing, planning, operation and maintenance, etc. Supporting the creation/updating and implementation of emergency response plans or contingency plans.			x	x			x			x	x	x			x
Activating special funds to guarantee the operation of and to improve, upgrade and expand water and sanitation infrastructure to meet the specific needs of the pandemic.			x	x							x				
Ensuring urban service providers receive the necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment) to guarantee the proper operation of services.	x		x	x											
Ensuring rural and community service providers (both formal and informal) receive the necessary financial support and supplies (including personal protective equipment) and technical assistance to ensure continuity of service				x										x	
Promoting correct monitoring of the utilities and smaller operators . Developing a simple monitoring system to facilitate early detection of service delivery failures and promote corrective action.				x											
Establishing a coordination platform between government and service providers and their associations for the exchange of experiences, good practices, crossover learning processes, etc.			x				x								
Developing short- and medium-term economic viability plans for utilities.												x			
Establishing multi-actor emergency coordination mechanisms , including international and multilateral organizations and other actors	x	x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x		x	x



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Conclusion

In recent weeks, most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have implemented measures to varying degrees to restrict mobility and confine people to their homes. In parallel, both governments and utilities have implemented a set of measures to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 emergency on water, sanitation and hygiene. This analysis shows that:

- Direct economic financial transfers have been provided to households to maintain their consumption levels and contribute to their food security, generally with no explicit mention of water. In addition, many countries have implemented measures prohibiting the disconnection of users and enforcing the reconnection of previously disconnected users, as well as measures requiring water to be distributed to unconnected households and vulnerable groups. However, it is likely that these mechanisms will not be sufficient to cover the entire population.
- These measures could lead to an increase in household water consumption, which could compromise the capacity of systems. Several countries have promoted campaigns for the good use of water and sanitation services, while other countries rationed water by the hour.
- In terms of access to and management of sanitation, there are fewer concrete measures. This may be especially important for people in confinement who do not have access to sanitation at home and need to use shared or public toilets and for essential workers if public infrastructures are not available.
- Hygiene promotion campaigns and the distribution of basic products like soap have been stepped up but other measures such as the construction of hand washing facilities in schools, markets and prisons have been scarce.
- Some countries are implementing technical and financial support measures for service providers but this support may need to be extended if the period of confinement is prolonged. Some utilities are putting their own measures in place to protect workers and guarantee service.
- The request to suspend payment for water and sanitation services has generally been heeded by national governments and is expected to have a substantial impact on rural systems, which lack the liquidity and solvency of large urban utilities. There are no special measures to support these rural systems, which may suffer from a lack of liquidity and supplies in the short term.
- Some countries are facing two problems that can exacerbate the situation for vulnerable populations: droughts and the spread of dengue fever, which, according to the Pan American Health Organization, infected more than three million people in Latin America in 2019, six times the number infected in 2018.¹⁰ The spread of dengue fever is strongly linked to poor water storage in homes.
- The funding sources of these measures could only be identified in a small number of cases.

¹⁰ Pan American Health Organization (2020). Epidemiological Update: Dengue. 7 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.paho.org/en/documents/epidemiological-update-dengue-7-february-2020>