

ENVIRONMENTAL BEST PRACTISE IN EMERGENCY WASH OPERATIONS

A POSITION PAPER

PURPOSE

There is a recognised lack of standard environmental guidance and no coherent or systematic approach with regards environmental-related issues in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Cluster. Agencies have thus far largely relied on their staff's professional experience, common sense and consultation with local and national authorities and the affected populations.

This paper describes the main environment-related issues which should be considered and addressed in programmes relating to WASH planning and ensuing practices in an emergency operation. It is intended primarily for field practitioners and decision-makers and focuses on preventive actions and decisions that can help reduce the environmental impacts of at least some common and recurrent WASH-related activities and contribute to a better living environment for people in emergency situations.

This paper and accompanying technical briefing notes encourages people to systematically assess, identify and understand the potential environmental impacts and implications of their activities and to take reasonable and feasible initiatives to reduce these impacts and enhance the efficiency, appropriateness and quality of assistance to victims of armed conflicts from pre- to post-conflicts periods. It is clearly recognised that the consideration of environmental impacts must not hinder the efficient delivery of emergency assistance.

BACKGROUND

The aim of any water and sanitation programme is to promote good personal and environmental hygiene in order to protect health (Sphere, 2010). Humanitarian operations invariably impact the environment, the effects of which may be far reaching and

long lasting, affecting not only the physical environment but also on occasion the welfare and well-being of displaced and host communities.

Different components of emergency WASH programmes can be expected to have different impacts, both in scale and nature, but commonly include the following:

- pollution of ground water reservoirs and/or surface water bodies;
- over-extraction of groundwater which, in some instances, might lead to salt intrusion or the reduction of yield in previously existing wells and boreholes;
- waste accumulation or inappropriate disposal;
- promotion of septic tank use in shallow aquifers without adequate provision for the treatment and proper disposal of sewage collected to avoid pollution risks;
- inappropriate disposal of sludge; and
- excessive and/or inappropriate use or disposal of chemicals such as those used for vector control or in water treatment.

SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Responsibility for the environment, as a cross-cutting issue, rests with the WASH Cluster Co-ordinator.
- Decisions on providing WASH-related assistance should consider the environment-related health impacts of the assistance.
- WASH interventions in emergency contexts should embrace an Integrated Water Resource Management approach, whereby the potential effect of water abstraction, human and domestic waste disposal and physical resource use (such as timber) is analysed and addressed as a core part of the intervention responses. This must include analysis and addressing of the socio-economic impact of the intervention related to water and

resource use, such as the use of water for productive, non-domestic, purposes (e.g. brick-making), water vending, increased and inefficient irrigation of crops and the potential for water re-use and conservation.

- Incorporation of environmental issues into WASH activities usually results in better and healthier living conditions for affected populations.
- An early assessment should be undertaken of immediate WASH requirements. This should be followed up in more detail by a more comprehensive longer term recovery and development assessment as soon as the initial energy needs have been addressed.

ACTION POINTS TO CONSIDER

Positive steps that may be taken include the following:

- ✓ Undertake a rapid WASH-oriented environmental assessment, at the Cluster level, call on external environmental expertise as required.
- ✓ Identify basic WASH-environmental indicators for monitoring purposes.
- ✓ Consider and routinely apply the “prevention before cure” principle.
- ✓ Respect, to the extent possible, the guidance and standards outlines by Sphere, in relation to the siting and construction of WASH facilities.
- ✓ Identify qualified local partners for engagement and advice in relation to natural resource systems, for example groundwater facilities, recharge rates, waste disposal sites and so forth.
- ✓ Integrate environmental considerations into WASH contingency and emergency response plans by accounting for the main points outlined in this Position Paper and accompanying Key Concepts paper.
- ✓ Emergency WASH structures and associated facilities should be designed to be integrated wherever possible into existing systems and structures, e.g. waste disposal.
- ✓ Promote the need for a clean environment.

- ✓ Ensure proper disposal of WASH waste.
- ✓ Ensure that all chemicals brought on site are properly stored and used in accordance with their prescribed levels of application.
- ✓ Negative or potentially damaging environmental impacts associated with the provision of post-disaster WASH services and facilities should be mitigated.
- ✓ The means to transport WASH-related materials to an affected situation should be selected based on an assessment of the urgency for which the materials are needed to save or maintain lives and the environmental impact of the means of that mode of transportation.
- ✓ Where possible, the carbon contribution of the means used to transport emergency WASH assistance should be calculated and off-sets incorporated into programme budgets. Such off-sets can be accomplished through the direct purchase of off-sets or through project-based activities such as tree planting.
- ✓ Post-disaster WASH activities should identify and incorporate an analysis of the environmental impact(s) for other clusters. Cross sectoral co-ordination should be formalised and a common approach designed and implemented to limit negative environmental impacts.
- ✓ An assessment of the environmental impacts of immediate post-disaster WASH assistance should incorporate consideration of longer term recovery and development matters which might have an environmental impact.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For further or immediate guidance on how to address environment-related issues in WASH emergency operations please contact the Cluster Lead focal point:

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