
Carrying water in Lao PDR (Credit: DFAT/Flickr CC BY 2.0)

Water and COVID-19

By Marian J. Neal
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The water sector has an important role to play in our immediate response to COVID-19 as well as in the recovery and rebuilding phases as the world readjusts to a range of legacy impacts from the pandemic. This role spans and incorporates the breadth and depth of the various domains and disciplines of water resources management.

The strength and uniqueness of water is that it is connected to and embedded within most of the goods and services that we rely on as individuals, communities, countries and regions.

COVID-19 is testing the strength of these interconnections and interdependencies and is revealing just how important water is in addressing the health, food, transport, environmental and economic crises that are unfolding before us. A recognition that water is an essential service will enhance our ability to respond, recover and rebuild a post-COVID-19 world and provides an opportunity for us to rethink and reprioritise our interests, ambitions and resources.

The most obvious and immediate water and COVID-19 link is the risk this pandemic poses to the ability of water service providers (both formal and informal) to guarantee supply of water of a suitable quality, to enable sanitation and hygiene practices that limit the spread of the virus. In a developing country context, many water utilities were already under pressure prior to the pandemic due to the lack of resources dedicated to expanding distribution networks, building water treatment plants, addressing ongoing infrastructure maintenance, and/or enhancing capacity to manage systems and maintain standards. Indeed, many rural communities still lack any formal water service. Water service providers now face even more challenges with business continuity at risk along the whole water supply and treatment value chain, which could have disastrous health consequences if further disrupted by COVID-19.

In the urban water management domain, areas at greater risk since lock-downs have been

instigated in many countries are densely populated urban centres and peri-urban informal settlements, where social distancing and access to running water for hand-washing is nearly impossible. The pandemic is a wake-up call to urban planners and municipal bureaucrats to integrate water sensitive urban design and water smart cities into their policies and practices, and this includes peri-urban informal settlements. The highly unequal access to adequate urban infrastructure and services can be addressed by adopting a water sensitive city and circular economy approach to integrated urban water management.

The interdependencies of water security and food security have been tested as transportation and trade routes have been restricted and reduced in an attempt to 'flatten the curve' of the virus, bringing into sharp focus the need to ensure water availability and access for subsistence needs and domestic food production. For water scarce and stressed countries, that means paying particular attention to water use efficiency approaches, mechanisms, and technologies that allow for local production to meet basic nutrition needs and to ease the demand pressure of this thirsty sector. Our efforts to rebuild and recover our economies needs to be accompanied by sustainable land and water practices that strengthen the robustness of our food and agricultural systems to future shocks.

The health of our freshwater ecosystems underpins any social and economic ambitions that we might have. Thus, the good governance of our river basins and catchments is a cornerstone to building resilient systems that are robust to disturbances such as COVID-19. Ensuring sufficient water is available for water-dependent ecosystems and that our rivers are not over-extracted and polluted is a wise strategy that contributes to our long-term human wellbeing and ability to recover faster from disasters, climate change impacts, and disrupters to sustainable development and growth.

International and transboundary cooperation over shared water resources, a nuanced understanding of how cooperation and conflict interact, and utilising Thinking and Working Politically approaches to reflect and respond to dynamic political economies are critical to regional stability. In those regions of the world where governments and economies are fragile and conflict impacted, water sharing governance arrangements can play an invaluable role in keeping dialogue and knowledge exchange doors open between riparian countries.

Women and girls who are collectors of water used by the household or community are already recognised as a group negatively impacted in terms of their education, livelihoods and personal safety; the added dimension of COVID-19 has exacerbated this disadvantage. In some regions, social distancing and lockdown rules have resulted in a re-emergence of the gendered role of caring for those infected with the virus falling predominately on

women.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embraces the realisation of human rights for all, leaving no one behind. Adopting a human rights based approach to water management is imperative if we are to achieve the SDGs, but also if we want to build a more resilient world as we reconstruct livelihoods and economies during the transition from COVID-19 response to recovery.

COVID-19 can be described as a threat multiplier to the existing pressures, drivers and ambitions of a sustainable world. Climate change has also been described as a threat multiplier, also intersecting with water challenges. We need to adopt a systems-thinking approach if we are to succeed in addressing multifaceted issues and threats. Water is an essential service; it is a variable that, if we pull in the right direction, can have a positive knock-on effect at many levels (individual, household, community, country and region) as well as over different time intervals (immediate, medium- and long-term).

This is a crucible moment if ever there was one, and the water sector has an opportunity to provide strong and effective leadership at this time. Governments can and should make policy and practice changes to ensure that there are some long-term positive outcomes of the COVID-19 legacy.

For a more detailed exposition, click here.

This post is part of the #COVID-19 and international development series.

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Link:
https://devpolicy.org/water-provides-multiple-entry-points-to-responding-to-and-recovering-from-covid-19-20200522-2/
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