

Call to Action

Building Momentum around Climate Change in Rural Sanitation

November 2021

On 28th October 2021, the [Sanitation Learning Hub](#) (Institute of Development Studies) and the [Institute for Sustainable Futures](#) (University of Technology Sydney) convened a workshop that brought together rural sanitation practitioners and researchers from across the world. In anticipation of COP26, we discussed how climate hazards and events will exacerbate existing sanitation challenges and what actions the sector needs to take to respond appropriately.

Why do we need to act now?

Climate change has major implications for the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. Currently, most discussions are focused on water supplies or urban sanitation infrastructure and facilities, with topics such as opportunities for resource recovery after wastewater treatment, and optimising treatment facilities towards reducing emissions. However, climate change impacts on rural sanitation and hygiene are just as devastating and need more serious attention.

Therefore, with this Call to Action, we wish to highlight the climate change implications for rural sanitation. Drawing on existing knowledge and experiences of practitioners and researchers engaged in rural sanitation and hygiene, we wish to encourage discussions and action in this area.

Frequent hazards, uncertainty, increasing variability and the intensity of extreme weather conditions are already making it harder to sustain progress with rural sanitation coverage, and may stop, or even reverse progress made. Floods, storm surges, and heavy rains are damaging latrine facilities, disrupting their functionality and making it harder for people with physical disabilities to access these services. Droughts, water scarcity and dry conditions are challenging the maintenance of handwashing behaviour, the safe management of menstrual hygiene and the resilience of existing sanitation infrastructure.

All these disruptions are causing people to revert to open defecation. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [Sixth Assessment Report](#) makes it clear that the weather extremes driving these disruptions will continue to intensify with each additional fraction of a degree of global heating.

Further, climate hazards are affecting people's livelihoods, which in turn affects their ability to prioritise their sanitation needs. Landslides and floods also limit access to local markets that supply the products and services necessary to maintain safe and functional latrines, such as pit emptying and transportation services.

The sector currently faces several challenges including, but not limited to:

- lack of recognition and prioritisation, by governments, donors and international agencies, of climate change impacts on rural sanitation;

- knowledge gaps around affordable, accessible, climate-resilient sanitation technologies;
- limited documented evidence on successful interventions and local responses;
- difficulty in establishing a common understanding of climate vulnerability and rural sanitation in a practical context, due to the complexity and multidimensional nature of climate change impacts;
- tendency to only invest in hardware and large infrastructure while neglecting enabling environments towards resilient sanitation; and
- limited acknowledgment of power dynamics in shaping how climate impacts are experienced, and the diversity of experiences, perspectives and relationships amongst people, households and communities.

Building climate resilience in the rural sanitation sector requires action across local, national, regional, and global stakeholders. While current research and programming already focus on ensuring sustainability of sanitation and hygiene, the actions below outline additional measures that need to be taken to sustain progress in an increasingly extreme and unpredictable climate. This will need to be supported by practitioners, researchers, community-based organisations and local institutions.

There is also an immediate need to explain the urgency and necessity of action to donors and bring them into wider discussions to secure support for rural sanitation and hygiene within climate funding, and, respectively, for climate resilience in rural sanitation and hygiene funding.

What actions are needed immediately?

In research and learning:

- Conduct formative research to understand existing and highest priority climate change-sanitation vulnerabilities at different levels (community, private, public), to address them appropriately.
- Include the collection of climate resilience data in routine monitoring by International Development Agencies and NGOs.

In practice and programming:

- Bring together climate change advocacy and WASH groups to deliver focused messaging.
- Build learning into programmes to learn from existing coping strategies and innovations, collecting evidence on what works, including existing local knowledge on responding to climate impacts.
- Think through opportunities to ensure people are prioritising sanitation during and after climate shocks.
- Integrate climate-relevant aspects in CLTS (community-led total sanitation) triggering, transect walks and other participatory behaviour change interventions.
- Consider climate vulnerability in pro-poor sanitation subsidies and support mechanisms, adapting existing programmatic strategies.
- Consider resilience as an ongoing process rather than an endpoint, and acknowledge resilience is heterogenous across different groups.

All stakeholders across the sector need to:

- Engage grassroots and local partners working in diverse (e.g. agriculture/livelihoods) aspects of climate resilience across sub-national regions within sanitation and hygiene programming.

- Build on existing local adaptive mechanisms and practices to minimise impact with support from local government, such as precautionary early flood warnings to communities, and responses around timely cleaning and reinforcement of facilities.
- Consider sanitation and hygiene related activities in the context of ecological systems and encourage thinking and action that sustain rather than destroy local natural systems (which are part of resilience) in the long term.

What actions are needed in the medium-term?

In research and learning:

- Collect data on disasters and climate change impacts and share with rural dwellers and stakeholder groups, in relevant and understandable forms, to help them prepare. Also, consider forecasting and modelling of flood events to minimise disruption of sanitation facilities.
- Make the effort to understand how slower onset events like droughts, increasing scarcity and desertification impact rural sanitation practices and behaviour.
- Conduct formative research to understand and unpack how communities can take up faecal sludge management practices to be more climate resilient, and how this can contribute towards sustained access to services.
- Convene spaces and discussions for a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration for coordinated approaches, to address the highest priorities and increase climate resilience at the different levels (community, private, public).

In practice and programming:

- Include data related to climate impacts on rural sanitation and hygiene and resilience in monitoring by utilities and local and national governments.
- Formulate indicators of resilience to climate - these should be simple, and practical. Resilience should be considered at different levels (household/community, level, socio-economic, political and cultural levels).
- Advocate to governments to commit to action plans, policies and budgets for rural sanitation resilience.
- Advocate to donors for financing that encourages cross-sectoral collaboration and engagement
- Consider how approaches towards behaviour change interventions need to change to suit increasingly extreme and variable climate contexts
- Catalyse demand to ensure sanitation and hygiene facilities are prioritised during and after extreme climate events. Encourage people to invest and take ownership of their climate-resilient technology and infrastructure to ensure sustained investment and maintenance.
- Make emergency response plans for vulnerable areas and consider back up container-based toilet plans.

All stakeholders across the sector need to:

- Build consensus through an area-wide action plan with support from relevant stakeholders such as local governments, NGOs and community leaders.
- Ensure an area-wide approach that includes considerations of the ecological landscape it covers. Work towards scaling up this approach to become part of government policy and implementation.
- Avoid silos. Bring together nature conservation organisations, agricultural organisations and the private sector to develop a landscape approach that both

enables communities to become climate resilient and equips sustainable WASH supply and services.

- Explore nature-based solutions for preventing sanitation pollution from contaminating water in rural settings

What actions are needed in the long-term?

- Transform our ways of working and engaging with other sectors to ensure our approaches are systemic and contribute to addressing all basic human and environmental needs, not just sanitation and hygiene needs. Build confidence within governments and donors to back intersectoral thinking and collaboration as a way forward.
- Develop long-term sustainable supply chains and markets for resilient sanitation products and services in rural areas.
- Build sustainable, culturally acceptable, inclusive, affordable, context-specific infrastructure and technologies in rural areas.
- Consider income generation activities for resources to finance sanitation in rural areas impacted by climate extremes.

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