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POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WaSH) IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Mary Fairio

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Key Points

- Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WaSH) should be prioritised now because everyone must access these basic services to minimise the spread of COVID-19.
- WaSH sector is impacted more as water demand increases, soap is needed, and sanitation becomes essential.
- However, 80 percent of PNG's rural population and urban settlers are not able to access these critical WaSH services.
- All stakeholders including government, businesses, media and individuals must work together to create a safe and hygienic environment for everyone.
- Going forward, the PNG Government must prioritise the WaSH sector by effectively implementing the WaSH policy.

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POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WaSH) IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By Mary Fairio

The strategy to promote “safe water, sanitation, and hygienic (WaSH) conditions” emphasised and encouraged widely by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is perhaps the most important strategy to prevent COVID-19 infection. However, there are variations of water accessibility between different countries and within countries such as urban versus rural areas.

WaSH has always been an important area, yet neglected in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Only recently, the PNG Government endorsed the implementation of the National WaSH Policy (2015-2030). It is a step forward, but two steps behind especially during a global pandemic like COVID-19. In a developing country like PNG, WaSH sector will be affected in various ways. This paper therefore, attempts to explain: i) the potential impact of COVID-19 on the WaSH sector; and, ii) provide possible strategies to address the issues.

The WaSH

The impact of COVID-19 on PNG is widespread and can lead to catastrophic outcomes. A critical area is WaSH, which is a crosscutting sector that has already been impacted in a big way; especially when water, sanitation and hygiene are the very basic requirements to protect individuals against infectious diseases such as COVID-19.

Evidence from studies show that hand-washing can prevent life threatening diseases and save lives. For example, a review of related articles (Rabie & Curtis, 2006) found that hand washing can reduce the spread of respiratory diseases by around 15 to 20 percent.

Despite WaSH being a universal right, emphasised by Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goal number 6, not everyone has access to water and sanitation. Globally, 29 percent of the world’s population (2.1 billion) do not have access to safe drinking water, and nine percent (over 600

million) do not have access to improved water source and sanitation (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). This has resulted in 1.2 million deaths annually, where 66 percent of these deaths are in the low-income countries (ibid.)

For example, there is still inaccessible and unsustainable WaSH for many in the Pacific Islands despite rapid growth and cultural change especially in the urban centres. PNG presents its own challenges towards addressing accessible, and sustainable WaSH for all. So far, PNG has made slow progress in addressing WaSH. One key progress is the WaSH policy (2015-2030).

The PNG WaSH Policy (2015-2030) aims to “provide equitable access to safe, convenient and sustainable water supply and sanitation and to promote improved hygiene practices and long-term hygiene behavior change at personal, household, community and institutional level in particular to rural and urban settlement areas that are currently under-served” (Department of National Planning and Monitoring, 2015:8). To date, implementation is a challenge. Given a geographically diverse country such as PNG, understanding the various factors that impact on WaSH is critical to implementing the WaSH policy effectively.

The following attempt to discuss the possible impact of COVID-19 on the WaSH sector in PNG.

Potential impact of COVID-19 on WaSH

Water

A major impact on WaSH is the increasing demand for water for handwashing, laundry, and so on. During COVID-19 pandemic, where “washing hands” is the basic requirement, how can people frequently wash their hands when there is limited access to water especially in many rural areas in PNG? Household income and expenditure survey found that 54 percent of households, mainly in rural areas, do not have access to improved water source; and majority, 76 percent use basic unimproved toilets. There is a large difference in water and sanitation access between rural and urban households. As a result, WaSH related deaths in PNG are estimated at 6,164 per year (Institute for Sustainable futures Papua New Guinea WaSH sector brief, cited in DNPM, 2015).

In addition, densely populated areas with access to limited water are at risk of COVID-19 (Jerving, 2020). For example, people living in settlements, rural and isolated areas, prisons and vulnerable people. Many in these places depend on shared facilities, such as water sources and toilets. Even when there is access to water, it is only available for a few hours per day. During the lockdown period from 23 to 31 March 2020, Eda Ranu rationed water in Port Moresby. During this time, communities that have communal water taps in urban settlements for example, would have been at risk because of limited water to wash hands, utensils, to cook, and so on. When there is limited or no water, people are at risk of getting sick and face a much higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

Sanitation

Another major impact on WaSH would be the need for frequent use of soap for washing hands. However, some people may not be able to afford soap. During COVID-19, it is also critical to wash hands with soap, but there are people who may not be able to have access to soap. According to Bruce Gordon of WaSH at WHO, “solutions that are not regularly recommended, are possible” (Jerving, 2020). Alternative to soap includes chlorinated water, but it is not usually recommended by WHO because it can lead to dermatitis after many hand-washes. Washing hands with ash and clay can also work in place of soap.

However, even with soap and when there is limited or no water, people might not be able to wash their hands after toilet, for instance. How can one use soap without water? It has been confirmed that less than 10 percent of confirmed COVID-19 cases was present with diarrhoea (WHO, 2020). While there have been no reports of virus transmission by faeces yet, sanitation cannot be overlooked. Sanitation must also be taken into consideration, as it is a risk area that the virus can be transmitted if the toilet is not clean or disinfected. Aside from clean toilets, general cleanliness of the environment is critical during this pandemic.

Hygiene

Yet another major impact on WaSH is the essential need to use disinfectants on surfaces such as tables and desks. But not everyone can afford disinfectants. Many who rely heavily on informal sector for income may not be able to purchase disinfectants because they cannot sell their produce during the lockdown. Though disinfectants are essential, not everyone have access to these products.

It has been found that the survival of coronavirus on surfaces varies in timeframe ranging from two hours to nine days, and it depends on a number of factors: surface type, temperature, relative humidity and the specific strain of the virus (WHO,

2020). The same review also found that inactivation could be achieved within one minute using common disinfectants such as 70 percent ethanol or sodium hypochlorite (ibid.). This shows that hygiene consideration is critical at all times during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Approaches to WaSH during COVID-19 outbreak

There are different WaSH efforts in response to the pandemic. The PNG Government is primarily and increasingly involved in various ways. For example, apart from allocating millions of kina into preparedness for COVID-19, the Government is also involved in conducting major public awareness campaigns on precautions to take such as maintaining hand hygiene. Framing and driving these messages using different forms of media is important, especially when 80 percent of PNG’s population live in rural areas and the majority are engaged in the informal sector where water accessibility is also a challenge.

Alongside governments, development partners in the WaSH sector have implemented related programs at the community level. For example, WaterAid PNG provided COVID-19 awareness materials to the East Sepik Provincial Health Authority to carry out extensive awareness throughout the rural areas in the East Sepik Province.

Private organisations and businesses are also involved to address the WaSH aspect of the pandemic. Theodist, a major stationary shop in Port Moresby and a hardware in Alotau Town have built a sink and provided soap for customers before entering the shops. In addition, other shops have provided hand sanitizers apart from checking customers for body temperature, such as Stop and Shop and Vision City Mega Mall in Port Moresby.

At the provincial level, the National Capital District Governor, Hon. Powes Parkop and NCD’s three open electorate members are keen to see that all communities can access clean water, as they collaborate with the UNWomen and Eda Ranu. The WaSH component requires collaboration between partners and different stakeholders.

At the individual level, hand sanitizers, wipes and other washing items were purchased by individuals to keep themselves, their families, home and surrounding clean. Hand sanitizers, disinfectants and soap are essential sanitation and hygiene items that can prevent the spread of COVID-19.

As we have seen the devastating effect on WaSH sector so far, COVID-19 affects everyone at all levels and does not consider any differences in age, status, background and so on. Therefore, it is important that everyone knows the basics

of protecting him or herself, family, and community from the infectious virus. That starts from paying attention to basics of water, sanitation and hygiene.

Potential strategies to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on WaSH

- Government organisations, donors and others are already working to help fill the gaps in the WaSH Sector by having their own programs, but there is a need for WaSH professionals to re-strategise quickly because of the impact of COVID-19. One important area is collaboration and pulling resources together.
- It is important that water and sanitation services are safely managed, and apply good hygiene practices such as cleaning and disinfecting. These include keeping water supply or sources safe, safely managing wastewater and faecal waste, and have WaSH in public and health care settings.
- Ensure WaSH services are available in all educational establishments especially primary schools and for WaSH education to be a key component of children's learning from an early age.
- It is critical that government include financial provisions for water suppliers like Eda Ranu and Water PNG to find effective ways to assist with providing water for the areas needing water most such as the rural areas and urban settlements.
- At the individual level, everyone has the responsibility for maintaining basic health including hand washing. Where there is limited or no water, storing water from rain, river, tank and rationed water can help.
- The Government must now prioritise WaSH sector as this is a critical area to a safer and healthier population.

Conclusion

Evidently, WaSH sector must be a priority for the government during this time where everyone must access basic water, sanitation and hygiene services to protect themselves against the spread of COVID-19. Going forward, the PNG Government must prioritise WaSH sector by effectively implementing the WaSH policy. We may not improve this area overnight, but at least make a progress on improving

some areas of WaSH in readiness for an outbreak, especially in rural and settlements areas.

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About the Author

Mary Fairio is a Research Fellow with the Gender in PNG Research Program at PNG National Research Institute. She has a Master's degree in Political Science and a Graduate Certificate in Gender Studies from Ohio University, USA. Her research interest include understanding gender issues in PNG particularly women leadership, and gender based violence.