

International Development Committee - Special Session on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

28th February 2023 Grimond Room, Portcullis House

Written notes/follow up to oral evidence. Dr Nick Hepworth, Water Witness International

nickhepworth@waterwitness.org +44 7519 120967

1. *The importance of WASH to development*

- Access to safe water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is a central priority for development which underpins economic and social progress, **but I urge the Committee to consider WASH in the context of water security more broadly** because of its importance as an accelerator, or break on the attainment of almost all the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Water security is defined as **‘the reliable availability of an acceptable quantity and quality of water for production, livelihoods, health and ecosystems, coupled with an acceptable level of risk from hazards including drought, flooding, pollution and conflicts.’**¹
- Securing sustainable access to WASH, and preventing the almost 1 million deaths a year which result from a lack of safe WASH², requires **effective water resource management (WRM) and disaster risk reduction (DRR)** within a holistic approach to ensuring water security.
- **Water security is also needed for food security**, 70% of global water use is in agriculture and we need to increase food production by 60% and irrigation by 15% by 2050 to tackle today’s hunger and meet future demand³.
- **Water security is needed for nature.** Freshwater species are being lost at rates faster than in any other ecosystems⁴.
- **Water security is needed to deal with the impacts of climate change** since water is how climate change is felt. Almost all emission scenarios indicate increased and more severe drought and floods. By 2050, an additional 500 million people are likely to face water stress in Africa because of climate change⁵.
- **Water security underpins economic growth, peace and political stability.**

If we fail to take effective action now and **begin to invest the 1% of global GDP needed to deliver water security**⁶, the prognosis looks very grim. Without urgent action, by 2050:

¹ Grey, D., Sadoff, C.W. (2007). Sink or swim?: Water security for growth and development. 545–571. doi:10.2166/wp.2007.021.

² WHO, 2022. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>

³ World Bank. 2017. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/waterresourcesmanagement>

⁴ IPBES, 2019. Summary for policymakers. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3553579>

⁵ USEPA/NASA 2015.

⁶ World Resources Institute 2020. <https://www.wri.org/insights/it-could-only-cost-1-gdp-solve-global-water-crises>

- 5 billion people will lack water at least once a month.⁷
- 700 million people will be at risk of displacement because of intense water stress.⁸
- Water related losses in some regions will constrain economic activity by as much as 10% of GDP⁹. Putting this in context - COVID typically cost 3.5%.

These are not distant problems disconnected from the United Kingdom. New analysis commissioned by Water Witness to be launched at UN Water 2023 shows that **71% of the UK's total water footprint lies outside the UK**. This means that more than two thirds of the water use we depend on to supply the UK with food, clothes and other goods takes place overseas using other peoples water. Assessments suggest that as much as 40% of that water use is already unsustainable, depleting and degrading water resources, pushing distant communities into climate vulnerability and threatening the future viability of our strategically important supply chains¹⁰.

Tackling the global water crisis sits alongside the climate emergency as one of the greatest challenges facing humanity. Yet **water security continues to suffer from a lack of political prioritisation and inadequate investment**. The International Development Committee can play a role in the fundamental and urgent change now needed on water. Broadly, we need the United Kingdom government to work with partners across business, finance, research and civil society to make shared water security an urgent global political priority, to demonstrate bold leadership, utilise its convening and diplomatic power, and to mobilise the policy, legal reform, and financial investment needed for a fairer water future.

There are a range of proven and good value for money opportunities to address the poor governance which is at the heart of the water crisis. For example, **investment in social accountability monitoring and budget tracking to incentivise implementation of policy, enforcement of water law and adequate financing, has been shown to deliver positive outcomes for improved water services and governance in 8 out of 10 accounts**.¹¹

The UK-led Fair Water Footprint Declaration signed at COP26 in Glasgow and the growing partnership for implementation also offers great potential to trigger the systemic change needed on water, but as discussed under Section 5, **realising this potential will be contingent on UK government funding through FCDO's long delayed '£40 million Transforming Water Governance' Programme**.

⁷ WMO, 2022. State of Global Water Resources report informs on rivers, land water storage and glaciers. <https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/state-of-global-water-resources-report-informs-rivers-land-water-storage-and>

⁸ UN High Level Panel on Water, 2022. <https://www.un.org/pga/76/2022/08/30/high-level-panel-on-harnessing-global-development-agendas-on-the-road-to-2023-during-the-world-water-week/>

⁹ World Bank Group. (2016). 'High and Dry : Climate Change, Water, and the Economy'.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/high-and-dry-climate-change-water-and-the-economy>

¹⁰ Chapagain, A.K. and Mekonnen, M.M. (forthcoming, 2023), Understanding the water footprint of the Global North and our dependency on water use within the Global South. Water Witness International. UK.

¹¹ Accountability for Water, 2021. <https://iwaponline.com/h2open/article-abstract/5/2/307/88802>

Recommendations:

1. The FCDO and UK government should take a holistic approach to global water security with a balanced focus on WASH, water resource management and disaster risk reduction.
2. The UK government and FCDO should work with partners across business, finance, research, NGOs and civil society to make shared water security a global political priority, demonstrate bold leadership, utilise convening and diplomatic power, and mobilise the policy, reform, and financial investment needed for systemic change on water.
3. Prioritise investment in accountability monitoring and budget tracking to incentivise improved water governance at local, catchment, national and global scales.
4. Increase the number of FCDO staff dedicated to working on water security in the UK and overseas to adequately reflect its importance and the workload ahead.

2. Progress on water-related SDGs.

SDG targets are all off track, but rapid progress is possible if we act now. Based on UN's 2021 update¹²:

- 1 in 4 people still lack safely managed drinking water.
- 46% - so almost half of humanity - lacks safely managed sanitation.
- Only 56% of domestic wastewater is safely treated.
- Implementation of 'Integrated Water Resource Management' (IWRM) is the 'wheel-house' of water management and climate adaptation. Despite global commitment to implement IWRM over 20 years ago at WSSD 2002 in Johannesburg, levels of implementation are alarmingly low, at 54% globally and 46% in sub-Saharan Africa.

UN figures show that the funding needed for IWRM simply isn't there. Water Witness analysis across Africa suggests that only about 10% of the funding needed for water resource management is actually in place.

With the right kinds of reform, many aspects of water management can be self-financing. Setting a more appropriate level of tariff for abstraction of water from rivers and aquifers can generate revenue for authorities that can be ploughed back into management and monitoring of water. It can also start to put a more appropriate value on water and build incentives for responsible use.

Recommendations:

1. The UK, through FCDO and the wider development community and must invest a more appropriate, and greater level of human and financial resources, and diplomatic effort in improving water resource management. This should target structural support for stronger WRM institutions, creation of sustainable

¹² <http://www.sdg6data.org/en/indicator/6.5.1>

infrastructure and nature based-solutions, and targeted finance to dramatically improve global water governance.

2. The FCDO and the wider UK government should stand ready to implement the findings and recommendations of the [Global Commission on the Economics of Water](#) and to support global scale reform in the way that water is valued, managed and financed.

3. The UK International Development Strategy

The International Development Strategy (IDS) rightly prioritises girl's education, health security, climate and nature, economic growth and conflict resolution.

However, the UK's withdrawal from investment in water resource management and cuts of two-thirds of funding for WASH are totally incompatible with these stated goals because water security underpins delivery of each of them. For example:

IDS targets getting 40 million more girls into school globally. To get girls into school and performing at their best 3 preconditions are:

- **decent facilities and menstrual hygiene management in school.** In Tanzania for example, 30% of schools have no water access at all and 70% lacked basic sanitation.
- **children that are well and healthy through good WASH access:** 443 million school days are lost every year because of water-related illnesses.
- **lifting the burden on girls of fetching water.** Women and girls spend a total of 200 million hours fetching household water each day.

Health security: 62% of Africa's urban population are unable to access basic WASH services and water borne disease which causes almost 1 million avoidable deaths each year.

Climate and nature: Improved water management is a key strategy for responding to the climate emergency and protecting nature. WASH is a critical component of climate resilience. Water management offers huge potential for clean energy, for example only 10% of Africa's hydro-electric power potential is currently exploited.

Economic growth and security: Without water security you cannot create decent jobs or grow your economy. 42% of jobs globally are heavily dependent on water in sectors of agriculture, mining, fisheries and forestry – so this is particularly important in Africa where these sectors dominate.

Water security is a factor in civil and ethnic unrest, regional conflict and driver of migration. The UN High Level Panel on Water predicts that 700 million people are at risk from being displaced by 2050 because of intense water stress. An alarming illustration of the drivers of such displacement is recent research by ICIMOD which suggests that even if mean global temperature rise is limited to 1.5 degrees, one third of Himalayan glaciers will

be lost, threatening the water security of 2 billion people across Asia - a quarter of humanity - who rely on their meltwater rivers for their health and livelihoods.¹³

Recommendation:

1. The priorities set out in the IDS are appropriate but improved water security and WASH access are precursors to progress on girl's education, health security, climate and nature, economic growth and conflict resolution. An explicit focus on, and investment in WASH and water security, and a supporting UK strategy on tackling the global water crisis, are therefore urgently needed.

4. Aid cuts

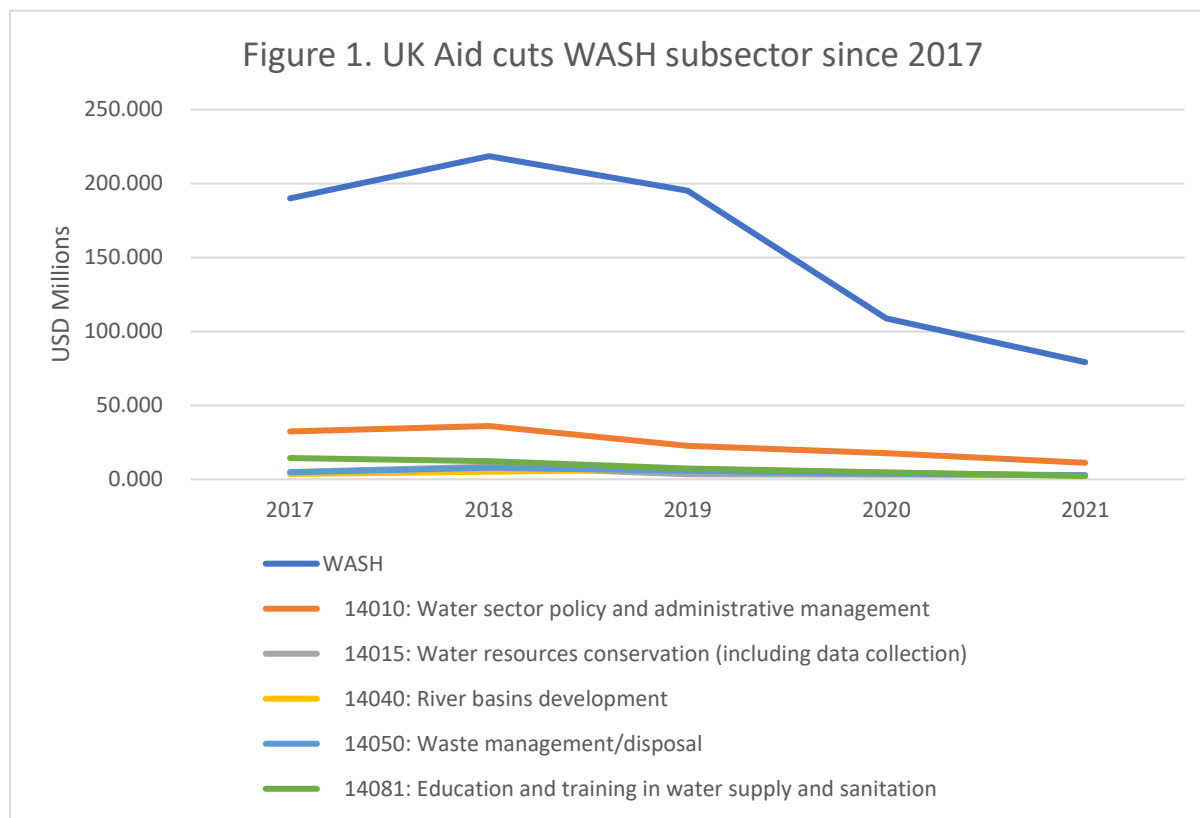
Our analysis of the cuts based on data reported by UK to OECD, suggest that proportionally, water has lost significantly more funding than other sectors. This is a clear strategic misstep considering the central role of WASH and water security in underpinning the UK's international development strategy.

- **All sectors have lost a 1/3rd of aid between 2019 – 2021 from 14bn to 9bn.**
- **Over the same period WASH/WRM spending dropped by 2/3rd. From 288M to 100M.**
- WASH saw the biggest total drop as it comprises the majority of aid to the sector, from 218M to 79M.
- **WRM and flood preparedness, were already at low levels and have been cut further to almost nothing (see Figure 1.).**
- **Disaster risk reduction was cut by 80% from 10M to under 2M.** This is simply irresponsible when one considers that 170 million people already affected by drought, and that under all emission scenarios floods and drought are set to increase in frequency and severity.
- **Aid for water was focussed on the most vulnerable poor countries in Africa but this support has been cut by two thirds from 180M to 60M.**
- Seven countries account for the majority of aid to the sector. All have seen cuts of over 50% compared to their 5 year high-point. Ethiopia and Nigeria being cut 99% compared to 2017.
- As noted in ICAI's information note on the UK's changing approach to WASH of 2022¹⁴, both the speed and the scale of these cuts have been devastating – forcing disorderly and chaotic withdrawal and cancellation of often high performing programmes.
- Water Witness lost £1.3M of Aid Direct funding at very short notice, despite re-assurances that Aid Direct spend for civil society would be protected. As a result we

¹³ Wester et al. (2019). The Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Mountains, Climate Change, Sustainability and People. 10.1007/978-3-319-92288-1.

¹⁴ <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/The-UKs-changing-approach-to-water-sanitation-and-hygiene.pdf>

have also lost significant match funding, and been unable to help around a million vulnerable people to become more water secure.



In April 2021 I authored an open letter signed by 52 leading development and water experts warning the then Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab that cutting aid on water would impact the health, wellbeing and economic prospects of millions of people (See Annex). Sadly, we are now beginning to see the tragic consequences of the decision to proceed with such dramatic cuts to UK aid on water.

UK Aid cuts and Malawi's Cholera epidemic

Malawi is in the grip of the deadliest cholera emergency in its history with 40 thousand cases, 1450 deaths, and all Districts affected. The epidemic started after flooding of the Shire River displaced 190 000 people in southern Malawi in January 2022. 'Storm Ana' dumped an unprecedented 300 mm of rain in a single day. As well as directly killing 142 people across the region, the flooding created perfect conditions for cholera: smashed up water infrastructure, contaminated flood water, large numbers of people forced to move into displacement camps (see Plates).

The most badly affected Districts included Mangochi, Balaka, Phalombe and Chikwawa. I visited Chikwawa in March 2022 and saw the devastation met on families who'd lost kids who'd fallen out of the trees the community had escaped to during the night of the flood.



Based on our analysis, had UK Aid not been cut so dramatically it could have lessened the impact of the flooding, and possibly prevented or at least reduced the impact of the current cholera epidemic.¹⁵

Malawi is highly vulnerable to cholera, an appalling disease which causes death by diarrhoea and dehydration. It is spread by faecal contamination of food and water supplies and is

¹⁵ Our DevEx article and Water Witness's testimony and evidence cited within it draw on:

- a. Available data on the cholera epidemic and its origins including UNICEF and the World Health Organisation <https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2022-DON435>
- b. A detailed review of the BRACC evaluation of February 2022, BRACC learning notes and programme design material.
- c. Discussions with key informants in Malawi in March 2022 including community members affected by Storm Ana floods, District Government staff responsible for Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation, the Principal Officer of the Department for Disaster Management Affairs, BRACC partners and FCDO staff.
- d. Email communications with the team responsible for the BRACC programme evaluation.

relatively easy to avoid through decent WASH provision. Only a quarter of Malawians have access to a safe toilet, only 10% of households have access to handwashing and 25% of all water points don't work. The UK has historically been an important and major donor to the water sector in Malawi, but has cut its aid on WASH by 50% since 2018. UK spending on health education was cut completely in 2018.

The UK cuts means fewer spares, fewer technicians, less monitoring and less safe water, sanitation and hygiene across Malawi, and will have certainly have made Malawi more vulnerable to cholera outbreaks. But there is also a specific programme called BRACC (Building Resilience and Adapting to extreme climate events) which faced drastic cuts in 2021. Had BRACC been fully implemented it could have helped communities to be much more resilient, and could have controlled and minimised the cholera outbreak more directly.

BRACC was a £90M UK programme focused on building resilience for over 1 million people in the four districts most badly affected by floods and droughts – Mangochi, Chikwawa, Palmobe and Balaka. It focused on increasing household income and food security, on using climate and weather forecasting data, and helping District Civil Defence committees to plan for extreme events. It also provided something called a 'crisis modifier' – a significant pot of money which could be drawn down in emergencies and deployed as a quick response to a climate event to stop a bad situation getting very much worse.

Despite the BRACC programme scoring A++ - the best FCDO rating it could get, most of the work was terminated by FCDO in 2021 after just 2 years of a 5 year programme^{16,17}. Delivery staff told me they were given 3 months to pack up and clear out, and how shocked they were to be shut down when the programme was performing well, having gained the trust of communities.

Had the programme remained in place – the communities affected by the floods may have received advance warning, contingency plans could have been in place, and a rapid response fund set up to deal with exactly the type of flooding seen could have been used to ensure decent WASH for the displaced people, and rapid treatment for those that became sick with cholera.

When we flagged this in an article with DevEx, FCDO's Press Office got in touch to ask us to amend the article saying that they weren't investing heavily in early warning systems under BRACC, and that the crisis modifier wasn't designed to respond to floods. However, the BRACC programme documents and guidance clearly indicate that the crisis modifier could be deployed in response to rapid onset events like floods:

¹⁶ Surprisingly, the BRACC programme is listed as 'on track' on the government's devtracker website, but with a planned spend of only 60 million, compared to the original budget of 90million. BRACC has been cut by 30million USD, but is listed on the FCDO website as 'implementation phase' and the budget annual totals have been adjusted down, making it look like it hasn't been cut.

¹⁷ A component called PROSPER - Promoting sustainable partnerships for empowered resilience was particularly badly hit

‘...the guidance note describes circumstances and processes where the crisis modifier may be used to respond to rapid-onset events such as flooding (e.g. in cases such as the 2019 flooding related to Cyclone Idai), p4. BRACC Crisis Modifier Brief

According to the lead evaluator of the BRACC programme:

‘If it was still working as initially intended, the crisis modifier could have potentially been activated to release funds for rapid response [to the floods].’

Furthermore, the BRACC programme design document, states that the improved use and access to climate data and information is one of the 11 areas of BRACC programme intervention together with ‘Disaster Preparedness’ and ‘Disaster Risk Reduction and Planning services’. BRACC’s stated purpose was to provide *‘targeted support in the most vulnerable districts, communities and high priority catchments in Malawi, to strengthen the resilience of poor and vulnerable households to weather and climate-related shocks.’*

Further still, the BRACC programme evaluation of work done prior to the cuts states that:

‘Many interviewees in both Chikwawa and Balaka described a decline in cholera and other waterborne diseases in communities, linked directly to the programme.’

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the cancellation of this 5 year programme of support for resilience to climate shocks in four districts just two years into delivery is likely to have undermined its potential to prevent or minimise the impacts of a major flood some 8 months later as well as the subsequent cholera outbreak which started in and around those same four districts. Note that, the first cholera case was identified in Machinga hospital close to Mangochi, and Mangochi has seen the highest infection and mortality rates of any District in Malawi.

So BRACC and the Malawi cholera epidemic provide a tragic example of what can happen when good quality UK aid is cut to some of the most vulnerable people in Africa.

There are difficult decisions to be made on government spending, but the decision to cut aid that stops children dying from avoidable diseases that we banished from Europe over 100 years ago shouldn’t even be on the table. Irrespective of the economic crisis, we cannot just pull up the ladder of development and kick it out of reach for people like those in Malawi.

Recommendations:

We want to see the UK government respond in 5 ways:

1. Immediately step up with emergency aid to Malawi to deal with the cholera epidemic. The UN cholera response appeal is for \$45M. To date the UK has donated around £500 000, just 1.3% of the total needed.
2. FCDO should commission an independent review of the role that BRACC’s cancellation – and the reduction in UK Aid to Malawi more broadly – has played in the current cholera epidemic in Malawi to generate key lessons and improve future decision making.
3. Reinstatement of lifesaving climate resilience programmes like BRACC.

4. A credible and time bound plan for getting aid back to pre-pandemic levels, and within this, a clear prioritisation of water security.
5. A cross government strategy to tackle the global water crisis which includes plans for generating and stimulating the investment needed to close the gap on water security in the most vulnerable countries including Malawi, and globally.

5. Role of the Private Sector

There is a significant role for the private sector and multi-national corporations to play in tackling the global water crisis:

- Corporations use a lot of water – it's estimated that globalised supply chains account for or influence over 70% of the world's water use and pollution.
- An estimated one in five of the world's population work in globalised supply chains.
- Corporate and supermarket supply chains and operations often overlap with places facing the most difficult water and climate challenges.
- Corporations have huge political and financial influence, and communication power.

Where water is abused in supply chains, through pollution or overuse, it damages nature, communities and economies, and sadly, we have many examples of this. Where companies act as responsible water stewards – they can be an important ally.

Smarter ways of working with the private sector on water is something Water Witness has focused on for over a decade. For example, we co-founded the Alliance for Water Stewardship and developed the first ever international standard to guide and recognise responsible water use which is now used by the likes of Apple, Unilever, Coca Cola, Diageo and Danone.

However, responsible water stewardship still remains niche, practiced only by a handful of leading companies at a handful of sites. We now need to make water stewardship the global business norm. We need to make sure that our very significant global water footprints are 'fair' so that the multinationals and supply chains that serve our needs are advancing resilience and water security rather than undermining it through pollution and overuse.

To be clear – companies have a great deal of influence and are an important ally, but based on over 15 years of working closely with multinationals on water, we can conclude that they are not always in a position to demonstrate the the bold leadership needed to tackle the water crisis – they are often too risk averse, face their own resourcing and prioritisation constraints, and are often not ready or well placed to engage in advocacy, debate and action on water governance. Governments and the 'entrepreneurial state' need to lead, and be ready to legislate for the response, and this is echoed in the work of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water.

We've seen some very good leadership from the UK government in this regard through their co-leadership of the Glasgow Declaration for Fair Water Footprints launched at COP26. The Declaration is now signed by 26 parties and commits governments, business, banks and

NGOS to transformative action to ensure zero pollution, equitable withdrawal, universal WASH access, protection of nature and planning for droughts and floods in their supply chains by 2030. The Declaration is being led by Chatham House, FCDO, Water Witness and CDP with strong support from Minister Lord Goldsmith and this is exactly the kind of ambitious leadership we need to see. The problem is that the UK has yet to commit funding to deliver it's own Declaration's commitments, or to support others in their journey.

Recommendation:

1. The committee should urge the UK government to back up its commendable leadership on, and commitment to Fair Water Footprints with adequate funding (through the £40M Transforming Water Governance Programme and other vehicles), commitment of human resources across DEFRA, DIT and FCDO, and where necessary new legislation. There is huge potential here for the UK and the FWF consortium to embed water security and SDG 6 delivery into global investment, financial decision making, corporate reporting and international trade, and to move water up the political agenda.

6. Importance of WASH for women and girls

Women undoubtedly feel the brunt of water insecurity – through ill health, hardship and lost opportunities, and they need to be supported to be in the lead with solutions. One approach which we know works well is to help women to demand greater accountability for water and WASH through social accountability monitoring. For example this involves enabling women, girls and young people to demand and ensure the human right to water and sanitation, to advocate and bargain on behalf of their communities to ensure that good services are in place, undertaking community budget analysis and tracking as active agents of change. In a recent global evidence review we found that 80% of this type of accountability interventions on water had positive outcomes. Sadly that was the work we were planning to deliver with the £1.3.M of Aid Direct funding which was pulled by FCDO.

Recommendations:

1. FCDO should reinstate the Aid Direct Programme and allocate funding to value for money programmes which support improved governance for water security and which directly support women and girls to become more water secure.

7. UN Water Action Agenda

This is an important milestone and opportunity for tackling the global water crisis. We'll be in New York working with FCDO and WaterAid to champion Fair Water Footprints and Accountability for Water.

It will be vitally important at the event for countries like the UK to demonstrate leadership commitment to solving the water crisis through formal announcements of funding. The UK has a compelling offer to world on water and historically we've demonstrated some of the

best science, research and aid on water issues. The meeting in New York is a chance for the UK to demonstrate that it is still a leader and to start rebuilding trust and credibility.

Recommendations:

1. The UK should announce new and significant funding for water security at the UN Conference – for example by confirming its commitment of £40M to the Transforming Water Governance programme (which has been on hold for many months), and committing an additional £40M to better reflect the true level of investment needed, and to signal the need for new investment to others.

8. Additional question from IDC regarding UK Aid on WASH compared to other nations

Historically the UK was an important donor to the WASH and water sector. Over the last decade the top 5 bilateral donors on WASH and water have included the UK.

ODA on WASH, Constant 2020 USD, Millions (Code 140 in OECD CRS, Total reported 2012-2021)

1st Japan = 11,034.39

2nd Germany = 8493.64

3rd France = 5607.13

4th United States = 4093.75

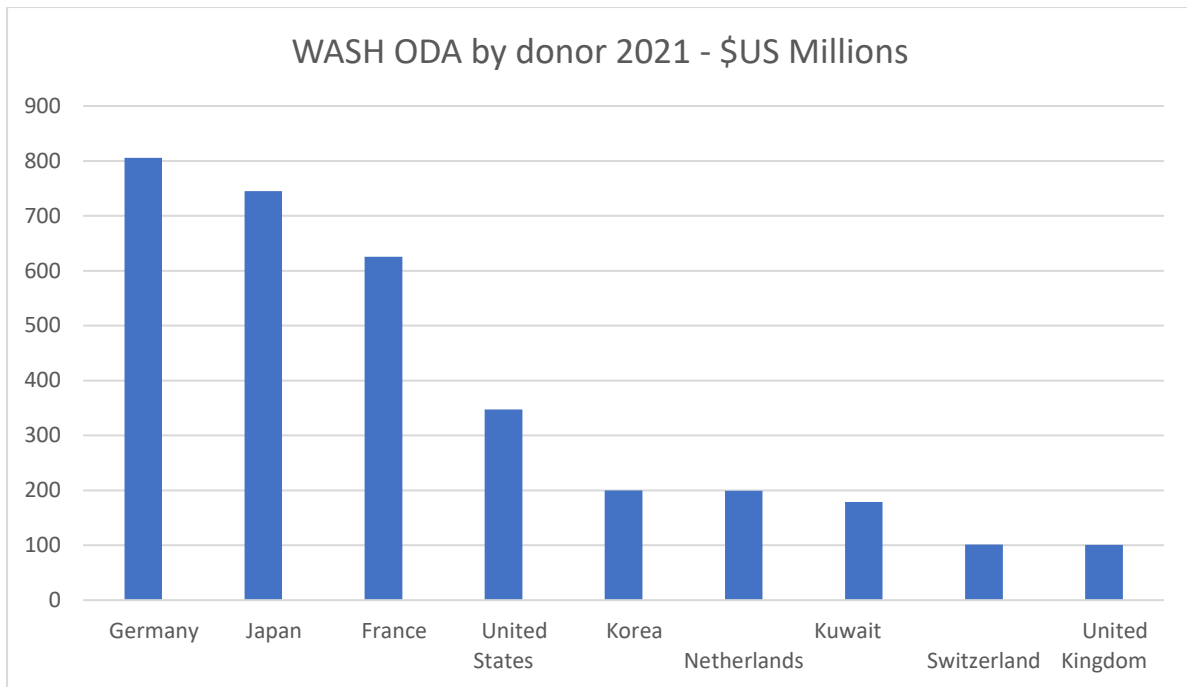
5th UK = 2,177.70

These 5 donors accounted for 72% of all bilateral WASH ODA over the last decade.

But because of the cuts the UK has dropped out of the top 10 of all WASH donors (including multilaterals), and in the last 2 years has been in 9th place among bilateral, 2020 = 142, 2021 = 100 with larger sums being allocated to the sector in 2021 by Switzerland (8th) Kuwait (7th), Netherlands (6th), Korea (5th), as well as the long-standing sector leaders mentioned.

2021 totals:

Germany	805.383
Japan	744.998
France	625.376
United States	347.062
Korea	199.944
Netherlands	199.415
Kuwait	178.929
Switzerland	101.077
United Kingdom	100.510



Non WASH UK spend on Water

Disaster risk reduction was cut by 80% from just over 10million in 2018 to just under 2 million in 2021

Over the last 5 years, “river basin development” peaked in 2019 at 6.8million USD, dropping two-thirds to 2.34 million in 2021.

‘Water resources conservation’, peaked at 8.5million USD in 2018, dropping two-thirds to 2.8million USD in 2021.

It is not clear which programmes or activities these investment result in.

Recommendations:

1. In line with the growing severity of the global water crisis, the UK government should at least match the investment made on WASH and water security by other leading nations. This is likely to require between a four and eight fold increase in aid spend on water security.

Annex – Copy of Aid cuts letter

To the Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP,
Secretary of State for the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office,
King Charles St, Whitehall,
London SW1A 2AH

cc. Wendy Morton, Minister at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

28th April 2021

Minister's letter:

Reversal of plans to cut UK ODA for safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) by 80%

We write to voice our deep concern regarding the 80% cuts to the UK Aid budget for WASH reported in today's press. We are also alarmed by cuts to UK Aid Direct funding for front line work by water-focused NGOs communicated today, contradicting your statement to the House of Commons last week that Aid Direct spend for civil society would be protected.

These cuts result from a UK government decision to reduce aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP. They end an era of bold global leadership by the UK on the provision of safe water and sanitation and hygiene for the world's poor, just when that leadership is needed most. They illustrate just how damaging the political decision to cut UK aid will be for the health and economic opportunities for millions of people.

Cutting bilateral support to WASH by 80% during the global pandemic is a dereliction of the UK's moral obligations towards the world's poor. It is also wholly incompatible with both the UK's claimed leadership of the climate agenda, and delivery of the government's stated international priorities of girls' education, health security, climate and nature, economic growth and conflict resolution.

Health security: 62% of Africa's urban population are unable to access basic WASH services which exposes them to uncontrolled COVID transmission, and water borne disease which causes 1.4 million premature and avoidable deaths each year. Since 2015, the UK has helped over 62.6 million people gain access to safe water and sanitation. The cuts mean a staggering 10 million people stand to lose out on gaining access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities this year. In the midst of the pandemic, the decision to halt support for basic health maintenance is simply unethical. It is also an act of self-harm to the UK, given that 'no one is safe from COVID, until we are all safe'.

Girl's education: 443 million school days are lost every year because of water-related illnesses. Over half of primary schools in low-income countries are unable to provide access to safe sanitation, and this is a known barrier to girls' school attendance and improved educational outcomes. Women and girls spend a total of 200 million hours fetching household water each day. The UK's decision to cut investment in WASH will directly condemn millions of girls to a life of drudgery and lost opportunity.

It undermines the delivery of your stated target of getting 40 million more girls into primary and secondary schools globally.

Climate and nature: Access to WASH is a critical component of climate resilience. It is impossible to reconcile these cuts and their impact on the vulnerability of the world's poorest communities to climate shocks with the UK's hosting of COP26 and claimed leadership on the climate agenda. Cuts to the UK Aid Direct budget, also announced today, will lock millions into extreme climate vulnerability and exacerbate loss of water ecosystems and water related biodiversity.

Economic growth and security: Every £1 invested in water and toilets returns an average of £4 in increased productivity. Water-related losses, including the economic consequences of inadequate WASH provision, will hit GDP growth by as much as 6 percent by 2050. Across the world, water crises are a key factor in both civil and ethnic unrest, regional conflict and driver of migration. Pulling the plug on the UK's investment on WASH, at a time when the world needs our leadership on this topic most, is a clear strategic misstep if the UK government is genuine about its ambitions for inclusive growth, fair trade and conflict prevention.

In light of this incompatibility between the UK's global goals and today's announcements, their implications for the world's most vulnerable people, and the UK's credibility as a world leader, we ask you to demonstrate your leadership as Secretary of State through:

- The immediate reversal of both the draconian cut in spending on the most essential basic services of water supply, sanitation, and hygiene for the world's vulnerable people, and cuts to Aid Direct programmes which advance the government's stated priorities.
- Convening of UK and global water expertise and multi-stakeholder representatives to develop a progressive UK's strategy in response to the global water crisis which maintains an appropriate level of investment, improves efficacy of aid on WASH, joins up government action for shared water security and realises the UK's global leadership ambitions.
- Ensuring that global water security and universal WASH access is a priority across UK government and for our global partners, including through our leadership of COP26 and the upcoming G7 Summit.

We look forward to your response and to supporting the efforts of your Ministers and Ministry to maintain the UK's leadership position in the global effort to provide universal access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and a fairer water future for all.

Yours sincerely,

CEOs / members of UK WASH Network¹⁸

¹⁸ The UK WASH network, of whom many of us are members represents over 100 UK-based organisations supporting global effort to ensure universal access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene, and water related Sustainable Development Goals.