

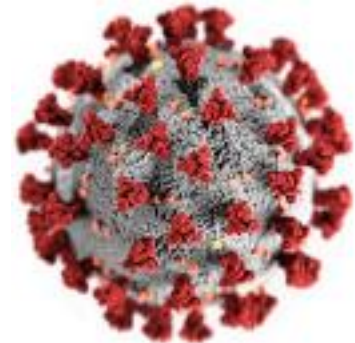
# Water and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Business Framework for Water and COVID-19 Practical Actions to Contain the Pandemic

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**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has caused a worldwide public health crisis and severely disrupted the global economy. Handwashing plays a critical role in reducing the transmission of the coronavirus and relies on access to safe, clean water. Yet, an estimated three billion people worldwide do not have access to basic handwashing services in their homes and more than two billion live in water-stressed river basins where they may not have reliable access to freshwater resources (WHO 2019; United Nations 2018).



To combat the spread of the virus and rebuild our economies, collective action on water is essential. Such action can help not only to contain the virus, but also to realize the human right to water and sanitation and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 on Water and Sanitation (United Nations 2014; United Nations 2019). Further it can be vital in accelerating a “blue” economy whereby economic well-being and water resilience mutually reinforce one another.

The business community can play a key role in combatting the spread of COVID-19, as well as rebuilding the economy and reducing the risk of future shocks. This Issue Brief, developed by the Pacific Institute in its role as Co-Secretariat of the UN Global Compact’s CEO Water Mandate, with the contribution and expertise of global water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) NGO WaterAid, aims to articulate this role. Specifically, it:

- Articulates the connections between water, COVID-19, and the business community;

- Offers a practical framework on actions companies can take to advance COVID-19 response efforts in their operations, supply chains, and the communities where workers live; and
- Connects businesses to capacity building resources and practical examples of water-related actions companies are taking in response to COVID-19.

This is one in a series of Issue Briefs on COVID-19 and water developed by the Pacific Institute. These Issue Briefs and additional information and resources can be found at: <https://pacinst.org>.

An expanded, web-based version of this framework can be found at: <https://ceowatermandate.org/covid>.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY TO RESPOND TO COVID-19

Effective and responsible business action on the water- and handwashing-related elements of COVID-19 revolves around three principles:

- Corporate risks and impacts — and therefore influence and responsibility — regarding COVID-19 go beyond the company fence line, extending to workers’ homes and throughout the supply chain.
- Water stewardship and economic recovery go hand in hand. Companies can advance both through developing, implementing, and advocating for “blue” recovery strategies.
- Companies can build resilience to catastrophic events by supporting multi-stakeholder collective action and effective, high-integrity public water governance.

Based on these principles, we have developed a high-level framework that is divided into three phases and identifies actions companies can take within each phase (Figure 1). Phase 1 of the framework – the focus of this Brief – includes efforts to contain the pandemic and return to work. Future Briefs will describe *Phase 2: Fostering a “Blue” Economic Recovery* and *Phase 3: Catalyzing a Water Resilient Society* that will play out over the middle- and long-terms, respectively.

Figure 1. The Business Framework for Water & COVID-19



## PHASE 1: CONTAINING THE PANDEMIC

Workplaces where many employees congregate are at risk of spreading the coronavirus through close contact and unsanitary conditions. Therefore, the first and most urgent phase of this framework is to implement concrete actions to:

- Conduct a self-assessment of the WASH- and water-related elements of business operations;
- Safely and efficiently restore flow of water through previously closed facilities;
- Provide WASH training for employees;
- Invest in handwashing facilities and protocols and water access at the workplace;

- Facilitate and encourage proper handwashing practices across communities and suppliers; and
- Convert or focus business operations to develop products or services that combat COVID-19, such as soaps and hand sanitizers, where appropriate.

Each of these is described in more detail in the follow sections.

## **1. Conduct a self-assessment of the water- and handwashing-related elements of business operations**

Before implementing any solution, companies must first understand the key risks exposing their employees to COVID-19 and other threats resulting from the shuttering of operations in recent months. Ideally, such an assessment is conducted as early as possible, identifies and prioritizes a company's COVID-19 risks as they pertain to water and handwashing, and defines strategic solutions that effectively and efficiently manage those risks.

Risk identification will benefit from the completion of a Hazard Analysis in Critical Control Points (HACCP). The HACCP process is a systematic approach to the identification, evaluation, and control of safety hazards that can help identify opportunities for the virus to be contracted across various business settings, map out key points of exposure, and determine mitigation actions. While typically employed for food safety, these processes can be used to address the water- and handwashing-related elements of COVID-19. NGOs, such as WaterAid and others, can help businesses and other organizations design relevant HACCP assessments across a variety of contexts and circumstances.

Strategic solutions should comprise both hardware (i.e., physical interventions such as new handwashing stations, signage, etc.) and software (i.e., training programs, protocols, etc.).

## **2. Safely and efficiently restore flow of water through previously closed facilities**

As society begins to reemerge from quarantines, stay-at-home orders, and business shutdowns during the pandemic, attention must be paid to the potential health risks associated with stagnant water inside building plumbing. Under normal conditions, the regular flow of community tap water into and through building water systems minimizes the amount of bacteria and metals that build up in water. However, even after a short period of shutdown, stagnant water can pose risks to health if not carefully managed (Gleick 2020).

If their facilities have been shut down, businesses should restart the flow of water through their manufacturing operations, offices, and retail facilities to ensure the water is safe for people to drink, does not expose them to Legionella when using showers or HVAC systems, and does not adversely affect any operations that require high-quality water.

For example, Facilities Management of Colorado State University maintains water flowing through the pipes of unoccupied buildings by regularly running faucets and flushing toilets, ensuring that the water remains safe to drink. Meanwhile, for buildings that usually serve large numbers of people and have extensive plumbing systems, it is impractical to continuously flush water through the pipes. CSU has posted signs on

such buildings indicating that the water is not safe to drink and will flush the system upon reopening (Walsh 2020).

### **3. Provide WASH training for employees**

Water and handwashing at the workplace are critical elements of preventing the transmission of the virus regardless of the nature of the business or the type of facility. By washing hands thoroughly (and refraining from touching their face), workers can drastically reduce the likelihood of being infected or spreading the virus. This practice is both critically important at the workplace — in agricultural, manufacturing, and office settings — and at home. If workers do not wash hands properly at home, they increase the likelihood of contracting the disease and spreading it to co-workers once they return to work.

Often, a lack of awareness on how to wash hands effectively or the possible repercussions of not doing so is a key barrier to effective handwashing. Therefore, actions to educate employees on proper handwashing techniques are not only an ethical imperative, but critical for businesses' ability to operate. If many employees become ill due to COVID-19 (or are caring for loved ones who are sick at home), the business will lose many productive hours due to absenteeism.

Effective WASH training programs make use of existing materials wherever possible. Companies can therefore build on and expand their own existing processes, trainings, or procedures or use existing educational resources, such as WaterAid's infographic on the topic (WaterAid 2020c). Many countries will also have national education campaigns that companies can integrate into their own programs and messaging.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for WASH messaging. Different companies will require different messages, processes, and approaches based on their unique circumstances. Training programs should leverage several different educational and communication approaches, including audio and visual materials, social media outreach, experiential learning, demonstrations, and more. Leaflets and brochures alone are typically largely ineffective at achieving lasting behavior change. The messages across these different approaches should be comprehensive, consistent, and as concise as possible.

WaterAid has developed two resources that may be helpful for companies seeking to provide WASH training to employees: *Prioritizing hygiene for business resilience: enabling safe return to work for global supply chain employees in the face of COVID-19*, which includes practical infographic guidance to workers about COVID-19-safe behaviors (WaterAid 2020c) and *WaterAid - How can we ensure everyone can wash their hands with soap and water, to protect lives from COVID-19?* (Gautam 2020).

For example, L'Oréal has developed an e-learning module called #SafeTogether that updates employees on the L'Oréal Group's workplace hygiene and health protocols, including best handwashing practices. L'Oréal requires its employees to take the module, available in 14 languages, before returning to work. Over 14,000 employees have already successfully completed the course. L'Oréal has made a version of the module

available publicly via CrossKnowledge, a digital learning company, where it can be used by CrossKnowledge's 500 corporate clients (L'Oréal 2020).

#### **4. Invest in handwashing facilities and protocols and water access at the workplace**

Beyond training workers on proper use of handwashing facilities, businesses must also ensure that adequate handwashing facilities and access to clean drinking water are consistently available in the places where they are needed. As with training programs, the types and numbers of facilities and protocols needed will vary from company to company depending on their unique circumstances. The facilities and protocols implemented should be a direct response to the risks and needs identified in the initial self-assessment. Companies should consider working with WASH NGOs to implement comprehensive and effective handwashing facilities and protocols.

Companies should develop and adopt protocols that ensure that these facilities are regularly cleaned, maintained, and kept operational. They can also use promotional campaigns to ensure that employees are aware of the new facilities, as well as cues (e.g., markers pointing to handwashing stations, markers showing proper distancing measures for handwashing queues, etc.) reminding employees of the facilities and proper hygiene behaviors.

WaterAid's *Handwashing Stations: An easy-to-use technological and context-based manual* will be a useful resource in establishing proper handwashing for many companies (WaterAid 2020b).

For example, CEMEX has adopted safety protocols aligned with global, national, and local health authority recommendations, including the "Taking care of family at home protocol," "Personal Hygiene Protocol", and the "Canteen and Resting Area Protocol" that emphasize proper handwashing, provision of sufficient hand washing stations, and access to soap and water or sanitizing gel (Cemex 2020).

#### **5. Facilitate and encourage proper handwashing practices across communities and suppliers**

Businesses have the greatest ability to implement trainings, facilities, and protocols at their owned-and-operated facilities. However, they are still exposed to considerable risk due to improper practices at workers' homes and among suppliers. As such, where possible, businesses should use their influence and financial resources to encourage and facilitate the implementation of such practices in homes and among suppliers.

As a starting point, companies can simply disseminate educational materials, such as the WaterAid infographic and guidance, to communities and suppliers (WaterAid 2020a, WaterAid 2020c). Additionally, to improve WASH in workers' homes, they can partner with local WASH NGOs or support local government WASH efforts. For suppliers, especially those less likely to have access to financial resources, businesses can consider investing in proper handwashing facilities, alcohol-based hand rubs, and/or access to clean drinking water in order to help ensure a consistent flow of critical supplies. They can also connect suppliers to local NGOs who may be able to assist them in developing such programs.

## 6. Convert, focus, or accelerate core business operations to support pandemic response

Some, but not all, businesses have operations that can be converted to develop products and/or services that support COVID-19 response efforts. This is most common among breweries, distilleries, chemical manufacturers, and producers of household goods that can convert their core operations to produce hand sanitizer. Other businesses may already be producing soap and other necessities and can increase their production of those products. In addition, companies can leverage their unique capabilities and assets (e.g., advertising or logistics) in partnership with other businesses and NGOs to expand access to hygiene and water related products and services

For example, ACCIONA has implemented measures to ensure continued provision of basic water and sanitation services to vulnerable populations in Peru, Mexico, and Panama amid the pandemic. For example, when the Chincha Baja community of Peru had an issue arise in their water-to-well pumping facility, ACCIONA resolved the issue. During the failure itself, ACCIONA ensured that the community had access to water by coordinating water distribution via a water tanker. ACCIONA has also continued providing support to communities in Oaxaca, Mexico during the pandemic by building dry toilets and rainwater catchment systems, distributing cleaning and handwashing materials, and leading sensitization activities on preventive measures (Acciona 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

Business action responding to COVID-19 is vital not only to our societies' broader efforts to contain the pandemic, but also to companies' risk mitigation efforts. If businesses fail to act, workers may be exposed to the virus at the workplace, affecting business productivity as well as public health more generally.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the water- and handwashing-related elements of COVID-19, there are several core actions that most businesses will want to consider. First, most businesses will want to conduct a self-assessment to better understand exposure, risks, and strategic solutions. Once this is completed, companies can then build a plan that addresses their own unique needs and circumstances. Such a plan might include worker trainings, establishing and maintaining handwashing facilities, providing signage and other guidance for using those facilities properly, supporting supplier and community efforts on these elements, and in some cases, converting business operations to support COVID-19 response efforts.

Once businesses have contained the virus, they can then consider how to support economic recovery and achieve water resilience over the long-term. Future Issue Briefs will cover these topics in more detail.

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