

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

FACT SHEET: On Global Handwashing Day, UNICEF warns that 3 in 10 people do not have basic handwashing facilities at home to fight off infectious diseases

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF; Oct. 15, 2021)

Although handwashing with soap is critical in the fight against infectious diseases, including COVID-19, globally, around 3 in 10 people – or 2.3 billion – do not have handwashing facilities with water and soap available at home. The situation is worst in the least developed countries, with over 6 in 10 people without access to basic hand hygiene, UNICEF warned on Global Handwashing Day.

“Global response efforts to the pandemic have created an unprecedented time for hand hygiene. Yet progress remains far too slow for the most vulnerable, underserved communities,” said UNICEF WASH Director Kelly Ann Naylor. “Hand hygiene cannot be viewed as a temporary provision to manage COVID-19. Further long-term investment in water, sanitation and hygiene can help prevent the next health crisis from coming. It also means fewer people falling ill with respiratory infections, fewer children dying from diarrheal diseases, and more pregnant mothers and newborns protected from preventable conditions like sepsis.”

The latest data show that some progress has been achieved since 2015. For example, the global population with access to basic hand hygiene at home has increased from 5 billion to 5.5 billion, or from 67 per cent to 71 per cent. However, if current trends persist, 1.9 billion people will still not have access to basic hand hygiene by the end of the decade.

According to the latest estimates:

- Globally, 3 in 10 people – or 2.3 billion – do not have access to basic handwashing facilities with water and soap at home, including 670 million people without any facility at all. In the least developed countries, more than 6 in 10 people lack basic hand hygiene facilities at home.
- 2 in 5 schools worldwide do not have basic hygiene services with water and soap, affecting 818 million students, of which 462 million attend schools with no facility at all. In the least developed countries, 7 out of 10 schools have no place for children to wash their hands.
- 1 in 3 healthcare facilities worldwide does not have hand hygiene facilities at points of care where the patient, healthcare worker, and treatment involve contact with the patient.
- The cost to provide hand hygiene in all homes in 46 of the world’s least-developed countries by 2030 is an estimated US\$11 billion*. The cost to governments for hygiene promotion are estimated to be equal to 25 cents per capita per year.

Deep inequalities exist across and within countries regarding access and progress, with the most vulnerable children and families suffering the most. Moreover, in fragile, conflict-affected, and refugee settings, progress is especially slow:

- In fragile contexts, 1 in 5 people do not have any hand hygiene facility at home.
- In 8 out of 20 countries for which UNHCR has data, more than 30 per cent of refugee households do not have access to soap.

- Globally, current progress rates must quadruple to reach universal hygiene by 2030. In the least developed countries, the rate of progress would need to increase ten-fold, and in fragile contexts, it would need to accelerate by a factor of 23.

UNICEF urges governments to commit to providing hand hygiene, not as a temporary response to the pandemic, but as an investment in public health and economic resilience. The latest joint UNICEF and WHO report identifies five accelerators that can enable governments to rapidly scale up access to hand hygiene, including good governance, smart public finance, capacity building, consistent data, and innovation.

Notes to Editors:

** This estimate assumes that households would bear the cost of installing handwashing facilities and the cost associated with purchasing water and soap. Governments would bear the cost of hygiene promotion, both initial and 'top-up'.*

Least Developed Countries: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen, Zambia

UNICEF. 2021. "FACT SHEET: On Global Handwashing Day, UNICEF warns that 3 in 10 people do not have basic handwashing facilities at home to fight off infectious diseases."

<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fact-sheet-global-handwashing-day-unicef-warns-3-10-people-do-not-have-basic> (accessed November 11, 2021).