Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
A Global Challenge. Worldwide 68.5 million people have been forced to flee as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.

- Most are hosted by the least developed countries where access to water and sanitation services is already a challenge.
- Over three quarters are hosted in cities, towns and villages, with the remainder living in camps or settlements.
- Camp life lasts an average of 20 years – but can be as long as 40+ years.

UNHCR’s global role is to lead and coordinate action for the ‘International Protection of Refugees’ and others who have fled as laid down in the 1951 UN Convention of the Rights of Refugees. This includes ensuring access to vital services including Water, Sanitation, Food, Health, Education, and ultimately to find lasting solutions including the safe return to their home country, resettlement in a new country, or integration into the local community where they found safety as a refugee.
UNHCR's WASH response

1. Ensures immediate survival, dignity and the prevention of disease outbreaks.

2. Fully integrated with long-term planning for sustainable solutions.

3. Ensures full participation of refugees in WASH services including involvement in decisions on design and location of water points and latrines, empowerment in the operation and maintenance of facilities and services through capacity-building, refugee-led hygiene promotion activities, and the establishment of WASH committees.

UNHCR WASH embraces the 2030 agenda:

PROTECTION: UNHCR WASH activities contribute to relieve refugees from poverty and hunger. Adequate sanitation facilities and menstrual hygiene management options contribute to dignified living conditions and safe environments.

PEACE: UNHCR WASH activities are implemented in such way to promote peaceful co-existence with host communities and in an inclusive manner to protect the most vulnerable community members from violence, discrimination and other protection risks.

PROSPERITY: UNHCR WASH activities empower refugee and host communities through capacity building, creation of livelihood opportunities and encourage the use of cash to strengthen local markets for water, sanitation and hygiene item markets where possible.

PLANET: UNHCR WASH activities seek to prevent environmental degradation through sustainable groundwater use, solid waste management and safe management of the entire sanitation chain, including disposal or recycling of faecal sludge.

PARTNERSHIP: UNHCR works with over 50 civil society partners, governments, IOM and UNICEF, philanthropic foundations and academia institutions to implement, study and innovate WASH solutions responding to refugee needs.

UNHCR WASH works towards implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6, in particular targets 6.1 on achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all and target 6.2 on achieving access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.

UNHCR WASH is guided by the Global Compact for Refugees and works with civil society, governments, academia and the private sector to scale-up emergency responses, ensure increased capacities and service-levels for refugees and host communities and foster livelihood opportunities linked to WASH interventions.

Human waste is rich in nutrients, if treated and handled safely, it can be used for agricultural food production or agroforestry which can benefit refugees and the host community. This is an example of a tree nursery near Nduta Camp in Tanzania which produces fruit trees and trees for firewood. © UNHCR/Russell Fraser
Emergency Water Supply

Life saving interventions such as water trucking, essential water supplies for refugees – jerry cans and emergency water treatment

Sanitation

Emergency community sanitation such as chemical toilets, trench latrines, temporary safe disposal of feces and disease outbreak prevention

Hygiene

Prevent water related diseases thru hygiene items and hygiene education and information activities, conduct participatory assessments of WASH needs, establish systems to track WASH behaviours and service levels.

Transition

Development of long term infrastructure such as deep boreholes, centralised water treatment, motorised and reticulated water systems.

Expanding sanitation facilities with vision of providing household or shared household facilities. Establish systems to safely collect, transport and treat waste.

Elaborate a “theory of change” which enables refugees to adopt hygiene-promoting behaviours, such as handwashing with soap, safe handling of faeces of babies/toddlers, household water treatment and safe storage, personal hygiene- including menstrual health management.

Protracted

Inclusion into national systems, alignment with national norms and standards, improved asset management, and costs reduction (e.g. solar pumping).

Progressively improve sanitation facilities, including showers; ensure effective and cost efficient operation and maintenance of facilities; recover nutrients and embodied energy from waste to mitigate environmental impact.

Review programme; expand hygiene promotion approaches; revise strategy, identify information gaps, and integrate with national and local systems.

To date only 15% of the approximately 300 mechanised boreholes in UNHCR camps and settlements have been fitted with solar panels. However, UNHCR has the vision to scale up the use of renewable energy for water pumping as well as for powering UNHCR field offices in areas where grid power is not available. © UNHCR/Russell Fraser
In order to ensure dignity and to prevent diseases such as skin and eye infections, soap and water for washing laundry and bathing or showering are essential. © UNHCR/Gemunu Amarasinghe

“The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights”

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; November 2002