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Global Development Strategy: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)



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Cover photo: Abdulkadir Mohamed/NRC

Muslimo Issack washes her hands with soap while using a handwashing station installed by NRC at her settlement in Kahda district, Somalia.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

We specialise in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services to protect the rights of people affected by displacement. In terms of people reached, WASH is consistently NRC's biggest core competency. We are recognised by stakeholders for our strong integration with other sectors, including Shelter and Settlements. There is, however, an internal recognition that we can do better at striking a balance between quality and quantity. While we can demonstrate excellent engineering proficiency for hardware (safe water delivery, latrine blocks with handwashing facilities etc.), we don't always implement the software needed to fully realise its impact and help ensure our services are sustainable. It is through these softer outputs that we will concentrate our efforts during this strategic period.

By the end of 2025, we will be recognised for our focus on, and ability to deliver WASH programmes that are holistic and correctly balance software and hardware. Our signature programmes will include:

- moving from increased knowledge to changing behaviour
- integration to support better learning outcomes in schools
- facilitating governance of sustainable WASH systems that scale
- understanding land and water rights in WASH – and becoming recognised in the WASH sector as the pioneer and lead on this issue

To get there, the global WASH development strategy will focus on the priorities below. Click on each heading to go to the respective section.

- 1 Move from increasing knowledge to changing behaviour
- 2 Use, support and change local markets to meet people's WASH needs
- 3 Facilitate governance of sustainable WASH systems that scale
- 4 Mitigate climate change and strengthen community-based water resource management
- 5 Strengthen learning outcomes in schools through integrated programming
- 6 Improve our ability to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks
- 7 Strengthen the delivery of quality WASH services in hard-to-reach areas
- 8 Improve adherence to Safe and Inclusive Programming (SIP)
- 9 Understand land and water rights: identification and protection of people's rights
- 10 Increase collaboration and exchange of expertise with local actors
- 11 Strengthen digital and technology in WASH

Introduction

What is the purpose of the development strategy? It shows where NRC will focus global programme development and innovation efforts, and towards what areas we will channel internal resources and global fundraising efforts in relation to the core competency (CC). The strategy covers NRC's global portfolio, therefore countries and regions will find workstreams that are more or less relevant for their particular context.

Who is the audience? The strategy is primarily intended for the core competency technical line and other relevant staff at country, regional and global level, but can also be shared externally.

Who will implement it? The global core competency leads are responsible for leading the implementation of the strategy. They will engage with regional and country colleagues, primarily through the technical line, to get input, exchange experiences, share work, conduct pilots, develop trainings and guidance, fundraise etc. This will be done both remotely and through face-to-face workshops and seminars at country, regional or global level. Global technical guidance and tools will be developed to support the implementation. The strategy is ambitious and will require successful fundraising if we are to achieve our goals.

What is expected from countries and regions? Except for prioritised workstreams (see below), country and regional offices can select the workstreams that are most relevant for them. The response policy provides a framework for the activities and themes falling within the scope of each core competency, and countries can implement any activities within that scope that are relevant in their context. Contributions to the core competency development strategies should be factored into the annual workplans and balanced scorecards of the core competency team. As guidance becomes available for new areas of work, countries and regions are expected to follow this. Please reach out to the global lead if your country/region is planning to do, or already doing, work or pilots in line with a workstream.

What does it mean if a workstream is prioritised? All country and regional offices implementing the core competency are expected to contribute to or implement elements of this workstream within the current strategy period 2022–2025. Prioritised workstreams are marked with orange in the overview on page 3 and with a grey flag (►) after the heading.

How did we arrive at these workstreams? The strategy was developed through a participatory process across the organisation. The process identified areas of work needed to: 1) address quality issues discovered through monitoring, evaluations and risk monitoring to ensure we comply with the NRC Response Policy and the quality standards we adhere to; 2) stay relevant by responding to global trends in the sector and beyond; and 3) deliver on the NRC Global Strategy.

What does the strategy not do? It does not: 1) set boundaries for what NRC does and does not do within a core competency (see NRC Response Policy); 2) provide technical guidance on how NRC will implement certain activities (see framing papers, handbooks, guidance notes); 3) promote NRC's activities and approaches (see capacity statements, value propositions and programme presentations).

What is the duration of the strategy? The strategy reflects the duration of the NRC Global Strategy 2022–2025, and includes a mid-term review.

Please note: NRC has clear ambitions to make all our programmes more people-centric and improve how we design and implement responses as one – both across core competencies, and between programmes and advocacy. How we will go about this is still not decided. These two elements will therefore be strengthened across the core competency development strategies as part of the mid-term review.



Water trucking, like here in Shaidayee IDP site in Afghanistan, can provide lifesaving access to water, but must be accompanied by an exit strategy linking to a more sustainable solution. Photo: Enayatullah Azad/NRC

1 Move from increasing knowledge to changing behaviour ▶

Strategic outcome:

NRC implements soundly designed and relevant hygiene promotion campaigns, as well as other key behaviours like water management and governance, which target changing behaviour rather than increasing knowledge.

Unfortunately, hygiene promotion in WASH responses is often neglected. Typically, it is implemented as an add-on to water or sanitation programmes, which take centre stage. Hygiene carries as much weight in terms of public health impact as water and sanitation interventions do, if not more. Repeated studies have shown the likelihood of contracting diarrhoea is reduced when handwashing with soap is practised regularly when compared with providing access to safe water or safe excreta disposal. In addition to this, hygiene promotion activities are most often more cost-effective than other WASH approaches, so there are plenty of reasons to be placing more focus on this area.

Behaviour change approaches can help to achieve better and more sustainable hygiene practices and outcomes. Evidence shows that improved knowledge and awareness alone do not result in improved positive hygiene practice.

By the end of 2025, WASH teams will apply behaviour change techniques to help to ensure that our hygiene promotion campaigns put people at the centre and are based on formative research that targets barriers – whether they be psychosocial, technological or contextual – to positive hygiene behaviour. They will implement activities as part of their hygiene promotion and behaviour change strategy. This will result in WASH teams putting people at the centre to change hygiene practices, maximising the impact and sustainability of our hardware interventions.

Global initiatives will include:

- teams trained via a bespoke offline programme that combines theory and practical sessions
- adopting the Wash'Em approach to change handwashing behaviour in emergencies
- developing robust monitoring and evaluation systems to broadly assess practice and help shape programming

2 Use, support and change local markets to meet people's WASH needs

Strategic outcome:

People's WASH needs are met through a market-based response wherever possible.

Markets are likely to be affected by a crisis. A crisis can disrupt both the supply and demand of essential WASH items, commodities and services required for survival and positive health practices, like water, soap, sanitation services, sanitary pads, and other hygiene-related items.

No-one knows the needs of a person or household better than that person themselves. Market-based approaches help to address this by restoring choice to better meet the needs of affected people and support existing services. Rather than providing items directly, this approach supports dignity and helps to ensure sustainability and reduce dependency.

By working with strategic market actors in partnership and applying a market systems analytical lens, we will not only support our beneficiaries, but also the wider community. These systemic, scalable and more sustainable solutions will help contribute to our Partnership, Governance and Sustainability goals. While in given contexts, our emergency response might need to start with more traditional methods, a market-based approach will encourage programmes to have phased and strategic programming with a clear exit strategy, considering the humanitarian development nexus, helping to create sustainable services.

By the end of 2025, we aim to move away from traditional service delivery and towards an “as little as possible, as much as necessary” approach. By supporting the public and private sectors, temporarily filling identified gaps, and offering technical support, business development services or capacity building, we can meet people's needs on a larger scale and in a more sustainable manner. Traditional default positions undertaken without a market analysis will be challenged by well-trained staff.

Global initiatives will include:

- utilising new NRC analysis and programme design tools and internal processes to create programmes that support market systems to serve people better
- every programme in the learning phase will incorporate an after-action review to help us improve
- “visionary recruitment” and advocacy to country offices

3 Facilitate governance of sustainable WASH systems that scale ▶

Strategic outcome:

NRC WASH teams strengthen, and establish when needed, strong governance systems, building the capacity of the private sector, government and communities to operate sustainable systems that scale.

NRC operates in large-scale and complex emergencies where government and the private sector often have weak coping capacity and struggle to deliver essential services, even in non-emergency situations. Too often, humanitarian WASH actors provide service delivery and exit without establishing or strengthening a sustainable governance system. This often results in increased and self-perpetuating dependence on NGOs because of unreliable, failing and eventually non-functioning services. This drains resources, increases the risk of disease, and diminishes socioeconomic opportunities for those we aim to serve.

We will consider the long-term impact of our work and use a phased approach to transition towards more sustainable solutions. The ultimate goal of this will be to facilitate relationships and strengthen the capacity of government, the private sector and affected communities, to provide essential services in the long run that scale.

We will not offer the same activities and solutions in years one, five and ten. Activities like water trucking might be the best first-line response in certain contexts to ensure timely impact, but must feed into a longer-term market system change approach involving private sector and government partners. Installing, for example, intelligent water dispensers with integrated revenue collection, will build private sector capacity to offer improved services, and support both localisation of response and community self-reliance, leaving communities stronger than they were when NRC arrived.

By the end of 2025, we will have moved beyond establishing temporary and siloed management structures such as traditional water management committees, and will instead support the creation of appropriate and inclusive governance systems that scale.

Global initiatives will include:

- carrying out formative research to understand which governance structures and business models work best
- building internal capacity
- developing flagship models to learn from

4 Mitigate climate change and strengthen community-based water resource management

Strategic outcome:

NRC WASH teams will work effectively to reduce their carbon footprint and support communities to sustainably manage natural resources, mitigating the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable and increasing resilience and adaptation.

Climate change has an immense negative impact on WASH services. People affected by displacement can be impacted in many ways, as water is the primary medium through which we feel the effects of climate change. Droughts mean less water is available, creating conflict and inhibiting good sanitation and hygiene practices. Floods lead to water contamination, and heavy rainfall favours vector-borne diseases. Rising sea-levels lead to the salinisation of drinking water sources and climate shocks result in damage to infrastructure and increasing reliance on emergency operations, all of which have massive economic costs.

Community-based water resource management (CBWRM) is conceptually aligned with disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. Water scarcity can affect health, food security, economic activity and environmental wellbeing, and can create conflict. Managing water resources effectively is necessary for ensuring the supply of water on which people's health and livelihoods depend – now and in the longer term.

The WASH sector presents a huge opportunity to contribute to global climate goals and reduce the impact of climate change. We will prioritise solar-powered water supply systems, when technically and economically feasible, and improve our environmental performance through the application of NRC's Environmental Minimum Standards (EMS) and the NEAT+ tool. By the end of 2025, to help mitigate the impact of climate change, we will support communities to develop water resource management plans that help ensure sustainable practice and prioritise water use (i.e. personal, productive including agriculture and livestock use, and commercial). Sensors with corresponding GIS data will feed into digital mapping and monitoring of groundwater for sustainable management in water-scarce climate-stressed areas.

Global initiatives will include:

- developing integrated guidance with LFS, Shelter and Settlements and Advocacy teams, supporting communities to have access to and influence higher-level institutions and decision-makers
- support for country offices to achieve this



Access to water is crucial to livelihoods for our work in Afghanistan. Photo: Enayatullah Azad/NRC

5 Strengthen learning outcomes in schools through integrated programming ▶

Strategic outcome:

Children and young people achieve better learning outcomes through integrated education and WASH programmes. Whenever NRC works in schools, there is both Education and WASH, working as one.

WASH in schools and learning spaces aims to support the provision of safe drinking water and child-friendly sanitation facilities, and promote lifelong health for children, young people and their families. During emergencies, education is often disrupted. Schools are often damaged or destroyed and, in many instances, displacement means absorbing new pupils, thus putting additional pressure on existing substandard WASH facilities. Ensuring children and young people can return to a school with adequate WASH facilities is an essential part of recovery. Too often, this doesn't happen.

The benefits of access to clean water and pleasant toilets in schools are increased toilet use and no open defecation, meaning fewer illnesses and more days in school. A good school WASH programme can improve pupils' health, boost educational achievement, support girls' menstrual hygiene needs, promote gender equity and inclusion, especially for children and young people with disabilities, and in turn, bring positive impacts to communities.

By the end of 2025, whether it is part of a standalone WASH in Schools national campaign, an NRC school shelter programme or an alternative learning space where our Education teams work, there will always be a minimum level and NRC standard of WASH. Integration must be ensured, and responsibility not dismissed when other actors are taking the lead on WASH. We will seek to standardise our WASH in Schools work: from budgeting to outcomes, programmes will be integrated. Whenever and wherever there is an NRC Education programme, it will be accompanied by strong WASH in Schools work, and vice versa. This could be NRC core competencies working together or with partners. WASH and Education teams will work as one.

Global initiatives will include:

- undertaking a systematic review and producing a set of tools and accompanying guidance outlining the NRC WASH in Schools way



Providing access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education in schools will lead to better learning outcomes for children like Magani in the Central Sahel region of Africa. Photo: Tom Peyre-Costa/NRC



Handwashing activity at a school in Jordan. Photo: Tina Abu-Hanna/NRC

6 Improve our ability to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks

Strategic outcome:

NRC WASH teams work effectively to prevent the spread and mitigate the impact of disease outbreaks among displacement-affected people, particularly in overcrowded settings like camps.

Public health experts and scientists warn that disease outbreaks like Covid-19 will become more common and the new norm. Furthermore, outbreaks of cholera and dysentery are becoming more frequent. We must be prepared.

WASH is essential for slowing down the spread of many diseases. As we all now know, frequent and proper handwashing with soap is one of the most important measures that can be used to prevent the spread of disease, and WASH has been at the forefront of NRC's response to Covid-19. Reliable water and sanitation services in healthcare facilities and households are critical to maintaining hygiene (hand hygiene, laundering, bathing, cleaning and disinfection). Ensuring these WASH services are continuously available is critical not only to public health but to governance, economic growth and protection. Good WASH is imperative in order for the health sector to succeed.

By the end of 2025, we will adapt, evolve and change how we do WASH, with an increased emphasis on public health messaging. The focus will be placed on supporting healthcare partners and strengthening health systems, establishing infection prevention and control (IPC) procedures, ensuring the most appropriate information reaches targeted groups using risk communication and community engagement, and behaviour change techniques to encourage safe practices. NRC WASH teams will be provided with clear direction on how to support the health sector, as well as capacity building on key elements like IPC, public health messaging and gender-sensitive behaviour change.

7 Strengthen the delivery of quality WASH services in hard-to-reach areas

Strategic outcome:

WASH teams deliver quality services in hard-to-reach areas.

Humanitarian contexts are becoming increasingly challenging for organisations to access and provide assistance. A growing challenge for NRC comes from administrative restrictions, interference in operations, impediments to freedom of movement and a growing decline in respect for humanitarian principles. Combined with increasingly violent areas of operation and denial of the existence of humanitarian needs, WASH teams experience restrictions and obstructions both to accessing people in need and to delivering suitable life-saving services and assistance. Responses in hard-to-reach (H2R) areas already account for half of NRC's operations.

H2R areas offer increased programmatic and technical challenges for WASH teams, particularly with regard to identifying needs, monitoring work, and ensuring quality and adherence to minimum standards. Longer-term strategies can be more problematic to formulate and adopt, requiring innovative approaches to planning and delivery. While fraud and misappropriation of NRC resources intended for humanitarian work can affect all projects, WASH is particularly at risk due to its heavy reliance on materials and contracted labour.

By the end of 2025, our WASH teams will have a portfolio of modalities, tools and methodologies to choose from, to help ensure we are delivering a quality WASH response in H2R areas.

Global initiatives will include:

- a review to understand which WASH modalities are best suited to H2R areas
- learning on what needs to be adapted, including in community engagement and behaviour change
- understanding how WASH interventions can enhance access to H2R areas



It can take many hours to reach the people with the greatest needs in remote or isolated areas like North Kivu, DR Congo: Photo: Tom Peyre-Costa/NRC



Our borehole drilling team at work in a remote area of the Central African Republic where traditional contractors are not present. Photo: Elie Franc/NRC

8 Improve adherence to Safe and Inclusive Programming (SIP) ▶

Strategic outcome:

NRC WASH teams will apply Safe and Inclusive Programming (SIP) approaches in the projects we deliver, to help ensure a truly holistic approach that puts people at the centre of our work.

We recognise that the need for WASH goes beyond public health concerns, but must ensure that all our services are inclusive, safe to use and avoid exacerbating risks. WASH teams will be engaged with communities throughout project cycles and ensure systems are in place to make iterative improvements and address concerns on safety and access, based on a continuous feedback loop from all users, especially women, girls and people living with disabilities.

By the end of 2025, we will:

- consult communities, especially women and girls, on barriers to accessing WASH services, and solutions to ensuring meaningful access
- ensure safe, accessible and inclusive WASH services for all, ensuring we are meeting women and girls' needs and reducing violence against women and girls
- follow standard operating procedures (SOPs) on WASH safety, particularly with regard to water trucking
- ensure beneficiaries can offer feedback via community feedback mechanism (CFM) channels, which are analysed and responded to by the WASH team
- use assessments and an accessibility audit to identify the extent to which WASH services could expose people to harm, and what can be done to improve safety and inclusion
- ensure site safety during construction through improved contract management

Global initiatives to support this will include:

- creating an online induction/training for WASH staff new to NRC, to ensure familiarity with best practices, standards and SOPs
- working with SIP colleagues to identify areas for capacity strengthening
- training on inclusive build designs, child-friendly facilities and menstrual hygiene management
- support for the rollout of a WASH Safety SOP
- workshops on sharing best practices

Safe and Inclusive Programming (SIP):

SIP ensures the mainstreaming of protection, age, gender and diversity in NRC programmes. Our SIP Minimum Standards describe a number of actions, in a suggested hierarchy of urgency, that guide NRC country offices to ensure that our programming is safe, accessible, accountable and participatory.



Women and children gather at a water point in Nigeria to fetch water for their daily needs. Photo: Samuel Jegede/NRC

9 Understand land and water rights: identification and protection of people's rights

Strategic outcome:

People's rights are promoted and protected by obtaining a thorough understanding of land and water rights, leading to safe and sustainable WASH interventions.

WASH activities sometimes require significant changes to land and the use or reappropriation of water. This might happen when constructing on-site sanitation or when infrastructure cuts through different boundaries on public, private and institutional land. Acquiring a full picture of the existing systems of land and water rights and governance, including power dynamics, and identifying the most at-risk groups can be very challenging. However, if facilities are installed without this understanding, it can reinforce unequal access to facilities and essential resources and can result in conflicts, unused facilities, increased rent, cancellation of projects, and/or reluctance to grant permission for other humanitarian interventions.

By the end of 2025, our WASH programmes will work to promote and protect rights through carrying out proper due diligence and consultation processes before proceeding with WASH construction, in order to avoid disputes and promote sustainable access to and use of infrastructure once the project is implemented.

Global initiatives will include:

- building internal capacity, standardising our response and creating a comprehensive set of tools for staff
- creating an online training available to WASH practitioners (including externally)
- positioning ourselves as the focal point for understanding land and water rights within the Global WASH Cluster

10 Increase collaboration and exchange of expertise with local actors

Strategic outcome:

WASH teams facilitate strong governance structures through local actors, allowing services to operate sustainably after we exit.

NRC recognises that local actors are the main responders in any crisis, and we already collaborate with different types of local actors in the countries in which we work. However, we want to do much better and significantly increase our collaboration and exchange of expertise with local actors.

There is a multitude of local actors that are relevant to our WASH work, but in this strategic period, WASH has prioritised the private sector and local government. This is because we see them as particularly relevant for the implementation of WASH priorities #2 and #3 (“Use, support and change local markets to meet people’s WASH needs” and “Facilitate governance of sustainable WASH systems that scale”), and we need to prioritise our efforts.

NRC wants to complement the direct implementation of activities by working more as an enabler of action for others, particularly local actors. Local government, the private sector and communities (including community-based organisations and social enterprises) are key to ensuring sustainable service delivery of WASH. Typically, it is not technical issues that cause services like boreholes, handpumps or latrines to fail or fall into disrepair, it is weak governance and poor capacity after exit.

By the end of 2025, we will act as a temporary actor and facilitator between parties, strengthening relationships, building capabilities, and ensuring interests are balanced. This will enable services to operate reliably after we exit.

Global initiatives will include:

- identifying best practices and piloting new initiatives looking at continuity of services in the event of NRC’s exit
- conducting research to understand which governance structures work best independently of NRC
- after-action reviews for every example programme
- building internal capacity through training, secondments and learning visits
- developing flagship models to learn from

11 Strengthen digital and technology in WASH

Strategic outcome:

WASH programmes build knowledge and experience of appropriate data and digital technology to deliver better programming, improve efficiency and quality, and scale our interventions.

Digital and technology can play an important role by providing resource-efficient solutions to challenges associated with WASH. Priority opportunities to explore by 2025 include, but are not limited to:

- **water delivery and quality:** using digital equipment with improved accuracy for testing quality, adopting the Safe Water Optimisation Tool (SWOT) to ensure optimal residual chlorine levels in households, and use of sensors on trucks delivering water to improve accountability and equality
- **community engagement and user-centred approaches:** exploring digital applications and tools to enhance community engagement and feedback on WASH services, with a focus on women and inclusion of the most marginalised
- **climate and environment:** using sensors with corresponding GIS data and equipment such as piezometric (dip) meters for digital mapping and monitoring of groundwater to manage water sustainably in water-scarce climate-stressed areas. Opportunities include improved accuracy of borehole drilling, drought warning mechanisms, and improved operation and maintenance of hardware, all of which can inform advocacy work. The NEAT+ tool will be used to identify issues of environmental concern.
- **behaviour change:** roll out of the Wash'Em approach, which uses software to target the improved behaviour of handwashing with soap

We will support this implementation through global initiatives that include pilot programmes, exploring partnerships and selecting country office “champions” to support uptake and scale. Furthermore, we will contribute to ensuring that our WASH teams are trained and equipped to use NRC digital programme tools. We will also use digital technologies to enhance service delivery by exploring and testing innovative technological solutions that can make our work more efficient and effective.