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Accelerating cholera prevention through water, sanitation and hygiene: A global political economy analysis

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▲ Estevão Manuel David, general practitioner and director of the Etatara Health Unit, Mozambique, 2024.

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Key messages



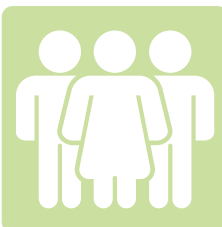
Cholera continues to pose a significant threat to public health around the world. **Climate change** is complicating things further, contributing to **larger and more deadly outbreaks**, and the re-emergence of the disease in countries that haven't seen it in years.



More action and investment in cholera prevention through WASH will need new ways of working. This includes developing stronger narratives that call for cholera prevention to be part of **long-term WASH and development objectives**; building new partnerships in these sectors; and agreeing on the most **cost-effective WASH packages** for different cholera settings.



Improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in areas most at risk are essential for the long-term prevention, and ultimately elimination, of cholera. WASH also has a host of other **health and economic benefits**.



Embedding **cholera prevention** in broader development plans, and integrating it with other **disease initiatives**, offers the chance of a **more coordinated, holistic and sustainable approach to public health**.



Long-term prevention of cholera requires **better collaboration** between the health, WASH, humanitarian and development sectors.



Cholera **outbreaks** are an opportunity to highlight the **importance of action and investment** in sustainable WASH solutions in disease hotspots.



The full analysis and findings for this brief can be found in the *Global cholera PEA report* (October, 2024). Please access using the QR code. The methodology used in this research was based on WaterAid's *Political Economy Analysis Toolkit*, which you can access at washmatters.wateraid.org/pea.

● Malaki James Sankhani, ground labourer, washing his hands at a standpipe. Malawi. 2023.



WaterAid/Dennis Lupenga

Introduction



Cholera remains a major threat to public health in some of the poorest countries around the world. Climate change is increasing the complexity of seasonal cholera patterns as well as the vulnerability of areas where the resilience of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and health systems is already low.

In 2023, cholera was reported in 45 countries, with the number of deaths and cases increasing from the previous year by 71% and 13% respectively.¹ With the global resurgence and geographical expansion of cholera in recent years, there urgently needs to be more political leadership, capacity and financing for long-term cholera prevention through WASH.

New research by WaterAid on the global political economy of cholera identifies opportunities and barriers to action and investment in WASH for long-term prevention of the disease. This brief presents a summary of these findings, identifying priority areas for action and practical steps to move us closer to this goal.

1. WHO 2023 [Cholera](#), 2023 [World Health Organization](#) – global cholera statistics.

The problem

Insufficient prioritisation and funding for sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

▼ Marta Cacilda, collecting water for drinking and household chores from an almost dry pond. Mozambique, 2023.

While cholera is a public health challenge, sustainable solutions require close collaboration with, and leadership from, other sectors, particularly the WASH sector.

Despite widespread recognition of the critical role of WASH in the long-term prevention of cholera, sustainable WASH services in cholera hotspots – defined as Priority Areas for Multisectoral Interventions (PAMIs)² – are not a priority.

National Cholera Plans (NCPs) include WASH, but translating this into action with long-term financing is challenging. Efforts to tackle cholera in the current crisis are also weighted towards short-term, reactive measures to tackle outbreaks. Lack of collaboration on cholera prevention between the health and WASH sectors – and between the humanitarian and development sectors – is also a major barrier to progress. Mechanisms to encourage joint planning, data sharing and accountability are often lacking.



2. GTFCC 2023. [Identification of Priority Areas for Multisectoral Intervention](#) – guidance document.

The political economy of cholera

In recent years, a number of issues – including protracted conflicts and humanitarian crises, global political and economic instability, record levels of forced displacement, rapid urbanisation, and climate change – have contributed to an increase in cholera outbreaks.³

Cholera control has also been influenced by the interests of key players, the constraints upon them and the relationships between them. Table 1 summarises the most prominent global political economy features of cholera.

● Cholera survivor Charifo Foguete dos Santos in his bathroom where he contracted the disease during a time of heavy rainfall that caused flooding and poor hygiene. Mozambique, 2023.

3. Cholera Annual Report 2022. *Weekly Epidemiological Record* 38, 22 September 2023, Vol 98 (pp 431–452).

Table 1: Key political economy issues in the global cholera response

Political economy issues	Description
Health sector leadership and financing means cholera is addressed through a predominantly health lens	The Global Task Force on Cholera Control (GTFCC) roadmap to end cholera calls for a multi-sector approach. However, in practice, cholera is seen as mainly a health sector issue. As a result, cholera is predominantly addressed through a health lens and through the leadership and financing of the relevant ministry of health, with support from health donors. This hampers planning and funding for long-term WASH infrastructure and systems. Additionally, health interventions are often rapid and reactive, while WASH operates on a much longer timescale. This makes it a challenge to effectively implement WASH under health leadership and increase ownership of, and accountability for, cholera by the WASH sector. Furthermore, the oral cholera vaccine (OCV) is free in many countries, which may encourage an over-reliance on vaccines, as opposed to other complementary approaches such as WASH.
Lack of evidence and consensus on the right 'WASH package' for different cholera settings	There is a lack of clear evidence on the most cost-effective approach to tackling cholera through WASH. This includes a lack of consensus on whether the focus should be on achieving basic WASH coverage or a higher level of service. The complexity of defining and costing WASH packages for different cholera settings, and identifying the benefits of different approaches, makes it difficult to plan and mobilise both domestic and external resources.
NCPs need resources and integrating with long-term planning	While the development of NCPs demonstrates a political will among governments to tackle cholera, these plans are often not fully funded and only partially implemented. Mechanisms for translating the NCP into action are missing. This is particularly true of the WASH elements, which are a large part of NCP budgets. Unless the WASH parts of NCPs are integrated with WASH sector plans and budgets, or national and sub-national development plans and budgets, there is a substantial risk they will remain underfunded and under-prioritised.
Cholera disproportionately affects marginalised groups and hard-to-reach areas – meaning it is often not a political priority	Who cholera affects – and the inconsistency with which it occurs – means it often loses the attention of decision-makers between outbreaks. There may also be a political disincentive to invest in long-term WASH improvements where the main beneficiaries are not an influential constituency, particularly when there are high operational costs. These issues can make tackling cholera over the long-term politically, practically and financially challenging.
The priorities and ways of working of the main cholera actors influence the agenda	The nature of the GTFCC's staffing and its relationship with the World Health Organization (WHO) lends itself to health sector leadership and engagement with ministries of health. GTFCC partners are also weighted towards the health and humanitarian sectors, with relatively few partners focused on long-term development. GTFCC working groups mainly consist of technical experts, and there is a notable lack of skills and capacity in advocacy and communications.
Lack of coordination at a national level	Beyond responding to outbreaks, the health and WASH sectors in countries affected by cholera often do not effectively collaborate on long-term solutions. An inability to jointly plan and share data across ministries and departments hinders the chances of a multi-sector approach and agreement on priority areas to target.

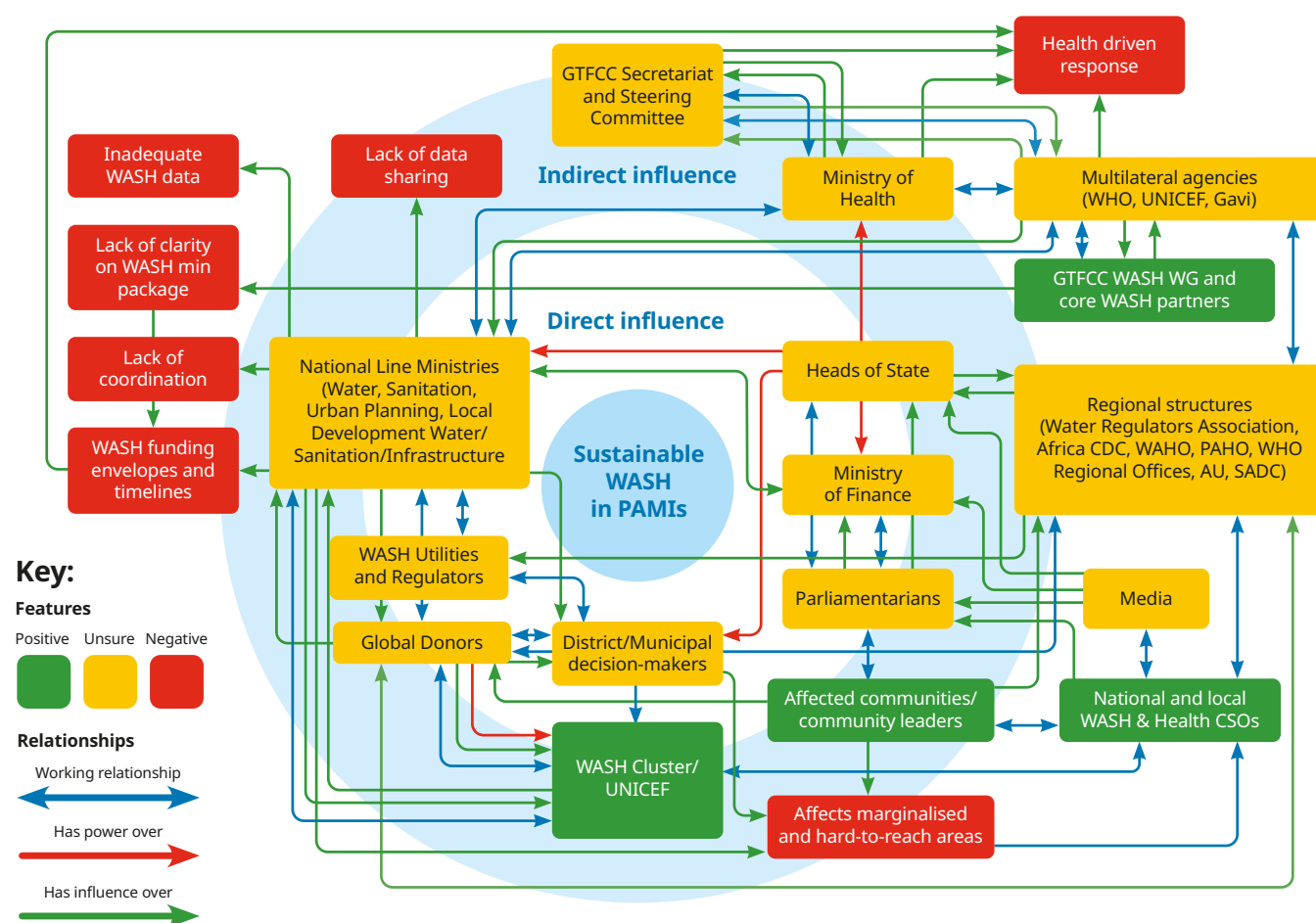
Towards sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene in cholera hotspots



Mapping prominent political economy features and the relationship between key players and issues, helps us work out how to reach those with the power and influence (Figure 1).

This global-level political economy analysis (PEA) map shows key cholera actors, including the GTFCC and its core partners, predominantly in the outer ring of the diagram, with indirect influence over sustainable WASH in PAMIs. Those with a direct influence, such as ministries responsible for water, sanitation, urban planning and finance, along with high-level government representatives, lie in the inner ring. These are the people and organisations that need to be influenced to successfully scale up investment and action on sustainable WASH in PAMIs.

Figure 1: Global cholera political economy map



Priority areas for action



A business-as-usual approach will not bring about the investment and action needed for sustainable WASH in PAMIs. Based on the above PEA, rapid progress requires action in four linked areas:

▲ Women and children collecting water from an unprotected spring. Malawi, 2023.

1

Framing and positioning of cholera

As long as cholera is seen as a health issue, investment will come primarily from the health sector and remain focused on health solutions. As such, there is a need to move beyond health towards a wider ownership of cholera in the WASH sector, which includes increased accountability for disease prevention. A stronger rationale that includes cholera as part of a wider WASH or development objective is urgently needed. One way to achieve this is to build a narrative behind the principle of 'leave no one behind' as outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is likely to be more politically and practically acceptable than a narrative that just talks about PAMIs through a disease-specific lens.

2

New actors and partnerships

There needs to be new organisations and alliances at the global, regional and national level to make cholera part of a wider agenda and reach decision-makers outside of the cholera space. This includes ministries responsible for WASH, ministers of finance and other health actors. It's critical to build meaningful engagement based on trust and an understanding of the mutual benefits of working together. This in turn will encourage more data sharing, joint planning and a joined up, holistic approach at national, regional and global levels.

3

National government leadership, capacity and financing

Prioritising sustainable WASH improvements as the ultimate solution to cholera will not happen without government leadership in cholera-affected countries. This means making cholera a political priority, with more domestic resources for WASH in PAMIs being a prerequisite so as to attract funding from bilateral donors, multilateral development banks and others. Country-level cost-benefit analyses will help free-up both internal and external resources. Integrating NCPs on WASH into urban, development and district WASH plans is also essential to ensure long-term implementation and funding. Cholera outbreaks must be seen as an opportunity to highlight the importance of action and investment in sustainable WASH solutions in disease hotspots.

4

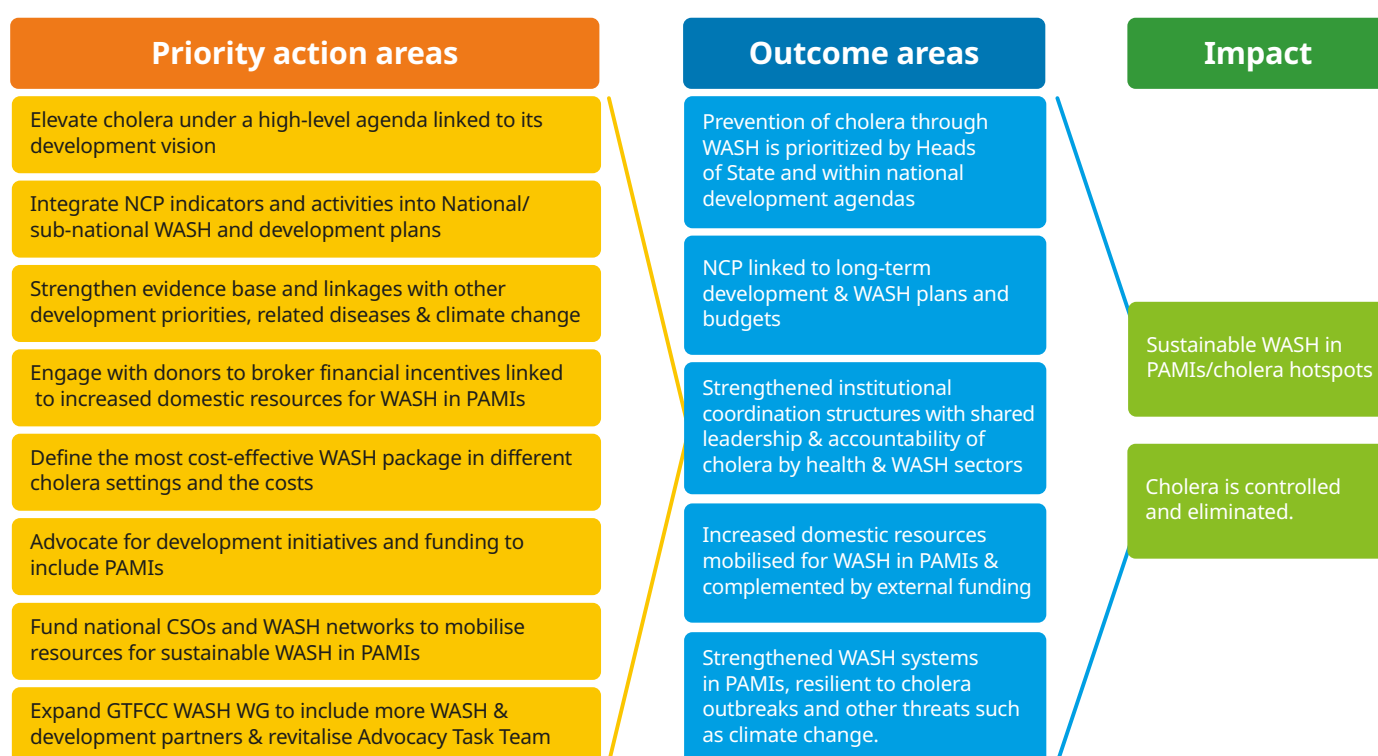
Appropriate and coordinated support from partners and donors

The GTFCC, its Country Support Platform (CSP) and key partners have an important role to play in strengthening the capacity of governments and providing coordinated support to countries. This requires the right support at the right time. Key areas of support to accelerate WASH for cholera prevention include:

- **GTFCC WASH Working Group** – The group should be broadened with new members including those working in WASH development and governments and civil society in cholera-affected countries. There is also an urgent need for clearer costings and guidance that better articulates the most cost-effective WASH package for different cholera settings.
- **GTFCC Advocacy Task Team** – There is a need to reconvene and strengthen the Advocacy Task Team, as part of the GTFCC secretariat, to lead strategic advocacy and communications and support national advocacy.
- **Support to civil society organisations and networks** – Strong local civil society networks are a powerful way to engage and pressure parliamentarians, ministries of finance and other branches of government.
- **Integrating cholera into other disease and development agendas** – Deeper engagement with the WASH community is essential in order to understand and tackle the challenges of dealing with cholera. Approaching cholera in the same way as other WASH-related diseases (e.g. typhoid) will lead to more joined up ways of working.

The priority areas for action are summarised in this theory of change diagram (Figure 2) below.

Figure 2: Theory of change to drive long-term cholera prevention



Recommendations for stakeholders



The growing number of cholera outbreaks show there is an urgent need to prioritise the disease at the political level and speed up funding for long-term prevention through WASH.

Here is what key stakeholders need to do:

Governments should:

- Integrate activities and outcomes from National Cholera Plans (NCPs) into national and sub-national development plans and budgets, and WASH plans and budgets. This will help ensure WASH in PAMIs is part of long-term planning and funding.
- Make cholera a political priority, and improving access to WASH a financial priority (with specific and protected funding for WASH in PAMIs).

Partners and civil society should:

- Advocate for broader development initiatives and funding to include hard-to-reach PAMIs. Engage with major WASH actors and funders to better understand how to put cholera on WASH agendas.
- Prioritise research into the most cost-effective WASH package for different cholera settings. Gather more evidence on the cost benefit of using cholera and PAMIs as targeting indicators for investment in WASH.

The GTFCC should:

- Develop and strengthen links between the approaches to cholera, development and other related diseases. Use GTFCC networks to embed cholera indicators within key WASH and development objectives.
- Work with donors to broker financial incentives for tackling cholera, and support more domestic funding for WASH (with a focus on PAMIs).
- Strengthen GTFCC partnership through more development and WASH representation on working groups. Reconvene the Advocacy Task Team with dedicated resources and a workplan.

► Maria Pedro Mocola, a business woman, fixing a water pump. Mozambique, 2024.



Glossary

CSP: Country Support Platform – part of the GTFCC that supports efforts, primarily at national level, to control and eliminate cholera.

Gavi: An international alliance that includes the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, working to increasing access to vaccines.

GTFCC: Global Task Force on Cholera Control – a partnership of more than 50 organisations.

NCP: National Cholera Plan.

PAMIs: Priority Areas for Multisectoral Interventions.

PEA: Political economy analysis – a way of looking at the power dynamics and economic and social forces that influence development.

Political economy: How politics and economics affect one another.

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals.

WASH: Water, sanitation and hygiene.

WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.

Front cover images (top to bottom):

Medical staff working at the Mechanhelas District health centre, treating cholera patients. Niassa, Mozambique, March 2023.

Chikondi Moto, 8 months pregnant, carrying a full container of water on her head, Malawi, 2023.

Chifuniro, washing her 2-year old son Ernest Namizimbe. Malawi, 2024.

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