

## Linkages between the COVID-19 pandemic & Protocol on Water and Health activities on equitable access to water and sanitation






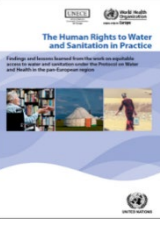
➔ *Helping governments to respond to COVID-19 pandemic and to be prepared for similar epidemics - why addressing inequities in access to water and sanitation is crucial?*

Across the world, **inequities persist for vulnerable and marginalized groups, between rural and urban areas, wealthy and less wealthy people** which is an obstacle to the full realization of the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation that aim at universal access. Parties to the [Protocol on Water and Health](#) have the legal obligation to provide access to safe water for **“all members of the population, especially those who suffer a disadvantage or social exclusion”**.

The work on [equitable access to water and sanitation under the Protocol](#) aims at supporting countries to enhance access to water and sanitation for all, including poor, vulnerable and socially excluded people. To achieve **equitable access to water and sanitation**, governments must take into account three key dimensions: **geographical disparities; specific barriers faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups and affordability concerns**.

Understanding, identifying and addressing these **equity-related issues** in access to water and sanitation can help governments to develop appropriate policy frameworks and implement specific measures to **be prepared, prevent and respond effectively to pandemic such as the current COVID-19 pandemic**. Indeed, as washing hands with soap and clean water is the main prevention measure in the fight against COVID-19, governments must provide continuous access to sufficient water and adequate hygiene **to the entire population** including the **most vulnerable**. People living in informal settlements, homeless, rural populations, women, children, elderly, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees, low-income people, prisoners and all other vulnerable groups must have **continuous access to sufficient and affordable water to ensure their personal hygiene and fight the virus**.

The **Protocol on Water and Health** has been supporting countries in the pan-European region to take concrete steps to **ensure equitable access to water and sanitation** by providing **tailored technical and policy support** thanks to several [guidance tools](#). These tools contributed to **improve the governance and policy framework** needed to develop an **inclusive and effective response to pandemics such as the COVID-19**. See below more information the relevance of these tools for countries to better prepare and respond to health crisis:

Protocol's guidance tools	Relevance for the COVID-19 preparedness and response
<p><a href="#">No One Left Behind: Good practices to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation in the pan-European region</a></p> 	<p>Provides basis to understand the key <b>socio-economic dimensions</b> of equitable access to water and sanitation which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- geographical disparities;</li> <li>- barriers face by vulnerable and marginalized groups;</li> <li>- affordability concerns.</li> </ul> <p>These dimensions should be considered by governments to <b>provide effective and inclusive political/technical response and to prepare for epidemics such as the COVID-19 pandemics</b> – where access to safe and affordable water and sanitation is key for prevention of spreading.</p>
<p><a href="#">Equitable Access Score-card: supporting policy processes to achieve the human right to water and sanitation</a></p> 	<p>Provides a methodology to assess the situation, analysing the 3 equity dimensions and the governance framework in place, to identify current <b>equity gaps</b> that must be addressed to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation (through specific quantitative and qualitative questions). <b>The analysis of these gaps is the first step to elaborate concrete technical and policy actions that ensure equity in access to water and sanitation, which is crucial to leave no one behind in the fight against COVID-19.</b></p> <p><u>Examples:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Assess how access to WASH is provided in specific settings such as <b>educational facilities, retirement homes and prisons</b> which are particularly at risk in the event of pandemics;</li> <li>-Assess how specific <b>vulnerable and marginalized groups</b> are being integrated in WASH policies.</li> </ul>
<p><a href="#">Guidance Note on the development of action plans to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation</a></p> 	<p>Provides guidance on how to use the equitable access self-assessment findings to develop a roadmap to <b>identify specific actions/strategies at policy and technical levels to respond to equity challenges</b>. These policies and actions then can play a key role in <b>improving/ensuring the inclusive water and sanitation access required in crisis such as the COVID-19</b>.</p>
<p><a href="#">The Human rights to water and sanitation in practice: Findings and lessons learned from the work on equitable access to water and sanitation under the Protocol on Water and Health in the pan-European region</a></p> 	<p>Highlights concrete technical and policy actions taken by countries that went through a self-assessment to achieve equitable access to water and sanitation. Some of these actions can be considered as good practices to put in place to secure access to water and sanitation health crisis such as the COVID-19 in an equitable way.</p> <p><u>Examples:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-<b>Armenia</b> is <b>revising its water code to integrate the concept of equity and vulnerable and marginalized groups</b>. This initiative will help strengthening the inclusivity of the WASH policy framework which is relevant to respond to a health crisis in which access to water is crucial.</li> <li>-In <b>North Macedonia</b>, public toilets were reconstructed and opened for free public use, making them accessible to vulnerable groups such as homeless.</li> </ul>