



# PEOPLE HAVE EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINED ACCESS TO CLEAN AND SAFE WATER TO MEET THEIR EVERYDAY NEEDS.

## The Problem

**Worldwide, one in three people do not have access to safe drinking water, and two out of five lack basic handwashing facilities.<sup>1</sup>**

**Meanwhile, overarching water insecurity – too little, too much, or too dirty water – is increasing in scale, scope, and impact in the face of a growing climate emergency.**

### Root Causes of Water Insecurity

Our changing climate, poor water governance, inadequate water management and planning, and inequitable control of resources are the root causes of water insecurity. These issues can fuel tensions and conflict as people – increasingly on the move – compete for scarce water. In fragile contexts, conflict can push water systems and services to fail just as disagreements over water can lead to escalations of violent conflict.

### Contributors to Water Security

Resource scarcity, urbanization and uneven population concentration, and unsustainable economic development clearly contribute to water insecurity by increasing pressure on water. Lack of cost recovery for water usage, insufficient investment in water services, and poor functionality mean that

water infrastructure and systems are not keeping up with – much less making progress against – the Sustainable Development Goals for water and sanitation. The increasingly severe effects of climate change are pushing water systems to their limits. Extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and crippling droughts are making it increasingly impossible to meet demand while staving off severe threats to security and livelihoods.

### Affecting the ‘Last in Line’

Water insecurity disproportionately affects those who have been systemically excluded because of their gender, age, location, or identities. The impacts are especially pronounced for those considered ‘last in line’ for services or access to improved systems, such as residents of slum areas, displaced people or those fleeing conflict, those who have relied on floodplain and wetland ecosystems for subsistence production, and rural farmers and pastoralists facing unpredictable rains. Water security is also a source of constant stress for those who are unable to pay for water, unable to access improved services and systems, or at risk of gender-based violence when physically accessing water.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals Report - 2022



Objectives

Our pathway to water security moves us closer to a world where **people have equitable and sustained access to clean and safe water to meet their everyday needs.** This means that:

- › Immediate water, sanitation, and hygiene services (WASH) needs are met in humanitarian crises
- › Equitable and inclusive water governance processes support the water needs of marginalized individuals and groups
- › Market-driven, accountable, and professional service delivery sustains water system functionality for marginalized groups
- › Natural and engineered water systems are climate-resilient – supporting water conservation and integrated water resource management



Resilience Approach

**Inclusive, climate-smart water systems contribute to resilience by improving livelihoods, food security, and social cohesion.**

**Through our programs, partnerships, and influence, Mercy Corps helps sustain improvements in clean, safe, and equitable water access – even in times of crisis.** Our efforts center on strengthening water systems – and the people that rely on them – to adapt in the face of rising conflict risks, climate change trends, and extreme weather.

Water governance, rather than infrastructure, is at the heart of our resilience approach. We foster inclusive and equitable processes that center the needs and meaningful participation of marginalized groups – and women in particular – resulting in greater access to and functionality of water systems. We also seek market-led solutions that contribute to the

financial sustainability of engineered water systems for personal and professional use. This means working with water providers and users at multiple levels to identify sustainable water solutions and to strengthen water planning, governance, management, and financial capacities of service providers and private sector and market actors. In emergencies and humanitarian crises, we provide access to lifesaving water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services and work to minimize destabilization of services where they do exist. As the context shifts towards stabilization or recovery, we mobilize resources and support partners to move towards more integrated approaches focused on local water systems. **By sequencing, layering, and integrating our peace, humanitarian, and development assistance, we strengthen the capacity of communities and the water systems they rely on to cope, adapt, and thrive.**





**COPE: in the midst of crisis**

**We provide lifesaving access to water, sanitation, and hygiene and help minimize damage to or disruption of water services.** We meet immediate water and sanitation needs for people impacted by conflict or natural disaster. Where possible, we provide cash or voucher assistance for water and sanitation goods and services, helping to incentivize local market actors to be part of the solution. When relevant, we use behavior change approaches to improve sanitation and hygiene practices. And in partnership with local actors we install, operate, and manage WASH equipment and facilities and establish protections to minimize safety risks to women, girls, and marginalized groups.

**ADAPT: to climate and conflict threats**

**We strengthen planning, technical, managerial, and financial capacities for sustainable rural and urban water solutions. In recovery and stabilization settings, we actively partner with water system actors and communities to build resilience to ongoing stresses and future shocks in both urban and rural settings.** This involves strengthening core competencies amongst water

utilities, water managers, and private sector providers to deliver longer-term water and sanitation services. We improve the accountability of providers to water users while engaging with communities to advocate for their own interests and participate in planning and delivery processes. We lay the foundation for financially sustainable services by promoting a willingness to pay for water, and we develop or expand early warning/ early action systems to advance flood resilience and drought risk reduction services.

**THRIVE: today and into the future**

**We support water utilities, water committees, irrigation user groups, and households to invest in their own water security.** We partner with key water system actors to identify long-term solutions to replenish groundwater systems, increase efficiencies in water use, develop fee-based mechanisms, and decarbonize water systems. We advocate for inclusive policies and positive incentives that foster sustained cost recovery and reinvestment, build thriving irrigation communities, incentivize water conservation, and create equitable and inclusive opportunities for effective natural resource management.

**Areas of Focus**

**Mercy Corps has defined five distinctive areas of focus in each of our four outcome areas: water security, food security, economic opportunities, and peace and good governance. These distinctives are not the only programming pathways that we will pursue over the next decade – but we believe these approaches will lead to the greatest impact for the resilient, inclusive communities we work with.**

These distinctive focus areas are not just what we will do; they set us apart. Though they may be tailored to the specific contexts in which we work, these unique and innovative areas of focus articulate what people can expect of Mercy Corps and set the programming standards to which we hold ourselves accountable.

**Delivering Responsive and Efficient Humanitarian WASH Services**

Equitable access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) enables individuals and households to meet

urgent needs in times of crisis. Re-establishing access to water and sanitation is a critical need in the wake of a natural disaster or for those fleeing conflict. Depending on the context, increasing access to responsive and efficient humanitarian WASH may include infrastructure rehabilitation or construction, water trucking, or other forms of delivery and removal. We help ensure that services and facilities are modified to enhance safe and dignified access for people facing additional challenges due to gender, age, or ability. We work with local partners – government authorities, service providers, civil society organizations, and others – from the start to enhance participation and strengthen capacities for service delivery. With an eye towards the longer-term, we focus on building markets, providing cash and voucher assistance, and investing in appropriate WASH technology. Whenever possible, we identify and explore new climate-smart, tech-enabled solutions to increase efficiency, sustainability, and safety of WASH services – even in times of crisis.



IRAQ, 2017



GUATEMALA, 2015



**Scaling Innovative Solutions for Water and Sanitation**

Large-scale and lasting water and sanitation solutions require integration across governance, market, and engineered water systems. Traditional infrastructure-led approaches to service delivery have failed to build inclusive and sustainable business models for water and sanitization utilities. In most contexts, water utilities play a challenging role – balancing the need to provide services with making a profitable return on investment. We work closely with these utilities and relevant service providers to develop sustainable and resilient business models while ensuring that water governance mechanisms and market-led pricing schemes address the water and health needs of the poor and marginalized in the service area. This requires support to strengthen technical, managerial, and financial capacities within local institutions – not just the utility itself but also key partners in government, the private sector, and civil society.

**Advancing Community Flood Resilience**

Growing pressure on flood-prone areas coupled with increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather results in loss of property, livelihoods, and life. Solving for the problem of ‘too much’ water requires culturally appropriate and cost-effective approaches to building community resilience to floods while simultaneously strengthening policy, planning, funding, and prevention. We address increased community flood risk through stakeholder coordination and planning, the development of flood early warning systems, development of climate-smart infrastructure to prevent flooding, and education and training of first responders. We partner with the most at-risk people and communities to anticipate, prepare for, and respond to floods, and we work across social and environmental systems to foster partnerships with and between public agencies, local businesses, and civil society groups to scale proven solutions.

**Promoting Sustainable Water Management and Rural Livelihoods**

Drought, land degradation, failed water points and irrigation projects, and uncoordinated or ineffective management of water resources limit the health and prosperity of rural communities. Tackling these complex challenges requires a systems-level approach to rural water that starts with governance and finishes with infrastructure – not the other way around. Local communities are agents of change that should be

engaged in planning and have decision-making power. We work with communities to advocate for secure rights to access, use, and manage water – so that farmers and herders will invest in productive, climate-smart uses of water. At the same time, we nurture private-sector service provision, build professional management capacities, and support cost-recovery initiatives to sustain long-term financing for community water systems.



INDONESIA, 2009



NIGER, 2018



## Incentivizing Water Conservation

Conserving existing water supplies is essential for economies to grow in a world increasingly characterized by having ‘too little’ water. This requires a holistic approach that focuses on improvements in water capture, pumping, filtration, and use coupled with the identification of alternative sources of water, such as rainwater harvesting and wastewater reuse. We work with water ministries and institutions, equipment suppliers, water utilities, and private sector service providers to find the market,

policy, behavioral, and cultural factors that can help spur adoption of conservation solutions and technologies. We help stimulate and build momentum and local interest in water conservation to harness support for reform measures that incentivize ‘good’ conservation and penalizes ‘bad,’ illegal, and wasteful uses. These incentives can help stored supplies last longer, ensure continued access for downstream ecosystems and communities, and push back the date that water runs out.



*A better world is possible. And this is how we get there.*

**[mercycorps.org/pathway](https://mercycorps.org/pathway)**