

## COVID-19: the need for a progressive and coordinated CSO response – Reflections from Ghana WASH CSOs

*On Thursday May 7, 2020, the Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation (CONIWAS) in collaboration with the Resource Centre Network (RCN) and through the Watershed programme organized a webinar under the RCN National Level Alliance Platform (NLLAP) to discuss the role and response of Ghana's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the wake of the unfolding reality of Covid-19.*

The overarching aim was to “dialogue on the relevance of WASH in the fight against the COVID 19 pandemic and the civil society response.”

Dubbed “Dialogue on the WASH and COVID-19: Civil Society organizations role and response,” the panelists and participants discussed the implications of COVID-19 on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) activities, CSO response especially how inequalities are being addressed in WASH provisions and livelihoods during these critical times, WASH related advocacy messages to improve and support in mitigating the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic and how the WASH sector can better collaborate with other sectors in the COVID 19 response among others.

The webinar provided the opportunity for government, the local Assembly and CSOs to engage in frank and open discussions on the shortfalls or otherwise of Ghana's response on COVID-19 in relation to WASH, evaluate the adequacy and threats of COVID-19 on CSO WASH projects and programming.

The panelists and discussants included – Mr. Martin Dery, Chairman, CONIWAS, Mr. Kweku Quansah, Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, Ms. Rhoda Gyampoh, Gender Desk Officer, Tarkwa-Nsuem Municipality, Mr. A.Y.O. Mudoc, Executive Director, Afram Plains Development Organisation (APDO), Mrs. Vida Dutu, Country Director IRC Ghana, Mr. Ben Ampomah, Executive Secretary, Water Resources Commission and cross section of CSO heads, representatives in Ghana and beyond.

### ***Cooperation and collaboration not working in isolation will help us fight COVID19***

In fact, it was recognized that COVID19 has brought to light the fragility of our health system, social protection and public service including the delivery of WASH services and that it was imperative for CSOs to assess and revise how they are responding to the global pandemic by working together and complimenting each other.

Mr. Martin Dery, CONIWAS Chair said life may not be same in post COVID19 and that there are gaps in the current CSO responsiveness in terms of coordination and integration of activities. He added for some time now CSOs have been operating in silos and that Covid-19 has revealed the urgent need for cooperation and integration of activities and greater intersectoral collaboration and integration between the WASH, education, health subsectors. “When we work in silos, the danger I see is we respond to Covid-19 as a medical issue which is far from the case; Covid-19 is both a medical and public health

issue including aspects of WASH.”

“If you look at Ghana's allocation of funds in response COVID19, it seem to be focused so much on the medical aspect like provision of PPE, ignoring non-medical frontline activities and people including environmental health officers, community volunteers, water and sanitation management teams and so on.”

Mr. Dery also touched on message capturing and the need for CSOs to have a coordinated and uniformed communication on Covid-19. He said CSOs including community based organizations, volunteers and responders working with national health authorities and other partners need to develop, implement and monitor an effective action plan for communicating effectively with the public, engaging with communities, local partners and other stakeholders to help prepare and protect individuals, families and public health during the response to COVID19.

For his part, Mr. Kweku Quansah, a deputy director at the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources (MSWR) lamented that Ghana has not learnt from management of previous emergencies including Guinea worm and cholera. According to him during those emergencies, there was a lot of cross sectoral collaboration and coordination between government and CSOs and that WASH was a key determinant in the emergency response..

“We are facing the same thing today but if you look at media reports on COVID19, you will be tempted to believe that we are working together but we are not, and it is unfortunate” He lamented.

He added that even though the MSWR has not been directly involved in the National Covid-19 Emergency Response Committee, the MSWR has reactivated the WASH in Emergency Technical Working Group together with key partners including CONIWAS to deal with WASH related issues on COVID19.

“So far we developed a strategy which has been costed and already some organizations are supporting the strategy with funds and we hope to use the funds to implement the strategy especially training environmental health officers to carry out intensive education and sensitization on Covid-19 among others.”

He entreated CONIWAS and other CSOs to advocate for integration of WASH in the national emergency response on Covid-19 since adequate WASH intervention (handwashing, cough and sneeze etiquette) is needed in support of the

ongoing efforts especially to reduce the transmission in all settings where people with the disease are quarantined, or in areas with high number of cases.

In the same way, at the local level, Rhoda Gyampoh, a Gender Desk Officer with the Tarkwa-Nsuem Municipality in the Western Region, enumerated the steps the municipality has made so far since COVID19 was declared a pandemic in Ghana. According to her, the assembly has embarked on massive education, provided hand washing equipment to deprived and disadvantaged communities among others. "We are also empowering community partners with information and encouraging collaboration with key partners in our areas including the mining communities."

### **CSOs response against COVID19**

Similarly, at the national level, several mitigating WASH and social intervention measures have been identified and implemented as a critical factor both in containing the virus and lowering its immediate impact and aftermath. This is because WASH has been identified as an important essential service in the fight against COVID19 and useful in disease prevention and protection of health.

Mr. A.Y.O Modoc, Executive Director of APDO, mentioned massive sensitization and education on hygiene, sharing of relief items to vulnerable communities, supporting communities to maintain broken down water systems and cash donations to support the national COVID19 relief fund as some immediate measures CSOs have taken. He was however quick to observe that so far there has not been a concrete integrated strategy by CSOs and currently most CSOs are working as if they are competing among themselves when they should be complementing each other. He also mentioned the non-availability of funding for sensitization and education as well the noninvolvement of CSOs in the national emergency response on COVID19 as key issues requiring urgent attention.

### **COVID19 has exposed vulnerability in WASH access**

In most deprived and rural areas, people struggle to get water to drink let alone washing their hands. The struggles of the poor and vulnerable has been compounded by COVID19, says Mrs. Vida Dutu, IRC Ghana Country Director.

Amid the pandemic, Ghana's government announced free water for all Ghanaians for the next three months (i.e April, May and June of 2020) to ensure constant water flow as handwashing under running water is key in the prevention of the COVID19.

But for majority of vulnerable people in rural communities without connected taps, benefiting from this intervention remains a challenge.

Mrs. Dutu said unlike people in the urban sector, it is highly likely most vulnerable people in rural communities may not benefit from the free water service amidst the outbreak of COVID19

*NLLAP is a WASH sector multi stakeholder platform with the overall goal of improving sector learning and dialogue. It is hosted by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN). The platform offers learning and sharing opportunity for sector players as one of the practical approaches to improving sector engagements/sharing with the long term aim of achieving a knowledge driven WASH sector that delivers quality and sustainable services in Ghana. NLLAP meetings take place on the last Thursday of every month (with modifications when necessary) and are open to all interested parties. The discussions of each NLLAP meetings can be found on the RCN website [www.washghana.net](http://www.washghana.net).*

because of the complexities of different management arrangement in the rural water subsector. She added that COVID19 has therefore provided the opportunity to assess those complexities in the rural water subsector and use the lessons in the application of free water policy in informing reform that can better streamline and ensure we have smooth processes in the application of such social interventions in WASH.

Weighing in, Ben Ampomah, Executive Secretary, Ghana's Water Resources Commission said COVID19 is fundamentally changing the world, including water resource use and management and it is important now to assess our water supply systems and how it can support everyone. "Let us also take this moment to promote collaborative efforts (institutions, governments, citizens etc) and developing a roadmap on CSO response on improved WASH services and, responsive water use as far as COVID19 is concerned" He said.

Panelists with participants proposed practical opportunities for CSO engagement and recommendations to support the government efforts at mitigating the effects of COVID19.

The recommendations are outlined below:

- CSOs, Private Sector and government and academia have different strengths and can complement each other. Therefore, we need to strengthen the COVID 19 response platforms with adequate representations of these groups.
- Partners can complement efforts by planning interventions together. This can be done at regional or district levels so that duplications can be avoided
- Any organization carrying out interventions should endeavor to work with existing structures so that follow ups can easily be done to ensure some level of sustainability
- Civil society organizations must build alliances especially with local businesses and philanthropy, as well as work with existing partners to expand their influence in policymaking and governance.
- CSO should consider opening engagement government
- Assess the complexities of rural water subsector to ensure it supports the poor and the vulnerable.

### **About the Watershed Programme**

Watershed is a strategic partnership between the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and IRC, Simavi, Wetlands International and Akvo to work with CSOs to lobby and advocate for improvements in the governance and management of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as well as water resources management (WRM) services. In Ghana the partners are Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation (CONIWAS), Hope for Future Generations (HFFG), Ghana WASH Journalists Network (GWJN), and Conservation Foundation (CF).

If you are interested to propose a topic for a meeting please contact us on,  
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