

Ensuring Access to Water for Crisis-Affected Populations

When the world committed to achieving universal and equitable access to water as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the promise to Leave No One Behind was recognized as both an ethical responsibility and a key criteria for success. Five years later, however, individuals living in fragile and conflict-affected areas remained [less than half as likely](#) to have access to safely managed water, sanitation, and hygiene services than those living in stable settings.

Taking action to improve access to water and sanitation in fragile contexts is vitally important. It is essential in reducing the prevalence of water-borne illnesses, which continue to result in millions of preventable deaths each year. It helps prevent the emergence of conflict arising from water shortages and associated disputes, and enables populations to maintain agricultural livelihoods that may provide an alternative to joining armed groups. It also helps avoid the use of negative coping strategies like early marriage that are used when parents cannot meet the basic needs of all of their children. Further, it is essential in enabling displaced populations to find a solution to their displacement, whether in their places of origin or in secondary locations.

Closing this gap and delivering on the SDG targets requires urgent action. NRC supports

the [Call to Action for Survival WASH and Resilient WASH](#) and would like to further draw attention to three recommendations in particular.

1. Take action on climate change and natural resource management

People living in fragile and conflict affected settings are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and its effects on access to water. In Somalia, where a devastating drought has pushed entire ecosystems to the brink of failure, an estimated 8 million people lack access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene services. Vegetation cover, which was already minimal, is fading to nothing and the capacity of aquifers and other water systems to refill is being rapidly depleted. Together these conditions are threatening the traditional Somali economy and are further fueling a rural exodus. One IDP NRC spoke with had walked for 8 days to reach an IDP camp. “All my cattle succumbed to the drought. I lost 75 cows in a single night,” she said.

NRC has observed similar challenges in Iraq, where NRC [research](#) found that one in three families in drought hotspots had to reduce the area of land on which they plant, resulting in significant loss of crops and

incomes. Four out of 10 respondents said that they harvested less wheat, barley, fruit, and vegetables this year than they did last year. Should current drought conditions continue to damage crops and harvests, Iraq's farming communities will be forced from their lands to urban areas in search of alternative sources of income.

These droughts and their consequences cannot be traced back to a single, discreet source. Rather, it is the intersection of climate change, conflict, and governance that have resulted in the current crisis. Addressing this type of emergency thus requires an equally multifaceted approach. As a first step, two actions are urgently needed:

- **High-polluting countries need to take rapid action to reduce their emissions.** Communities in Somalia and Iraq feel some of the most acute impacts of climate change, while contributing only a negligible amount to emissions. Governments, private companies, and individuals in high-emitting countries must take immediate action to reduce their climate footprint.
- **All countries should put in place water resource management plans.** These plans should be developed in consultation with local communities and farmers and be supported with adequate financing. They should also be sensitive to the local context and conflict dynamics so as not to further exacerbate tensions within communities.

2. Put in place measures to protect water and water systems during conflict

Water and associated storage facilities and treatment systems are protected from attack

under International Humanitarian Law. Yet, in conflicts around the world, NRC has observed water infrastructure be damaged and destroyed by parties to conflict, with seeming disregard for the principles of distinction or proportionality. In Burkina Faso, for example, humanitarian organizations observed 58 attacks on water facilities from January to October last year. Incidents ranged from destruction of water points and water trucks to acts of sabotage against electricity generators of the state water agency.

The attacks in Burkina Faso reduced access to water for over 460,000 people, and when including those whose access to water was interrupted due to destruction of electricity infrastructure, the number rises to 830,000. It also placed a strain on the remaining water points. As one community member described, "Often, we spend the entire day at the water point only to leave with one jerrycan, and sometimes with nothing. We pay for and drink water that's very dirty and impure. We can't even dream of having enough to wash clothes, or ourselves."

An estimated two billion people are living in countries currently experiencing some form of armed conflict. These individuals should not have to fear for their ability to safely access water – a basic human right for every individual around the world. To address this, NRC encourages the following:

- **All States and non-state armed groups should put in place measures to protect water during their military operations.** This includes not only refraining from attacking water infrastructure, as is already required by IHL, but also committing not to use water facilities for military purposes, which can render them potential targets for attacks. These protections should be incorporated into relevant protection of

civilians policies, training materials, and rules of engagement.

3. Develop and implement equitable transboundary water sharing agreements

How water flows between countries also has critical significance for access to water. In the absence of legally binding agreements, downstream countries can find themselves with significantly reduced water for their populations. Where the downstream country is also affected by conflict, water shortages resulting from transboundary disputes can compound issues of damaged and destroyed water infrastructure, leading to significant supply challenges for local residents.

NRC has seen the impacts of this in Syria and Iraq, both of which rely on neighboring countries for a significant percentage of their water resources. In recent years, water flow from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers has seen a steady decrease, which has contributed to the onset of drought and water scarcity issues inside the two countries, deepening economic vulnerability and exacerbating drivers of displacement.

While a protocol was signed with Syria and Turkey in 1987 to allocate fair and equitable water through to the downstream rivers, decreases of water flow have continued. In Syria, where conflict has damaged critical water infrastructure and a fuel crisis has resulted in a lack of electricity for pumping water, the reduced water flows have now led to the spread of diseases such as cholera and

pushed struggling communities to rely on purchasing water to cope.

Dham, a farmer who has spent a lifetime in the fields in the northeastern city of Hasakahm explained, “we have not received water from Alouk [water station]... people increasingly rely on trucking water in, and some of this water comes from unsafe water sources.” To support Dham and others like him to have safer access to water, NRC encourages the following:

- **Regional mechanisms should be developed and implemented to promote equitable sharing of water across borders.** These mechanisms should be supported by the international community and accompanied by relevant accountability mechanisms to ensure implementation and compliance.

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