Why universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene is a critical component of the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Despite significant progress during the MDG era, 748 million people still lack access to improved drinking water sources, 2.5 billion lack access to improved sanitation and of these 1 billion still practise open defecation. Inadequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) remains a leading cause of preventable diseases and deaths among children under 5 years of age globally. Exposure to repeated WASH-related infections also contributes to stunting and prevents children from reaching their full potential.

The linkages between improvements in WASH and the achievement of targets related to poverty, health, nutrition, education, gender equality and sustainable economic growth are well established. Furthermore UN Member States have recognised the human rights to water and sanitation with the passage of a General Assembly resolution in 2010.

The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals called on Member States to aim for universal access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, with a particular focus on women and girls. In addition, we recommend that Post-2015 WASH targets and indicators:

Include hygiene
Benefits associated with improved hygiene, and with washing hands in particular are well established. Post-2015 targets should reflect hygiene alongside drinking water and sanitation in order to maximise the impact on the health and wellbeing of children and their communities.

Go beyond the household
Universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene in homes remains the primary concern, but future targets should also prioritise WASH in settings beyond the household including schools and health facilities. A healthy and dignified school environment is conducive to keeping children in school – especially girls. Hand-washing with soap in birthing centers has proven to greatly reduce sepsis and tetanus.

Address safety and sustainability of services
In addition to extending access to unserved populations, targets should address the challenge of providing reliable supplies of safe drinking water and safely managed disposal of human waste and sustaining those services to ensure lasting benefits.

Eliminate inequalities and fulfil the promise of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation
Future targets must aim to progressively eliminate inequalities. Stratifiers of inequality can include sex, race, ethnicity, income, location, disability or any other form of discrimination or marginalisation. Future targets should also promote progressive improvements in the quality of services based on the human right to water and sanitation criteria: availability, safety, acceptability, accessibility and affordability.
Suggested targets for 2030:

1. Eliminate open defecation
2. Achieve universal access to basic drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene for households, schools and health facilities
3. Halve the proportion of the population without access at home to safely managed drinking water and sanitation services
4. Progressively eliminate inequalities in access

Target 1: Eliminate open defecation by 2030

One billion people still practised open defecation in 2012

In absolute terms the decline has been modest, from 1.3 to 1 billion between 1990 and 2012

Target 2: Achieve universal access to basic drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene for households, schools and health facilities by 2030

Progress is on track to meet the basic drinking water target for all households by 2030.

Renewed efforts are required to achieve universal access to basic sanitation and hygiene by 2030.

Target 3: Halve the proportion of the population without access at home to safely managed drinking water and sanitation services by 2030

Unless carefully managed, basic drinking water and sanitation does not ensure safety

An estimated 1.8 billion people drink water containing evidence of faecal contamination.

Target 4: Progressively eliminate inequalities in access by 2030

Despite progress, pronounced disparities persist in access to drinking water and sanitation such as between rich and poor in South Asia

To meet obligations under the human right to water and sanitation these disparities need to be monitored

For more information:
Please see UNICEF’s webpage on Children and the Post-2015 Development Agenda: http://www.unicef.org/post2015/

1 WHO and UNICEF, ‘Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation – 2014 Update.’