

TAKING THE LONG VIEW:

Faith-based Organizations (FBO) and Sustainable Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Healthcare Facilities (WASH in HCF)

April 2, 2025, between World Water Day and World Health Day, 30 FBOs and key partners gathered at the highest point in Washington DC, the National Cathedral, to take the long view: focus on sustainability and explore what each organization is doing to ensure WASH in HCF is long lasting. Co-hosted by Catholic Relief Services and the Washington National Cathedral, it was the largest gathering of FBOs on WASH in HCF to date.

FBOs, who operate up to [50% of HCFs](#) in some countries and serve the most vulnerable, continue to demonstrate that WASH—foundational to health—is a solvable need. The rich Compendium of WASH in HCF Progress summaries from 25 FBOs provided in advance of the event can be found [here](#). WASH in HCF saves lives, fosters public confidence in healthcare services, reduces the costly burden of illness and disease in human potential, lives, and treasure; it improves global health security and helps prevent and contain rising global concerns (i.e., AMR, MDR-TB, epidemics/pandemics and more). Better health leads to greater economic development and community security worldwide. (A deepdive into data can be found [here](#); and see [WHO's helpful Case for Investment](#).)

To underscore the multifaith interest in global health and WASH, welcome remarks were delivered by Rev. Canon Jan Naylor Cope, Provost of the National Cathedral; Rabbi Jack Bemporad, Director of the Center for Interreligious Understanding/Director Emeritus of the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue; Imam Muhammed Magid, Chairman of International Interfaith Peace Corps/Co-President of Religions for Peace/former President of the Islamic Society of North America, offered a lunchtime blessing; and Sr. Theresa Sullivan, Executive Director, Daughters of Charity International Project Services blessed our evening meal. Cardinal Michael Czerny, Prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Integral Human Development, sent a [video](#) message from Rome.

GOALS FOR THE DAY:

1. Recognize and honor the tremendous progress made in WASH in HCF in the past five years and accelerate action
2. Focus in on sustainability strategies
3. Broaden community among FBOs to expand prioritization and sustainable progress
4. Set next steps

SUSTAINABILITY EXPERTS FROM THE FIELD:

The day's work began with 3 implementers who are cracking the code on sustainability. They offer expertise and encourage participants to be in touch. Joining us from the field via Zoom: Francois Kangelwa/Catholic Relief Services (CRS)
Ruth Gemi/African Christian Health Association Platform (ACHAP)

Tertullian Mariga/Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB)
[contact information can be found on the master list of attendees below]

These experts highlighted:

- The critical importance to engage multi-stakeholders i.e., health authorities, regional faith leadership, WASH operators, facility staff, to strengthen coordination and clarify roles
- Capacity-building initiatives like training and coaching sessions to improve skills and awareness
- Shifting the mindset from infrastructure provision to long-term service management
- Performance monitoring and integration of WASH into daily management of healthcare
- The role of the “circuit rider”

SUSTAINABILITY—CREATE AN ETHOS WHERE USERS WON’T ACCEPT FAILURE

Having laid the groundwork, two breakout sessions dug deeper into the people and the mechanisms needed to ensure sustainability. We collectively landed on 5 themes:

1. Sustainability is more than structural
2. Sustainability is about people
3. Focus on behavior change
4. FBOs are unique advocates
5. Structural standards are fundamental

SUSTAINABILITY IS MORE THAN STRUCTURAL:

Infrastructure is where we tend to go first, and too often the first message is the need for more money and equipment, when the reality is we need to start with a philosophical approach that recognizes WASH in HCF as the mechanism central to providing safe care.

SUSTAINABILITY IS ABOUT PEOPLE:

WASH in HCF sustainability relies heavily on people—their commitment, training, incentives, behavior change, and feedback—as well as clear standards for monitoring and evaluation. In particular:

- Monitors and evaluators: who have authority and determination to hold senior staff responsible.
- Circuit riders: Sustainability needs a point person(s). That could be a circuit rider, a mobile systems-level point person with technical expertise in WASH and quality-of-care advocacy, able to make a circuit of numerous HCFs to ensure sustainable and effective WASH functioning in each.
- Cleaners: need to be trained, motivated, affirmed, and HCFs must have a budget for local cleaners.
- Facility-specific and local stewardship committees: to hold community accountable and engage with available tools, e.g. WASHFIT, Clean Clinic Approach.

It’s important to acknowledge HCF staff, including physicians, are not automatic WASH advocates. WASH itself doesn’t seem to land. We need to reframe WASH as a lifesaving

intervention that strengthens health systems and offers critical IPC, not just access to more water.

Making the “business case” for sustainable WASH in HCF can help build champions and advocates within the facility, health system, and among leadership to build and sustain WASH improvements. Because getting and keeping HCF staff is a challenge, emphasize WASH also improves working and living conditions and helps attract and retain quality HCF staff and reducing turnover. The business case also includes increasing patients, reducing the need to replace infrastructure, increasing supervisor visits, and the cost effectiveness of reduced infections. Data on cost effectiveness, patient attendance, and staff retention can contribute to the business case.

Every HCF needs a cultivated WASH advocate. WASH is fundamental and yet first to be dropped when an HCF doesn’t have resources. Doctors are still going to do the surgery. An IPC officer who is a focal point and owns the WASH process, can work with doctors, nurses, cleaners, administrators and community committees.

Sustainability has to be top down, for now, but if only INGOs/FBOs are engaging, we won’t get to sustainability. The only way to reach the sustainability target requires local buy-in. WASH needs leaders and doers in the HCF and promoters who go out into the community and create a community committee that develops ownership of the program and passion at the local level. The responsibility to monitor, enforce, and reward progress resides with the local community. The HCF staff and local supporters must have a sense of ownership and responsibility for protocols while continuing to have access to professional consultants and engineers.

FOCUS ON BEHAVIOR CHANGE:

Understanding the impact of WASH in HCF makes it more likely to be passed along. HCFs do not have social behavior change experts. Social behavior change needs to start with HCF staff who, at a minimum, need to understand behavior change, which is more than skills training. Training needs to include learning the reason why they’re asked to do what they do and understanding “why” they’re doing it. Speak the language of your audience, so when we talk to health people, for example, we explain WASH in terms of IPC and quality of care.

Generational habits don’t change overnight. Connect with grassroot organizations to understand local needs and culture, then provide a framework that sets expectations and understands community norms. This may include modification of centuries of water and sanitation related practices to embrace a new way of daily life. Build trust to overcome false assumptions and cultural concerns. (Example offered: a man might believe his wife will not get pregnant if she uses soap.) Engage peer-to-peer communications to address social norms and put pressure on behavior change. The community needs to see and understand the benefits and when people see impact, word-of-mouth can be most effective.

Stronger communication about the value of WASH in HCF in the local community is needed. The community needs to understand its role as a disease/illness carrier and the HCF is a

neighbor. WASH is best characterized, not in terms of infrastructure, but as needed to ensure healthy populations and improved quality of life. Every WASH system needs to be a “win-win” for the local area. If the community identifies water as a priority, then money will be used for WASH.

FBOs ARE UNIQUE ADVOCATES:

FBOs are part of the fabric of the community. We greet each other in our houses of worship. We don't have the luxury to leave. Our accountability is long-term and we have a level of commitment that goes above the traditional worker.

The faith leader (or tribal leader) are entry points where FBOs can build community leadership and awareness, gain endorsements, and identify needs specific to the community. Faith leaders are trusted messengers, the local ‘insider’ who can be a key to success. Each community has faith leaders who influence their congregations, including HCF staff who are likely members of a church or mosque. They need to buy-in and be educated so they bring people on board. Sermon guides to “inspire people to inspire people” could make it easier for faith leaders to do what they already want to do.

FBOs can ask more of faith leaders and faith hierarchy. We can work with them as a first point of contact for help with community strategies and HCF administration. FBOs can also work with faith leaders to address bad theology when it comes to understanding health.

STRUCTURAL STANDARDS ARE FUNDAMENTAL:

We tend to solve the problem before we know what the problem is resulting in a lack of alignment between technology and operations. The perceived complexity of WASH can turn off INGOs. You have to define the problem clearly, and then there is absolutely an optimal design. Guidelines, policy, and regulation come from a group with expertise, with governments aligned. Then comes construction, training and maintenance.

- Could a global DATA Platform be set up so there's a database which identifies what each HCF site has and where the gaps are?
- How do we create change at scale?

WASH in HCF will remain facility-by-facility and dependent on individual manager interest and commitment, unless we work at the systems level. Attendees paid attention to "systems" thinking. Systems-level approaches are critical for sustainability. Networks are a natural fit for WASH along with other health systems strengthening activities. At the supervision, accountability and budget level, this means integrating WASH into health systems requirements, processes and budgets. Annual budgeting and spending on preventive maintenance, education, and speedy correction of problems must be a priority. Budgeting needs to be open and transparent.

Due to varying experiences, there was some debate among technical experts about which structures do best:

- On one hand, experience has shown that water points connected to HCFs have a better chance of sustainability; second comes schools, while stand-alone community water points are most problematic where the responsibilities for WASH infrastructure are put on individuals and loosely formed community WASH committees with many challenges are found in the community dynamic. HCFs and schools have structures so it's easier to assign roles and accountability, and they have more ability or capacity to take on operations and maintenance plans or even renovation and repair programs unlike a water user community committee.
- On the other hand, experience also shows structures within HCFs and schools, especially small ones (but also larger facilities), lack capacity and struggle to manage water service delivery effectively. In many instances, these institutions lack the capacity or organizational strength to consistently fulfill even their core mandates of education and healthcare.
- Conclusion: Water services for HCFs should be integrated into the broader public water supply system and planned at the administrative level responsible for service delivery, unless the facilities have the financial resources to manage the full life-cycle costs of water systems dedicated to their exclusive use. Water service management is often more sustainably handled by dedicated entities, such as water user associations or private operators through public-private partnerships.

FUNDING AND THE CHANGING U.S. FOREIGN AID LANDSCAPE:

Focusing on the elephant in the room, the group came together to discuss the withdrawal of U.S. funding. Key takeaways:

- With the need to recalibrate programming as a result of massive cuts in U.S. public funding it was indeed a time to focus on sustainability.
- Communities need to mobilize funds. Grassroots is a must especially when governments are not sustained during unrest.
- Local markets are evolving and contracting out for services can aid government and faith-based facilities. Public/private partnerships are evolving.
- There will be additional focus on funding later in the year.

NEXT STEPS:

- Among notable new commitments: The Anglican Church and Muslim World League both expressed interest in launching pilot initiatives similar to the Vatican Dicastery. Find the transcript of [next step responses](#) from the end of our day together and offers to connect from many attendees. [NOTE: This long document is open for editing if you wish to amend your response.]
- Link with attendees: Find the master list with contact information [here](#).
- Join the WHO/UNICEF [Community of Practice](#): The CoP offers a wide range of trainings and tools, run by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Water Institute. They are in the process of creating a subgroup specifically for FBOs. Expect an email update.
- As foreign assistance is restructured in the U.S. (and elsewhere), there's interest in setting up a WASH ADVOCACY CONSORTIUM, so we can collectively reach out to

policymakers at key touch points about the fundamental health, economic, and security roles of WASH.

- Learn about the UNC Water Institute's [conference](#), the largest focused on water and health: October 2025; consider submitting a side event (deadline June 1).
- Mark your calendar for a possible meeting a year from now, possibly in Rome, to share a year of accomplishments.

Do be in touch with each other! And stay in touch with us, the Global Water 2020 alumnae team. If you're looking for some extra expertise, our team is here to help make those connections,

Susan
(Global Water 2020 alum)
Faiths for Safe Water

Susan K Barnett
Cause Communications
Former network news journalist helping nonprofits be heard
www.cause-comms.com
susankbarnett@gmail.com
917.841.0221 (mobile, WhatsApp, Signal)