

Water Under Fire

VOLUME 3

Attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impacts on children

Cover: Attacks on water and sanitation services have been a signature of the armed conflict in Syria which is entering its tenth year. In the picture, a girl is carrying jerrycans of water and is walking past a pile of debris on a street in Aleppo, capital of the north-western Aleppo Governorate. Aleppo has been exposed to prolonged fighting during the conflict and has experienced frequent interruptions in its water supply.

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Other titles in this series

Water Under Fire: For every child, water and sanitation in complex emergencies, Advocacy alert, March 2019, <www.unicef.org/reports/water-under-fire-2019>

Water Under Fire Volume 1: Emergencies, development and peace in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, August 2019, <www.unicef.org/reports/emergencies-development-peace-in-fragile-and-conflict-affected-contexts-2019>

Water Under Fire Volume 2: Strengthening sector capacity for a predictable, quality humanitarian response, November 2020, <<https://www.unicef.org/reports/strengthening-sector-capacity-for-quality-humanitarian-response-2020>>

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Foreword

The human dependence on water has been exploited all too often during conflict. Nearly every conflict-related emergency where UNICEF has responded in recent years has involved some form of attack hindering access to water, whether directed against water infrastructure or through incidental harm or tactic used by a party to the conflict to limit water supply to populations.¹ Where there has been conflict, water has been part of the battleground.

There is no war that does not affect children. Children suffer not only when their lives, health, education, families and communities come under attack, but also when their support structures, schools and hospitals that exist to help them grow and flourish are attacked. Less widely discussed to date are the impacts on children of attacks on water and sanitation services.

UNICEF launched the Water Under Fire campaign on 22 March 2019 to draw global attention to three fundamental areas where change is urgently needed to secure access to safe and sustainable water supply and sanitation in fragile contexts. The first volume of the report series focuses on action across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to strengthen water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The second volume is dedicated to the WASH sector’s capacity to deliver a predictable, quality humanitarian WASH response. This third volume in the series focuses on ending attacks on water and sanitation services in armed conflict and the impact on children.

For the purposes of this report, attacks on water and sanitation systems are defined as all ground, sea and aerial acts, which may affect the civilian population and civilian objects including through the use of munitions and unexploded ordnance. Attacks also refer to cutting off water services to civilians and targeting of water service providers that operate and maintain this infrastructure, including the denial of access to spare parts needed for repairs and consumables required to run systems.

Children rely on safe and sufficient water and sanitation for their survival and development. When children’s access to water and sanitation services is cut off during conflict, they are forced to rely on unsafe water that may threaten their lives. When the flow of safe water stops, children – especially the youngest – suffer diseases that may have fatal outcomes. Diarrhoeal disease linked to unsafe water and sanitation kills more children than violence in conflict.²

During war, it is not uncommon for children to be tasked with fetching water, which can expose them to sexual violence and abuse, and deadly harm. In addition, lack of access to water has an impact on access to education for children, especially girls, and may have other longer-term impacts on a child’s development.³ For these reasons, UNICEF recognizes that attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure are attacks on children.

The global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has acutely demonstrated to the world the fundamental importance of access to safe and sufficient water for hygiene and survival. It has also reminded us that in conflict-affected contexts, where water may already be scarce, everything possible must be done to protect water and sanitation personnel, systems and services.

Access to safe water and sanitation for all has perhaps never been more urgent. And it is achievable – provided we work together, respect the rules of war and hold each other to account when systems fail.



Manuel Fontaine

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UNICEF



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