



Stretched into Emergencies – A WASH Experience from India to South Sudan

SUMMARY

From 23 April to 23 July 2022, I Ananya Ghoshal, a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) officer, working in the UNICEF Office in Lucknow, India, joined the Juba South Sudan Country office as WASH Resilience Specialist (P3) on a stretch assignment. My main tasks in the Country Office included supporting the WASH Chief, collaborating closely with different section leads, and working on donor reports, support the section in National cholera planning, donor visits and mid-year review reports. This was the first time I was deputed outside my comfort zone, a non-family duty station, and gain experience in an emergency context.

The purpose of the stretch was to step in until the recruited WASH Resilience Specialist (P3) was able to come on board. Working closely with the Supply, Education, Communications, and Donor Relations Sections, the position was to support the development, preparation, management, implementation, monitoring and coordination of a multi-year Resilience programme in the WASH Section. The specialist was to be responsible for promoting public visibility of results, as well as broader partnership-building and communication with various donors like the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the government of Korea, German donors and other key stakeholders.

The aim of the WASH resilience programming is to support sustainable service provision as part of the humanitarian development nexus to strengthen the resilience of people, communities, and systems. The stretch assignment's objective included to strengthen WASH resilience into programming (existing and new), including to focus on sustainable urban and rural WASH services delivery; government and stakeholder capacity building; sustainable school WASH facilities; supply chain improvement; and private sector engagement.

Within this framework I benefited from opportunities like, i) attending "Impact assessment" study and inserting climate resilient questions, ii) contributing to the National Cholera Prevention Plan, iii) contribute to social media posts via UNICEF South Sudan's' handle, iv) handling donor visits, v) mid-year reporting, vi) Non-Tropical Diseases planning and proposal development with the Ministry of Health, and vi) facilitating, organizing and documenting a high-level review workshop with donors, partners and internal staff.

Background

I am Ananya Ghoshal, a Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) officer, working in UNICEF in Uttar Pradesh, India for the past five years. Uttar Pradesh is one of UNICEF's largest field offices with the state's population at 230 million. Apart from seasonal floods and droughts, we work here primarily with a lens of long-term developmental, not emergency work.

Prior to my employment with UNICEF, I had worked in a foreign country, but not within an emergency context. Since I joined UNICEF in 2018, I received the WASH in emergencies training in 2019 organized by UNICEF Pakistan. However, my lack of experience in an emergency context, had made me feel less confident to contribute to local emergencies given UNICEF's mandate as a humanitarian organization and the need for emergency programming in India as well.

UNICEF's new strategic plan¹ mentions a blended approach of developmental, as well as humanitarian emergency approach for all programming. In Uttar Pradesh's context, the emergency experience gained from the stretch assignment would help me plan and respond to seasonal emergencies.

As I was determined on getting an experience in an emergency context within the United Nations system, I had bookmarked the stretch assignment advertisement page and regularly checked it for any postings related to WASH work, given my professional background in my 11 years in WASH, like CLTS, solid liquid waste management (SLWM), water and hygiene including menstrual hygiene management (MHM).

Although my previous application for a stretch had not been successful, I did not give up. When the stretch opportunity for WASH Resilience Specialist (P3) opened in South Sudan, an

emergency context country, I readily applied, and my application was successful.

Upon receiving the email that I had successfully advanced to the actual stretch; I was overwhelmed with a sense of excitement. Despite the excitement, a small part of me was worried as this is the first time, I was moving to a country supporting emergency programming.

Story

Pre arrival to Juba and my personal exploration

Once the assignment was confirmed, I started preparing myself by reading about South Sudan's WASH context, as well as general background information on South Sudan. As I sought more information about the country, I watched YouTube videos and researched as much as I could. The videos gave me a good understanding of the local food, people and some of the challenges faced in the area. During the search, I also found a YouTube video about a "7-foot tall club" in South Sudan, which gave me the thrill to work with tall people as I am only 5 feet 1 inches tall. There was another video where an expat traveler documented all the wonderful food items and local money exchanges and value. My receiving supervisor, WASH Chief of South Sudan, Mr. Dara Johnston, introduced me to another Indian colleague based in the country. Through a MS Teams call, we were able to discuss what items to carry along and what not. This exercise was very fruitful, as well as gained some much-needed clarity on the Visa processes. Furthermore, my supervisor connected me with the HR team and other colleagues who helped me to prepare for the opportunity. I had printed all the necessary documents and kept soft copies of them in my phone as I might not have access to internet until I reached the UNICEF Guesthouse in Juba, South Sudan. A "Welcome pack" was sent by HR over

¹ [UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 | UNICEF](#)

mail with all required details and phone numbers of relevant security officials.

Arrival to Juba

Upon my arrival in Juba, I was received by a UN vehicle and was taken to the designated guest house for UN officials. The following day, a shuttle bus was present at the gate to transport UNICEF personnel to the office to ensure everyone arrived on time and safely. My arrival at the office was followed by a scheduled security training. The welcome package played a significant role, allowing me to prepare myself mentally and physically for getting ready for the new environment and new office. I was introduced to different sections and colleagues by the Programme Assistant and WASH Chief, who introduced me to the team, other section Chiefs, the Deputy Representative and the Representative of the South Sudan Country Office. Meeting the team reminded me of the 7 feet tall club. I felt like a Liliput in the country of Gullivers.

Figure 1: Realization of average height difference in South Sudan



² Washdata.org

The WASH situation of South Sudan, as of 2020, reported that 60 per cent of the population in South Sudan still practice open defecation (ODF)². Based on my previous 11 years of professional experience as a WASH practitioner, I could imagine the whole roadmap and challenges through which the country is yet to move, based on the community-led total sanitation / community approaches to total sanitation (CLTS / CATS) and ODF experience in my own country, India. Based on this, the following were some key tasks and achievements that I could perform.

Figure 2: Facilitated a workshop on Sustainable WASH for Resilience Programme



Key tasks and achievements:

My main tasks were to assist the WASH Chief and coordinate with other sections. Below listed are some key results of my stretch assignment:

- Embedded climate resilient questions in an impact assessment study: An impact assessment study of the overall programming was being conducted and led by World Bank and partners. To understand the full extent and range of WASH interventions, I assisted them in revising, and added appropriate WASH-related questions to ensure the evaluation addressed all aspects of WASH interventions in the country.

- Contribution to the National Cholera Prevention Plan with relevant WASH perspectives: This was a Government led cholera plan that was being charted out coordinated by the health section. I was asked to attend a 2-day long meeting and ensure the inclusion of relevant WASH aspects. The final document has now been published and I have been informed that my name has been included under the team that has developed this National cholera plan for South Sudan, which is my first international policy document development mention.
- Supported in coordinating a donor visit in Juba: I visited and prepared the sites for a meaningful visit by the donor, so that the feedback received from them is relevant and helpful for further fund generation. During this process, I got apprised about the community practices and preferences and it helped me understand the local dynamics such as water is always trucked in the urban areas and there is a lot of conflict for accessing water. Some of my photos made their way to social media posts on UNICEF South Sudan's [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).
- Supported Mid-year reporting: During the mid-year review, I supported the team in creating donor reports by gathering and organizing necessary, comprehensive data. I focused on compiling figures and presenting a slide that illustrated the utilization of funds according to each individual donor.
- Workshop on Non-Tropical Diseases (NTDs): With limited experience in this topic, this was a challenging, yet an exciting opportunity. I read several articles and scholarly articles to understand the connection of WASH and NTDs. As I built my capacity on NTDs, I understood the importance of WASH and contributed to the planning and proposal development for a joint bid for funds with the Ministry of Health, South Sudan.
- Facilitated the mid review of Sustainable WASH for Resilience Programme: A mid review was conducted for the Sustainable WASH for Resilience programme which is funded by the Government of the Netherlands (2019-2023). This workshop included discussions with donors, partners and internal staff. I drafted the TOR for the consultant who, finally could not arrive in Juba, due to security restrictions. My prior experience in facilitation and coordination gave me confidence to take the lead in organizing, facilitating and documentation of the workshop on 01 July 2022 for which I received great recognition. As the workshop was using a “no Power-point presentation” approach, this required a lot of back-end preparations. Representation from the National Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the State Departments of Land and Housing affairs, the donor representation, representation from the partner organizations and UNICEF WASH team from CO, Juba and the 4 state offices of the target areas were involved in the workshop. To make this review workshop happen successfully, I contributed to the following:
 - i. Developed the TOR for the international consultant
 - ii. Coordinated with the field level team for sending in their inputs
 - iii. Gave feedback to the inputs received and finalized posters exhibited.
 - iv. Oversaw the administrative logistics for the workshop in collaboration with Communication section

- v. Facilitated the workshop, along with WASH Specialist and Chief of WASH.
- vi. Prepared a report capturing the key highlights of the workshop visually (photos and video) Video recording of the discussions, especially the unique points from each state were useful for the final documentation process.

In addition, I contributed by developing a country reporting template for WASH, including automated data analysis tools, like bar diagrams and comparison of progress between states.

Conclusion

South Sudan is still struggling with the issue of Open Defecation. I come from India where the country has been declared open defecation free and now the concept of “clean villages” has been initiated with various initiatives for solid and liquid waste management.

My experience in India gave me a strong understanding of achieving open defecation free environments, knowledge I was able to use and transfer to South Sudan. At the same time, my experience responding to emergencies in South Sudan has equipped me with knowledge and skills that I can now apply in my home country, India. My experience in one of the field offices in Western Equatoria State in Yambio (this place is significant as the food basket of the whole country) was educational and further useful to hone my technical WASH skills.

One of my most memorable recollection of my assignment in South Sudan CO though is the happy hour, which was held every Friday, organized by the local staff association.

For those colleagues, who want to advance in their career and like to embrace challenging roles and opportunities I would recommend considering taking up the opportunities a stretch assignment

can offer. For me personally, it was an enriching experience and I still cherish the relationships and the experience I received through the 3-month long stretch assignment in South Sudan. This type of opportunity also helps in understanding new concepts, helps in confidence-building for new assignments and is a best experience for the “explorer” and “learner” parts of our minds. As a female WASH officer, it also helped me understand how much UNICEF cares for staff members, especially in an emergency context. Thus, staff members who are still trying to decide whether to take the plunge or not, should definitely try.

I would describe my stretch assignment as an unforgettable experience. I went to Juba, South Sudan, with a mindset to learn and contribute to my best ability to the organization. I was pleasantly surprised by the warm reception I received from the country office staff. The inclusive environment made me feel like a valued member of the team which boosted my confidence well beyond my time on site.

References

[UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#)

[Joint Monitoring Programme](#)

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About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

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