



# Discovering Diversity and Overcoming Challenges: My Stretch Assignment to Mongolia from Pakistan

## SUMMARY

This diary is a personal reflection of Ihsan Ullah Khan from UNICEF Pakistan on his enriching experience during his stretch assignment to UNICEF Mongolia. Ihsan shares how he and the host country benefited from this opportunity and reflects that this cross-learning initiative was beneficial for both countries' WASH program as well as Ihsan, personally and the receiving team learning about different workplace environments as well as getting exposure to different work cultures.

Besides learning, the exposure for Ihsan was a wonderful opportunity to interact with UNICEF regional office and other partners including UNDP, UNFPA, UNDSS and UNRC office on the One UN premises. Field missions to Bayankhongor and Gobi Alta province were new experiences in understanding UNICEF programming, government structure, operational modalities, and the culture of Mongolia.

Ihsan Ullah Khan is a WASH Officer based in Karachi Field Office, Pakistan. He completed his stretch assignment in Mongolia Country Office from 15 May 2022 to 15 August 2022, temporarily filling in a vacant WASH officer position.

## Background

I am Ihsan Ullah Khan, a Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Officer based in the Karachi Field office, UNICEF Pakistan. My key responsibilities are to carry out WASH need assessments in emergencies, overseeing WASH infrastructure work in urban and rural areas, WASH supply management, enabling environment initiatives, and coordination with government line departments.

The stretch assignment opportunity for the Mongolia Country Office aimed to support and lead the WASH team for three months. Given my work experience and interest in further learning and growing as a professional, I shared my resume with my supervisor and Chief of Field Office at Karachi, Pakistan. My application for the stretch assignment was successful after a short but thorough interview. From May 15, 2022, to August 15, 2022, I served as WASH Specialist (P3) while reporting to Deputy Country Representative, Ms Ayako Kaino.

Meeting with dedicated and professional colleagues in the Mongolia Country Office and working on a different WASH programme with different challenges than those encountered in Pakistan, has been a truly valuable life experience. As the culture, climate and traditions of Pakistan and Mongolia differ from one another, I wanted to utilize this opportunity to learn and explore more about WASH programming in other contexts.

## Story

Despite some progress in sanitation in Mongolia, limited access to safe sanitation services remains a major public health threat and is a key contributor to diarrhoea diseases. The overall proportion of the population using safely managed sanitation services is 56 per cent and open defecation remains an issue in rural areas at 25 per cent<sup>1</sup>.

As I was filling in for a colleague who was normally leading the WASH team, I received handover notes before I arrived in Mongolia, allowing me to familiarize myself with WASH programme, challenges and starting to coordinate with section colleagues even before my arrival in Mongolia. A deeper dive into programmes and projects enabled me to understand the approaches for WASH services in the country once I arrived. Upon my arrival, the WASH team gave me a comprehensive orientation on the background of Mongolia WASH programme, its challenges and progress. Based on that, we developed a plan for tasks that were supposed to be completed in next three months. I had to present programme updates in weekly, biweekly, and monthly meetings as per office routine schedule.

Moreover, to ensure my time in Mongolia was beneficial for me as well as the organization, my supervisor made sure my work plan matched my skills and strengths yet was challenging me to

grow in understanding the context of Government and UNICEF interventions modalities while considering my short duration of stay of only three months.

My supervisor Ms. Ayako Kaino also oriented me on the overall programme, coordination structure, meeting schedule and finalized the task for my Performance Evaluation Report (PER) as well. She was kind enough to discuss on my prayer times as well as allowed me to be flexible for Friday prayers. I fully practiced my religion in Mongolia office.

**Picture 1: Group photo with partner and WASH team during field visit to Bayankhogor province**



### Key results of the stretch assignment:

- 1. Strengthened the capacity** of the Mongolia UNICEF and partners team on i) water safety planning in urban and rural settlements through orientations. One session was conducted with UNICEF staff while three sessions were conducted with provincial WASH consultants, ii) solar-powered WASH services in schools, HCF and the community with the lens of climate resilience and climate change programming.
- 2. Provided technical support** to the team and developed ToRs for the engagement of consultants, ii) solarization of health facilities, bathing areas, schools and

<sup>1</sup> [Washdata.org](http://Washdata.org).

provided basic guidance for planning and implementation of solar systems.

3. **Organized orientation** with UNICEF and WASH implementing partner teams on Pakistan Approach to Total Sanitation (PATS) to eradicate open defecation in rural areas to inspire cross-country learning.
4. **Guided the WASH team in the development of the final donor** Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) report submission. Took lead and submitted the WASH project report to the project advisory group and to KIOCA delegates in a meeting.
5. **Drafted the following documents:**
  - A concept note on WASH in schools for 21 provinces was drafted and submitted to management for resource mobilization.
  - Drafted concept note for funding to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to strengthen sanitation programme in the country.
  - Under the guidance of the Country Representative, i) a technical assistance paper was developed and submitted to donors for fundraising and ii) a proposal was submitted to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
  - Revised proposal and submitted to management for further submission to the Government of Korea for fundraising.
  - Furthermore, I assisted the team in the mid-year review to conduct the mid-year review workshop. Additionally, I supported the team in developing funds utilization plan of current and expiring grants. I will be keen to follow up later if the concept notes were successful in securing the proposed resources.

**Picture 2: Child with water carrier from water ATM in Gobi Alta Province**



## Challenges

One of the most difficult, yet rewarding, aspects of the stretch assignment was understanding the context of Mongolia's WASH programme implementation strategy, which is significantly different from Pakistan's implementation approach. Therefore, to fully understand its objective and implementation, I planned field missions in two provinces: Bayankhongor and Gobi Altai. This put me in a better position to plan and guide the Mongolia team based on my observations from the field. I was able to write concept notes and proposals with the support of the WASH team. The field missions further challenged me on how sanitation can be improved in rural areas, while considering the cold weather conditions during the winter season that prevail in Mongolia. For instance, the temperature below freezing point is one of the challenges to design sanitation system for schools and in community

unlike Pakistan. Therefore, special arrangement must be done if pour flush latrines have to be designed within the dormitories of schools and communities. The prevailing sanitation system in most of the communities are pit latrine with no flush system.

Majority of the population I encountered only spoke Mongolian; thus, many have limited exposure to speaking and understanding English. Therefore, most documents had to be translated into English for my detailed understanding while some of the workshops and meetings I attended, were held with support of a translator.

## Learnings from the stretch assignment

- **Leadership skills:** By the end of the assignment, I had significantly enhanced my ability to effectively lead a team. The skills that I improved included decision providing strategic direction, orchestrating coordination, problem solving and planning, funds management, review of reports and coaching. Moreover, I successfully delegated tasks to team members, contributing to the refinement of their abilities. I also placed considerable emphasis on bolstering the team's capacity, which involved formulating plans for solar-powered systems in hospitals and shower rooms and developed proposal, concept notes and theory of change for results-oriented framework.
- **Coordination and communication skill:** During my stay in Mongolia, I coordinated closely with the East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) addressing diverse areas such as WASH and Climate Environment Energy and Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery (CEED) planning and provided WASH updates in monthly meetings. The regional team provided valuable guidance in the developing concept

note and proposals. Direct interaction with senior colleagues enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of communication pathways with the regional office and effective utilization of their resources to complement those of the country office resources.

- **Insights on ATM-based water systems:** I gained valuable insight into ATM-based water systems in Mongolia, which the Pakistan office is developing. During my stretch assignment, I visited field and observed the complete operations and processes of ATM-based machines and real-time usage. In Pakistan, we followed a similar approach but encountered some challenges, such as availability of technology for water conservation, revenue generations and funds management at communal level. Upon my return to Pakistan, I shared the key features of the

### BOX 1: Testimonial from the Deputy Representative, UNICEF Mongolia

*"I just wanted to share our gratitude to you and your team for letting us enjoy working with Ihsan for 3 months. It has been great pleasure and learning for us. He was a great team member to our WASH team as well as UNICEF Mongolia. He particularly worked on 1) Building capacities of Mongolian government counterparts and WASH team on Urban Water Safety and Water quality monitoring, 2) Sharing approaches to Total Sanitation in Pakistan, 3) Actively engaging through CPMP process as well as other strategic discussions at CMT and PCM, 4) Developing proposals for multiple potential donors like ADB, Government of Korea, Aus Aid, and 5) Managing one of the biggest sectoral.*

*- Ayako Kaino, Deputy Country Representative, Mongolia Country Office*

water ATMs as implemented in Mongolia and will further discuss and brainstorm with WASH colleagues on following a customized approach in Pakistan.

## Conclusion

To be able to go beyond my job description and to learn new skills and competencies in an international setting has been a great opportunity to develop my career. The working modality in the Mongolia Country Office is significantly different from the working modality in the Karachi field office as it goes beyond the local into a national context, which thus has widened my perspective on in overall programming in health education, WASH & clean air, Early Childhood Development and (ECD) and immunization.

The stretch assignment was not only a learning opportunity but also, I had a chance to explore the new country, tradition and culture and to get familiar with people around me. Moreover, the assignment has been a great networking opportunity as managing the team and communicating directly with the Senior Management Team of Mongolia allowed me to see the strategic priorities of national level programming.

Upon my return to Pakistan, I have been able to continue using the skills that I learned during my stretch assignments, such as team management, the delegation of tasks, coordination with

international staff and regional staff and Country Management Team members.

At the end of my assignment in Mongolia, the UNICEF Mongolia Staff Association (UMSA) team organized a farewell party where my contributions to the WASH programming were acknowledged and appreciated by Country Representative Mr. Evariste Kouassi Komlan and Mr Tapan Mishra, the UN Resident Coordinator presented me with a token of appreciation for my contribution to Mongolia.

## Acknowledgements

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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:

*Discussion Papers* explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

*Fact Sheets* summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

*Field Notes* share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

*Guidelines* describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

*Reference Guides* present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

*Technical Papers* present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

*WASH Diaries* explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

*WASH Results* show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

*COVID-19 WASH Responses* compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

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