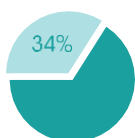


# Critical access to water during COVID-19 endangered by a rise in demolitions in the West Bank: The case of Masafer Yatta

## The right to sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water: A struggle for Palestinians in Area C

Everyone should enjoy the right to sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water. Access to clean water and sanitation is not only a fundamental right and a critical element for human dignity and health, but is also essential to the achievement of several basic human rights. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), both ratified by Israel and Palestine, recognize the right to water as part of the right to life (ICCPR Art 6); for an adequate standard of living and the right to food (ICESCR Art 11); and the right to health (ICESCR Art 12). In addition to the obligations under International Human Rights Law (IHRL), the supply of adequate and safe water to the population is also protected by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in situations of occupation. Israel as an occupying power under IHL must, to the fullest extent of the means available to it, ensure sufficient quantities of water for the Palestinian population under occupation in the West Bank. Currently, in many parts of Area C, the basic water needs of Palestinians are not being adequately met.

### Facts and figures<sup>2</sup>



More than 34% of West Bank households have limited access to safely managed water sources.



In the West Bank, at least 144 schools and 132 healthcare units lack sufficient WASH facilities (primarily toilets, drinking and handwashing stations).



In Area C alone, more than 100 communities/residential areas rely entirely on rainwater harvesting and water trucking.



The price of tankered water reaches over 30 NIS per cubic metre in Area C, compared to 5 NIS for piped water.

Israel controls more than 85% of the water resources in the West Bank.<sup>1</sup> In Area C (which represents 60% of the West Bank) communities depend on Israel's planning system, however, the application process for a construction permit has an extremely low success rate. These restrictive and potentially discriminatory planning policies, as described by the UN Secretary General,<sup>2</sup> deny communities access to affordable and safe water, including drinking and domestic water, and water for basic hygiene and sanitation facilities, including toilets, sewage networks, and cisterns. This lack of access to water also prevents herders and pastoralists who are living in these areas from maintaining their livelihood assets. Currently, 178,000 people living in Area C are identified as vulnerable due to the lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).<sup>3</sup>

## The threat of Covid-19 intensified with a rise in demolitions of WASH infrastructure

In cases where water infrastructure has been installed in Area C, it often remains under threat of demolition. According to OCHA's demolition tracker, demolitions in Area C increased by 30 per cent<sup>4</sup> during 2020, compared to 2019. The mass demolition of Humsa Al Bqaia in November 2020 represents the largest number of structures destroyed in a single incident since OCHA established the demolition database in 2009. Some 84 structures (including 29 donor-funded residential homes, water tanks, latrines and livelihood structures) were demolished, displacing 158 people and affecting 1,017 people. While demolitions have increased, they have also affected WASH infrastructures more specifically. In 2020, 83 WASH-related structures were demolished or confiscated due to the lack of a building permit.

The denial of access to water and the impact of increased demolitions on WASH infrastructure is of particular concern during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Access to WASH is critical to hydrate, maintain personal hygiene, and reduce infection risks. For communities without easy access to health facilities, the adoption of adequate hygiene practices is the easiest, cheapest and most secure way to fight disease. WHO has identified access to WASH infrastructures and facilities as a critical priority to prevent COVID-19 transmission. Ensuring adequate, safe and regular WASH services for vulnerable Palestinian communities is the primary component of the WASH COVID-19 inter-agency response plan. However, the increase in demolitions has had a negative impact on an already dire situation. The lack of access to water prevents affected households from applying measures to stop the spread of the virus, which is already putting a significant strain on healthcare services in the West Bank.

1 PWA, World Water Day 2020

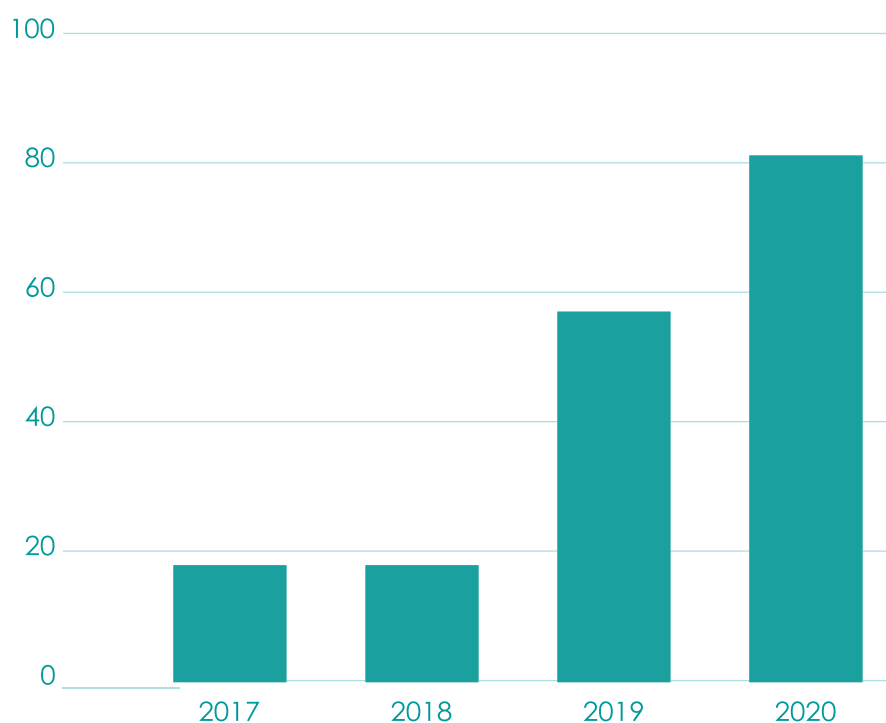
2 UNSG, 12.02.14.A/HRC/25/38. Para 11-20.

3 WASH Cluster vulnerability tracker 2020

4 Humanitarian needs overview, oPt, 2021, (PMICS) 2019-2020

5 OCHA demolition tracker

## No. of Demolished WASH Structures in Area C



## The case of Masafer Yatta

Many of the families in Masafer Yatta, southern Hebron, were unable to cover the cost of water for their domestic and livelihood needs. These families felt compelled to abandon their land and sell their livestock to earn an income as daily workers in Israel. On 25 November, citing the lack of building permits, Israeli authorities demolished 28 structures in Masafer Yatta, of which 11 had been provided as donor-funded humanitarian aid. These structures included homes, livelihood-related structures, and water and sanitation facilities. In a single day, 36 Palestinians, including 21 children, were left homeless at the onset of winter and a further 715 Palestinians were adversely affected by the destruction. Approximately 3.7 km of the water network, which served 667 Palestinians, was cut. The damage forced the village council to discontinue all water services until the water network can be repaired. Communities now have to collect water from external sources at a cost of approximately 30 NIS per cubic metre, instead of the standard 5 NIS per cubic metre from the water network. The demolition in Masafer Yatta prevented more than 700 people, including children, from accessing water and adopting adequate hygiene practices during the COVID-19 epidemic. Moreover, it has prevented people from exercising their rights to water and to health.

## Proposals for action

### ■ Israel

- Israel should cease the demolition of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in Area C, as access to water is a fundamental right.
- Israel should guarantee safe and adequate access to basic services to Palestinians, including to WASH infrastructure, in line with IHL.

### ■ International community

- The international community should engage in the protection of communities at immediate risk of demolition such as Masafer Yatta through advocacy with the Israeli authorities.
- The international community should continue to engage in all relevant fora and, when acts of demolition occur, jointly advocate for them to desist. This advocacy should focus in particular on demolitions trends (including WASH infrastructure) and the humanitarian consequences.

### ■ Donors

- On behalf of humanitarian actors, donors should advocate with the Government of Israel for their ability to pursue lawful humanitarian activities and interventions without concern or fear of these interventions being demolished.
- More than 65% of the financial needs of the WASH humanitarian response plan, including the Covid-19 response, are not being met in the oPt. Therefore, donors should increase funding to the WASH sector, particularly for activities in Area C, and enhance resilience programmes to improve the community's capacities in such emergencies.