

WaterAid Liberia and Sierra Leone: A review of the trans-boundary pilot programme

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Introduction

WaterAid established a pilot ‘trans-boundary’ programme in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2009. With four Monrovia-based staff and an annual budget of just under GBP 1 million, the programme is engaged in national sector policy and campaigns work, together with service delivery in two counties of Liberia and two districts of Sierra Leone. A review of the pilot programme by two independent consultants was commissioned in June 2012 to assess progress, relevance and effectiveness, and to make recommendations for future direction.

Main findings

Policy influencing work has been a strong and effective component of the programme. WaterAid is represented at the highest level in national WASH consortia involving government, donors and civil society organisations, and has been instrumental in establishing sector policies, Government commitments and budgetary allocations in both countries. Resulting institutional reforms and the arrival of new funding and progressive decentralisation require the conversion of policies into effective systems for delivering impact at scale. WaterAid is not just responding to this evolution but is instrumental in driving it, moving into new forms of advocacy to ensure that Government obligations and donor commitments are translated into accountable actions. The workload is placing fast-growing demands on the programme, especially in maintaining effective representation in Freetown.

The selection of remote and difficult communities for service delivery work has been a programme strength in terms of reaching the most marginalised people in both countries, but capacity constraints and logistical challenges have made it difficult to achieve high beneficiary numbers, and justify a future approach based on more concentrated geographical areas and the inclusion of larger settlements.

A standardised package of service delivery work has been appropriate thus far, and has laid the foundation for developing areas of country-specific niche expertise in technologies and approaches (eg water supply for very small communities and sanitation marketing).

Water supply based on installation or rehabilitation of low-cost handpumps has been appropriate in the context of high water tables and rural poverty. Design-driven planning

based on a numerical service delivery targets is, however, resulting in clustering of waterpoints and outlier households are given insufficient consideration. Operations and monitoring based on the 'cashbox' concept is also encountering difficulties, with limited evidence that communities have taken responsibility for maintaining their own water supplies.

The high prevalence of open defecation justifies the Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach to sanitation improvement and this work in Sierra Leone is strong, mainly due to WaterAid's engagement of district 'technical teams' in verification and follow-up. CLTS in Liberia is constrained by facilitator limitations and communities' dependent mentality. Hygiene promotion work seems unsustainable, based on time-limited training events, and does not reflect WaterAid's significant global expertise in this area. School latrine construction standards are adequate, notwithstanding design errors in vent pipe positioning and pit configuration.

The higher quality and sustainability of service delivery in Sierra Leone reflects stronger decentralisation with more experienced government staff at district level, the hierarchical but open relationship between the technical teams and partner NGOs, and the strength of those NGOs and the prevailing 'developmental' (as opposed to humanitarian) atmosphere.

Although new partners have been identified in Liberia, work there is still constrained by lower technical quality and sustainability. This arises from a lack of technical expertise within the programme team, limited Government and NGO staff capacity (particularly in community-based process facilitation), and distances and poor roads that constrain close supervision. Sustainability has been particularly challenging in a pervasive climate of humanitarian work based on donated goods and services. This dependency culture in a post-conflict environment has not been countered by a sufficiently contrasting strategy from WaterAid, with a 12 month period for intervention, output-oriented partnerships and a sense of inevitability of support regardless of community engagement exacerbating the short-term, non-participatory perception of project work. While external support from the region and the UK has been significant in some areas, especially in policy advocacy, closer mentoring in operational work and partnerships could have helped identify and address a number of these problems at an earlier stage.

Monitoring of service delivery interventions is based on field visits by WaterAid staff every three months and focuses on physical verification of outputs for the current year's activities. These are relatively superficial visits due to constraints of staffing, time and distance, and the weakness of partners may justify more in-depth support and follow-up, albeit at a cost.

Operational and managerial oversight of the programme has greatly improved since an internal audit in late 2011. Upcoming recruitment and possible new office establishment bring a risk of disruption to the programmatic work underway, particularly due to the limited pool of skilled individuals from which to recruit.

Recommendations

Develop a strategic plan based on phased growth: Growth in both countries is justified by the scale of the challenges and facilitated by funding available, but should be carefully paced within the framework of a five-year strategic plan that should be developed by early 2013. A blend of service delivery and policy advocacy remains appropriate but with stronger linkages between the two.

Plan towards separate country programmes: Progressive establishment of an independent Sierra Leone programme is proposed, with separation from a free-standing Liberia country programme by early 2014.

Consolidate existing work before considering expansion: A consolidation of work in existing counties and districts is proposed, with a more focussed package of work within those areas, so that interventions can be built up in a more inter-linked, cross-cutting and efficient way.

Develop a strategic expansion plan in each county or district: Using census and water point mapping data, long-term intervention plans should be developed based on progressive expansion from entry hubs.

Work in larger and more accessible settlements: In order to deliver beneficiary numbers more cost-effectively, respond to the more evident health risks in fast-growing settlements and allow greater influencing of partners and Government, the programme should be working in larger settlements, including district and county headquarters.

Lengthen community engagement: The current 12-month duration of engagement with target communities should be extended, to facilitate deeper relationship-building and participation.

Apply conditionalities for community support. A more demand-driven approach is proposed, in which there should be no pre-set assurance that a community will enjoy the full package of WaterAid support. Suggestions include asking communities to apply for support in competitive 'bidding', stipulating community contributions to water supply work and agreeing to suspend work or leave communities if interest is low.

Change the nature of partner project agreements: ‘Rolling’ partnership agreements are proposed, still 12 months in duration, but including a blend of new initiatives together with the continuation of previous years’ activities.

Increase the frequency and duration of project monitoring: Staff should be visiting projects more frequently, accompanying partner staff to communities at every stage of inception and implementation, providing advice, support and verifying the scope and quality of outputs. This will undoubtedly increase costs.

Identify and develop programme technical strengths: Liberia and Sierra Leone offer context-specific opportunities that the programme could exploit to develop expertise of regional and global value. In Sierra Leone these could include sanitation marketing and in Liberia approaches for providing clean water in very small and remote communities.

Slowly expand urban sanitation work: A Monrovia Civil Society Organisation (CSO) partnership offers an entry point for a urban sanitation work, which would allow WaterAid help this important segment of the population, to bring influencing closer to policy-makers and to deliver beneficiary numbers. However, this should be developed slowly and in a carefully staged manner.

Conduct a technical appraisal of all unfinished or inoperative water systems: An audit of water points installed or rehabilitated by the programme is proposed in order to draw a line under investments made to date through repair or, if unavoidable, removal.

Change the design of institutional latrines: Institutional VIP latrines should be built with external vent pipes and drop-hole covers. Fossa Alterna should be properly implemented.

Conduct re-training in CLTS: Further expert training is suggested in CLTS to share experiences and remind facilitators of the correct approaches and typical pitfalls.

Organise a look-and-learn visit from Liberia to Sierra Leone: To allow the Liberian partner and government staff to see the institutional modalities of the Sierra Leone programme and experience a more advanced CLTS process first-hand, a visit is proposed for later in 2012.

Conduct a looking back exercise: Partner capacity remains weak and a process of looking back is suggested, to what has been working and what has not, and what can be done to improve standards and sustainability.

Further decentralise policy advocacy: There is a need to establish stronger systems of planning, budgeting, implementation and accountability at district and county level. WaterAid has an instrumental role to play in building up local authority competence and

capacity, giving guidance and practical support to these processes, and providing a stronger voice for civil society to engage. This will require new staff and more decentralised support.

Open an office in Freetown and recruit for this: The scale of the Sierra Leone sub-programme, the grants already secured, and the need for closer programmatic supervision going forward, justify the opening of a WaterAid office in Freetown. Two employees are initially suggested. Oversight of the district work may continue from Monrovia. There should be no immediate need to increase staffing in Monrovia.

Open a field office in Harper and recruit for this: A field office in Harper with technical and developmental capacity would bring WaterAid closer to its partners and to the county governments. Use of UN domestic flights would greatly reduce costs and time involved in management by WaterAid, while increasing effectiveness and strengthening partnership.

Ensure strong external support during growth: Recruitment, new offices and additional support systems will place a heavy burden on the programme team. They will need strong support from UK and the region to manage the process of growth, to ensure that programme work does not suffer and to sustain progress in improving systems and accountability.

Selected lessons learned

The costs and difficulties of providing close support should be considered when selecting operational areas for a new programme: While a focus on a country's most remote and insecure locations may be justifiable once a country programme is well established, it is not advisable in the early years of operation.

The 'trans-boundary' model requires operating areas to be adjacent to each other: The huge distances between service delivery areas in Liberia and Sierra Leone has effectively resulted in two separate sub-programmes, although at policy advocacy level the synergies have been excellent. Future trans-boundary efforts should work in regions that are adjacent to each other.

New country programmes need very close support and oversight in both systems and approaches: WaterAid should allow for – and cost – an extended period of close technical and operational support to new country programmes when they are young and at their most vulnerable. This might be achieved through 'crack teams' to introduce systems, procedures and standards, to advise on policy advocacy direction, and to guide the technical direction of service delivery.

New country programmes should be headed by experienced WaterAid staff: Ensuring that WaterAid's organisational culture and ways of working are well-defined at the outset of a new country programme requires experienced WaterAid staff. This may necessitate the extended placement of external personnel. In Liberia and Sierra Leone this has been well handled at Team Leader level, as reflected in the high quality of policy and advocacy work, but there has been inadequate support to administration and finance and to service delivery.

A specific 'support package' for new country programmes may be justified: New country programmes need specialised support for at least three years and WaterAid may wish to consider a specialised unit to support new country programme establishment.

Restricted funds should be avoided for new country programmes: Restricted funds limit flexibility and such funds should be avoided for the first two to three years of new programmes.