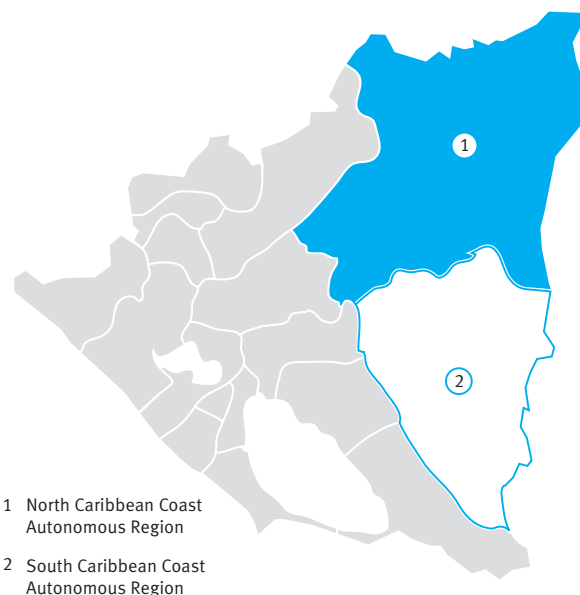


WaterAid Nicaragua Country Program evaluation

Introduction

WaterAid country programs are externally evaluated every 4 years to assess relevance and operational effectiveness; as well as technical “excellence.” In 2014, six WaterAid country programs (CPs) were evaluated, including Nicaragua, one of WaterAid’s newest programs. In addition to assessing both positive elements of programming and those that need improvement, the evaluation process concludes with clear recommendations and a management response for incorporating the evaluation’s guidance into future planning and implementation.



Context

Nicaragua is the 2nd poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) after Haiti. It ranks at number 132 on the Human Development Index.

Nearly half of the total population (6 million) live in poverty, and 17% live in extreme poverty. Poverty and low levels of human development are most acute in the Autonomous Regions of the country’s Caribbean Coast, where 40% of the population are members of politically, economically and socially marginalized indigenous and/or Afro-descendent groups.

WaterAid’s work is currently concentrated in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region; and is in the process of extending its presence to the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. The autonomous regions of the Caribbean Coast fully recognize the multi ethnic composition, culture and languages of its people and while Spanish is the official language in Nicaragua, the Miskitu language and culture dominate in the areas where WaterAid is currently working.

Despite considerable water resource availability in Nicaragua, there are substantial spatial and temporal

variations in rainfall and hydrogeological availability, patchy infrastructure coverage and poor service reliability, resulting in limited water access.

National Joint Monitoring Program statistics for water show high levels of improved water supply in urban areas (98%) with lower rates in rural areas (68%). Data from ENACAL, the public utility responsible for urban water and sanitation service provision, suggests that urban coverage is less than 60% nationally, due to insufficient and unreliable service.

Nicaragua is the only Central American country not on track to achieve the MDG for sanitation. Improved urban sanitation coverage is 63% and has only progressed minimally in 20 years due to limited investment. Improved rural sanitation coverage (currently 37%) remains low due to a steep rise in the use of unimproved facilities.

Coverage levels in the Caribbean Coast Autonomous regions where WaterAid works are strikingly low. Only 18% of the population has sustained access to safe water, and 20% has access to adequate sanitation. These low rates are exacerbated by poor service functionality rates (up to 80% of water supply services are estimated to be non-functional).

WaterAid

WaterAid works in 26 countries with a mission to transform lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in the world's poorest communities. WaterAid works with partners and influences decision-makers to maximize its impact. WaterAid America, a member of the global governance structure, WaterAid international, raises funds for and awareness of WaterAid's global mission and programs and has a special mandate for pursuing WaterAid's mission in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

Established in 2011, Nicaragua is one of WaterAid's newest CPs. During its three-year pilot phase, the program reached over 6,800 people with water and 4,000 with sanitation in 26 rural villages and 10 peri-urban neighborhoods in one of the most remote and marginalized regions of the country. Funding progressively increased and the annual operating budget for 2014- 2015 is projected to be \$700,000.

Evaluation

In November 2014, two independent consultants and a member of WaterAid UK's Program Support Unit conducted an evaluation of the Nicaragua country program to assess its relevance, effectiveness, and technical excellence, leading to recommendations for the first CP strategy development process due to begin in December 2014. The evaluators spent three weeks consulting key local and national stakeholders and institutions on sector challenges and visiting WaterAid supported projects. This briefing note summarizes the evaluation team's findings and recommendations.



Key Findings

❖ WaterAid deliberately identified and targeted the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region given the alignment between the region's needs and WaterAid's mission (low coverage, marginalized communities, limited functionality of existing services).

❖ The CP has strong leadership and a small, dynamic team able to directly support partners with service implementation.

❖ The program has developed a substantial amount of expertise in the North Autonomous region particularly around gender-inclusive vocational training for community water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) technicians and hygiene promoters. While implementation quality is overall very good, the evaluation team observed that some trained community-based WASH technicians were not adequately supervised during construction.

❖ A diverse group of partners bring unique skill sets to a shared mission. WaterAid has supported communities to operate and maintain services and strengthened local governments to provide external support to communities. These efforts have led to a growing recognition of the important role municipalities and government institutions must play in sustaining services.

❖ The team has fine-tuned some promising approaches to WASH service delivery which include rainwater harvesting, manually drilled boreholes fitted with rope pumps, pour-flush toilets and household water treatment and storage. They have used inclusive approaches to train artisans and have developed an innovative micro finance mechanism which provides users with access to credit for services.

❖ The Country Program has successfully struck a good and vital balance between achievement of realistic user number targets and the freedom to innovate and improve implementation models; this is particularly

crucial in the challenging environment in which WaterAid implements. There is evidence of learning and a healthy feedback loop between users, partners, key stakeholders and WaterAid, enabling the program to rapidly adapt approaches and technologies to user needs.

❖ Overall, WaterAid Nicaragua scored well on the assessment, receiving a majority of "good" (with improvements necessary) and "very good" (with only minor improvements necessary) ratings.

❖ The evaluation team identified two main weaknesses, which were deliberately not prioritized during the pilot phase due to limited resources, and which will be addressed in the coming years: the absence of an explicit policy-advocacy function and the lack of experience documentation. These areas are further challenged, as core WaterAid documents, intended to provide guidance to country programs, have not been accessible to the mainly Spanish speaking WaterAid Nicaragua team. As a result of these weaknesses, the program's learning and achievements, and WaterAid's global experience are still not well-recognized, either by the Latin American/Caribbean region's WASH sector or the general public.

❖ The local enabling environment is characterized by weak capacity in both local government and local organizations to plan for, construct, operate and maintain water and sanitation services. While largely outside of WaterAid's control, this poses a major contextual challenge to the prospect of long-term external support for WASH services. Partnerships established each with municipal governments, local implementing partners, and community water and sanitation users associations, came with various challenges. For example, the evaluation team questioned whether the national guidelines for community management of rural water supply is appropriate for use in the autonomous regions. Partner skill levels are still not at a stage where WaterAid can

reduce oversight, support, and supervision.

❖ Through a process of both innovation and trial and error, including user feedback, there is high social acceptance of all technology options deployed by the program.

❖ Implementation approaches extend beyond simply subsidizing the introduction of services to establishing markets for WASH products and unlocking access to credit, which increases users' ability to pay. The program's approach to marketing has made great progress increasing access to safe water and sanitation among households with net incomes of about \$10/day, equivalent to the international standard poverty line of \$2/day per inhabitant. That said, the full lifecycle costs associated with different service options are not well understood, meaning tariffs and necessary subsidies may not be accurately configured for services to be financially sustainable.



Summary Recommendations

- WaterAid has established a well-managed Country Program in Nicaragua that has achieved some notable successes in its first three years despite limited financial and technical and/or thematic support from the global organization.
- There are however some critical areas that must be strengthened. Currently, the country program has no dedicated advocacy function. Without this function to address national and regional level blockages, it will be difficult to attain large-scale WASH service sustainability and greater recognition of WaterAid's work nationally. Related to the absence of a dedicated staff person focused on policy-advocacy, there is a lack of experience in effective documentation. As a result, the CP is unable to convert its achievements into persuasive policy influencing tools. Therefore, the evaluation recommends that the CP invest in experience documentation and recruit staff to fill the much needed advocacy function to amplify the program's successes. Addressing these should be done strategically and in line with program realities.
- WaterAid will need to continue to strengthen its capacity building initiatives in light of the lack of professionally trained individuals in both the public and private sectors to staff Municipal WASH Units and other service support functions respectively. Despite previous and largely unsuccessful efforts to engage INATEC, Nicaragua's National Technical Institute, WaterAid should persist in gaining their participation in training WASH tradespeople. Equally, given some weaknesses in implementation quality, WaterAid should dedicate more effort to the supervision of vocational trainees and partners until WA and partners are confident that they are implementing to a high standard.
- The CP has seen limited results with building the capacity of groups of local community members to manage rural water services. The Caribbean Coast region is geographically, culturally and economically distinctive from the rest of the country and there have been concerns about the appropriateness of this community management model. Moving forward, the CP should investigate the success of the adaptations that have been made, or seek alternatives to this model.



Conclusion

WaterAid Nicaragua has implemented a successful 3-year pilot program with both context-appropriate and innovative approaches and strategies. However, the CP lacks dedicated human resources to effectively disseminate and promote these strategies and ultimately use examples of the program's successes to influence decision makers to prioritize and scale up WASH access, particularly in marginalized areas. The evaluators believe that these gaps seriously impair the CP's ability to achieve greater impact.

The aforementioned weaknesses in the CP stem from limited resources during the pilot period. The CP now has an opportunity to push a more ambitious policy and influencing agenda forward, in order to address substantial sector blockages at higher levels. This will position the team well to take forward WaterAid's new 2015 - 2020 global strategy and reinforce its sector strengthening agenda. WaterAid should continue to build on the solid progress achieved in Nicaragua's North Caribbean Coast during the pilot phase and look to use the evidence for wider influencing work country-wide.



1 The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and income indices used to rank countries into four tiers of human development.

2 AQUASTAT 2014: http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/data/cf/readPdf.html?f=NIC-CF_eng.pdf: Long term average total renewable water resources amount to approximately 164.5 km³ per year, or about 27,056 m³ of water per person per year.

3 The Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation by WHO and UNICEF is the official United Nations mechanism tasked with monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goal relating to drinking-water and sanitation (MDG 7, Target 7c), which is to: "Halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking-water and basic sanitation."

4 WaterAid's fiscal year starts April 1.

5 Formerly abbreviated as the RAAN, now officially known as the RACCN.

6 WaterAid transforms lives by improving access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation in the world's poorest communities. We work with partners and influence decision-makers to maximize our impact.

7 WaterAid's themes include: water, sanitation, hygiene, urban, sustainability, water security, equity and inclusion and disasters