

How can development agencies support district and national monitoring and review systems?

A summary of the session held at the UNC Water and Health Conference on 29 October 2018.



Moderator Clarissa Brocklehurst in discussion with Heather Skilling (DAI); Thavin So (WaterAid Cambodia); Jane Nabunya Mulumba (IRC Uganda) and Miguel Vargas-Ramirez (World Bank)

Session Overview

This session was convened to explore the key components of successful monitoring, performance review, and course correction mechanisms, which are recognised as drivers of sector reform and – ultimately - improved WASH sector performance. The meeting brought together representatives from INGOs, development banks, multilateral agencies and others to strengthen understanding of how development agencies can engage effectively in this complex area.

The session was split into two halves, which focused on district and national level monitoring respectively. This note summarises some of the key points arising from discussion, incorporating reflections from presenters, panellists, and members of the audienceⁱ.

Key Messages

Monitoring is a keystone of a functional WASH sector

The countries that make fastest progress are those that develop systematic monitoring and review systems with the capability to analyse systemic bottlenecks and to make corrective adjustments in policymaking. The SDGs have raised the bar for sector monitoring, with tracking progress toward the WASH targets requiring more data and more robust monitoring systems. The achievement of these targets will require review

process that can regularly capture and manage this data to make more effective policy, planning, and budgeting decisions.

Data is political

Collecting data and using it in decision-making is inherently political, and needs to be recognised as such. This is well illustrated by Joint Sector Review processes, which are an interface between political decision making and monitoring, and whose outcomes will never be shaped by data alone. Local level monitoring can also be subject to upstream political pressures. Political leaders and bureaucratic incentives can create pressures to over-report coverage and therefore success. Conversely, under-reporting access can be a way for local level bureaucrats to generate increases in central government allocations. In addition, incentives for evidence-based decision-making can often be superseded by other political interests, meaning data is collected but ultimately not used.

Data reporting is as important as data collection

Too often data collection is driven by external factors and processes, culminating in too much data and too many reports. More effort needs to be put into understanding which data are needed by whom, and for what decisions. This can ensure that only relevant data is collected, streamlining reporting processes, and helping government stakeholders identify and unpack key information.

"We come to the district with a long report ... They need a paragraph!"

Importance of linking local and national monitoring

There is value in ensuring sub-national data can feed into national platforms on an ongoing basis, to allow a common view of national level progress across different regions. INGOs can play a particular role in supporting data collection at local level and creating symbiosis with national platforms, so the local context is visible at national level. Similarly, it is important to ensure JSR outcomes are documented and cascaded to sub-national levels where they can then be implemented.

Joint Sector Review processes are a key component of national monitoring and course correction, but they are not yet fulfilling their potentialⁱⁱ

In many cases, JSRs have been successful in bringing the sector together around the table, but not in translating this through into policy and planning process. Indeed, some JSRs have drifted to become bloated 'talk shops', rather than spaces in which partners sit down to discuss what is working and what is not.

Tools can be useful – but are not a silver bullet

There is currently too much focus on developing new tools; as a sector we need to use and improve what we have, rather than assuming new tools are the solution.

"The WASH sector is churning out too many tools - let's stop and reflect on what we have"

Recommendations for moving forward

Development partners should understand and respond to country context

Participants agreed that recognising the monitoring structures and processes already in place, and working with government to improve these and address identified gaps – for example by enriching the qualitative elements of the monitoring process - should be the starting point of all programmes.

“We must allow governments to lead on setting out their own monitoring needs. That way they can articulate better what is needed and link up those needs with upstream policy-making.”

Development partners should better harmonise monitoring approaches

It was recognised that harmonisation among development partners, with all agencies working to the same process and collecting data in the same way, is often both desirable and extremely difficult. However, even small NGOs should explore ways to follow due process and feed their data and learning into a bigger picture, for example through participation in a country’s sector working group. It was also suggested that development partners could adopt common, context specific leading indicators or core learning questions that would help track whether partners were pulling in the same direction.

Development partners should work with and strengthen government capacities and systems

Even more important than harmonisation across development partners is the need to deliberately invest not just in data collection but in strengthening the country processes needed for continuous, ongoing monitoring and review. Partners should design interventions as intermediate steps consistent with a longer term aim of building government capabilities to analyse and set the necessary reforms. In particular, development partners should focus on strengthening the bridge between monitoring and policy cycles, either through investment or – in the case of civil society organisations – a proactive role in providing analysis, critiquing data, and ensuring the outcomes of sector review processes are followed up systematically. The continued evolution of donor funding modalities is also central to creating space for more responsive and adaptive approaches in which the focus of a programme can evolve during implementation as data is collected and analysed.

“We need Collaborative Behavioursⁱⁱⁱ from development partners to invest in country-led monitoring systems”

There is a particular need to strengthen the links between monitoring, learning and reform.

For lasting change and change at scale, stakeholders need to understand more about why the WASH sector is performing the way it does; this means ensuring data feeds

into processes of learning and adaptation, and is used to understand what is working, what is not, and why. As a sector we need to be more deliberate about this learning layer, by strengthening the bridge between data coming in and the evidence basis for reform.

“The core value of monitoring is the ability to change course. We need to have the ability to re-examine our theory of change at regular points in the course of implementation”

We also need to better understand how to stimulate demand for monitoring and review processes

Government leadership is central to the success of monitoring and review processes, and technical solutions will not have an impact unless we are also successful in identifying the triggers and entry points that will build political demand. Development partners should seek to understand the incentives for evidence-based decision making at each level, and then to maximise these through their interventions.

“Better is the enemy of the good”

A key requirement of development agencies wishing to support district and national monitoring and review systems is a willingness to support a less than perfect process, for example by focusing on building capacity of a local authority, where national institutions and systems are moving slowly. Similarly, development partners need to be prepared to accept that attribution for the results of their support may not always be as clear as they would like.

“‘The attribution isn’t clear’ should never be an acceptable reason for development partners not to do something!”

ⁱ This note was prepared by session organisers; Clare Battle and Henry Northover, WaterAid. Particular thanks are due to session moderator Clarissa Brocklehurst, and session contributors: Thavin So, WaterAid Cambodia; Miguel Vargas-Ramirez, World Bank; Heather Skilling, DAI/WALIS; Jane Nabunya Mulumba, IRC Uganda; Annie Msoa, WaterAid Malawi; Ceaser Kimbugwe, WaterAid Uganda; Antonio Rodriguez Serrano, World Bank; Guy Hutton, UNICEF.

ⁱⁱ Find more of WaterAid’s work on JSRs here: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/joint-sector-reviews>

ⁱⁱⁱ See SWA collaborative Behaviours: <http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/priority-areas/the-four-swa-collaborative-behaviours/>