

# Think Piece 1

## Ethiopia: A priority country for universal access to WASH in Africa

Lessons learned from WASH systems strengthening: an overview of the programme design process and activities undertaken in Gololcha Woreda, Ethiopia



Zeitu, 37, is a mother of seven. She has to walk almost 8 km a day to collect water for her family.



## Introduction

WaterAid's investment in Ethiopia is intended to contribute towards universal and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) access. A key approach of WaterAid's work in Ethiopia is about strengthening the systems within which WASH services and behaviours function. The aim of the approach is to ensure WASH services and behaviours are inclusive and continue to function long after our interventions end. In Ethiopia, under the National One WASH Plan, government efforts at all levels are being harmonised and all actors agree on one common system for planning, procurement, implementation, monitoring and evaluation for WASH. However, while the institutional architecture is established, there is considerable variance in how effectively it is working in practice - systems for coordination, planning, and budgeting are not uniformly in place across different levels of government.

Under the Promoting Sustainable Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Services at Scale (SusWASH) project, WaterAid Ethiopia has developed and is implementing a systems strengthening approach in Gololcha woreda (district), in Bale zone of Oromia region. It aims

to strengthen the enabling environment for WASH thereby improving peoples' WASH access in a district where progress lags far behind other woredas in the country.

For WaterAid Ethiopia, systems strengthening refers to working in ways that transform the enabling environment (at the national, regional and local levels) to ensure WASH services and behaviours are both inclusive and sustainable. The 'system' involves all the people, institutions, policies, infrastructure and resources necessary to deliver and sustain inclusive WASH services and behaviours.

This document sets out the background to WaterAid Ethiopia's systems strengthening approach, the process that WaterAid Ethiopia took to design and implement it, key lessons learned, and recommendations for its implementation and scale-up. In sharing our experiences, we hope to inspire other WaterAid country teams and other WASH sector professionals applying or interested in learning more about, WASH systems strengthening.

Box 1: Woreda Gololcha WASH service level assessment, WaterAid Ethiopia, 2018a

### Gololcha in numbers

- 48% of households had access to an improved water source.
- 44% of households spent more than one hour a day collecting water.
- Only 19% of households had access to an improved and functional water service.
- 37% of households reported that water was only available on a small number of days.
- 62% of households had access to a latrine; however, most of them were unimproved.
- 75% of households had no access to a handwashing facility with water and soap.

## Why systems strengthening?

In 2017, Gololcha woreda was facing major WASH challenges: water services were not keeping pace with a growing population, there was a weak service with high rates of water point failure, people were experiencing poor service delivery, and hygiene and sanitation behaviours were not being sustained (see Box 1).

Some of the causes associated with these challenges relate to accessibility issues, as the limited road infrastructure makes it hard to reach Gololcha, a woreda located in a geographically remote area (550km from Addis Ababa). Groundwater scarcity and low water quality with high levels of fluoride limit access to clean water and make water treatment costly. The

low capacity of and limited financial resources available to the woreda water office limit the ability to monitor, plan and budget for new and existing WASH services.

The compound of these challenges meant both WASH agencies and the government were not adequately prioritising the need to address WASH problems in the woreda. This is demonstrated by WaterAid Ethiopia's 2018 baseline assessment, which revealed that 14 of 26 kebeles (the lowest government level in Ethiopia, comprising, on average, 1,000 households each) had no access to water beyond an unimproved or surface water source (see Graph 1).



Figure 1: WaterAid's approach to WASH systems strengthening

## Designing a WASH systems strengthening intervention

To address these systemic challenges, a holistic systems strengthening approach was designed (Figure 1) under WaterAid's Global SusWASH programme and has been implemented in four countries so far: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uganda.

To operationalize the systems strengthening approach, WaterAid Ethiopia works closely with the district (woreda) administration - the lowest level of government with the mandate to ensure sustained universal WASH access is available to all. Efforts are also made to take evidence and lessons learned from the district level to influence and advocate for policy or regulatory

changes at higher levels of government.

WaterAid facilitated a series of participatory tools and exercises with local stakeholders to analyse and understand the strength of the enabling environment for WASH inclusion and sustainability. Stakeholders included: the woreda council, different government offices (including water, health, education and finance), utilities and the rural road authority. The analysis included an assessment of the willingness and ability of government (at multiple levels) to ensure sustained universal WASH access, stakeholder resource mapping, information flow mapping and an assessment of roles and responsibilities. A woreda sustainability analysis tool (Figure 2) was also developed and used to assess the strength of the institutional functions and processes (or 'building blocks') of the WASH

system within Gololcha woreda. These building blocks included: sector coordination, strategic planning, financing, institutional arrangements, and accountability & monitoring. The strength of service delivery and water resource management in the woreda were also assessed (Photo 1).

Photo 1: A service provider assesses the strengths and limitations of the water service delivery at the woreda context-analysis workshop in Jara town, Gololcha.



Government officials, utility staff, service providers, school heads and community representatives worked in mixed stakeholder groups to assess the strength of each building block on a scale from ‘emergency WASH’ (not meeting minimum requirements) through ‘fragile but strengthening’ (some of the minimum requirements are met), ‘transitional’ (a large portion of the minimum requirements are met) to ‘fully transitioned’ (above minimum requirements).

The series of exercises helped stakeholders to: i) discuss and identify key constraints and bottlenecks to WASH inclusion and sustainability;

WASH				
Building block	Weak / non-existent	Fragile but strengthening	Transitional	Fully transitioned
Coordination	●			
Strategic planning		●		
Financing		●		
Institutional arrangements		●		
M&E and accountability	●			

ii) understand existing government structures, reporting and information flow systems within the sector and across various government levels; and iii) reach agreement on where efforts to strengthen the system should be targeted at woreda, zonal, regional and national levels to shift the sector towards a ‘fully transitioned’ state, where WASH access is universal and sustained.

Considering the combined results of this participatory context analysis, local WASH sector stakeholders and WaterAid Ethiopia designed a systems strengthening initiative to:

- **Support the woreda water office to monitor, plan and budget** for universal and sustainable WASH access.
- **Strengthen woreda-level coordination** for WASH.
- **Support local government leaders to fulfill their roles and responsibilities** under the National WASH Implementation Framework and recognise everyone’s WASH rights.
- **Facilitate life-cycle costing assessments (LCCAs)** and strengthen government’s and utility’s capacity to plan, budget and manage water schemes.
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems** at the district level. Develop a district information system centre to regularly update WASH service level and infrastructure data.

Figure 2: Adapted from WaterAid Ethiopia, 2018b



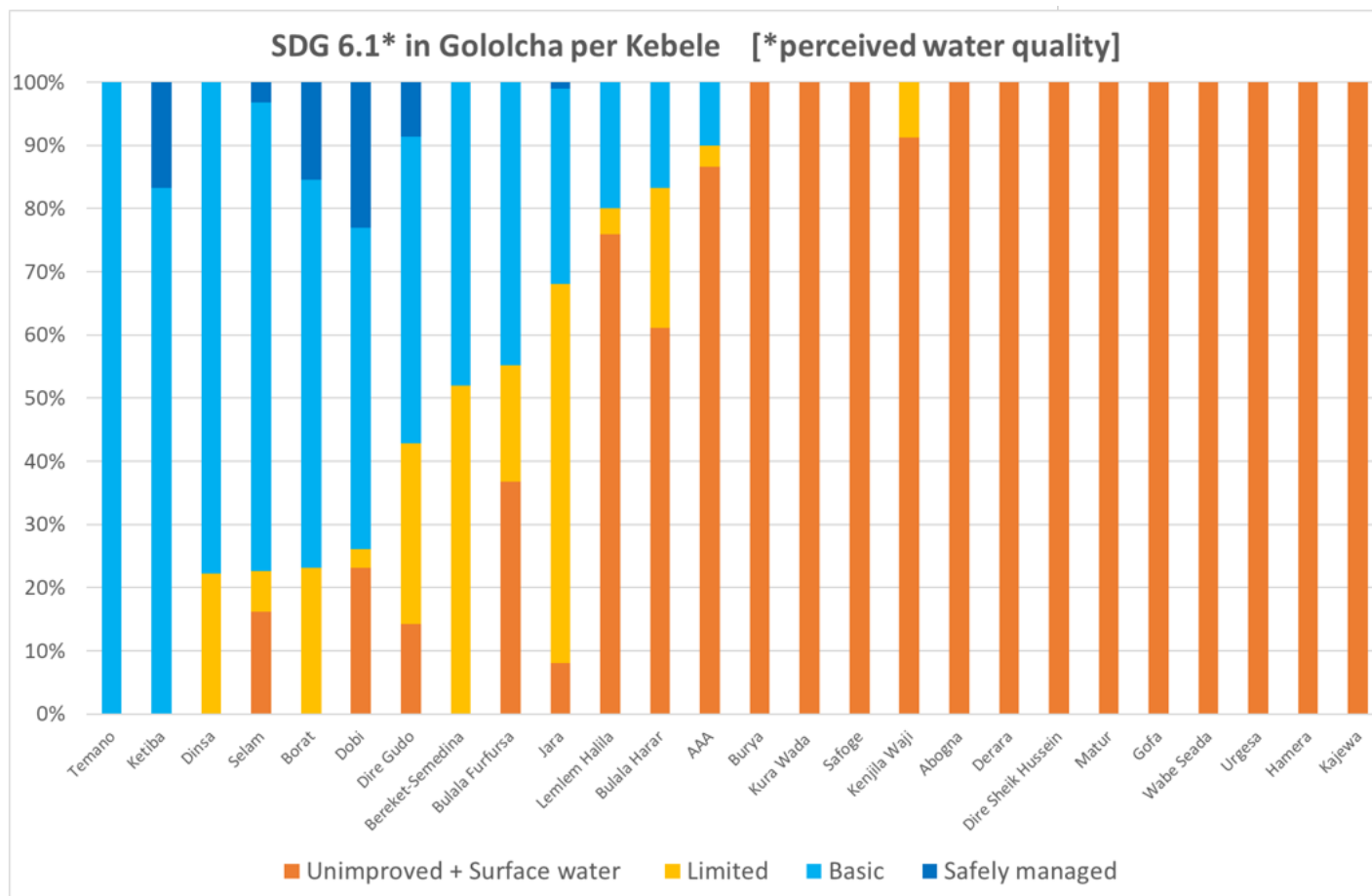
- Establish an effective user feedback mechanism
- Demonstrate inclusive and sustainable service delivery models for government scale-up in schools and communities.

WaterAid Ethiopia's systems strengthening approach was designed to support the operationalisation of the One WASH National Plan (OWNP) and its key pillars: creating an enabling environment and good governance for the sustainability of WASH outcomes and maximising the availability and efficient use of human and financial resources to create demand for improved WASH services and sector capacity.

The following section of this document sets out how WaterAid Ethiopia operationalized the systems strengthening approach in Gololcha woreda.

## Strengthening monitoring, costing and planning processes for inclusive, sustainable WASH in Gololcha woreda<sup>1</sup>

The first step towards WaterAid Ethiopia applying the systems strengthening approach in Gololcha woreda was to support the local government to develop a household baseline in which 1,314 households were interviewed. Questions were asked to understand the current WASH coverage and service levels in the woreda (graph 1). 12 of the 26 kebeles in the woreda relied on unimproved and surface water sources. Of those with access to an improved water supply, only 19% were reported functional at the time of the assessment.



Graph 1: Source: Woreda Gololcha water service level assessment, WaterAid Ethiopia, 2018a

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the process of supporting government to undertake a baseline of service levels, asset mapping and life cycle costing assessment of water supply services, see WaterAid Ethiopia (2019). Think piece 2: Lessons learned from WASH systems strengthening: a deep-dive into costing and planning for sustainable and inclusive water supply services in Gololcha woreda, Ethiopia

Following the baseline, WaterAid Ethiopia supported Gololcha local government to develop an asset registry to map the available water systems and points from source to tap stands. Detailed infrastructure information was collected that included the status and age of the infrastructure. Water quality samples were also taken (microbiological, physical and chemical).

With the baseline of service levels and asset registry, WaterAid then supported the woreda water office to conduct a life cycle costing assessment (LCCA) of water supply services. Without this data, the local government were unable to plan and accurately budget for existing and future investments in water supply services – including replacement costs or inform the development of a Woreda One WASH Plan.

WaterAid Ethiopia, with support from IRC-WASH, conducted a five-day LCCA of water supply services. The mapping of the available water schemes per kebele and the development of a document involving all the costs associated with the maintenance, replacement and setting up of new water facilities, helped the woreda government and service providers get a clearer picture of the gaps, and the budget and investment needed to reach universal basic water access by 2030.

With results of the baseline of service levels, asset mapping and life cycle costing, WaterAid Ethiopia supported the woreda water office, together with all other relevant woreda offices, to prioritise intervention areas and set targets. These were set out in the Gololcha Woreda One WASH Plan whose objectives, defined between government officials and service providers, aims to accelerate the achievement of universal access to WASH by 2030.

The plan sets out eight WASH targets to accomplish during 2018-19; multi-year targets were also developed until 2030. They identify the specific activities, roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved, timeframes and budgets to achieve them. The 2018-2020 targets are:<sup>2</sup>

1. Increase rural water supply coverage to 78% basic access (as defined by the National Growth and Transformation Plan 2 standards of 25 litres per capita per day within 1km).
2. Increase basic urban water supply coverage to 85% (40 litres per capita per day within 250m).

3. Ensure an institutional water supply system is in place in all schools and healthcare facilities in Gololcha.
4. Ensure a sustainable safe water supply for the community in all communities in Gololcha.
5. Increase the households' treatment and storage of clean water rate from 60% to 80%.
6. Increase latrine coverage from 53% to 100% by fostering community awareness.
7. Increase latrine coverage at schools, health facilities and organisations to 40%.
8. Increase solid and liquid waste management coverage to 60%.

To help achieve some of these targets, the Gololcha woreda water office prioritised the following initiatives:

- Development of hydro-geological studies to assess the suitability of different technologies.
- Construction of handpumps, spring on spot, boreholes, traditional spring protection and self-supply.
- Expansion work on waterpoint construction and fencing work.
- Rehabilitation of non-functional and low performing facilities

The One WASH Plan has already been approved by the Gololcha water-related offices and will be endorsed by the woreda cabinet and council as an instrument to achieve the prioritised WASH targets.

To implement the plan, a woreda-level memorandum of understanding, which defines the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder involved, was prepared and signed by the local government. Regular joint monitoring and periodic evaluations will be carried out by the local government to track the progress towards the set targets as well as to document the process, challenges and lessons learned.

The main M&E activities include: quarterly monitoring of the implementation of the community capacity building programme (a programme provided by the district to train WASH committees on finance and operation and maintenance), quarterly monitoring of the financial management of the woreda budget, quarterly monitoring of the reporting system, and development of six monthly and annual performance evaluation of water-related government offices at the woreda level.

<sup>2</sup> Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2018



Figure 3: Gololcha woreda strategic planning cycle

## Supporting the set-up of One WASH coordination structures

Through woreda meetings, facilitated by WaterAid Ethiopia, government officials and service providers, identified a lack of coordination between the technical teams of different WASH sub-sectors (the Technical WASH Team) (as presented in Figure 2, coordination was recognised as an almost non-existent block in the woreda sustainability analysis tool). WaterAid is therefore supporting the establishment of the following coordination structures: the Woreda WASH Team (WWT), the Woreda WASH Steering Committee (WWSC) and the Technical WASH Team (TWT), as set out in the National WASH Implementation Framework. The role of the WWT is to prepare and manage a woreda WASH programme, the WWSC ensures the establishment and functionality of the WASH structures in the woreda, while the TWT consolidates the woreda WASH plans, monitors the implementation of the WASH programme at the woreda level, and maintains the woreda information database, among other activities.<sup>3</sup>

## Promoting a woreda-level Monitoring Information System

WaterAid Ethiopia is supporting the development of a management information system (MIS) centre to support WASH progress monitoring and inform annual planning and budgeting processes.

The aim of the MIS centre is to have a government tool where WASH data can be regularly collected, updated and easily accessible by woreda, zonal and regional governments. WaterAid has introduced the free, open-access online platform, mWater, for this purpose. While the management of the MIS centre is the responsibility of the local government, WaterAid Ethiopia is supporting the set-up of the centre by training government officers of the water and health offices to collect and analyse data using the mWater platform. If successful, the MIS centre may be used as a model for the zone to replicate in other woredas. WaterAid is also engaged in the development of the national MIS and working to ensure alignment across government levels.

## Enhancing accountability and regulation

As with monitoring, accountability for WASH was recorded by local WASH stakeholders to be weak/non-existent in the district during the initial assessment phase. To address this, WaterAid is working with local government to set up woreda-level social accountability platforms. These are open spaces where community members, government officials and service providers work together to make a performance assessment of the water service provided, and discuss (first independently and then together in an interface meeting), the main challenges and concerns of water service delivery. The challenges raised by the community and utilities have so far included poor customer service, a lack of communication channels for communities to provide feedback, inaccurate billing, community water theft by illegal connections to the water network, and a lack of reporting on leakages.

These challenges, coupled with the low level of service currently provided by the utility, affected peoples' willingness to pay their bills and to report illegal connections. There was an overall lack of community trust in the service provider, a 'blame culture' between users and water utilities, and a lack of ownership of the water infrastructure among the communities.

To address these challenges WaterAid, in collaboration with the local community, government and service provider, facilitated a process to develop a concrete action plan.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2011

The agreed joint actions included:

- Preventing leakage by replacing pipes and fittings
- Disconnecting individual household pipelines that get water directly from the source
- Water chlorination
- Tariff adjustments

A joint follow-up committee was established between the parties to ensure the implementation of the action plan and its subsequent monitoring.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of having clear objectives, roles and responsibilities. They felt confident that by working together they could make a difference: increase participation of the community and district sector offices; build capacity of district sector offices to budget, plan and monitor; bring transparency and find joint

solutions to shared problems.<sup>4</sup>

This shared sense of responsibility to address shared challenges was fostered by sustained engagement with local government and utility staff and applying materials, developed as part of the Making Rights Real project.<sup>5</sup> The materials were used to improve local government responsiveness to citizens' demands, supporting them in identifying the different stages in planning and problem solving, but also to draw on their personal motivations and the perceived benefits of:

1. **Being a hero** by reaching everyone, even the hardest to reach.
2. **Showing progress** by communicating a solid plan that is progressing.
3. **Developing better relationships**, especially with the community that pays for the services.
4. **Improving coordination** by having clear roles and responsibilities.

Criteria	Entitlements	Currently available	Scores				
			Very bad	Bad	Satisfactory	High	Very high
Water quantity	40 l/p/d	3-5 l/p/d	X	X			
Water quality	Safe (free from diseases)	Contaminated, contain worms, not treated	X			X	
Time spent to fetch water	5 minutes (within 200 mts)	More than three hours, when they fetch from water points in nearby kebeles	X X				
Affordability of water tariff	Affordable	7.60-10 Birr per m <sup>3</sup>	X			X	

Table 2: Community's and service providers' performance assessment

Key: X: Community X: Service providers

<sup>4</sup> WaterAid Ethiopia, 2018c

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the Making Rights Real project see [www.rural-water-supply.net/en/resources/details/840](http://www.rural-water-supply.net/en/resources/details/840)



The result of these engagements contributed to government officials and service providers acknowledging the importance of working together with other main stakeholders and creating a network committed to making sure everyone has access to and uses reliable and sustainable water supply services.

Regarding the community, one of the solutions brought out of the social accountability platforms is the establishment of customer forums in the urban areas of the woreda, as set out in the One WASH National Plan, to solve chronic issues in customer-utility relations.



Photo 2: Making Rights Real toolkits and training in Jara town, Gololcha.

Kebele representatives have been chosen by the community and are now responsible for bringing users' queries to the forum. The forum meets monthly at the kebele level and quarterly at the municipal level. An executive committee is responsible for contacting the service providers to solve any problem with the provision of the water service.

The kebele representatives do not have to wait until these meetings are held if there is an urgent request/concern; the executive committee can contact the service provider at any time. The executive committee frequently participates in the water board meetings held by the service providers.

The main objectives of the customer forums are to bridge the gap between customers and water service providers, to have the service providers actively engage in customer complaint resolutions, to maintain transparency and equity in service delivery, and to mobilise resources for the poorest

community groups to have access to the water supply. They are also meant to engage the service providers in controlling water leakages, designing water safety plans and implementing water quality controls.

The customer forums were created through the social accountability platforms to function as a regular check-and-balance from the community to water service providers offering rapid and effective action on any problem with the water supply service. However, there is still the challenge of actively engaging urban communities to participate in the forums, as they are demotivated to make complaints to a system when water supply service remains inadequate.

## Demonstrating models and approaches for inclusive, sustainable service delivery and behaviour change

WaterAid Ethiopia has taken a holistic systems-strengthening approach to build the capacity of local government officials and service providers to design, implement and manage inclusive WASH services. Post-training action plans have also been developed to ensure built capacity is sustained over time.

WaterAid Ethiopia's capacity building approach for service providers not only focuses on strengthening individuals' personal skills but also on enhancing the water utilities' internal processes and systems (e.g. water quality monitoring, planning, budgeting). For example, in the case of Gololcha, WaterAid Ethiopia has conducted a capacity gap assessment identifying the key gaps that hinder service delivery including, for example, weak asset management, weak operation and maintenance capacity, and limited capacity to monitor water quality and service levels.

## Lessons learned

1. Through systems strengthening, WaterAid Ethiopia is aiming for transformative changes in the way government (at multiple levels) and service providers monitor, plan, budget and finance WASH services and behaviour change interventions. We also aim to bring about changes in the way local government, service providers and communities provide and respond to user feedback, thereby improving customer satisfaction and accountability. These structural changes take time and strongly depend on the external environment and the wider political economy. WaterAid

Ethiopia continues to examine the wider context to understand how to influence and support systems change within the WASH sector.

2. The systems strengthening approach requires a long-term investment and timeframe. The approach is resource intensive in terms of the time and skills required to establish government relationships and to build government and stakeholder capacity.
3. Identifying and tracking change in the system is complex. WaterAid continues to learn how best to monitor systems change, while also demonstrating WASH service delivery models to increase WASH access and service levels directly.
4. Advocacy at different government levels is needed to scale up models and approaches piloted at the district level.
5. A dynamic systems strengthening effort requires a deeper understanding of power dynamics, relationships and different roles that impact on woreda-level decisions and resource flows.
6. Development agencies should identify the incentives and motivations of local government officials and service providers in order to achieve high performance in water service delivery.
7. Community involvement is key for strengthening water service delivery. Supporting the development of social accountability platforms empowers the community by making users aware of their rights and making service providers accountable.

## Recommendations for development partners supporting the WASH sector in Ethiopia

Systems strengthening requires a detailed context analysis to understand the multiple and systemic barriers to inclusive, lasting WASH. This involves identifying all the relevant actors in the woreda, understanding their challenges to fulfilling their roles and responsibilities, and assessing the strength of the institutional processes and capacities to deliver and sustain WASH to all. Such analysis requires early and continuous engagement with government, civil society, service providers, private sector, CSOs and communities.

Systems strengthening involves building the capacity of local government officials and service providers to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. This can also help to keep them motivated. Capacity building and training should be designed in a way that contributes to the improvement of the implementation of the One WASH Plans. Capacity building at the zonal and regional levels is required for the approach to be sustained and scaled-up to other woredas.

The zonal and regional governments should be in charge of following up and supervising all system strengthening efforts at the woreda level. This helps to strengthen government ownership and increase the potential for government scale-up of demonstrated models and approaches.

Specialist skills and capabilities are required to implement the systems strengthening approach. WaterAid Ethiopia, together with other INGOs engaging in systems strengthening, should invest more time and resources in acquiring the right staff to work at the woreda level – particular skills required include utility and asset management, WASH planning, budgeting and monitoring. They should also generate opportunities for continuous learning and course correction.

Further scrutiny on how national policies are implemented at the local level, as well as on the challenges related to their implementation and their adaptability to a specific context, are required from the start to influence bottom-up policy changes.

Greater accountability can be achieved by strengthening customer forums and institutionalising social accountability platforms. Establishing specific customer service departments to deal with the customer-utility interface and developing customer charters can contribute to strengthening the sense of community ownership of the water supply infrastructure.



## Conclusion

The systems strengthening approach applied in Gololcha woreda is still in its infancy. WAE has worked and continues to work closely with the local government, utility and communities to strengthen district level coordination, management and planning, budgeting and monitoring processes for WASH. Efforts have also been made and will continue to be made to strengthen customer feedback and accountability mechanisms within the small town of Jara. While these efforts are a step in the right direction to bringing about systems change, it is too early to see how these efforts translate into improvements in peoples' WASH access. WAE will continue to support Gololcha over the coming years and to document and share progress on how the approach is contributing towards the achievement of SDG 6.

It is WaterAid Ethiopia's belief that if WASH systems are not strengthened by the shared efforts of governments, service providers, development partners, the private sector and local communities, it will not be possible to reach universal, equitable and sustainable access to WASH by 2030.



Photo 3:  
Institutionalising  
social  
accountability  
platforms can  
contribute to  
reducing high  
water tariffs  
from private  
vendors.

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## Acknowledgements

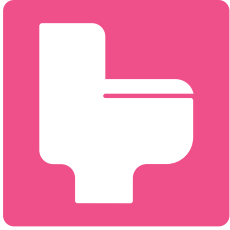
Written by María Florencia Rieiro with support from Tseguereda Abraham and Gashaw Kebede.





## Who we are

Our vision is a world where everyone, everywhere has clean water, sanitation and hygiene.



*“WaterAid has been operating in Ethiopia for 36 years as the only WASH focused NGO. During our previous strategy (2011-2016) we have reached over 1.4 million people across Ethiopia with access to water supply, sanitation and hygiene, this was based on our focus on access and coverage in line with Government’s push for universal access. However, in order to sustain access rates, more focus on systems building is needed. Therefore, our current strategy presents a shift to support capacity and capability a lower level of government (Woreda/District level). Our programming package consists of service delivery, systems strengthening and influencing to deliver sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services to reach and sustain universal access. Amongst our key value adds in supporting the strengthening of the WASH sector in Ethiopia is to draw lessons from our innovative WASH programs in Oromia, Amhara, Tigray and SNNPR and inform the design and improvement of sustainable sector wide systems and advocate for planning for sustainability. This think piece captures and presents our knowledge from our programming approach and innovation from our ‘Sustainable Wash Services’ project in Gololcha, Oromia, financed by the H&M foundation and regional government of Oromia. It highly our learning drawn from effectively working with important actors at the woreda level to enable strengthening of WASH systems for sustainable universal access. This was enabled by flexible and courageous financing of a project that was framed to deliver long term change and not just focused on immediate results. This document is intended to shape and advance current practice to employing the ‘systems thinking’ by WASH actors in Ethiopia and beyond. I hope you will use and share this document and we look forward to having partnerships to further scale our experience in systems strengthening so our vision for universal access to WASH in Ethiopia is a reality in our lifetime.”*



Bethlehem Mengistu,  
Country Director,  
WaterAid Ethiopia

This case study examines WaterAid Ethiopia’s systems strengthening approach in Gololcha woreda, Oromia region, with a special focus on the enhancement of Gololcha’s water service delivery. It also presents key lessons learned and main recommendations and ways forward for the implementation and scale-up of the approach.

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