

Executive summary

This report shares WaterAid's practical experiences of system strengthening for more inclusive and sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as part of the SusWASH programme. Strong systems are needed to ensure WASH gains last and deliver benefits to everyone in society. The SusWASH programme is a five-year, H&M Foundation-funded initiative (2017–2022), implemented in Cambodia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uganda, with a global learning component. Case studies featured in this report focus on stable and unstable, rural and urban contexts.

This report is not a formal independent evaluation. It is a learning report based on lessons emerging from the programme so far. The report is targeted at WASH practitioners, governments and donors implementing or funding WASH system strengthening, as well as those who are interested in doing so.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (clean water and sanitation) is seriously off track. Billions of people still lack access to clean water, decent sanitation and good hygiene.¹ Many countries will not achieve universal access to even basic levels of service by 2030 unless governments and donors assign greater importance to delivering and sustaining WASH with more emphasis placed on reaching marginalised people.

- **Zahra, 15, has to walk almost 8km to collect water for her family, sometimes going twice a day. Dengeza, Safoge, Gololcha, East Bale, Oromia, Ethiopia, May 2018.**

The structure of this report

- **Section 1** provides background to the SusWASH programme, gives a history of WASH system strengthening, describes the components of WASH systems and sets out our theory of change.
- **Section 2** describes the tools and approaches used to understand the WASH system in SusWASH focus countries and our framework for measuring change.
- **Section 3** presents our experiences of strengthening WASH systems in SusWASH focus countries, drawing out evidence of change and lessons learned.
- **Section 4** consolidates our lessons learned, highlighting leverage points and interlinkages between different parts of the WASH system that affect achievement of inclusive and sustainable WASH. It makes recommendations for WASH practitioners and donors implementing system strengthening programmes and sets out next steps.



Four interlinked challenges currently stifle progress:

- Poor WASH sustainability
- Social exclusion and weak accountability
- Poor WASH scalability
- Insufficient prioritisation and resourcing of learning and adaptation

These issues are symptomatic of weaknesses in WASH systems and are exacerbated by poor environmental sustainability, growing demand for water, weak governance, structural inequalities and climate change – highlighting the imperative for implementers to use systems thinking to tackle them. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed weaknesses in WASH systems; not just in low and middle-income countries but high income countries too.^{2,3}

Systems thinking is relatively new to the WASH sector, but the health sector has been applying it for some time as a means of ensuring health gains are effective and sustained.

We understand the WASH system to be all of the people, behaviours, policies, processes, resources, interactions and institutions necessary for delivery of inclusive, lasting, universal access to WASH. Much like an ecosystem consists of a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment, relevant literature sums up the WASH system as actors, factors and the interlinkages between them.^{4,5,6} We have used a variety of different tools to understand the WASH system in each focus country and designed programmes that tackle systemic barriers to sustainability and inclusion, as well as capitalise on leverage points that bring about change in the system.

We have developed a theory of change based on five broad outcome areas which represent groupings of different WASH system components. The SusWASH programme is underpinned by continuous analysis, learning and adaptation, facilitated by a global learning function. We have also developed an evolving measurement framework to capture changes in the WASH system and understand the effectiveness of our approach.

System strengthening means understanding that WASH exists in complex systems with many component parts and within different social, economic, political and environmental contexts.

It involves identifying and working to address the barriers in behaviours, policies, processes, resources, interactions and institutions that block achievement of inclusive, lasting, universal access to WASH.

Common barriers, linkages, dependencies and interactions between different actors and factors were observed in the WASH system in all four focus countries. Several approaches were used to strengthen the WASH system.

These included:

- Convening actors and facilitating dialogue.
- Providing technical assistance and building capacity.
- Strengthening WASH delivery and behaviour change models.
- Empowering people to demand their rights and fulfil their responsibilities.
- Generating evidence, documentation and sharing lessons learned.
- Influencing and advocating for greater sustainability and inclusion.
- Continuously analysing, learning and adapting ways of working.

We have learned a number of lessons about system strengthening as a result of implementing SusWASH so far:

- System strengthening takes time, involves heavy interaction with government and is most effective when aligned with government timelines.
- Flexibility to change approaches that are not working or no longer relevant is essential. Organisational management processes and donor reporting requirements have to enable adaptive management of programmes.

- Adaptive management requires a culture of regular learning, reflection and course correction to be embodied within organisational processes. Whole teams need to be built and sufficiently resourced around learning. Learning is most impactful when teams have an existing culture of regular review, reflection and adaptation built into management procedures, as well as an environment in which it is ok to fail and learn.
- A global learning function that facilitates reflection and cross-country learning is essential for strengthening organisational understanding about how system change happens. The same function, with sufficient budget, can consolidate lessons learned and mobilise technical expertise from inside and outside the organisation to enhance programme effectiveness.
- It is necessary to allocate sufficient resources and time to understand problems, power relationships, causal factors and leverage points that might drive change in the WASH system in a given context. At the same time, it is important not to get bogged down in over-analysing the system. Analysis should aim to build a common understanding of barriers to sustainability and inclusion, leverage points and consensus on which aspects to prioritise.
- Close collaboration between practice and policy staff is essential. When practice and policy teams do not work towards the same outcomes, relevance of work is low and progress is slow. Performance tends to be highest when practice and policy teams work well together and when staff have the latitude to engage in both practice and policy arenas. This encourages use of evidence from practice to influence policy decisions and align practice priorities with emerging policy topics.
- Gender equality and social inclusion must be continuously mainstreamed through all system strengthening activities. In order to change systems, we need to be persistent in bringing in the principles and standards of the human rights to water and sanitation. This can be challenging as these concepts may be controversial or culturally sensitive in some contexts.
- System strengthening necessitates a long-term commitment to working with a district until the WASH system is 'good enough' to ensure that inclusive, lasting WASH will reach everyone. Moving around between multiple districts and leaving districts when the WASH system is still weak will not result in lasting outcomes. System strengthening programmes therefore necessitate a strong funding pipeline behind them of 10 years plus.

Skills, experiences and perspectives required by teams and partners working on system strengthening interventions

- Facilitation and collaboration
- Critical thinking and analysis
- Advocacy and influencing
- Interpersonal and communication
- Understanding of government processes and ways of working
- Traditional WASH skills, for example: water and sanitation engineering, hydrogeology, sanitation and hygiene behaviour change
- Understanding of gender and social inclusion issues and principles of the human rights to water and sanitation
- Understanding of public finance
- Data analysis
- Strong programme and adaptive management to enable learning and course correction

Achievements of the SusWASH programme so far

Cambodia

- 44,532 people reached with improved sanitation in communities and 8,514 people benefiting from improved WASH in healthcare facilities.
- National WASH management information system (MIS) strengthened.
- National and Provincial Action Plans (PAPs) reviewed and updated based on up-to-date data.
- Civic Champions Leadership Programme institutionalised within government decentralisation programmes to ensure ongoing sanitation service and hygiene behaviour change delivery at local levels.
- WASH decision makers in sub-national government institutions demonstrate greater understanding of challenges faced by marginalised people.

Ethiopia

- 12,230 people reached with improved water supply and 5,096 children benefiting from improved water supply in schools.
- Costed district WASH plan developed attracts non-governmental organisation (NGO) investment in WASH.
- Woredaⁱ WASH Team (WWT) established with clear roles and responsibilities. WWT plays leadership role in coordination and planning of WASH delivery.

Pakistan

- 59,398 people reached with improved sanitation in communities and 18,095 children benefiting from improved sanitation in schools.
- WASH messages integrated into national school curriculum and MHM teacher training manuals endorsed by Sindh Government.
- Sindh Education Management Information System (SEMIS) includes indicators to track school WASH.

Uganda

- 40,140 people reached with improved sanitation services in healthcare facilities and 4,635 children reached with improved sanitation in schools.
- Mayors' Forum strengthens government leadership and improves coordination between the Kampala Capital City Authority's (KCCA) political and technical wings, leading to approval of sanitation ordinance regulating sanitation in the city.
- Empowered citizens are monitoring WASH budget expenditure in public institutions and holding their leaders to account.
- Evidence used to inform WASH in healthcare facilities (HCFs) guidelines and national policy discourse on cross-sector WASH integration.

We have not undertaken a cost-benefit analysis to compare the merits of system strengthening with more conventional approaches to WASH implementation. This would require an in-depth evaluation. However, it is well known that more conventional approaches, implemented without broader efforts to strengthen the wider environment into which WASH is introduced, fall short when it comes to ensuring WASH is sustained and inclusive. Consequently, we believe that funding system strengthening is a cost-effective investment because of the increased likelihood that WASH gains will be sustained and reach those left behind.

i. Woreda is the Amharic term for district. Woredas are sub-divided into kebeles (wards).