

Section 4.0: Conclusion

This concluding section consolidates what we have learnt so far about:

- Characteristics of the WASH system in SusWASH focus countries: barriers, linkages, dependencies, interactions and leverage points for change
- Measuring changes in the system
- Lessons for system strengthening programmes
- Skills and resources for system strengthening
- The value of system strengthening versus more conventional WASH approaches
- Recommendations for donors
- Next steps

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed multiple weaknesses in WASH systems around the world; not just in low- and middle-income countries but high-income countries too.^{2,3} These weaknesses result in poorer and more marginalised people going without adequate WASH access, exposing them to greater risk of disease transmission and the impacts of a changing climate.

It is necessary to allocate sufficient time to understand the shape and function of the WASH system as well as barriers to WASH sustainability, inclusion and scalability before implementation starts. It is not necessary to over-analyse the system as there is always a practical trade-off between the time that can be spent on analysis versus the time that must be spent implementing. Experienced staff often have a good understanding of barriers and linkages between different component parts of the system as well as influential actors to target for advocacy. The aim of the analysis phase is to arrive at a consensus over which areas to tackle and who might be most influential in bringing about change in the system. Adaptive management allows for our understanding of the WASH system to be updated as the programme progresses.

This section outlines our understanding of the WASH system in the four SusWASH countries and leverage points identified (or created by the programme) that could be used to bring about change.

Characteristics of the WASH system in SusWASH focus countries: barriers, linkages, dependencies, interactions and leverage points for change

The WASH system is characterised by multiple linkages, dependencies and interactions between different actors and factors. While it is useful to break the system down into building blocks for the purposes of participatory barrier analysis, maintaining a separation between different building blocks in this conclusion would lead to a high level of repetition and overlook how our efforts to strengthen one part of the system has influenced another.

Although each WASH system was different, some common barriers, linkages, dependencies and interactions between different actors and factors were observed in all four focus countries. For example, monitoring was a weak area, accentuating deficiencies in planning and financing. Other factors contributed to undermining planning and financing, such as weak coordination between different actors, unclear institutional arrangements, insufficient resource allocation and a lack of prioritisation afforded to reaching the most marginalised.

These led to weaknesses in service delivery and behaviour change, insufficient targeting of poor and marginalised people and low sustainability of WASH gains.

In Pakistan, unclear institutional arrangements at the district level drove weaknesses in government accountability. For example, although the Sindh Local Government Act stipulates that district staff are responsible for ensuring people receive water services, local government staff were not aware of this Act, so water quality and O&M challenges persisted where government assistance was clearly needed. Likewise, weak accountability drove unclear institutional arrangements as provincial authorities did not enforce the requirement for local government staff to undertake their role in supporting water supply either from a maintenance or water quality perspective.

The lack of any formal mechanism for service users to express concerns about WASH service levels meant Jara utility in Ethiopia was not formally accountable to service users. When users did express concerns to the utility through informal means, insufficient financing weakened the capacity of the utility to respond to service user concerns. The utility were also facing complex hydrogeological challenges which impacted on their ability to provide reasonable levels of service.

● Hailu Moti is the manager of Jara Town Water Utility. He inspects the journal that records the amount of water produced at the borehole daily. Jara, Gololcha, Bale, Oromia, Ethiopia, November 2017.



The relationships and interactions between different actors impacted on how the WASH system functioned in all four countries. Social barriers drove a lack of inclusion of women in decision making in Cambodia, Pakistan and Ethiopia, meaning their participation was low in key coordination forums, particularly in Ethiopia and Pakistan. In Pakistan, the government largely regards INGOs/NGOs as service providers rather than agents of change, particularly at provincial and district levels. There is considerable suspicion of INGO activities and limited scope for INGOs/NGOs to push for modification of government practice and social, cultural, religious sentiments in wider society. This relationship significantly constrains the role of INGOs/NGOs in strengthening WASH systems in Sindh.

Divergence between the political and operational arms of government in Kampala led to weak coordination and delays in approval of the sanitation ordinance designed to set standards for sanitation in low-income areas. In Gololcha woreda, pre-existing hostility between communities, government and service providers obstructed constructive interaction for WASH improvements. This hostility has its origins in political tensions as well as a feeling within communities that they are being left out of wider development initiatives due to their remote location. The Governor of Kampong Chhnang Province in Cambodia was initially disinterested in improving sanitation until incentives could be found to gain his support.

Strong government leadership and an active civil society were clearly needed to drive change in all parts of the WASH system in the four countries. Where this has been limited or absent, progress towards system change has been hampered. Insufficient finance was clearly a major barrier in all four countries, constraining improvements in other areas of the WASH system as well as WASH access and sustainability. It is still possible to strengthen other areas of the WASH system to bring about significant improvements, but ultimately more money has to be leveraged and allocated to WASH for significant change to be realised.

Leverage points that could bring about change were identified as part of system analysis and also created by undertaking activities in the programme that we could then capitalise on.

Improved monitoring was identified as an area that could drive system change in all four countries with impacts on planning, financing, coordination and accountability. The extent to which efforts to improve monitoring gained traction was largely dependent upon the timing of the intervention and the level of government commitment assigned to MIS development at the national level. For example, progress has been good in Cambodia as a government-led drive to improve the national MIS coincided with implementation of the SusWASH programme, enabling WaterAid to feed into MIS development and piloting at national and provincial levels. This was linked to a government priority to update national and provincial WASH action plans.

The existence of a well-functioning JSR process in Uganda provided a platform for integration of KCCA WASH data and greater scrutiny of KCCA's performance. Knock-on impacts have been observed with improvements in KCCA's WASH planning (with the five-year strategic plan based on more harmonised WASH data from different departments within KCCA). Progress on monitoring has been limited to district level in Ethiopia due to the national MIS being under review for some time, but has led to knock-on improvements in district planning and budgeting. Pakistan does not have a WASH MIS at national, provincial or district levels and restrictions placed on data collection make strengthening this aspect a longer-term goal. There is also no monitoring system to verify if sanitation gains have been sustained beyond initial ODF certification. It was possible to integrate WASH indicators (including MHM) into the existing Sindh Education MIS however, using the Sindh WASH technical working group. An asset inventory and hand pump abandonment study highlighted significant sustainability concerns regarding community and school water services prompting PHED to consider the matter at district level. However, there are yet to be any knock-on impacts of these interventions on planning and budgeting at the district or provincial level to improve WASH sustainability in Sindh.

Capacity development in monitoring, planning and life-cycle costing led to production of a costed district WASH plan in Golocha, Ethiopia. This costed WASH plan was a leverage point for attracting investment to the district from other development partners, but investment from the zone was not significant as central government allocate finance based on a formula. This is an important lesson as development of a costed district WASH plan may not trigger greater government investment without sustained WASH budget advocacy at the national level. Costed plans can help to make the case for increased national WASH funding allocations but sufficient funds are yet to be made available at the national level. Forming and building the capacity of Participatory Budget Advocacy Clubs through our partner CSBAG has increased confidence and ability of local council chairpersons and community representatives to scrutinise public budgets in Kampala. Training of SMCs on life-cycle costing triggered improved financing for maintenance of water and sanitation facilities in schools.

Securing early government buy-in for WASH research has helped to leverage finance and inform government decision making. The Towards Safely Managed Water study undertaken in Kampong Chhnang succeeded in attracting significant development partner finance to help scale safely managed water supply. However, the Government of Cambodia is yet to make decisions on financing for rural WASH.

We saw an opportunity to strengthen government WASH leadership and coordination in all four countries by convening WASH actors and facilitating better interaction between political and operational wings of government. These efforts have made progress in Cambodia through the Civic Champions programme for improved sanitation and hygiene led by WaterSHED, in Uganda through the WASH Mayor's Forum, in Ethiopia through use of MRR materials and in Pakistan through the District WASH Forum. Efforts have led to increased confidence of female WASH leaders in Cambodia. Women already play a key role in WASH leadership in Kampala, perhaps because it is a metropolitan area with fewer barriers to women's participation. Progress is yet to be made on greater participation of female leaders

in the rural districts in Ethiopia and Pakistan, where there are fewer women working in local government.

In Pakistan, interactions with the Director of CD led to the development and roll-out of a WASH teacher training manual featuring MHM and good sanitation and hygiene behaviours. The manual will be used in all schools in Sindh scaling the dissemination of behaviour change messaging.

Service delivery and demonstration of WASH delivery models provided an entry point to engage with local government in Pakistan, Ethiopia and Uganda. Demonstrating WASH delivery models simultaneously met the demands of communities as well as the priorities of local government (to extend services). This in turn helped to secure local government and service provider buy-in for broader efforts to strengthen management arrangements, monitoring, planning, financing, coordination and accountability. We think it unlikely this would have been possible without a significant service delivery component in Gololcha or Thatta.

The potential for collective action had an impact on the level of change that could be achieved. For example, in Cambodia, multi-stakeholder inputs into MIS development meant all WASH actors were aligned behind the indicators used. In Pakistan, linking with the World Bank-funded SSSP meant WaterAid's sanitation and hygiene IEC materials could be applied in 13 districts in Sindh.



● Washing clothes at a water channel in the village of Muhammad Urs Sehejo, Chatto Chand Union Council, Thatta District, Sindh Province, Pakistan, September 2018.

Measuring changes in the system

System strengthening programmes require a measurement framework that can capture changes in the system and provide insight into the impact of interventions. With many actors working on WASH in a given area, attribution of change to one particular programme, actor or event is challenging or impossible. Monitoring must therefore take account of what different actors are doing and where collaborative efforts are being made.

Our measurement framework is evolving based on learning we are capturing as part of the SusWASH programme. Currently, we report against outcomes defined in our theory of change. These outcomes relate to groupings of different components of the WASH system.

The pilot measurement framework breaks the WASH system down into component parts and evidence of change can be captured on a periodic basis. We define evidence of change as

positive or negative results that are indicative of progress towards outcomes. The framework allows for capture of qualitative information related to interactions or events that brought about change. It is possible to track transitions from one building block state to another, but we have found that such transitions can take a great deal of time, so information regarding smaller changes that are indicative of general progress or regression are captured.

Ultimately, system strengthening programmes have to result in improved service levels and it is important not to lose sight of this. It is therefore necessary to combine lead indicators, such as evidence of change, with measurement of lag service level indicators, such as those captured by our post-implementation monitoring surveys that look back at least 10 years and JSRs. At the point of writing, this framework is being piloted in the four SusWASH countries with the aim that it is refined and ultimately applied as part of WaterAid's organisational programme monitoring processes.

Lessons for system strengthening programmes

We have learned the following during implementation of the SusWASH programme so far:

- **It can take time to build trust and set up the necessary agreements** with government and partners to work on system strengthening. It is more straightforward to implement system strengthening in areas where we already have agreements and strong working relationships in place at district and provincial/regional levels, but this is not to say it should not be done as part of all programmes. System strengthening involves heavy interaction with governments and is most effective when aligned with government timelines.
- **System strengthening requires a clear theory of change with fixed outcomes**, but flexible activities and outputs. Outcomes need to be problem-focused and sighted on areas of the system where change is required.
- **System strengthening necessitates a long-term commitment to working with a district** until the WASH system is 'good enough' to ensure 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. WASH programmes therefore necessitate a strong funding pipeline behind them of 10 years plus to allow for system strengthening.
- **It is unrealistic to expect all activities and outputs envisaged at the start of a programme to still be relevant or impactful** once unforeseen blockages arise and understanding of the WASH system progressively deepens. 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 country 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 learning across teams and countries is essential** for strengthening organisational understanding about how to bring about system change. The same function enables consolidation and dissemination of lessons for future programming and influencing wider sector practice. Furthermore, this resource, with sufficient budget, can mobilise and coordinate technical expertise from inside and outside the organisation to enhance programme effectiveness.
- **It is necessary to allocate sufficient resources and time to understanding 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, power dynamics, leverage points and consensus on which aspects to prioritise. Proposals must factor in sufficient time for this analysis.
- **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 programme and policy teams work well together and when staff have the latitude to engage in both practice and policy arenas. This ensures engagement at multiple levels – encouraging use of evidence from practice to influence policy decisions, and alignment between practice priorities with emerging policy topics.
- **System strengthening efforts must be complemented by demonstration or strengthening of service delivery models** and in some cases, direct service delivery, especially in low-coverage areas. If services are non-existent or woefully inadequate, neither government institutions nor communities will have the motivation to go through a slow, step-by-step process that may only yield results in terms of adequate

services in years to come. Service delivery also helps to learn from what works and what does not in different contexts.

- **Costed district WASH plans do not always result in increased government investment in a district** as funding allocation formulas higher up in the system may be based on a wide range of criteria. Sustained national level WASH budget advocacy is therefore essential to unlock funds for district plans.
- **Districts are not always willing to engage.** In contexts where responsibilities are being rapidly decentralised, districts may be overwhelmed and under-resourced to lead WASH and a plethora of other services. Political and social motivations may also reduce willingness to engage on WASH. Strategies must be devised to identify WASH champions and stimulate stronger engagement.
- **People defined as marginalised may not necessarily consider themselves to be so or may be reluctant to engage in empowerment activities.** They may fear they will draw attention to themselves and put themselves in a difficult position with authorities, particularly if they have unofficial immigration status, for example. Partnering with experienced CSOs can help to overcome some of these concerns.
- **Use of MRR materials can help unpack rights issues** in a non-confrontational way and help government staff to better understand their roles and responsibilities.
- **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 unfamiliar to more traditional WASH professionals and be controversial or culturally sensitive in some contexts.
- **Continuous government participation and buy-in for research can ensure greater uptake of findings** and translation into practise.

Skills and resources for system strengthening

From our experience, WASH system strengthening requires a diverse team of individuals with the latitude to work across practice and policy-related issues simultaneously. More specifically, teams and partnerships should bring the following skills, experience and attributes:

- **Facilitators and collaborators:** To bring together a diverse range of local and national stakeholders to reach consensus around common challenges, identify solutions, and encourage continuous reflection, learning and adaptation.
- **Critical thinking and analysis:** To ensure approaches remain relevant and opportunities to accelerate progress are identified.
- **Advocacy and influencing skills:** To act upon analysis, identify key stakeholders and influence government decision making.
- **Interpersonal and communication skills:** To build strong partnerships and collaborations with a wide range of people and institutions, particularly government.
- **Understanding of government processes and ways of working:** At local or national levels to understand how decisions are made and who and which institutions have the influence and power to bring about change.
- **'Traditional' WASH skills:** In hydrogeology, water supply and sanitation engineering, behaviour change, sanitation approaches, service delivery management models, small and medium-sized enterprises/business development.
- **Understanding of gender and social inclusion issues:** To ensure the most marginalised people excluded from WASH are identified, targeted and benefit from system strengthening efforts.
- **Understanding of public finance:** To understand financial mechanisms and processes, including how budgets are developed and finance is leveraged and allocated.
- **Data analysts:** To support indicator harmonisation, data collection and analysis, and development of MIS.
- **Strong programme and adaptive management:** To enable learning and course correction.

The value of system strengthening

While this report is not a formal evaluation or a rigorous cost-benefit analysis, we believe that system strengthening, as described in this report, can lead to better, lasting and more inclusive outcomes when compared to more conventional WASH approaches. Like any way of working, if system strengthening is poorly implemented, it is unlikely to have a positive impact. However, if it is done well, it provides a means of acknowledging that systemic barriers exist, tackling these barriers and dealing with complexity.

Conventional WASH approaches do not typically involve a detailed analysis of the systemic barriers to inclusion or sustainability. Conventional programmes have a typical timeframe of one to three years. They are generally structured around four standard components: construction of WASH facilities, setting up management committees, community training on improved WASH behaviours and capacity development of local government. These 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.^{48,49,50}

WASH failure rates make the case for joined-up efforts that also strengthen public voice, leadership, coordination, planning, financing, monitoring, accountability and demand for WASH, and also break down social barriers that exclude certain people. Whilst none of these elements are new to WASH, system strengthening provides a means of understanding where and when such efforts are relevant and strategic for maximum impact. These efforts are likely to be cost-effective as they aim to prolong the life of services and improved behaviours as well as ensuring they are accessible to all.

- **Bunya Fred, 51, hospital cleaner, closing the gate of the medical waste disposal site that houses the incinerator, placenta and ash pit, Ndejje Health Centre IV, Makindye Ssabagabo Municipality, Wakiso district, Uganda, November 2019.**

Recommendations for donors

- **Flexible budgets and outlook**
Strict log frames and budgets can limit the ability to adapt and remain relevant as contexts change or barriers become better understood. The H&M Foundation allowed budget flexibility which enabled us to adapt our approaches as we understood the context better and as changes and opportunities arose.
- **Extended timeframes**
System strengthening aims to achieve changes in behaviours, policies, processes, resource allocations, interactions and institutions – all of which takes time. WASH system strengthening therefore requires long-term funding commitments.
- **Greater cost-effectiveness of WASH**
Investing in system strengthening means investing in the set-up of internal programme management structures that facilitate relationship building, reflection, learning and course correction. The benefits of such activities may not be immediately visible but are crucial for establishing the partnerships and understanding of the WASH system required to bring about lasting change.



Next steps

In December 2019, the H&M Foundation granted a two-year extension to the SusWASH programme; it will now run until March 2022.

The four implementing countries will continue their efforts to strengthen the WASH system in the same target areas as the first phase.

As next steps, we will continue to:

- Embed system strengthening into all of our work areas from practice and policy, to funding and communications.
- Document and share our lessons and experiences from our WASH system strengthening efforts with other practitioners and donors.
- Review our theory of change to see if the assumptions hold true.
- Continue to learn how best to monitor and measure WASH system change.
- Collaborate with others to advocate for increased and longer-term funding for WASH system strengthening through platforms such as Agenda for Change.⁵¹
- Generate more evidence on the cost-effectiveness of system strengthening.