

Strengthening SWA engagement at country level: Malawi case studyⁱ

The Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Partnership is a global multi-stakeholder partnership that aims to strengthen country processes in order to drive progress towards a common vision of sanitation, hygiene and water for all, always and everywhere.

In February and March 2017 WaterAid, under the leadership of the Government of Malawi and on behalf of the SWA partnership, undertook a case study to analyse and document ongoing sector reform and system strengthening processes in Malawi, and explore how the SWA partnership can strengthen its contribution to those national processes.ⁱⁱ This note summarises SWA efforts to enable and strengthen national sector systems in Malawi, and explores how the partnership's vision and objectives can best be operationalised going forward.

Malawi's engagement in SWA

Malawi has been an official SWA partner since March 2012, and has been engaged to varying degrees in most SWA High Level Meetings. Awareness of SWA varies across and within different agencies and organisations, but in general is concentrated among a small group of active members of the SWA Task Force. Within government, awareness is high among key personnel in the Department of Water Supply Services, but low within the Planning Division. Among donors and development banks there is sometimes vague recognition of the SWA name, but little detailed understanding of its work or their own organisation's role within the partnership. Awareness of the SWA Building Blocksⁱⁱⁱ and Collaborative Behaviours^{iv} is strongest with the government focal point, but overall awareness of these components of the SWA framework among WASH sector stakeholders in Malawi is very low.

Strengths of SWA engagement in Malawi

- **Catalyst for advocacy**
SWA's High Level Meetings (HLMs) are appreciated for stimulating a conversation about WASH at the global level, and playing an important role in WASH policy dialogue. The meetings in Washington DC are also seen as having useful impact at country level by mobilising high profile figures to lobby

Ministers to increase finance to the sector, and helping the Minister of Finance understand sector needs and issues.

- **Framework for dialogue on sector weaknesses and blockages**
Those stakeholders that actively engaged in preparations for the 2017 HLM welcomed the shift in emphasis towards strengthening country processes, and identifying strategies for resource generation. SWA's role in highlighting the building blocks and collaborative behaviours of an effective sector, and supporting countries to understand the challenges and steps needed to meet the SDGs, is seen as a key benefit of engaging with SWA by those familiar with the Framework.
- **Neutral forum**
SWA's ability to bring partners together in a neutral forum that is not owned by any one organisation, enabling it to provide space for challenging conversations about sector progress, is seen as a key part of its value.
- **Opportunity for learning**
The high level meetings organised by SWA have provided useful learning opportunities and built awareness of key issues and priorities, particularly where they have facilitated discussion between ministers from Malawi and those from other countries.

Weaknesses of SWA engagement in Malawi

- **Failure to link with national processes**
There has been little integration between SWA activities and national targets and processes, and SWA engagement is almost entirely separate from broader WASH sector activities in Malawi. This is particularly apparent when it comes to sector processes for developing and reviewing actions and undertakings, where there remains a disconnect between the development and reporting of SWA commitments and Malawi's Joint Sector Review (JSR). Instead SWA engagement is focused on reporting to international, external forces and demands. This failure to link with national process is seen as a critical weakness, and a key factor behind the lack of perceived impact of SWA.
- **Narrow engagement**
Active engagement in SWA in Malawi remains limited to a relatively few actors, predominantly within government, UNICEF and civil society. The SWA Task Force is inclusive to all those who want to join, but to date efforts to bring more stakeholders to the table have not been successful. Particularly noticeable is the absence of development banks, and bilateral and multilateral donors other than UNICEF, which is attributed to a lack of awareness and understanding of the strategic importance of SWA among development partners (DPs) at country level. This limited scope undermines SWA's ability to facilitate a multi-stakeholder dialogue around the bottlenecks and remedial policy options within the WASH sector.

- **Weak accountability**
Another consequence of the lack of alignment between SWA and sector processes is a lack of follow up and accountability around SWA commitments or activities. SWA HLMs are seen as useful opportunities to give Ministers ideas, but of limited use for accountability purposes. The lack of engagement from development partners has also undermined efforts to foster mutual accountability across constituencies.
- **Commitments not linked to finance**
There is limited evidence of SWA engagement leading to impacts in funding allocations for WASH in Malawi, nor does the partnership seem to have helped the sector strengthen its relationship with the Ministry of Finance (MoF). MoF is not involved in the analysis and discussions that form the SWA preparatory process, and commitments and actions identified by government of Malawi as part of SWA engagement have not been linked to a resourcing strategy, and are thus seen as being detached from “financial realism”.
- **Commitments not tackling operational challenges**
Limited awareness of the SWA Framework means SWA is still perceived by many as “mainly about infrastructure”, and lacking a focus on the “softer-side” of systems strengthening, which in turn has exacerbated the infrastructure focus of Malawi’s Sector Investment Plan. It is acknowledged that some SWA commitments have been more operational, but these tended to be referenced and quoted much less.
- **Challenges with political leadership and engagement**
There is a sense that convening of SWA meetings and activities is reliant on donors or NGOs, which moves the ownership away from government. There are also concerns around the strength and breadth of government engagement in SWA, in particular the limited engagement of the Principle Secretary. These challenges are compounded by frequent Ministerial changes during the course of Malawi’s membership of SWA, meaning gains in political will achieved through SWA activities have been short-lived.

Key recommendations for strengthening SWA’s country engagement

Whilst SWA has had some positive impact to date, Malawi’s experience indicates that significant changes are needed to ensure SWA fulfils its potential at country level. Key recommendations are summarized below.

a) **Communicate the benefits of SWA engagement**

In a crowded and busy sector, SWA needs to think carefully and critically about the benefits of the partnership, and communicate these to all constituencies of partner, focusing not just on the SWA “brand” but on the strategic importance and value of the conversations and actions that are driving the sector forward.

- b) Deepen the partnership’s focus on strengthening country processes**
Stakeholders are looking for ways to strengthen core sector systems such as finance and monitoring, and have welcomed SWA’s increasing focus on strengthening the enabling environment and catalysing improvements in development effectiveness – where they are aware of it. However, stakeholders also encouraged SWA to match rhetoric with practice, and ensure ‘strengthening country processes’ is truly the central starting point of all SWA activities and decisions.
- c) Prioritise alignment with existing country mechanisms and processes**
Ensuring more effective alignment between SWA’s country engagement and existing country processes and mechanisms should be the keystone of SWA’s efforts. The status quo of parallel structures and separate meetings is widely seen as unhelpful; instead SWA needs to be embedded into fora such as the Sector Working Group (SWG). This means SWA engagement must be structured in a way that prioritises strengthening and use of national cycles of planning, monitoring and review, rather than the imperative of responding and reporting to external global forces.
- d) Broaden and deepen engagement among existing partners**
The perception that SWA is only targeting a limited number of partners is damaging to partnership’s reputation as a multi-stakeholder platform, and to its effectiveness. SWA needs to do more to bring on board stakeholders who risk getting left behind, both within government – by looking beyond ministers to strengthen its engagement with senior technical staff such as Principle Secretaries – and across SWA’s other constituencies. There is an urgent need for active efforts to ensure development partners internalise and engage with SWA at country level, and to explore ways to foster improvements in coordination and alignment among NGO partners.
- e) Strengthening mutual accountability**
The multi-stakeholder nature of SWA, and thus its potential to provide a platform for strengthened mutual accountability, is recognised as part of the partnership’s “unique selling point”. To maximise its impact, SWA’s mutual accountability mechanism should start from discussions at a national level, rather than creating an isolated process at international level. In particular, SWA should link to JSRs and other sector review processes.
- f) Continue to promote the Collaborative Behaviours and Building Blocks, but allow scope for flexibility and interpretation**
The SWA Collaborative Behaviours and Building Blocks are seen as a valuable framework that creates an opportunity for analysis, dialogue and feedback, giving the sector space to reflect. They are seen as complementing existing efforts, rather than starting a new conversation, and therefore their value is in providing a global framing that identifies key functions, rather than dictating forms in detail.
- g) Explore ways to channel technical support**

The lack of financial support linked to SWA – and the feeling that SWA preaches principles that it does not then support stakeholders to put into practice – creates a challenge for the partnership. Through the joint action of partners, SWA needs to ensure a clearer and more direct response to needs and challenges raised through engagement in the partnership.

Recommendations for strengthening SWA engagement in Malawi

Whilst the above recommendations are directed at the global SWA partnership as a whole, the case study also highlights a number of key recommendations for partners in Malawi.

a) Use SWA to drive in-country processes

SWA provides a valuable means to catalyse support around key in-country processes and opportunities, for example by harnessing global discussions about SDG readiness and linking these to link preparation of the second Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, or using the SWA building blocks to identify key reform areas. This impact will not be achieved as long as Malawi continues to view SWA as an isolated process. But by viewing SWA as a complementary force that can be used to inform and strengthen country processes, and taking ownership of opportunities provided by SWA, partners in Malawi can ensure engagement with the partnership reduces – rather than exacerbates – current inefficiencies.

b) Mainstream SWA into Sector Working Group

Whilst an SWA Task Force may still be useful to take forward specific activities, ownership of Malawi's engagement in SWA needs to sit with the sector as a whole. The SWG not only provides a means through which to broaden country engagement in SWA, but also to ensure any milestones or actions identified through SWA are aligned with broader sector planning and review taking place through the JSR.

c) Encourage strengthened SWA engagement by all sector partners

Partners in Malawi can play a crucial role in broadening the number of actors who are aware of, and involved in, SWA activities in Malawi. This could include using SWG meetings to share specific examples of best practices in taking up and applying the SWA Collaborative Behaviours.

d) Use the neutrality of SWA to rise above sector politics

SWA offers a way to navigate some of the challenges that can undermine collaboration within the sector, for example by circumventing competition among NGOs or DPs, or providing a neutral space to reflect critically on the bottlenecks preventing progress towards a sector wide approach (SWAp).

e) Strengthen WESNET

DPs are encouraged to increase support for the Water & Environmental Sanitation Network (WESNET), both through direct financial support, and by requiring their NGO partners to subscribe and report to WESNET. Civil

Society engagement in SWA in Malawi could also be strengthened by making WESNET the national SWA focal point for civil society.

f) Bring Ministry of Finance back into sector discussions

Encouraging representatives of MoF to reengage with sector discussions through fora such as the JSR would help ensure commitments catalysed by processes like SWA have the support of treasury and are included in necessary budgets.

g) Use the JSR as a dynamo for sector progress

Ensuring the JSR fulfils its potential as a driver of sector reform will be key to maximising the effectiveness not only of SWA engagement but of all activities in Malawi's WASH sector. Government and partners should take time to review and reach consensus on the objectives of the JSR, and agree clear steps to strengthen the processes and ensure these objectives are achieved.

Conclusion

Whilst SWA has brought benefits to Malawi's WASH sector by catalysing global WASH policy dialogue and providing a framework for discussion of sector weaknesses and blockages, it is clear that SWA is not yet achieving its ambition to catalyse the step change in sector progress needed to achieve water, sanitation and hygiene for all.

To fulfil its potential, SWA must re-orientate its activities to ensure SWA's commitment to 'strengthening country processes' is operationalised. This means ensuring country processes and systems are the centre point of SWA engagement, with the partnership's global activities aligned with, and acting to strengthen, country level process. The experience of Malawi also highlights the importance of continuing to deepen SWA's focus on sector building blocks and the Collaborative Behaviours, utilising the global and regional reach of the partnership to complement and reinforce country level efforts to identify and overcome challenges to the development of functioning sectors capable of delivering and sustaining WASH services to all.

ⁱ This Summary Note was written by Clare Battle, based on a longer report by Clare Battle and James Mambulu. Research was conducted by WaterAid in Malawi in February / March 2017, under the leadership of the Government of Malawi and on behalf of the SWA partnership.

ⁱⁱ Research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 28 sector stakeholders, representing government, civil society, bilateral donors, UN agencies and development banks.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/wp-content/uploads/download-manager-files/building%20blocks%20%20pager.pdf>

^{iv} <http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/the-four-swa-collaborative-behaviours/>