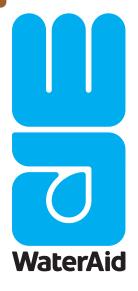# From data to decisions
Data use planning guide

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This planning guide is intended to be used by governments, development partners, or consultants who are leading the design of a new sector monitoring programme or re-designing an existing monitoring system.

WaterAid

Data use framework

The planning guide does not provide a roadmap for the entire process of designing a sector monitoring programme. It focuses specifically on supporting stakeholders to build a critical understanding of the issues which impact the use of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) monitoring data, and help inform strategies to address these issues within the design of sector monitoring programmes.

The guide is based on the **data use framework**, which was developed through research into data-informed decision making in the WASH sector. It draws on insights from political economy, behavioural science, and contemporary examples of national WASH monitoring programmes.

1. Purpose	**What types of decisions are made, and by whom?**
2. Context	**What are the key features of the institutional and political environment in which those decisions are made?**
3. Data	**What types of data and information are needed by the data users for the purposes identified?**
4. Processes	**How do governmental processes support evidence use and/or mitigate potential biases?**

For further background to this guide, please see the *From data to decisions Synthesis report* and *Policy brief* which are available here: washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/from-data-to-decisions

This planning guide is the result of a research commissioned by WaterAid and carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

Full details of the research findings and policy recommendations are available in the following publications:

- **Policy brief:** Kempster S (2020). *From data to decisions: Developing user-centred monitoring programmes for water, sanitation, and hygiene (Policy brief)*. London: WaterAid.
- **Synthesis report:** Pasanen T, Mason N (2019). *From data to decisions: How to promote evidence-based decision making through external investments in country-led monitoring processes.* London: WaterAid.

All publications are available here: washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/from-data-to-decisions

WaterAid also produces **programmatic guidance** to support external agencies which are working with national governments to strengthen broader aspects of sector monitoring. Programmatic guidance is available here: washmatters.wateraid.org/monitoring-and-accountability

1

Purpose:
what type of decisions are made, and by whom?

1a. Who are current and potential data users?

Why is this important to consider?

Mapping all the existing and potential data users and stakeholders who use or need WASH monitoring data will help identify those that should be involved in co-designing the monitoring system and whose data needs should be considered.

Example questions for stakeholder interviews

This first step is essentially stakeholder listing or mapping, to identify whose needs should be considered, and who needs to be involved in the design of the monitoring programmes. It can be carried out by an individual with good knowledge of the existing situation, but would be augmented by consulting two or three other experts for a range of perspectives. Questions include:
- Who currently uses WASH monitoring data, within national government, sub-national government, service providers, funders, knowledge and research organisations, and others?
- Who should use WASH monitoring data, but currently does not?
- Who are the most critical current/potential users of WASH monitoring data from these lists, and why?

Guidance

It is important to consider the roles and decision making mandates of key individuals at as granular a level as possible, and to keep in mind that each data user may be part of a complex decision process in which they both make some decisions and advise or defer to others. However, it's also necessary to have a manageable number of perspectives and to avoid getting bogged down in complex processes. Careful judgement is needed to strike this balance. Bear in mind that 'data use' may not be restricted to forward-looking decisions like planning or budgeting – it could include using data for advocating or holding others to account.

Consider a mix of different levels and perspectives, including: National government, e.g. ministries, departments and agencies; sub-national government; service providers, e.g. utilities, civil society organisations (CSOs); funders, e.g. donors; knowledge and research organisations.

1b. What type of decisions are (potential) data users making? What are other key uses of WASH data besides decision making?

Why is this important to consider?

Starting with key decisions encourages designing monitoring systems around the purposes data will be used for. This discourages investment in data collection or analysis which may ultimately not be used.

Example questions for stakeholder interviews

For each of the key stakeholders identified in 1a:
- What are the goals of your agency when it comes to WASH?
- What is your (agency's) mandate? What are your key tasks and responsibilities?
- What are the key decisions that need to be made by you/your agency/in the WASH sector in general (e.g. planning, budgeting, policy formulation, programme/asset/service management)?
- For what purposes besides making specific decisions could WASH monitoring evidence be used (e.g. accountability, advocacy, consensus building, research)?
- Can you give examples?

1 Purpose (continued):
what type of decisions are made, and by whom?

Guidance	Starting with goals and mandates can be an easier route in than asking straight away about 'decisions' in the abstract. Although direct/instrumental decisions are usually key to understanding the most important data uses, it's also important to encourage interviewees to think about other potential uses besides these, e.g. uses around accountability or influencing. Throughout this step, asking for specific examples can help encourage interviewees to be more concrete.
	Consider: Direct, instrumental decision making, e.g. managing projects/ programmes/services/assets; formulating plans, budgets or policies; holding to account, e.g. regulation, reward and sanction; influencing, e.g. advocacy, consensus building.

1c. What are the current and potential uses of WASH monitoring data in these decisions (or non-decision applications) and which are the priorities?

Why is this important to consider?	By following up on step 1b in this way, it is possible to link current and potential uses of WASH monitoring data back to key decisions (or non-decision activities like influencing and accountability). This ensures the rest of the analysis, and resulting system design and interventions, are grounded in users' data needs.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	For each of the key 'uses' identified in 1b: ● When making decisions/holding others to account/influencing others, what information is generally used? ● What role does WASH monitoring data currently play in each of these processes? ● What role could WASH monitoring data play in each of these processes?
Guidance	Stakeholders may be reluctant to admit that they don't use monitoring data, especially if there is an implied expectation that they should. Consider alternative sources of information, which could be used as prompts, and include research, evaluations and personal experience.

Context:
what are the key features of the institutional and political environment in which decisions are made?

2a. What is the scope and clarity of institutional arrangements in WASH – do key users of WASH monitoring data have the mandate, resources and political room to carry out their roles?

Why is this important to consider?	To stimulate greater use of data in decision making, sector monitoring programmes must be properly situated within broader sectoral and institutional arrangements. Ensuring that programmes are designed based on a strong, critical understanding of this broader context will ensure that monitoring programmes respond to the mandates of key decision makers/stakeholders and are embedded within decision making processes.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	● What is the extent of decentralisation across fiscal, administrative and political dimensions? ● How does this affect who makes decisions about WASH, e.g. for planning or budgeting? ● How clear are WASH roles and related decision making/data use responsibilities between different ministries, departments and agencies?
Guidance	The broader institutional architecture for WASH will determine the extent to which key potential users of WASH monitoring data can use data – to make decisions, hold others to account, etc. The extent of decentralisation, especially for WASH policy development, planning and budgeting, is a key consideration, as is the clarity of responsibilities between different ministries. Try to scope both how these arrangements look on paper and how they work in practice – responding to informal institutions can help monitoring programmes to stimulate data use.

2b. What are the key processes for planning and budgeting, and how does/could WASH monitoring information feed into these?

Why is this important to consider?	Key public financial management processes beyond WASH may strongly determine planning and allocation of funding for WASH services. Considering these issues ensures the WASH monitoring system is not lost in its own sector silo.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	● How are government budgets generally determined? ● How are WASH sector plans developed? ● How do the two processes interact, and what are the implications for feeding in WASH monitoring data?
Guidance	Plans and budgets developed by the most visible WASH line ministries (e.g. water, health) may be a small part of overall sector expenditure, especially in a decentralised context, where there may be bottom-up planning processes and/or autonomous budgeting at local levels. It is therefore important to consider both top-down and/or bottom-up processes. Consider the role of different actors in these processes: national government, sub-national government and external support agencies.

Context (continued):
what are the key features of the
institutional and political environment
in which decisions are made?

2c. What are the existing policy priorities in WASH?

Why is this important to consider?	Mapping WASH goals and targets ensures that monitoring programmes produce data that speaks to existing priorities. Potential areas of disagreement over policy should also be highlighted, to ensure that monitoring doesn't reinforce collective biases in decision making (for example, group reinforcement, in which people adopt a 'consensus' view in the face of contrary evidence, or confirmation bias, where people seek out evidence that confirms an existing, strongly held view or preference). This can ensure data that may be important in the future is not omitted from the monitoring programme.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	◖ Which areas (normative goals/sub-sectors/geographies/approaches) of WASH are currently prioritised, and why? ◖ Are these priorities reflected in sector policies or targets, or are they largely 'unwritten'? ◖ What is the extent of agreement about these priorities?
Guidance	Try to identify unwritten or implicit priorities as well as those written down in policy documents – these may have a stronger hold over people's decision making than the officially articulated priorities. Consider: Normative goals (e.g. universality, sustainability, modernity); sub-sectors (e.g. water/sanitation/hygiene); geographic focus (e.g. rural; small town; city; upland/lowland; marginalised/mainstream); preferred approaches (e.g. community-led/market-based/supply-driven; centralised versus decentralised).

2d. What are the wider political priorities and dynamics beyond WASH?

Why is this important to consider?	Long term use of data requires sustained political will to ensure the monitoring system is maintained and updated, and also the political will to respond to the data and allocate appropriate resources to WASH. Analysing the wider political context helps in understanding what processes or activities could be included within a monitoring programme to help stimulate or maintain the necessary levels of political will.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	◖ How does WASH compare to other sectors or issues in terms of importance? ◖ What is the role of statistical and administrative data in wider policy debates? ◖ How do those in power secure support? What is the role of evidence and data in securing support? ◖ How does WASH feature in attempts to secure political support? ◖ How far do you think the government is able to take a long-term perspective on policy issues and programmes versus being led by short-term projects or responding to sudden events?
Guidance	Consider: Other sectors (social, infrastructure, productive sectors); ways of securing support (e.g. impartial, evidence-based, programmatic versus clientelistic politics); degree of stability/fragility; level of dependence on external finance.

Data:
what types of data and information are needed by the data users for the purposes identified?

3a. What are the main types of WASH monitoring data required for the identified uses?

Why is this important to consider?	Identifying specific sub-sets of data types or indicators that data users find most useful to make decisions helps to make a distinction between 'nice to have' and 'must have', ensuring the monitoring system is designed as efficiently as possible. It also helps to design processes within the system to ensure data users have the data they need, when they need it.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	In the current and potential uses of WASH monitoring data (1c): - What types of data/indicators are most relevant? - Which data types/indicators emerge as priorities across the different users (1a) and their decisions (1b)?
Guidance	The core types of WASH monitoring data needed will often be 'outputs' or 'outcomes'. Where government plans incentivise improvements in institutional capacity and performance data, 'inputs' and the 'enabling environment' may be needed as a complement. However, it may be necessary to focus initially on a core set of uses and users, building from a core set of cross-cutting indicators, but allowing for the system to evolve and expand over time. Consider: Inputs (e.g. costs, expenditure); enabling environment (e.g. capacity to deliver/sustain services); outputs (e.g. services provided, performance); outcomes (e.g. services used/behaviour change); impacts (e.g. changes in health, wellbeing, livelihoods).

3b. What are the most important technical features that can enable use for each of the main types of WASH monitoring data?

Why is this important to consider?	Each required form of data will have certain qualities that appear technical but can have important implications on the attitudes and behaviour of potential users. Rather than assuming certain technical features of the WASH monitoring system are important, this step ensures design is based around the features of data that are most valued by data users. Even general 'good practice' features, such as timeliness or disaggregation, can mean different things to different stakeholders. Mapping supply-side data issues (e.g. logistics and technical challenges related to data collection and processing) can help to plan strategies to mitigate them from the start.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	- What technical features of identified key data are important to users to encourage use (e.g. accessibility, level of disaggregation, timeliness, validity)? - To what extent have existing technical or logistical challenges undermined confidence in the system/data use? - Has historic non-use of data undermined data collection or other more 'technical' functions of the monitoring system?
Guidance	Well-used systems (with evidence of response) can also engender confidence, reinforcing other functional areas of the monitoring system, e.g. data collection. Consider: Accessibility; level of disaggregation; timeliness; validity.

4 Processes:
how do governmental processes support evidence use and/or mitigate potential biases?

4a. What organisational and inter-organisational systems and processes exist for users of WASH monitoring data to use evidence?

Why is this important to consider?	Understanding existing arrangements for data verification, sharing, data analysis and performance review helps identify the opportunities and incentives for data use, and also how existing biases may be either exacerbated or mitigated. This can inform what gaps exist and how they could be addressed through a new or improved monitoring system.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	● Are there any systems or processes that encourage you to use WASH monitoring data? How? ● What is the reporting culture in your agency and does it currently serve a particular purpose (e.g. learning, accountability)? ● What opportunities exist to: simplify data for communication/interpretation; encourage dialogue and mutual learning around data; validate and verify data? ● What do you think can be done to improve the use of WASH monitoring data – a) in your agency, b) more widely?
Guidance	Key issues to identify may include the extent to which data is used at lower levels versus an expectation for upward reporting – whether the reporting is for accountability and learning, or just an end in itself; how those reporting processes are run; the way data is simplified and communicated; and platforms that exist for discussing and analysing data. Consider: Data reporting requirements; data communication mechanisms; data verification systems; dialogue platforms for discussing data; human, financial, logistical resources for data collection, management and use.

4b. How are WASH monitoring and WASH interventions in general funded, and what are the implications for data use?

Why is this important to consider?	It is highly unlikely that no WASH monitoring occurs at either national or local levels. The funding arrangements for WASH monitoring systems, and indeed for WASH interventions themselves, are a key set of 'systemic' drivers shaping how different stakeholders perceive and use the data generated. This step ensures any new investment or programme complements and learns lessons from current and historic funding of WASH monitoring.
Example questions for stakeholder interviews	● How is the current WASH monitoring system funded (design, data collection, data sharing)? ● Over what timeframe is the funding likely to be available? ● If currently externally funded, is there a clear process for transitioning into a government-financed initiative? ● What could support the intended data users to make a financial commitment to encourage ownership? ● Does the funding environment create any incentives that could create biases in how data is used?
Guidance	Consider the relative contribution of different parties: national government, local government, development partners. Also consider which party has control over budgets and financial planning, and the timeframes over which funding is made available.