

# Implementing political will

Effective leadership in delivering WASH for all



Research report

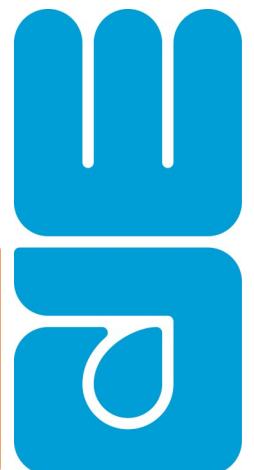


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## Executive summary

The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector has an abundance of international declarations with governments publicly committing themselves to achieving universal access to services. These high-level signifiers of political will are noteworthy for, by and large, failing to drive forward any significant progress. And yet, there is little discussion among WASH sector advocates and policy makers on how to translate publicly declared high-level political commitments into an agenda delivering a step change in progress.

Where a marked improvement in the coverage and sustainability of WASH services has been achieved in low or lower-middle income countries, the evidence points to the centrality of effective leadership in galvanising government administrative actions and sector progress. 'Effective leadership' is defined here as leadership that strives for improvements in the capacity, commitment and quality of government administration.

From an overview of the evidence of rapid progress in WASH sector performance, at least four identifiable effective leadership activities, or traits, stand out:

- High-level leadership setting out a compelling common vision for change that articulates the case for universal access to WASH services as part of broader nationally, historically or culturally resonant themes or central to 'nation-building' efforts and the quest for 'modernity'.
- Leaders taking a 'whole-of-government' approach where they are personally engaged in achieving well coordinated and resourced implementation efforts and ensuring bureaucratic structures are designed around key problem-solving activities and goals.
- Devolved leadership functions, so local-level implementers have a degree of autonomy over human and financial resourcing decisions to address local-level challenges.
- The development of a bureaucratic culture that systematically diagnoses implementation bottlenecks and develops 'course correcting' remedial reforms, with upward feedback loops to address systemic weaknesses.

Few contemporary aid programmes directly support the strengthening of effective leadership activities. They are often driven by donor imperatives to report to their domestic constituencies on the 'numbers of people reached' with new services. They may promote 'value-for-money' contracts that focus on delivering infrastructural or institutional changes needed for functioning WASH systems. But these forms of development assistance risk narrowing donor support to projects at the expense of the longer-term effort of strengthening the system-wide capabilities needed to expand access to WASH for all. Donor-driven 'projectised' approaches can end up dislocating WASH services from the core government management and accountability systems needed to develop the capabilities for achieving universal access to sustainable services.

External support agencies can deliver development assistance in ways that support the identified effective leadership activities and state capabilities. These include:

- Developing partnerships with governments based on the identification of common values and achievement goals, and having those agreed higher-level aspirations and learning modes define the targets, indicators and structure of programmes.
- Convening relevant actors and agencies to tackle specific or system-wide challenges at different points through implementation pathways, and progressively aligning and harmonising donor support behind country-led systems, as set out in the WASH sector's aid effectiveness principles – [the Collaborative Behaviours](#).
- Resourcing the innovation and learning programmes most needed to address system-wide weaknesses.
- Commissioning and convening the key agencies or actors, research networks and stakeholders in local 'policy communities' to diagnose bottlenecks and develop and monitor remedial reform options.

## Introduction

It is widely accepted in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector that the ‘political will’ of national leaders is essential to achieve universal access to sustainable services. However, the evidence suggests that high-level political commitments and intentions to achieve transformational change are, by themselves, insufficient. The sector has seen many international undertakings to achieve universal access to WASH made by heads of government and ministers in the African Union, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the UN, on high-level panels, at G7 summits and so on. These have largely failed to lead to significant progress being made, let alone ambitions being fully realised. Without a clear view of the sort of leadership activities required to push through change beyond a stated commitment, the sector’s advocates and policymakers are too often left promoting only the signifiers of political will – the rhetorical commitments in ministerial speeches, the ‘right’ language in declarations, or the setting up of high-level panels.

This paper aims to open up discussion in the WASH sector on political will beyond statements of commitment and identify ways that leadership activities are translated into effective administrative actions and implementation. It is hoped that by setting out some of the known characteristics of effective leadership, those wanting to see progressive change will engage with the follow-up activities that lie beyond the usual signifiers of political intent.

While there is no ‘golden definition’ of effective leadership for sectors delivering public services, the literature suggests it can be seen as ‘the actions that create the capability to drive reforms and mobilise people, ideas, means and resources to achieve sustainable and universally accessible services’ (Andrews M, McConnell J and Wescott A, 2010). Or, in other words, those leadership functions that aim to improve the capacity, commitment and quality of government administration (White G, 2006; Jeffries R, 2009). Effective leadership also involves dispersed functions with multiple actors taking on leadership roles, as opposed to the singular authority of ‘big man’ leadership (Williams D, 2019).

Using evidence from previous WaterAid research, a review of the grey literature and interviews with practitioners, implementing officials and governance specialists, this paper highlights four discernible sets of effective leadership activity: setting a values-based vision for change; taking a whole-of-government approach; decentralising resources and decision-making to the local level; and building the capacity to diagnose and resolve bottlenecks. It goes on to propose these four ‘action areas’ as the focus of donor support. It does not delve into questions of how and why effective leadership emerges. But it is hoped the evidence and case histories of what works will generate more discussion in the WASH sector about how the intentions behind statements of ‘political will’ can be translated into effective actions in government administration and functions for universal access to sustainable WASH services.



## Characteristics of effective WASH sector leadership

WaterAid research looked at the politics and delivery systems that achieved total sanitation and hygiene coverage within a generation in four East Asian states – Singapore, South Korea, West Malaysia and Thailand (Northover H, Brewer T and Shin RK, 2015). It also looked at rural and urban areas in Ethiopia, Indonesia and India where significant progress has been made (Mason N and Hueso A, 2016).

In all the countries studied, what counted was the leadership establishing a clear vision of large-scale change and universal access to WASH being foundational to that transformation. This aspirational vision mattered more than concerns over the availability of financial resources or the prior graduation into a particular stage of development (see table below). At the start of the 1960s, when South Korea set its national goals on public health, sanitation and hygiene in its Living Well strategy, safely managed sanitation covered less than a third of the population, while its per capita income levels were equivalent to, or lower than, many Sub-Saharan African countries. The leadership's pursuit of total WASH coverage was part of its longer-term vision for the country that put household water, sanitation and hygiene practices at the centre of the post-war nation-building project.

**Table: Per capita GDP in 1960 and sanitation achievements by 2000**

Country	GDP per capita in 1960 (USD)	National improved sanitation coverage rate in 2000
South Korea	\$155	100%
Ghana	\$183	10%
Liberia	\$170	12%
Senegal	\$249	43%
Zambia	\$227	41%
Zimbabwe	\$280	40%

Source: WaterAid, 2014

Central to delivering on that vision was the development of effective delivery systems and the bureaucratic capabilities and cultures to support these. In all countries studied, there were at least four key leadership activities behind the system-wide reforms.

### 1) **Setting a common vision based on values**

In all four countries, the national leadership built an aspirational vision that put hygienic practices and sanitation at the forefront of national development goals. Sanitation, hygiene and environmental health were seen as the necessary conditions for 'modernity', shared prosperity and common wellbeing.

In Singapore, the government's post-independence project of the 1960s centred on developing an international trading hub capable of attracting foreign investors. Central to that strategy was the high profile Keep Singapore Clean campaign and the provision of sanitation as a marker of a modern globally connected city-state. It also formed part of the government's social contract with citizens. The provision of universal access to sanitation services came with the imposition of counterpart obligations on citizens to conform to hygienic practices. In Malaysia, the political drive to deliver universal access to sanitation and hygiene was part of efforts to establish a cohesive civil society and build state legitimacy across all ethnicities.

“...unless something is done to help [the rural poor], they would not keep pace with the nation's progress. A new nation cannot afford to have an unbalanced population.”

**Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1958**

WaterAid's research in India, Ethiopia and Indonesia (Mason N and Hueso A, 2016) also points to the quest for modernity as a cohering goal.

In all cases, the leaders focused on repeating value-orientations they believed underscored the importance of sanitation and hygiene policy, linking them to the grander narrative around nation-building and socio-economic development. In doing so, they established a congruence between the common vision of wellbeing and citizens' perceptions of the benefits for themselves.

The leadership's exhortations and repetition of common values was not just for the wider public. It also formed part of the lectures given to the bureaucrats charged with delivering sectoral reforms. Setting out common national values to officials helped establish the rationale that energised and focused bureaucratic activity as well as laying down a broader justification for the strategic direction of policy.

## 2) Taking a whole-of-government approach

In all the countries studied, the head of government's personal engagement involved harmonising the government machinery and the coordination of broader groups of leaders and officials throughout the delivery system. That active personal engagement included designing and monitoring policy and assigning bureaucratic leadership roles and responsibilities – a whole-of-government approach.

Some key actions included:

- Quickly establishing bureaucratic networks of dedicated and motivated cadres to secure the 'quick wins' that generated momentum and built locally owned models of success.

- Designing bureaucratic structures around their implementation function, so the activities, purpose and aims determined the form of administrative structures and systems. In Singapore for instance, hygienic behaviours were identified as critical in achieving sanitation uptake. As a result, the Training, Education and Communications Branch in the Ministry of Environment was given a senior coordinating role within the Public Health Division. In Malaysia, engineers were retained in the Department of Health to develop the necessary sanitation infrastructure for achieving public health outcomes.
- Coordinating horizontal inter-departmental decision-making groups at key tiers down the implementation chain. In Malaysia, the Deputy Prime Minister called for development teams to meet “at least once a week, and have what I call ‘morning prayers’ where all departmental officers get together and instead of writing tedious minutes on files to each other, they settle differences in a coordinated way, in front of maps in their operations’ rooms.” (Deputy PM to Persatuan Ekonomi Malaysia, March 1965)

### 3) Incentivising local innovation and achievement

The successful implementation of water and sanitation services requires adaptation to local contexts (Hueso A, 2014). Policies need to respond to local constraints and opportunities. In the four East Asian countries, leadership functions were devolved to allow for locally generated remedial reforms to address local-level constraints. Bureaucrats were given the relative autonomy needed to repurpose human and financial resources required to deliver on the mission.

In 1960s and 70s rural West Malaysia, the few public sector workers on the ground were frontline health staff. Their primary healthcare functions were repurposed to include information, communication and education for rural households on hygienic practices and also to oversee improvements in toilet designs. But that decentralisation of resources and the capacity for local-level adaptation had to be squared with a bureaucratic discipline to deliver progress on set targets.

One way to reconcile the need for relative autonomy with the top-down drive for progress was through a mix of transactional incentives, including wide recognition of successes and professional rewards for implementers who delivered innovation and accelerated progress. It was actions and achievements that were the key criteria for professional advancement, rather than the length of an official’s tenure in institutions.

It is also worth noting that the scope for developing the capabilities of local-level implementers and their relative autonomy to make adaptations was helped, or at least not hindered, by the form of development aid that East Asian central governments received. Multi-year budget support and sector-wide programme support packages allowed for significant government discretion

on how investments were used to address local-level challenges and develop the supporting bureaucratic capabilities and learning culture.

#### 4) **Course correction and adaptive management**

A central feature in the bureaucratic culture of effective leadership is an insistent commitment to diagnose and resolve bottlenecks. And, if the needed remedial reforms are beyond the mandate of implementing officials, feedback loops take the more systemic bottlenecks up the decision-making hierarchy for resolution.

This culture of identifying bottlenecks and developing remedial alternatives partly reflected the absence of blueprints for delivering wholesale change in a complex area such as sanitation and hygiene. It was also probably a reflection of the wider context of a period that covered the formative nation-building years. The culture of learn-by-doing and ‘trial and error’ was the form taken due to historical necessity.

In the words of Dani Rodrik on the economic reforms of East Asia:

“...can anyone name the (Western) economists or the piece of research that played an instrumental role in China’s reforms? What about South Korea, Malaysia, or Vietnam? In none of these Asian cases did economic research, at least as conventionally understood, play a significant role in shaping development policy... The process consisted of diagnosing the nature of the binding constraints and identifying possible remedies in an innovative, experimental fashion with few preconceptions about what works or is appropriate.”

The diagnostic and ‘course correction’ bureaucratic culture was also central to the East Asian states’ approaches to sanitation and hygiene.

“Your function, first and foremost, is a function of a ‘breaker of bottlenecks’. You must get out and around to every district looking for frustrations, looking for departmental disagreements, looking for delays, and when you have found them, you must diagnose them and then: (a) try on your own behalf to solve them; (b) if you cannot solve them yourself then report to the officers of my Ministry and ask them to solve them; and (c) when all else has failed then they will be brought to me and I will try and solve them.”

**Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia at the State Development Officers’ Conference, December 1965**

The diagnostic activity was not a routine frivolous ‘review and reform’, but rather a form of analysis and response that was systematically used in all levels of policy-making and implementation.

In summary, the four activity areas of effective leadership are about a values-based common vision establishing the foundations for transformational



change, delivered through bureaucracies shaped and driven by their purpose and with a leadership culture insistent on pursuing improvements through continuous cycles of diagnosis and 'course correction'.

## Leading the single biggest national behaviour change campaign in human history

Many of the successful leadership actions in East Asia were also found in India's Swachh Bharat Mission, with its aim to eradicate open defecation and ensure all households had toilets. It is arguably the biggest behaviour change campaign in human history – a mammoth exercise delivered within a tight five-year timeframe.

The lead department, the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, was a small wing of federal government. It faced the challenges of policy implementation through multiple intermediating tiers of government, negotiating through countervailing political incentives between states and 'the centre', overcoming geographic distance and turning around centuries of common practice of hundreds of millions of households. While it may not have succeeded in achieving its goal of eradicating open defecation\*, it deployed effective leadership actions that produced wholesale change in the availability of toilets and in societal attitudes.

Some of those involved put its successes down to:

- 1) The Prime Minister's highly publicised personal priority and full engagement with the mission, including the launch in his 2014 Independence Day speech where he evoked Mahatma Gandhi's idea of sanitation as "more important than independence". It set the new Swachh Bharat Mission's campaign as resetting India's contemporary aspirations as well as the fulfilment of a historic legacy. The nation's independence leader's spectacles became the campaign's icon – the country's moral authority figure used to anchor a values-driven national and community behaviour change effort.
- 2) Mobilising the world's largest single financial package for toilet construction.
- 3) A Secretary heading the lead Ministry who was a subject expert and personally committed to the sector and mission. The tight five-year timeframe put pressure on an unwieldy delivery system that had historically been slow to respond to policy change. A mix of bureaucratic incentives was used that included aspirational motivations around delivering the common good as well as more transactional incentives in the form of professional recognition, advancement and reward.
- 4) Establishing 'quick wins' with a small highly able cadre of pace-setting officials from 60 districts capable of achieving Open Defecation Free status within six months.
- 5) Using a mix of adapted social and traditional media messaging to create a popular momentum around shifting social norms.
- 6) Engagement by lead officials attuned to the challenges and bottlenecks around implementation, making on-site visits and 'reflect and review' stocktakes on performance. In some states, there were loops of frequent feedback and response.
- 7) Reliance on multiple disciplines and sources of support from international academia, external support agencies, marketing agencies and corporates.

\*National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019–2020 – Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

## External support agencies' institution-building programmes

There are few good recent examples where external support agency (ESA) programmes have successfully focused on developing effective leadership. At the turn of this century, some aid modalities, such as debt relief and sector-wide and general budget support, did help buttress government systems. The heightened transparency over debt relief and widespread national debates over the use of freed up resources helped strengthen governments' accountability on the provision of basic services. However, more recent trends in aid have not helped to embed accountable and effective leadership activities.

Some traditional Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors have moved away from sector-wide approaches and budget support toward one-off 'projectised' aid interventions (Kempster S, 2020). In the WASH sector, projectised aid has too often led to fragmented outputs dislocated from core government systems, weakening the incentives to develop and implement serious country-driven strategies aiming for universal access. The push from some ESAs for narrow 'value-for-money' metrics in their aid programmes has had the effect of putting the 'numbers reached' with services as the overriding priority of programmes, often ahead of efforts to strengthen the delivery systems needed for sustainable services. Where value-for-money has meant maximising the numbers of people reached at the lowest possible cost, the development of the capabilities to expand access and the sustainability of services has too often taken a backseat.

There is also the risk that ESAs' project-led aid can be a substitute for the leadership's accountability for essential service provision and even undermine efforts to build sector governance systems over the long term. An underpinning ESA paternalism can displace the policy-making responsibilities of government, postpone the pressure for sector governance reforms and possibly undermine the state's key legitimisation functions (OECD, 2008).

Today, it is harder to find the sector-wide and multi-year programme aid that helped Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea innovate and build the learning modes necessary to forge their own 'owned' development pathways.

Most ESAs' more recent attempts to build institutions and incentivise efficiency gains in service delivery have had drawbacks when it comes to supporting the emergence of effective leadership traits.

- i) In the 1990s and early 2000s, some OECD donors designed approaches that targeted support at 'Islands of Effectiveness' or 'Pockets of Success'. The approach relied on identifying progressive leaders in ministries, local governments or whole departments. They were singled out as progressive 'drivers' of development. Donors would then mobilise surge support behind the stand-out performers, aiming to deepen progress with the hope of incentivising efficiency drives with adjacent leaders or ministries.

Some analysts question whether such targeted support to Islands of Effectiveness was ever going to deliver sustainable improvements, let alone have multiplier effects, without a broader understanding of the limitations imposed by the wider political economy. The concern is whether such selective approaches risk introducing distorted or only limited impacts when they run counter to the wider political settlement (Wild L, 2020; Israel M, 2020).

- ii) **Results-based finance or approaches** are very much in vogue with many official donors. The principle to pay-on-delivery of agreed outputs is one that has the benefit of allowing countries to devise and adapt their own implementation pathways to reach specified goals. By agreeing on the targets and leaving the executing agencies to devise their own means for reaching them, the model allows for country-driven approaches to emerge with the associated learning and ownership anchored within the executing agencies. Some lead practitioners interviewed for this paper suggest that the model is compatible with supporting effective leadership. While recognising that the rigidities imposed by some donors' logframe approaches are not appropriate, they advocate frameworks that set only broad goals as a way to encourage leaders to devise homegrown paths that also build the capabilities necessary to deliver services. So, for instance, they suggest a results-based model that sets out broad outcomes in building regulatory systems, infrastructural outcomes or environmental standards. The executing agencies are then free to adapt and learn as they implement.

However, for the purposes of building institutional capabilities and supporting effective leadership activities in fragile states, an aid model that defines fixed results at the outset of the programme sets a contractual framework that can limit the necessary flexibility for an adaptive and learning management culture necessary for the ongoing 'course corrections' identified in developmental states. Effective leadership is demonstrated by hard-to-measure activities and behaviours. These tend not to be consistent with the constraints imposed by pre-determined and quantifiable outputs and where innovation and trial and error incur the risk of failure and therefore of non-payment.

- iii) **Institutional capacity-building programmes**, in isolation from the will of recipient governments, have, at best, a modest record of improving effective leadership functions. While capacity-building and training programmes can provide much needed capabilities and additional resources for service delivery, too often there is a mismatch between the technical support offered and the needs of the wider political and behavioural environment (Kempster S, 2019). Many donors promote a range of governance measures and approaches that attempt to universalise the common 'best practice approaches' of delivery systems. But these can end up imposing particular organisational forms over

function, or put the structures ahead of the activities. And, in doing so, the reforms risk encouraging ‘isomorphic mimicry’ – the replication of ideal structures without the successful adoption of effective functions (Andrews M, Pritchett L and Woodcock M, 2017). In other words, the focus is on how institutions should be structured and not necessarily on optimising their functions or purpose-driven activities. The realities of context, the prevailing incentives and pressures, will limit how a graft from an external idealised model can be successfully transplanted (Wild L, 2020).

In summary, the limitations of some orthodox ESA approaches are that they tend to focus on fixed goals and targets, or the idealised forms of institutional structures. But as has been discussed above, the common traits of effective and accountable leadership are best captured as activities, behaviours and functions and not form. If we accept that a key feature of effective leadership is the ability to build in diagnostic and course-correction capabilities with active feedback loops, it should follow that ESAs’ development cooperation should be delivered in ways that support and help motivate those activities and functions.



## Some proposals for external support agencies

“One person with passion is better than forty people merely interested.”

### EM Forster

The following set of proposals takes the identified activities associated with effective leadership and builds on these with inputs from key informant interviews and the grey literature. It is hoped the proposals are a way of opening up the WASH sector’s discussions beyond the all too common ‘there’s a need for greater political will’ conclusions.

The main assumption underlying the proposals is that the identified features of effective leadership should be supported by ESAs as a way of accelerating country-led efforts to improve development outcomes. The focus of support should be on the characteristic features of effective leadership – the particular sets of activities and tasks rather than on the forms of institutional structure. The action areas identified in the preceding section were:

- building a compelling common vision of change based on national aspirations and common values;
- taking a whole-of-government approach with horizontal coordination and vertical disciplines required for multi-agency coordination and accountability;
- providing sufficient financial and human resources with the scope, or ‘change space’, for innovating locally owned solutions with upward feedback loops on progress;
- regular diagnostic activities that seek out bottlenecks and generate remedial ‘course correcting’ policy reforms and actions.

There are some good examples of fragile states or low and lower-middle income countries where effective leaders are delivering sustained improvements in the WASH sector. For those countries, ESAs should be supporting the leadership by progressively adhering to the aid and development effectiveness principles set out in the Paris and Accra Declarations – aligning and harmonising their aid in support behind country-led strategies. Indeed, the WASH sector has its own parallel [Collaborative Behaviours](#) promoted by the Sanitation and Water for All partnership and through the INGOs’ [Agenda for Change](#). However, the challenge for most ESAs is supporting basic services sectors where effective leadership is uneven or lacking. The following are suggestions for how that support might look.

#### **Action 1 – Setting a values-based dialogue for a common vision**

Building a shared values-driven agenda striving for improving WASH service delivery requires a close reading by ESAs of national and local leaders’ potential triggers and motivations for reform. ESAs should develop an ongoing dialogue that builds sufficient trust and confidence with leaders and is based on a close understanding of the underlying pressures in the wider political economy. The dialogue on values also requires ESAs to engage in longer-

term partnerships and more flexible funding arrangements that can tolerate the adaptation and changes needed to deliver on those higher aspirations.

WaterAid Cambodia's Civic Champions leadership development programme started by identifying a district with favourable political conditions for strengthening the building blocks of sector governance. The programme began with a facilitated dialogue with local leaders about the values they associated with progressive leadership. Following the development of that longer-term vision, the first implementation phase focused on developing monitoring systems before moving on to the planning and implementation of WASH services. This first implementation phase was reinforced by regular reflection and peer-to-peer stocktakes on progress and how leaders were applying their leadership values to the challenge of sanitation coverage. Some of that progress helped leaders in neighbouring districts to see that prioritising WASH services and fulfilling their mandate was not only achievable but preferable to continuing with an inadequate service. While the approach of selecting districts with a higher potential for 'quick wins' bears similarities to the Islands of Effectiveness model, the central difference is that the programme started with a values-based dialogue as opposed to focusing exclusively on a technical assistance programme. The programme's pause-and-reflect stocktakes maintained a sense of agency, common purpose and an orientation around a values-driven mission. The technical assistance aspects of the programme acted in support of that values-driven agenda.

### **Action 2 – Convening actors and agencies and aligning behind country systems**

The provision of universal access to water and sanitation services and the changed behaviours required for the uptake of sanitation and hygienic practices is above all a collective action challenge. The interdependencies of sector governance 'building blocks' – finance, policy, regulation, monitoring and sectoral coordination, among others – require ESAs to develop system-wide perspectives on planning and implementation challenges. As resource-endowed agencies, ESAs should support and help convene inter-departmental sector actors to identify key challenges and progress-chase reforms. Multiple combinations of relevant actors and agencies can be brought together to tackle specific or system-wide weaknesses at different points down through implementation pathways. And donors should be signalling a serious commitment to supporting those combined activities by progressively aligning and harmonising their support behind the outcomes of that country-led decision-making. The WASH sector already has the [Collaborative Behaviours](#) guidance as a basis on which to build donors' collaborative support behind credible country-driven reform efforts. These signed-up-to principles need to be taken seriously and acted on.

### **Action 3 – Supporting local-level innovation and leadership**

Countries that have managed to turn around their sectors have built professional incentives and career opportunities around strengthening sector

performance. The professionalisation of cadres has involved giving adequate compensation and opportunities and also accompaniment on designing creative and problem-solving innovations at all levels of implementation.

Donors can financially support cross-sector learning initiatives but also offer a level of accompaniment in collective problem-solving activities, including training opportunities, that responds to local-level constraints. ESAs have the resources and easier access to global knowledge hubs and support systems that can help efforts to strengthen local experimentation and innovation in a way that domestic resources can rarely support. Again, a whole-system perspective is needed to understand where some of that gap-filling and sponsorship for innovation and training programmes is most needed. The approach recommended here is for ESAs to act as enablers and partners in entrepreneurialism and solution-driven activities, rather than constraining partner governments with donor-led indicators and results frameworks. For instance, the World Bank's Field-Level leadership programme in Ethiopia focused on opening up creative opportunities for entrepreneurial staff and networks to emerge. This process helped staff and mid-level leaders to engage in problem-solving and fixing some of the endemic weaknesses in utilities.

The Twenty Twenty programme in Ethiopia, supported by WaterAid and Yorkshire Water, a UK water utility, involved a partnership with utility managers that started by jointly identifying one specific bottleneck – non-revenue water. By addressing tariff collection weaknesses and water loss issues, the programme helped settle on a common agenda around strengthening revenue collection, managing breakdowns and building income streams necessary to strengthen service provision. It helped establish strong customer engagement forums, feedback tools and a responsive customer complaints system.

#### **Action 4 – Diagnostics, course correction and policy communities**

The key feature of successful and dynamic sectors is the capacity to diagnose bottlenecks and make the necessary 'course-correcting' reforms. Donors need to find ways to invest in local experimentation and the capability for generating robust local analyses that feed into local decision-making and progress-chasing activities. Developing programmes that support programmatic adaptations is a way to enable the institutionalisation of diagnostic processes as the norms for bureaucracies and service providers.

ESAs can help support those cultural shifts by commissioning and convening the key agencies or actors, research networks and stakeholders in 'policy communities'. These multi-disciplinary groupings can be brought together on the basis of the skills sets needed to diagnose and resolve bottlenecks. They can be tasked with identifying key problems and the specific failures that underpin weak performance and to propose innovations that tackle those shortcomings. Even in some of the most fragile or 'off-track' countries, there

are in-country sources of multi-disciplinary research and analysis – from local universities, consultancies and practitioners from within the sector itself. The development and use of data sets from in-country sources has the added benefit of strengthening the sector’s local and national analytic capacity in policy communities with an ownership of resulting reform agendas.

The above four action areas require substantial changes in the form of ESAs’ support. Reforms are needed on how and what ESAs fund to allow for more adaptive and innovative delivery systems. Longer-term financing is needed delivered in ways that respond to locally determined needs and adaptations. This should be an underlying requirement across the action areas proposed.

## Summary

The intention behind this paper has been to move WASH sector policy-making and advocacy discussions beyond calls for greater political will and encourage support for the effective leadership actions required to translate progressive political intentions into effective implementation. By outlining the four effective leadership traits, the hope is that sector actors and external support agencies will have a more informed view and clearer options on how to catalyse effective leadership actions.

For sector delivery systems to work, leadership is best understood as activities that drive at: the promotion of a common vision that motivates collective action, an alignment and harmonisation of bureaucratic activities behind fulfilling that vision, a degree of autonomy for local-level innovation and adaptation and, above all, a culture of diagnosing bottlenecks followed by course correction activities. Institution-building, target-setting and indicators-for-results should be the servants of those action areas. To repeat the Bauhaus mantra: 'form follows function'.

The research does not address the important underlying question of **why** effective leadership has not emerged or, in some instances, has been actively suppressed in many fragile states. Nor does it set out the conditions that give rise to effective leadership. It does however look at ways in which ESAs can successfully support the emergence of effective leadership traits, and ways in which others already have. The paper proposes that ESAs' starting point for supporting the development of effective leadership should be investing in, or at least not displacing, the activities most commonly associated with it. If this more adaptive and enabling approach to development partnerships is accepted as necessary to strengthen basic services sectors, then substantial changes are needed to some of the existing donor funding models that currently prioritise maximising the numbers of people reached at the expense of investing in the systems needed for the sustainability of services.

The lessons point to the need for a major rethink of some of the dominant forms of donor partnership, including the forms of finance, the sequencing, responsiveness and targeting of support, and technical assistance programming. They also suggest that sector advocates should be shifting their sights beyond the immediate signifiers of political will towards the activities and functions of effective leadership to deliver accelerated progress.



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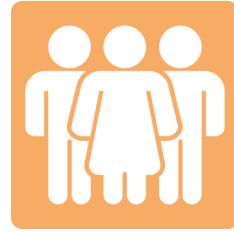
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**This report was written by Henry Northover.**

**Front top:** Rhoda Chikanda, speaking on behalf of her community, at Joint Parliamentarian Committee meeting with the people of Kapyanga, Kasungu, Malawi, April, 2017 .

**Front bottom:** Zewdu Kelbesa, right, WaterAid's Environmental Health Officer, and Regassa Chemedo, Babich Town's Water Board, chat. Babich, Liben Jawi, West Shewa, Oromia, Ethiopia, December 2017 .

**Back bottom:** Christopher Tumwine, 31, leader of the Weyonje community group, an action group for the improvement of WASH in Kamwokya II Parish, Kampala, Uganda, February 2019.

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