

# Nepal WASH Sector Review Process: Analysis and recommendations for moving forward

## Background

A Joint Sector Review (JSR) process was established in Nepal in 2011 to assess sector performance and policy constraints, and to promote the concept of a sector-wide approach in the WASH sector. The Nepal Government has recognised the JSR as a key building block of improved sector performance, and over the past five years has built a systematic pathway around a biannual JSR process. In turn, this support has been reiterated at the highest level – Nepal’s Statement of Commitment for 2014 Sanitation and Water for All High Level Meeting stated that ‘the second Joint Sector Review (JSR II) held in March 2014 has provided clear direction and solid contribution through intensive consultation and review’, and JSR meetings have been used as milestones of progress against SWA commitments.

Although the institutionalisation of the JSR has been commendable, the WASH JSR process in Nepal is felt to have not yet fulfilled its potential, and this limited progress has jeopardised the support of current Government leadership. Although the new Sector Development Plan (SDP) makes reference to an ‘annual sector review’, clarity on what this will entail has become less clear as drafts progressed, and the future evolution of the JSR process is somewhat in doubt.

In order to refresh and strengthen the JSR, and to ensure the future evolution of Nepal’s sector review processes builds on these existing foundations to further catalyse long-term sector performance and sustainability, in May 2016 WaterAid – in consultation with the Sector Efficiency Improvement Unit (SEIU) – supported a study of sector review processes in Nepal. We summarise the findings of the study here.

## Strengths

### Coordination and collaboration

JSR processes in Nepal are widely welcomed primarily for their contribution to the coordination of stakeholders. By bringing sector actors together, the JSR is seen as fulfilling its function as a single forum for learning, sharing and discussion. As such, the inclusive nature of the forum and the wide variety of stakeholders actively involved in processes of preparing and presenting technical reports, developing recommendations etc. is seen as a particular strength, with the thematic working groups and field visits valued for bringing together different stakeholders at different levels.

### JSR actions as the basis for joint planning

JSRs have been used to identify key priority actions for Nepal's WASH sector, which in turn have been credited with concentrating the plans of sector actors around common areas of consensus. In particular, both the 'One Plan' and the 'One Policy' action points agreed by JSR II are now on the path to being realised. The development of the SDP, through a Government-led consultative process with support from across the sector, marks an enormous achievement for the sector and a clear success for the JSR.

### Progress towards improved sector reporting

The JSR is credited with bringing sector stakeholders together to provide thematic reports on gaps and outstanding requirements in respective thematic areas.

### Joint responsibility for sector performance

The joint nature of the JSR is seen as a central strength, making it clear that the onus for reform lies not just on Government but also on Nepal's development partners, and – through joint signing of decisions – providing a commonly accepted way forward.

### Transparency

The clarity of communication on what is expected in the process has also been a strength of Nepal's WASH JSR. The process has been well documented, with good transparency and publicly available resources, all of which have been crucial in strengthening accountability across the sector.

## Gaps

### Translating plans into action – the implementation gap

Experience to date casts some doubt on the ability of Government and partners to translate identified plans and priorities into practice. Many of the sector's major donors cited a clear pipeline of activities already mapped out through to 2019/2020, which provides little scope to change programmes to respond to sector discussions. There is also an indication that whether or not undertakings are incorporated into plans very much depends on whether they are already an area of organisational interest and priority. This suggests a worrying disconnect between donors' support for joint planning and behaviours in practice.

Despite notable successes such as the SDP, concerns were raised around the extent to which the Government itself is necessarily taking all action points forward, with progress around several undertakings having stalled. In particular, the development of a Sector Financing Strategy was seen as a key undertaking, but has not been taken forward. Such situations are seen as symptoms of weaker Government coordination of collective leadership.

A number of stakeholders blamed the large number of undertakings included in JSR II for their failure to be picked up in plans. The range of action points was very broad, with many identified as 'high' or 'very high' priority, making identification of sequencing or prioritisation difficult.

Another key dimension of this 'implementation gap' is the extent to which the JSR currently provides a genuine forum for mutual accountability. The overarching JSR resolutions are not accompanied by identification of responsible parties. This makes the respective roles and responsibilities of different actors less clear and further undermines their ability to hold each other to account.

The JSR cycles have also lacked comprehensive follow up steps for reviewing progress against previous action points, creating a barrier to progress on the commitments made at meetings – and again contributing to a disconnect between the JSR and broader ongoing processes across the sector.

### Joint budgeting

Donors pointed to the lack of a forward-looking credible financing strategy as a reason for the JSR's limited success in stimulating a sector conversation around financing needs, allocations and gaps. However, Government officials have criticised the lack of transparency of some donor and INGO budgets as a significant ongoing problem. Lack of timely declaration of budgets by development partners is also cited as a key impediment to better joint planning. At present, considerable sector spending is still 'off-budget', and there is no systematic process by which to report total WASH budget or expenditure considering all sources. Without updated information that brings together donor, INGO and Government budget ceilings, and considers the contribution of users, it is hard for the JSR to play a role in ensuring allocation of funds on the basis of priorities.

## Joint monitoring

A JSR framework developed by WSP rightly puts a sector monitoring framework at the heart of any sector review process.<sup>1</sup> However, although Nepal's implementing agencies regularly carry out individual monitoring exercises (often through a consultant), Nepal lacks a coherent joint sector monitoring framework.

An Management Information System has been developed, but it is seen as inactive and rarely used, particularly at district level. The majority of monitoring which informs the JSR is done in a hurry as part of field visits in the immediate run up to the meeting, without agreed indicators, rather than being integrated into broader systemic monitoring. This in turn impedes ability to conduct a robust and comprehensive sector review based on understanding of collective contribution to sector performance over time.

## Joint reporting

Nepal's move to 'one sector plan' (SDP) has not yet been paralleled by a move towards 'one sector report', with the absence of the latter widely seen as the key missing link in the JSR process.

Lack of robust joint monitoring and reporting make it hard for the JSR to fulfil its function as a forum in which stakeholders can use data to inform action. Although information is presented through JSR conferences, its reliability is not always clear, and presentation is rarely accompanied by discussion of what this actually means for what will be achieved and what needs to change. Recommendations are often developed very quickly without critical consideration of sector progress and bottlenecks.

## Representation

Some questions were raised around the extent to which JSR focal points are consulting with, and truly representing, their wider constituency. The notion of joint responsibility may be somewhat undermined by the fact that one of the four constituencies currently participating in the JSR process (INGOs) is not a signatory to the final document, and thus has no formal channel of representation. The fact that the role of civil society representative is currently played by a users' network was also questioned.

## Bringing together national and regional conversations

The field visits organised as part of the JSR process have been widely welcomed, and at the moment seem to be the main source of regional learning and input. In contrast, the success of the Regional JSR meetings in 2015 seems to have been more limited, with no apparent follow up or feed into national conversation.

Furthermore, although there is evidence that the field visits organised during the JSR process have encouraged a flow of learning and input upwards from the ground to the central level, it is less clear how decisions made at central level are flowing back down and having a real impact on key sector bottlenecks. The weak involvement of MoFALD (Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development) in the JSR is also a serious detriment to stronger links between centre and local level.

## Recommendations

Although WASH sector review processes in Nepal – and the JSR in particular – are highly valued, particularly for their contribution to sector coordination and learning, it is clear that some key elements of the process remain weaker. The process also remains quite isolated, and does not seem to be well integrated into the broader sector cycle of planning, budgeting and monitoring. There are therefore huge potential gains to be achieved from seizing this timely opportunity to strengthen and refine the process to ensure it can fulfil its potential. In particular, the following recommendations focus on the importance of streamlining elements of sector review into a single, cyclical process and integrating this into wider sector processes of planning, budgeting and reform. By addressing these issues the sector can ensure Nepal's sector review processes evolve to catalyse long-term sector performance and sustainability.

1. The **WASH SDP should be put at the heart of sector review processes**, the chief purpose of which should be recognised as reviewing progress against SDP and key sector policies, and making adjustments as necessary through a limited number of prioritised undertakings that are clearly linked to the SDP.
2. The **respective roles and responsibilities** of the various elements of the review process should be clearly identified, and brought together to create a streamlined review cycle. The **JSR should be considered as part of a broader cycle of ongoing sector review** that encompasses:
  - Annual sector review (known as JSR or ASR)
  - Regional field visits and review discussions that feed into the central JSR gathering
  - Annual mid-term review (incorporating functions of the current SSG)
  - Regular convening of thematic group leads to check progress (e.g. quarterly)
  - Rationalised coordination structure

The respective purposes, functions, or frequency of the various elements of the sector review process should be mapped out and clarified in clear terms of reference.

3. The JSR should be reoriented to be much more **closely integrated into the sector cycle of planning, monitoring and reform**. A calendar that clarifies the timing of key elements should be identified, agreed and enforced, so that there is common understanding of how review processes fit with annual planning and budgeting cycles.
4. A process and format for development of a **consolidated annual sector performance report** should be identified and enforced, as an **input** to an annual JSR. A formal sector report could incorporate, or be accompanied by, a CSO/NGO report or assessment.

5. In parallel, all stakeholders should make concerted efforts to strengthen joint sector monitoring arrangements (including the development of standard monitoring tools), to ensure better accessibility of key data.
6. **Thematic groups should remain central** to the review process, but more should be done to ensure coherence and consolidation of work being done by these groups (including development of clear ToR). Agreement on alignment of current groups and SDP areas is also needed.
7. **Continued strengthening of the SEIU** should be prioritised, with particular focus on increasing oversight of thematic groups and strengthening monitoring and evaluation capacity.
8. Further consideration should be given to how to best **strengthen linkages with non-WASH ministries**. As a first step, the MoWSS should work with the MoFALD to better align coordination and review processes across national, regional, and district levels. Stronger links with health and education ministries would also add enormous value to the review process.
9. **Learning and review of the JSR process itself** should continue to be prioritised, including learning from other sectors in Nepal and other countries. Nepal should also engage in global discussions, to share learning and experiences and to draw from what works elsewhere.
10. The SWA Collaborative Behaviours<sup>2</sup> should be used as a framework for tracking performance of government and development partners, to ensure all are accountable for improving the way that they work together to achieve long-term sector performance and sustainability.
11. As a next step, a collective forum should be organised as soon as possible, to reach consensus on the role of sector review processes and agree a detailed action plan for moving forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Kerstin Danert. January 2016. *Effective Joint Sector Reviews for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) A Study and Guidance—2016*. World Bank Group / WSP

<sup>2</sup> <http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/about/the-four-swa-collaborative-behaviours/>