

Seven practical lessons for WASH systems strengthening from the SusWASH programme

Policy and practice brief



Implications for donors, policy-makers and practitioners



H&M FOUNDATION

 **WaterAid**

About this brief

Organisations and donors who work within the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector have increasingly adopted systems strengthening approachesⁱ to improve and sustain WASH services and behaviours. These approaches are based on the understanding that sustainable and inclusive WASH requires a strong system (see Box 1). Multiple organisations have developed conceptual frameworks outlining what makes up a WASH system, but there are fewer concrete examples of how non-governmental actors can support systems strengthening (see Box 2) in practice.

Systems strengthening is gaining traction as the WASH sector moves beyond direct service delivery and isolated capacity development approaches that have struggled to achieve sustained improvements in WASH. Systems strengthening enhances aid effectiveness by supporting the evolution of more professionalised service provision and behaviour change, with institutionalised support and greater accountability. While some in the sector may perceive systems strengthening as nebulous – too focused on analysis or unachievable within short timeframes – our experience shows that there are practical activities that help to identify and untangle systemic barriers to inclusive and sustainable WASH in the intermediate term, while contributing towards longer-term visions of change. Some of the changes required in the WASH sector may seem challenging initially, but if organisational cultures shift – centring reflection, learning and adaptation as part of all efforts – tangible and effective solutions to complex problems can be found.

This brief is aimed at WASH practitioners and multi- and bi-lateral donors, large foundations and trusts interested in advancing systems approaches and funding systems strengthening for the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6). It draws on our practical experience of strengthening systems – most notably through the five-year [SusWASH programme](#)ⁱⁱ – to present seven practical lessons that donors and implementing organisations can use to advance this way of working.

Box 1: A **system** is ‘all the actors, factors and the interactions between them which influence the achievement of universal, sustainable and safe access to WASH’.

Box 2: **Systems strengthening** is ‘a process of analysis, implementation, adaptation and learning used to address the barriers to the achievement of universal, sustainable and safe access to WASH, recognising that this access is the result of interactions between multiple actors and factors in a complex, dynamic system’.

The challenge

The WASH sector has a long history of grappling with the challenge of poor sustainability of services and behaviour change, whilst struggling to meet ambitions for sustained universal access to WASH. Progress on sustainability is constrained by multiple systemic barriers including:

- lack of recurrent spending, particularly on major maintenance and ongoing behaviour change;
- insufficient government and donor prioritisation for WASH, coupled with weak demand for improved services;
- fragmented and unaccountable institutions, with overlapping or unclear roles and responsibilities;
- poor coordination;
- weak policies and regulation; and
- skill shortages.

The systemic challenges are heightened by deeply engrained (and often increasing) social inequalities, growing demand for water, and increasing stress on resources through pollution and climate change. The result is prolonged periods of water service downtime, slippage in sanitation and hygiene behaviours, and unemptied or collapsed latrines. Alongside

i. Some organisations use the term ‘systems-based approach’, which is synonymous with ‘systems strengthening’.

ii. ‘SusWASH’ stands for ‘promoting sustainable services at scale’, and was a programme funded by H&M Foundation. See washmatters.wateraid.org/suswash for more details.



Roshna helps her child wash her hands in the village of Muhammad Urs Sehejo, Sindh Province, Pakistan. September 2018.

WaterAid/Sibtain Haider

service failures, there have been persistent issues of social exclusion, with the hardest to reach communities and individuals often left behind when access is expanded. The failure to achieve and maintain WASH gains represents wasted investment in infrastructure, service improvements or behaviour change programmes, and is a deterrence to increased investment in the sector. As a consequence of these systemic challenges and the wider effects, the WASH sector is significantly off-track when it comes to achieving the SDG for water and sanitation,¹ and still not working in a way that could hope to meet that ambition.

Historically, funding for WASH has largely prioritised the construction or rehabilitation of WASH infrastructure and the one-off promotion of sanitation and hygiene behaviours. These efforts have been accompanied with isolated activities to build community ownership, set-up community management structures, and stimulate local government buy-in for post-implementation support. However, evidence

confirms that this is not enough to ensure sustainability.² This business-as-usual approach pays little attention to tackling the systemic barriers that prevent universal, sustainable and safe WASH.

The aim of the systems strengthening agenda is to support the realisation of the human rights to water and sanitation by ensuring that WASH services last beyond project interventions, and that the inequalities which prevent universal access are tackled. Success can be judged when external non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other project-based or unsustainably funded models, no longer have a role in delivering and maintaining services. In a strong system, improved services are delivered through competent, adaptable, and viable local actors, institutions, and markets, and access is extended to those most marginalised in society. Reaching this point will require efforts that enable and mobilise domestic financial flows, models of blended finance,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as efforts that ensure funds are effectively targeted and spent.

iii. The OECD defines blended finance as the strategic use of development finance for the mobilisation of additional finance towards sustainable development in developing countries (OECD, 2018). Others define it as: "Finance (typically capital investment) which involves some combination of public/concessional funds and private funds" (Norman, G. et al. (2022). *Financialising water – context, evidence, risks: Urban Research*) – internal only.

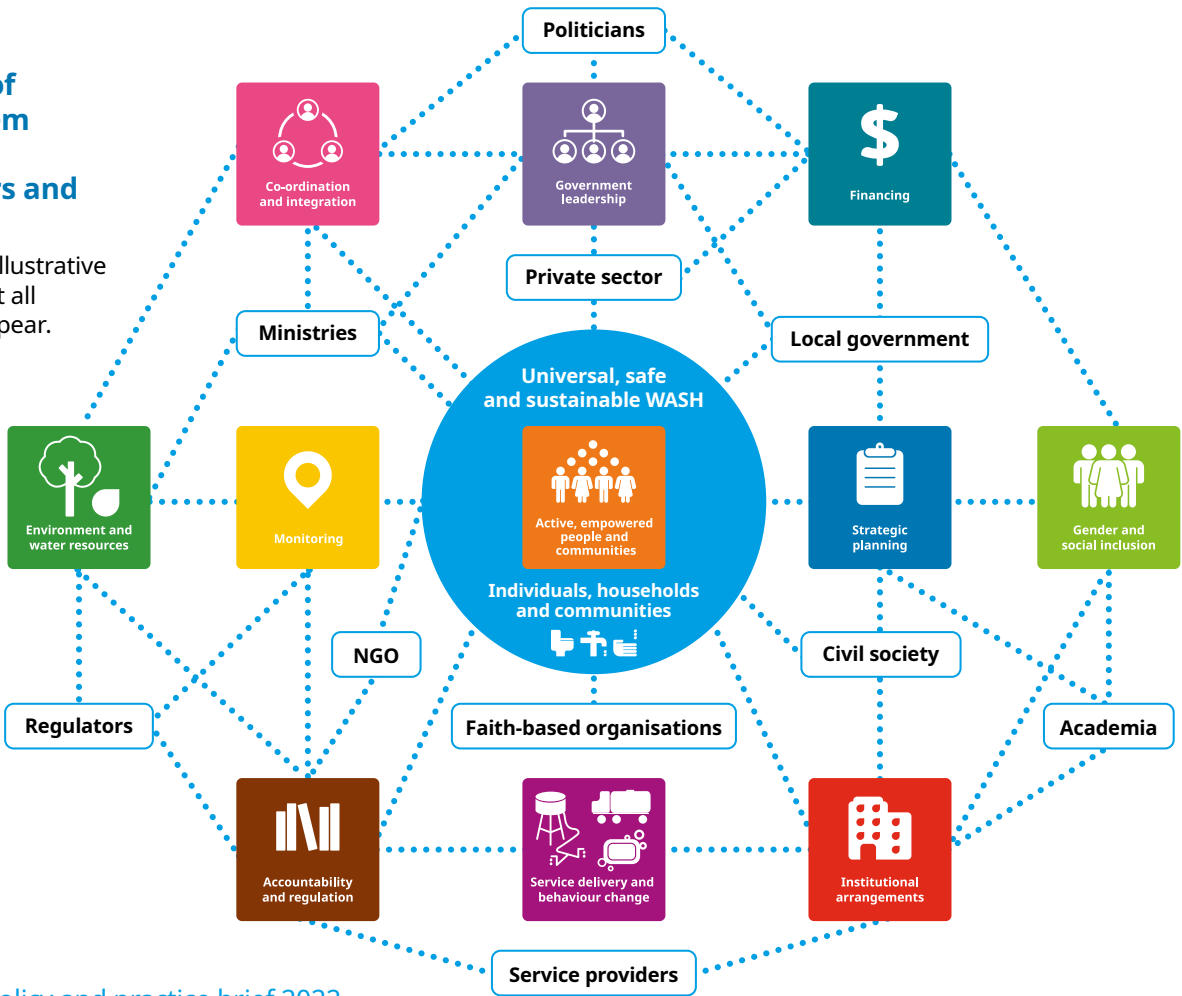
Our approach to systems strengthening

We have adopted systems strengthening as our core approach under our new [global strategy](#), and in line with the sector’s growing interest in systems approaches. For us, the WASH system includes ‘all the actors (people and institutions), factors (social, economic, political, environmental, technological) and the interactions between them that influence the achievement of universal, sustainable and safe WASH’ (see Figure 1). Strengthening this system is the process of analysis, implementation, adaptation and learning used to address the barriers to achievement of universal, sustainable and safe access to WASH. Systems strengthening does not prescribe or presuppose solutions. It does not exclude and is not in conflict with human rights based or gender approaches. It is a way of working which allows organisations and the sector as a whole, to identify what blocks progress, where, when and how to intervene in the system to bring about change, and places value on reflection, adaptation and learning.

Our understanding and capacity to apply systems strengthening in practice continues to evolve. The [SusWASH programme](#), implemented in Cambodia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uganda, was a testbed for us to pilot new tools and models in four different contexts, generating learning for the organisation and the wider sector. Our work in these four countries allowed us to better understand the components of a system, and how those systems – across very different operating environments – might be strengthened to help communities and countries achieve universal access to sustainable WASH services. Our internal reflections during this work, alongside an [independent evaluation](#) of the SusWASH programme, have helped us to identify the following seven lessons for how to apply systems strengthening approaches in practice. We hope that these lessons will prove as valuable for NGOs, donors and other organisations looking to adopt systems strengthening approaches, as they are for us as we continue to evolve our approach at country and global level.

Figure 1:
An example of a WASH system with various actors, factors and interactions

N.B lines are for illustrative purposes and not all system actors appear.



Model of inclusive, low water-use toilets demonstrated at a High School in Kampala, Uganda. November 2019.



Key lessons learned for systems strengthening

1

Identify entry points



WaterAid/Sibtain Haider

With limited resources, it's not possible (or even desirable) to work on all elements of the WASH system. However, it is important to conduct a thorough analysis to identify suitable entry points. These could be areas where there is existing momentum for change, where the organisation is well placed to support change, or areas that we think are most likely to leverage change or catalyse change in other parts of the system. For example, improving WASH monitoring can support stronger planning and greater government leadership, which in turn can provide the foundation for mobilising additional financing. Systems are inherently complex to the extent that it is not possible to understand all the connections within the system or predict the system-wide impact of an intervention. This can lead to 'analysis paralysis' – delaying taking action, whilst undertaking more research or analysis in search of the 'right' solution.

As a first step, it is useful to define the boundary within which you intend to contribute towards improvements in WASH access and service levels. Boundaries are often administrative or geographic areas or specific sub-systems (e.g., a sanitation service chain). While boundaries help to focus efforts, it is important to recognise the bottlenecks that may lie outside these boundaries, and the interactions at play between national and sub-national levels. In the SusWASH programme, boundaries were typically the lowest administrative unit at which the functions and mandate for the provision

of WASH were held (e.g., a district or city), but other actors may draw wider boundaries. Once boundaries were defined, we broke the complexity of the system down into more manageable component parts, or 'building blocks'. Building block assessments,^{iv} which assess the strength of individual components of the system, were complemented by additional analyses. These included understanding existing government priorities and their interest and ability to improve WASH services, the presence of other WASH actors and interventions in the target area, and capacities and resources available to strengthen the system. Tools such as political economy analysis,³ stakeholder mapping, gender and barrier analysis can help to understand interlinkages. But our experience is that non-structured analysis based on working relationships with local stakeholders and an implicit understanding of the context is equally important. Together, these analyses help build a picture of the system, including who has power to influence change, in order to identify the entry points (including which individuals and partnerships) that should be prioritised. These analyses should ideally be undertaken with local stakeholders – particularly local government water, health, finance, environment and climate change departments, and rights, disability and women's organisations – to tap into a diversity of local knowledge, build trusting relationships, build interest and credibility among stakeholders, and develop a common vision for change.^{v,vi}

iv. See the building block tool used in Cambodia here:

washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/sub-national-wash-sector-sustainability-analysis-tool-kampong-chhnang-cambodia

v. For more information on the process to design the SusWASH programme and identify entry points read this blog:

washmatters.wateraid.org/blog/taps-and-toilets-arent-enough-designing-wash-programmes-that-strengthen-the-system

vi. To learn more on how to practically use each of the analysis tools used in the SusWASH programme, see our Systems strengthening toolkit: washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxoof256/files/2022-07/System%20strengthening%20toolkit.pdf (accessed 23 Sep 2022).



▲ Zainab collects water from a pump installed by WaterAid in the village of Tamachi Mallah as part of the SusWASH programme. Province Sindh, Pakistan. May 2018.

Examples from the SusWASH programme

- **Supporting the development or strengthening of local and national government monitoring and management information systems (MIS).** Accurate, up-to-date service level data is essential to inform local government planning and investment decisions. Improved service levels are also an indicator of successful systems strengthening. However, local authorities often lack the resources and skills to gather such data on an ongoing basis. Support to government-led monitoring was a catalyst for changes in the planning, financing and service delivery building blocks. In Cambodia, the timing of this intervention was crucial as it aligned with an initiative to reform the national MIS. In Pakistan, our efforts to support district level WASH service level data collection highlighted significant service level challenges that could be used as a basis for further engagement with government institutions. In Ethiopia, we had to balance the utility of supporting local government service performance monitoring, with the practicalities of doing so in an under-resourced, low-capacity district where the risk of introducing unsustainable monitoring processes was high, and particularly so when the roll-out of the government's long-awaited national monitoring system had not begun. However, the data proved valuable for the development of a costed district WASH plan which was later used to attract further investment in the district.
- **Aligning with the delivery of government plans and priorities,** such as supporting the implementation of the National Decentralisation Policy in Cambodia, the delivery of Ethiopia's One WASH Plan, and aligning with the 'Clean Green Pakistan' campaign.
- **Contributing towards direct improvements in service levels** through infrastructure investment and support to infrastructure design. This was essential to gain traction for systems strengthening in low coverage districts where actors (including communities and local government) were primarily sighted on the urgent need for services. It also opened conversations about how systemic weaknesses lead to infrastructure failure. Systems strengthening efforts in such contexts have to balance the immediate need for service improvement with efforts to enhance other aspects of the system. This was the context in Gololcha woreda (district) in Ethiopia where we supported the extension of 'Jara Utility' and the provision of new services and management models in remote villages.
- **Appealing to the interests of influential actors.** Following a rapid PEA, the team in Cambodia were able to tap into the interests of the Provincial Governor to build his buy-in for enhancing access to sanitation across the province. This led to his public commitment to achieving province-wide open defecation free (ODF) status by 2023.
- **Filling crucial knowledge gaps** holding back WASH access. Small research studies and assessments help to generate the evidence needed for decision-making to be 'owned' by the authorities and the development of government guidelines. In Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia, there was a study into the potential for scaling safely managed water access, and an assessment of WASH in healthcare facilities (HCFs) in Uganda, which informed the development of the national guidelines.
- **Nurturing and supporting forums for stakeholder coordination** can catalyse improvements in government leadership – one example of this was the Mayor's Forum in Kampala.



Woreda level context analysis workshop. Gololcha, East Bale, Oromia, Ethiopia. November 2017.

WaterAid/Behailu Shiferaw

Implications for the WASH sector

Undertaking participatory analysis to understand the shape, strengths and weaknesses of a system takes time and will require organisations to allocate sufficient human and financial resource. Low levels of staff allocated to programmes (focused primarily on project and partner management) are no longer sufficient. New systems strengthening interventions must factor in sufficient funding and an extended project set-up phase of up to one year to build trusting relationships with local stakeholders, sign agreements to operate with government, and to develop a detailed and shared understanding of system strengths, weaknesses and entry points. During this time, external organisations and donors should be prepared to revisit the programme objectives and design, making fundamental changes if necessary. Entry points may include support to long-term government-led service level and performance monitoring (see examples). Donors and implementing agencies must be mindful of simply undertaking one-off service level assessments or 'baseline' research studies without government buy-in or involvement, or without considering government planning timeframes or sharing the data with government. There is a risk that these data collection activities will fail to build local or national monitoring processes and the data collected will remain unused and become quickly outdated.



WaterAid/Behailu Shiferaw

▲ Ellen Greggio, Programme Advisor at WaterAid, introduces mWater, an online data collection, analysis and management tool used to support asset management and service performance monitoring to government and utility staff in Gololcha Woreda. Oromia, Ethiopia. November 2017.

Bunya Fred, Hospital Cleaner, gets ready to clean the new women's sanitation block at the Ndejje Health Centre IV, Wakiso district, Uganda. November 2019.



2

Be clear about your role and objectives

When working to support WASH systems, external organisations must have a clear vision of how they will contribute to systems change and the conditions in which they might exit. There is widespread recognition that building strong WASH systems is a long-term and unpredictable endeavour. However, this does not mean that organisations supporting local or national WASH systems strengthening should have an open-ended commitment and an undefined role. When outside organisations take on a central role within the WASH system and create expectations that they will continue to fulfil this role, this could undermine local leadership, and weaken the WASH system.

Setting out a vision for an organisation's role (and eventual exit) should be done as part of early-stage discussions with local government, considering the organisation's strengths and expertise, and how other actors may already be supporting the WASH system. Organisations should ensure that they regularly review their role, and check that it is still appropriate and relevant. As the WASH system changes, an organisation's role in supporting it should evolve too. For some organisations, this may mean exiting the local area. Fixing a date for when an organisation will exit might not always be possible or realistic, but organisations should have an exit strategy which includes trigger points to reconsider their role or potential exit. This could be in terms of achieving universal access to WASH services, at a point when the local WASH system is considered sufficiently strong enough to continue development with more limited external support, or when a specific objective has been achieved – for example, when a WASH services monitoring system is established, owned and managed by local government, and is being used to inform planning and service delivery.



◀ Hanifah Bako, Head Teacher at Mirembe Primary School presents top-line life-cycle costed WASH budget for the school, Kampala, Uganda. February 2019.



Examples from the SusWASH programme

In SusWASH, half of the countries (Pakistan and Uganda) chose to work in sub-national areas where we had an existing presence and interventions. In other countries, we started working in new areas (Ethiopia and Cambodia), where there was a clear demand for WASH improvements and a compelling case for working with local government to strengthen the WASH system. Where we built on existing work, this meant that there were good relationships with local government and other stakeholders, and an implicit understanding of how we could support systems strengthening. However, in some instances, working in existing areas can also lead to assumptions or expectations from decision-makers that we will work in a particular way (e.g., directly supporting service delivery) or that we will have an ongoing permanent presence, which can also undermine attempts to strengthen systems. The independent evaluation of SusWASH found that setting out a long-term vision more explicitly could have helped us better define our supporting role and – particularly towards the end of the programme – think about whether this support was still necessary, and whether (and how) it could be taken forward after the end of programme funding.

Implications for the WASH sector

A long-term vision will need to be supported by programme design and funding. A starting point should be the assumption that achieving lasting change in part of the WASH system is likely to take 10 years or more of continuous engagement in the same geographic or administrative area. Longer-term funding can provide implementing organisations with the space to pursue longer-term goals and the time to demonstrate evidence of success of their systems strengthening efforts. Longer timeframes are required to strengthen the accountability and capacity of responsible authorities (or duty bearers) to progressively realise the rights of vulnerable people. This may mean donors have to accept less frequent reports of success and greater risk (given the uncertainty of working to strengthen systems outlined in lesson 5).

Where longer-term funding is not available, organisations should ensure that shorter-term project funding contributes towards the broader systems strengthening vision. By having a strong vision of the systems change that the organisation is hoping to support in the long-term (e.g., a multi-year programme of work), individual grants can be used to support specific activities under the same programme, helping to progress towards specific milestones within shorter timeframes. Gaps in donor funding should be covered by internal resources, and ideally accompanied by government co-funding, to ensure a minimum level of ongoing activities for an extended period. Momentum, relationships and trust built over time can quickly deteriorate in the absence of continuous engagement.



▲ Before the intervention, Yeout would spend hours each day searching water. Kampong Chhnang province, Cambodia. April 2019.



Work with partners and alliances

NGOs will need to identify and work with partners and alliances who can support systems strengthening and recognise that no one organisation has the capacity and skills to address all system barriers. This may mean understanding the politics of change to forge new partnerships that challenge conventional ways of working in the WASH sector. A more traditional partnership approach (for example, with an implementing partner responsible for community mobilisation or service improvements) is unlikely to be able to address the barriers to systems change across administrative levels. It is essential to develop a diverse partner base with those who have the connections, capacity, influence and the right to sit at decision-making tables. This could include rights-based groups (e.g., women's rights groups, organisations of persons with disabilities) to work on budget advocacy and inclusion, academic institutions to help build an evidence base for advocacy, and government departments (beyond water and sanitation) to support sector processes and reform. Sometimes partnerships will be formed through formal agreements, but they can also encompass looser alliances of external and local organisations. These partnerships and alliances will inevitably evolve as the strength of the WASH system, the key barriers to change, and the actions to address them, shift over time.

The forging of diverse partnerships with national and local stakeholders takes time, but will also mean more participatory decision-making. The pay-off is in the shared ownership of the reform agenda, with a wider pool of local stakeholders who can diagnose barriers to inclusive and sustainable WASH and work towards change. Crucially, it can also ensure that more remote communities or those who are marginalised from WASH are not excluded from decision-making or the benefit of targeted support. Working with larger common platforms also has the benefit of amplifying key messages about the imperative of system-wide reforms.

Where partnerships with new and non-traditional actors form a significant part of systems strengthening efforts, it is vital that these are meaningful partnerships, not just tokenistic. Crucially, partnerships must be based on principles of mutual respect, accountability and equity.⁴ Where local stakeholders have provided free information, advice or time, outputs should be shared, and their contribution recognised.



Examples from the SusWASH programme

The evaluation of the SusWASH programme found that there were significant variations in the relevance and effectiveness of the partnerships we formed. In the best examples, we were able to partner with locally-led organisations who had a clear vision of their role in supporting the WASH system – and help scale and expand their existing work. In the instances where we adopted a more traditional partnership approach – with an implementing partner contracted to deliver fixed service-based activities within the target district – this proved a poor fit for the flexibility and adaptation needed to support systems strengthening. This posed further challenges when attempting to link work across administrative levels, when there was a separation between district-level implementation and state or national advocacy and influencing.



▲ Sserunjogi Charles, former Kampala capital city central division Mayor, in his office, Uganda. November 2019.

▼ A photograph as part of the 'Water is Life - Leaving No One Behind' participatory photo project. 'Prek Thnort River, Takmao Town' photograph by Phal Karuna. Kandal province, Cambodia. March 2019.

Implications for the WASH sector

The global WASH sector will need to build partnerships with a wider range of stakeholders, especially with organisations who have the ability and position to reach beyond focus geographic areas, and who can engage with and influence local and national decision makers. This will be essential to addressing barriers at higher administrative levels and scaling successful models and ways of working. There will be occasions when existing organisations (potentially outside the WASH sector) have the capacity and skills to support systems strengthening. But where this is not the case, NGOs and donors need to be prepared to invest in a continued programme of development and support to nurture local organisations that can take on this role. Alongside supporting local actors, external organisations will need to be increasingly locally led (with global input) to have the legitimacy and credibility to advocate for reform.



4

Invest in country learning

Systems strengthening programmes need to be considered as both learning and implementation programmes by implementing organisations, local stakeholders and the global WASH sector. The learning on how to strengthen WASH systems is as important as contributing to WASH improvements in the target area. However, there is often limited resources (financial and human) dedicated within WASH interventions to trial new approaches or to capture evidence of change and lessons learned. There is also often weak internal capacity and learning culture to promote and capture lessons learned, with learning seen as of lesser importance than more concrete programme activities.

Learning is essential for systems strengthening work because the complexity means that it is impossible to know all of the impacts of a change or an intervention. Learning processes can help to identify and analyse both expected and unexpected outcomes, shedding light on aspects of the WASH system and how actors might influence change. Learning also underpins adaptation and flexibility within and beyond organisations (lesson 6) – nurturing a culture of learning and exchange by all stakeholders will help strengthen the capacity of permanent institutions. All these aspects of learning are needed to understand what drives systems change, and what is required, within implementing agencies, to practically apply systems strengthening.

Mechanisms to support reflection, documentation and learning exchange include: physical peer-to-peer learning exchange visits, pause and reflect sessions, regular monthly learning events/calls, annual learning workshops, programme newsletters, online discussion forums/boards, national and global WASH or development conferences, online networks and academic journal articles. These are only effective if there is an organisational culture which promotes and encourages ongoing learning and reflection.



WaterAid/Serawit Atnaflu



WaterAid

▲ **WaterAid Ethiopia facilitates discussion with District Water Office and utility staff about their roles and responsibilities for the inclusive and sustainable provision of WASH using Making Rights Real (MRR) tools.**

▲ **Enumerators receive data collection training to undertake asset mapping in seven unions councils in Thatta district, Sindh Province, Pakistan.**

Examples from the SusWASH programme

During the SusWASH programme, we saw great value in supporting learning and exchange between local actors within the WASH system and within WaterAid. In Cambodia, the team organised regular 'lunch and learn' events involving key stakeholders such as local implementing agencies, service providers, local authorities and civil society. These events helped to uncover more contextually relevant activities and informed project adaptations, for example shifting the focus on rural handpumps towards supporting the activities of private piped water operators. Peer-to-peer learning exchange offered opportunities for local stakeholders to learn from one another. High performing districts and communes in Cambodia acted as models for neighbouring areas to learn from and seek advice and support. A dedicated in-country learning team helped to capture a range of lessons learned from [strengthening local government leadership](#), [strengthening government WASH planning](#) and [sharing WASH experiences of people who face marginalisation](#).

A dedicated and budgeted global learning function helped to explore and overcome common challenges across country programmes and increased understanding of adaptive management and systems approaches. This included highlighting the relevance/relationship of systems approaches with other development approaches and priorities, [such as the human rights based approach](#). The function also helped illustrate how strong systems are needed to achieve, and are dependent on, advancements in gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI), and climate resilience. It also supported the development of a [global learning report on systems strengthening](#) to ensure our experiences and lessons learned could be shared more widely. Other learning mechanisms budgeted for within the programme included: monthly learning calls, annual learning workshops, conference attendance, support to documentation and development of sector-facing communications.



Implications for the WASH sector

Dedicated resources (human and financial) are needed to promote regular reflection and exchange between local stakeholders and implementing agencies, and to capture lessons learned for wider dissemination. Failure to budget for this into systems strengthening interventions risks missing opportunities to advance local and global sector knowledge of what drives progress in different contexts. It also risks repeating mistakes. An organisational culture which values and prioritises learning exchange and documentation is critical for success.



▲ Shumail Bhatti, Health Worker, talks to the community of Union Council Chatto Chand about the importance of clean water, good hygiene and sanitation. Province Sindh, Pakistan. November 2017.

S

Understand what is changing and why

All actors who support systems strengthening need to invest time and resources into monitoring how WASH systems are changing, what is driving the change, and how they are contributing to this. The long-term indicator of success in systems strengthening will be sustained improvements in WASH access and service levels. However, the precursors to this success are changes to the strength of the WASH system – something which can be much more difficult to define and measure. Understanding how the WASH system is changing will help stakeholders understand if progress is being made towards establishing the conditions required to support sustainable services. This will require a shift from thinking about change as a linear process of cause and effect, to considering the myriad and complex pathways of change. Results may be ‘messy’, without clear narratives of success or failure. Through SusWASH, we have started to roll out organisational approaches to monitor systems change, but no one tool can capture all of this. Organisations will need to develop and be comfortable using multiple approaches to provide different lenses on change and be aware that many tools (including building block assessments) only provide an indirect measure of the strength of the WASH system. Whatever tools are used, all stakeholders (including communities and marginalised groups) need to be checking in regularly on changes in the system – many are likely to be subtle and will be missed if there is only sporadic review and monitoring.

Whilst generic models of a ‘strong’ system can serve as a useful starting point, local stakeholders will know what metrics are relevant in their contexts. Adopting a participatory approach to monitoring systems change, and dovetailing with national or local monitoring metrics, has helped us to develop a shared vision of how the system should develop and avoid imposing an outside image of what a ‘good’ WASH system looks like.



◀ **Kaweesi Christopher Ronald, Chairperson Banda Community Advocacy Committee, shows letters highlighting community WASH demands forwarded to municipal authorities for action. Kampala City, Uganda. January 2018.**

▶ **Local stakeholders assess the strength of the WASH system from a gender perspective in Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia.**





Examples from the SusWASH programme

Like many WASH organisations, we use the concept of ‘building blocks’ to help break down the complexity of the WASH system and as a tool for understanding the condition of specific parts of the WASH system. All the SusWASH country programmes used participatory building block assessments to help build understanding of systems thinking, identify sector priorities and as proxies to track changes in the WASH system. When this was repeated as part of a regular process, it helped support rhythms of reflection, adaptation and planning, whilst introducing the concept of systems strengthening to stakeholders and building a shared understanding of challenges and priorities. Building block assessments aren’t a silver bullet for monitoring systems change: they are by nature subjective, and whilst they can show how the system is changing, they provide limited insight into why change has happened and what contributed to this. Their ability to assess relationships between actors, and the interactions between actors and factors, is also limited. We are still developing and piloting approaches to understand our contribution to strengthening WASH systems. But the experience and evaluation of the SusWASH programme has shown that undertaking regular building block assessments involving all stakeholders can stimulate vibrant discussion about system barriers and change.

For more information on the experience of WaterAid Cambodia using regular participatory building block assessments, see: SusWASH Cambodia Learning Synthesis Report [Measuring WASH Systems Change through Participatory Building Block Assessments](#).

Implications for the WASH sector

External organisations and donors will need to be comfortable moving away from attributing results to specific interventions or investments, towards thinking in terms of how they have contributed to change. They will also need to be patient and accept the possibility of failure: strengthening systems often requires collective action and is highly dependent on and influenced by external factors outside the control of the implementing partner. New approaches will need to be developed to track both the change and the contribution, but at times, the changes will be incremental, and part of a collaborative effort, where quantifying the extent of any single contribution may be impossible. Implementing organisations and donors will increasingly need to be comfortable drawing on qualitative measures of progress, rather than trying to quantify the results of their work or funding. This requires a strong theory of change, well-defined result statements of system changes to be achieved and how the organisation expects to contribute to this, as well as high quality qualitative assessment and reflection of progress towards them. Integrating continual monitoring and assessment into programmes will require shifting from considering monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a separate process undertaken by M&E specialists at set points, to something which requires the involvement of all team members.



▲ Gishu Jafar takes part in a handwashing demonstration during a hygiene behavioural change campaign event, which combined theatre, music and demonstrations in the marketplace of Jara, Bale, Oromia region, Ethiopia. March 2019.



Embrace flexibility and adaptability

Organisations and individuals working to support WASH systems strengthening need to be agile and responsive to change. Systems are complex and dynamic, and change within them can be unpredictable. It is important to take advantage of new, or unexpected opportunities and be aware of potential risks. It is also important to recognise the political nature of working to strengthen systems. As external actors, NGOs shouldn't necessarily lead change. NGOs will need to be able to move between roles within the WASH system depending on the willingness and ability of government to improve WASH services. For example, supporting advocacy for change where WASH is not prioritised, or adopting a supporting role where there is clear momentum from government for change. In this context, adaptability will mean refining or changing activities, reallocating resources, and evolving which sector stakeholders you engage with, and how you engage with them.

Systems strengthening will inevitably require developing long-term working relationships with multiple institutions responsible for WASH provision, support and regulation. These institutions will not be static over the course of a programme or intervention. Change in political leadership, policies, guidelines and funding could extend or limit the role of institutions. Commitments made by stakeholders may fail to materialise. Within institutions, the departure or promotion of a key individual can drastically alter how that institution engages with systems strengthening and external organisations. At a higher level, elections and changes in political priorities or legislation can result in new or lost momentum towards systems change.

Navigating this constantly shifting landscape can be challenging. Whilst the success of sector reform can depend on the commitment of a few key individuals within organisations, that success can be jeopardised if those individuals move on to new posts. It is important to strike a balance between nurturing relationships with a few senior individuals, and developing institution-wide partnerships which are inclusive of more junior staff who may be in post for longer periods.



Example from the SusWASH programme

In the SusWASH programme, country teams worked towards broad fixed outcomes, but the activities and pathways towards achieving these outcomes were flexible, so they could be changed – and so too could the budget allocated to activities. This set-up, supported by the donor, enabled regular adaptation in response to contextual change and new opportunities. Identifying changes in the context or new opportunities was facilitated through ad hoc and regular (e.g., monthly or quarterly) progress reviews and context analyses, including rapid PEA. Adaptation proved more challenging in instances where the organisational culture focused on delivering fixed activities and outputs within set timeframes (seen as measures of success), rather than the course correction needed for these activities to make a long-term impact.

Implications for the WASH sector

Overall, the WASH sector must invest in establishing the mechanisms required to collectively diagnose system bottlenecks and course correct. External agencies should model this behaviour throughout their work. Interventions that seek to strengthen systems must be structured in a way that allows for ongoing review, learning and responsive and proactive adaptation. This requires built-in flexibility to change planned activities and outputs, while keeping focused on longer-term outcomes. It also requires dedicated moments and tools to reflect on change and the extent to which planned activities continue to be relevant. People working to strengthen systems must be willing and able to embrace uncertainty and change course with intention. To do this they need to work within a culture that promotes trial, error and course correction. A conducive organisational culture must be accompanied by appropriate processes that can accommodate such shifts in programming – e.g., shifts in programme budget allocation, or changes in reported activities and outcomes. Many development initiatives are not typically set up to facilitate adaptability or long-term change.



▲ **Margret Namukasa, Nursing Officer, stands on the new labour ward extension at Ndejje Health Centre IV, which now has clean water, decent toilets and handwashing facilities as part of the SusWASH programme funded by the H&M Foundation. Wakiso district, Uganda. November 2019.**

◀ **Mr. Uy Lorn, WASH Focal Person in Choeurng Kreav Commune, presents hygiene behaviour change communication materials during a hygiene behaviour change training session. Rolea Bir District, Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia. February 2018.**

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Rethink ways of working

Adopting systems strengthening approaches challenges the way in which NGOs and other external organisations in the WASH sector work. The demands for learning and adaptation, long-term engagement, and more extensive local partnerships are at odds with a traditional, service-delivery focused approach to WASH. Organisations who want to support systems strengthening will need to nurture new skills and capacities, but also re-examine their ways of working and organisational culture: ultimately, narrow, project-driven interventions will not support stronger WASH systems.



Lalam Suzan and Christopher Tumwine, Kamwokya WASH Community Action Team members, conduct house to house WASH awareness-raising in Kamwokya II Ward, Kampala City, Uganda. December 2018.



Examples from the SusWASH programme

In the SusWASH programme, we found that while core WASH technical competencies were invaluable for engaging and building credibility with local stakeholders, supporting systems strengthening required additional skills of our teams. This included deep political awareness, accompanied by strong facilitation and collaboration skills to build partnerships and advocate for change. Enhanced data analysis and critical thinking skills to synthesise information from multiple sources and understand how the changing context impacted on our work. And an understanding of both WASH service level monitoring and public finance, to effectively influence resource allocation for WASH.

The organisational environment in which local teams work is also equally as important as their skills and capacities. The evaluation of SusWASH highlighted that where we defaulted to the ways of working that have previously been effective for service delivery-focused interventions, this held back progress on systems strengthening. Whilst low programme management overheads have historically been encouraged by donors, our experience is clear that systems strengthening requires staff to have significantly more time to engage with understanding the system, collaborating with partners, and influencing change. This requires more staff with significant time allocated to interventions, not just programme management. Improving access to WASH for the largest number of people possible can be seen as a mark of efficiency, but when teams continue to be incentivised to do this, they can miss opportunities to effect more systemic and long-lasting change. Whilst clear measures of programme success have often been seen as providing accountability for the work of NGOs, we found (as detailed in this brief) that they cannot effectively capture work to support systems strengthening. Purely quantitative measures can draw focus towards interventions that are most easily measured, even if they are not the most impactful, and having pre-conceived ideas of success can limit the scope of staff to learn from failure and adapt.

Implications for the WASH sector

External organisations will need invest in up-skilling internal and partner staff to develop skills, shift mindsets and implement new ways of working. SusWASH included a substantial technical support function for this reason, but there will be some instances, and some skills, where recruitment of new expertise and profiles from outside the organisation will be needed. Donors and organisations will need to accept that successful systems strengthening programmes are likely to require greater expenditure on organisational and partner staff, more conservative targets for the number of people directly reached by improved services in the project timeframe, and complementing quantitative targets with qualitative measures of progress. This will require both project funding and design to embrace longer timeframes and greater flexibility.



▲ Navy lives in Kro Lanh Village and hopes to have an accessible toilet of her own one day. Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia. April 2019.



WaterAid/Sibtain Haider

Where next on systems strengthening?

Across the WASH sector, the systems strengthening approach is increasingly being accepted as conventional wisdom, and as the most credible means of supporting countries to achieve sustained universal access to WASH. But there remains a gap between the conceptual framework and widespread understanding of **how** non-governmental actors can support systems strengthening approaches in practice. Our experience, through the SusWASH programme and in other countries, has shown that there are practical activities that organisations can adopt to untangle systemic barriers to change, and strengthen aspects of local and national WASH systems. Our experience has also highlighted the challenges that a transition to a systems strengthening approach poses for the WASH sector, and the changes that WASH implementing organisations and donors will need to start making in how they work.

Our approach to systems strengthening continues to evolve. Through our experience of working alongside communities, local and national government, service providers, private sector, and others, we are constantly improving our understanding of the challenges – and also the opportunities – for systems strengthening. We hope these lessons will help organisations across the WASH sector looking to make the same journey.



WaterAid/Behailu Shiferaw

▲ **Shahida with clean water collected from a pump installed by WaterAid as part of the SusWASH programme in the village of Muhammad Urs Sehejo, Sindh Province, Pakistan. September 2018.**

▲ **Hailu Moti, Manager of Jara Town Water Utility, stands with the only operational generator. Oromia, Ethiopia. November 2017.**

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Zahida Jakhro conducts a hygiene session in the village of Bapro Jakhro, Province Sindh, Pakistan. November 2017.

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'WaterAid (2022). 'Seven practical lessons for WASH systems strengthening from the SusWASH programme: implications for donors, policy-makers and practitioners'.

For more information about systems strengthening, visit our website: washmatters.wateraid.org/suswash

Front cover photos:

- Lalam Suzan and Christopher Tumwine, Kamwokya WASH Community Action Team members, conduct house to house WASH awareness-raising in Kamwokya II Ward, Kampala City, Uganda. December 2018.
- Shahida with clean water collected from a pump installed by WaterAid as part of the SusWASH programme in the village of Muhammad Urs Sehejo, Sindh Province, Pakistan. September 2018.
- Hailu Moti, Manager of Jara Town Water Utility, stands with the only operational generator. Oromia, Ethiopia. November 2017.
- Local stakeholders assess the strength of the WASH system from a gender perspective in Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia.

WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.