

Strengthening Joint Sector Reviews in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector

Learning synthesis note
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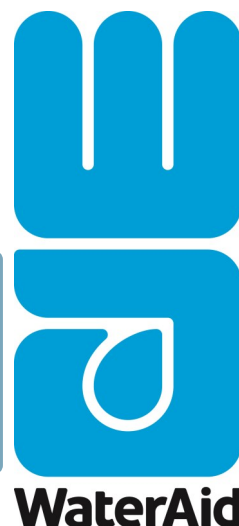


WaterAid/Andrew McConnell



MoATWD/Malawi

Written by Clare Battle,
Senior Policy Analyst
WaterAid UK



WaterAid

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Summary

When embedded as part of a broader monitoring and diagnostic system at all levels of government, Joint Sector Review (JSR) processes can provide an important entry point for driving sector progress. Supporting and strengthening these processes to ensure they effectively fulfil their potential is therefore a key strand of improving water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector performance. Learning to date suggests there are 18 key characteristics of effective WASH JSRs:

1. **Clearly defined objectives**
2. **Clearly defined scope**
3. **Government leadership**
4. **Clear roles and responsibilities**
5. **Effective engagement by development partners**
6. **Clear dates and timeline**
7. **Regularity**
8. **Adequate human resources**
9. **Consistent funding**
10. **Inclusive, multi-stakeholder process**
11. **Strong local-national links and experience-sharing**
12. **Based on accurate, timely data and analysis**
13. **Effective meeting or gathering**
14. **Limited number of SMART, prioritised outcomes**
15. **JSR outcomes feed back into sector policies, plans and strategies**
16. **High quality and transparent reporting**
17. **Strong accountability for follow-up**
18. **Alignment with other initiatives and processes**

Drawing on country experiences, this learning note provides more detail on each of these characteristics, highlighting examples of good practice and potential pitfalls. By doing so, it aims to provide practical guidance for all stakeholders engaging in JSR processes.

What is a JSR?

Despite their increasing prevalence, there is no standardised definition of a ‘Joint Sector Review’. A 2016 study for the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Programme suggested that: **“a joint sector review is a government-led periodic process that brings different stakeholders in a particular sector together to engage in dialogue, review status, progress and performance, and take decisions on priority actions”**¹. This definition has since been adopted by the Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS), which collects information on national assessments and JSRs as part of its biennial survey². Crucially, a JSR is not just a meeting; rather it is a process that involves both a preparatory phase and a period of follow-up, to ensure analysis and decisions are translated into action.

Why do JSRs matter?

JSRs are recognised as an important entry point for leveraging systemic change. To ensure continual improvements in WASH sector performance, policies, laws and programmes must be regularly reviewed, based on sufficient and timely data, and with the appropriate stakeholders, to determine and implement reforms as necessary. When embedded as part of a broader monitoring and diagnostic system at all levels of government, effective JSRs provide a vital mechanism through which to facilitate evidence-based decision making and identify the course corrections needed to drive sector progress.

The 2016 World Bank study argues that “at their best, JSR processes provide a reliable overview of finance, implementation, institutions, and gaps; bring sector stakeholders together; and contribute towards driving reforms and improving sector governance”. However, the study also highlighted that this potential is yet to be fully realised, and WASH JSRs’ contribution to mutual accountability can be demonstrated in only a few countries. Indeed, at their worst, JSRs remain characterised by “hurried preparation for a poorly facilitated gathering that identifies a plethora of problems and priorities for action that fail to be implemented or followed-up on”.³ Strengthening JSRs to ensure they fulfil their role as a driver of progress is therefore a priority for the sector.

Purpose of this note

There is no blueprint for a JSR that can be applied across all contexts; content and process will need to be approached differently depending on a wide range of factors. Nonetheless, there is a growing base of evidence and learning that can provide a useful foundation for those seeking to understand and strengthen sector review process.

This learning note aims to provide practical guidance (rather than theoretical definitions) for stakeholders engaging in JSR processes, and to encourage sector actors to reflect on how JSR processes can be best supported and strengthened. To do so, it brings together WaterAid’s learning from a range of countries including Malawi, Nepal, Eswatini, Uganda and elsewhere.

¹ Danert (2016) *Effective Joint Sector Reviews for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH): A Study and Guidance*. World Bank Group/WSP

² WHO (2018) *The GLAAS 2018/19 country survey*. World Health Organisation/GLAAS

³ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

Characteristics of an effective JSR

1. Clearly defined objectives

An effective JSR will have clear objectives that are revisited with every JSR cycle. These objectives should emphasise the role of the JSR as a cyclical process that will identify bottlenecks and drive sector reforms, but the specific nature of objectives may depend on the maturity of the sector in each context. In particular, the focus of objectives will depend on whether key building blocks such as a sector plan or coordination mechanism are already in place.

Objectives may include:

- Improved alignment and consensus-building among different stakeholders
- Improved reporting and analysis of progress towards targets
- Strengthened mutual accountability for delivery of commitments
- Common understanding of bottlenecks and lessons
- Identification of necessary course corrections and agreement of future plans
- Strengthened planning and budgeting processes

Difficulties are likely to arise if different actors have different – possibly even contradictory – understandings of the objectives of the JSR. For example, stakeholders in Nepal have had difficulty distinguishing between the purpose of the JSR and the parallel Sector Stakeholder Group meeting, as neither has a formal charter or terms of reference.

The process to identify and agree objectives should therefore consider what stakeholders hope to achieve through the JSR, and what success will look like. In Uganda, where a JSR has been running for nearly 20 years, there is a high degree of common understanding among officials at central and regional levels in terms of purpose, process, timings and structure of the JSR process, and most stakeholders are highly engaged and have appropriate expectations. This has developed over time as the process has undergone numerous iterations. In Eswatini, the JSR process is much newer, having only been established in 2016, so a series of presentations and discussions were used to build consensus among the stakeholders around the need for a JSR, and to develop a clear set of objectives.

2. Clearly defined scope

As well as agreement around a clear set of objectives, stakeholders must have a common understanding of the scope of the JSR, and the breadth of the themes it will cover. For example, the JSR could cover:

- Household WASH (sanitation/drinking-water/hygiene promotion)
- Institutional WASH (WASH in healthcare facilities/WASH in schools)
- Water resources
- Water for agriculture and livestock
- Solid waste management
- Emergency/humanitarian WASH

In most cases, there is unlikely to be capacity to address all issues in the sector at once, so some difficult decisions may have to be made. Common challenges include finding the right balance between breadth and depth, in order to ensure all relevant

issues are considered without losing focus, and finding the right balance between national and regional or local issues.

If there is a pre-existing plan or strategy around which the review will be framed, this can often help demarcate the scope of the JSR itself. But the challenge is likely to be greater if there is no sector plan or strategy to provide a framework; this was the case during Eswatini's first JSR, where the lack of an overarching plan or strategy initially led to uncertainty around what exactly was being reviewed. Lack of a common framework also increases the risk that individual ministries, agencies, NGOs and development partners will simply present against their own plans and targets, leading to 'project update' meetings, which lack reflection or analysis. This has been a challenge in Mozambique, where the government has used the JSR platform to report on the outputs of donor-funded projects implemented by the National Directorate of Water Supply and Sanitation, rather than to assess sector-wide outcomes and impact, and identify course corrections needed across the sector as a whole.

3. Government leadership

Government leadership is an essential pillar of an effective JSR; indeed, the GLAAS survey explicitly specifies that partner-led or partner-initiated assessments do not constitute a JSR process⁴. Usually, leadership should come from the main ministry responsible for WASH, and should include:

- Senior government officials (e.g. ministers, permanent secretaries) who are engaged from the outset, and clear on their commitment and roles
- Government investment of human and financial resources into the JSR process
- Management and coordination of inputs from other sector partners
- High level participation during the JSR meeting itself

A lack of government leadership can create a vacuum at the heart of the JSR process, and once again makes it more likely that the process becomes donor-dominated, with a focus on reporting upwards to development partners. However, regular staff turnover and government reshuffles can make it difficult to have sustained engagement – let alone leadership – for the JSR process. Challenges can also arise when senior officials perceive themselves solely as dignitaries to the JSR event, rather than active participants throughout the process. To mitigate some of these risks, it is important to not only have clarity about which government ministry will lead, but also to ensure buy-in is embedded beyond one or two key individuals.

In Madagascar, a country which has had multiple different ministers of WASH in recent years, the different ways these ministers have engaged with and owned the JSR process have greatly influenced its success. Indeed, the levels of engagement of the Government as a whole have varied depending on the willingness of the minister in charge of WASH to lead the discussions and pull various actors together into a process shaped around the Government's own objectives. When this has been done successfully, it has embedded greater energy and engagement across all stakeholders. Recognising the importance of such leadership, Eswatini's first JSR in 2016 was preceded by a delegation of government stakeholders from various

⁴ WHO (2018) *Ibid*

ministries and agencies to attend the JSR meeting in Uganda, a country with a mature JSR process that has run since 2001. This increased understanding of JSRs among a core group of professionals and allowed them to reflect on how such a process may benefit the sector in Eswatini, which in turn led to the emergence of ‘champions’ within the Department of Water Affairs.

Elsewhere, countries have struggled to move away from processes that are more donor-led – in both Zambia and Mozambique the JSR process is largely led by development partners with little initiative from government.

4. Clear roles and responsibilities

A JSR is a complex process and will require a support structure including a steering committee (providing strategic direction), and a secretariat (coordinating activities and operations). A JSR terms of reference (ToR), laying out the objectives of the process and the roles and responsibilities of different actors, will be key to ensuring clarity and accountability, and should be written down and agreed by all parties⁵. The lack of such clarity in Malawi – where it is not clear who is accountable for the delivery of the JSR – is seen as one of the reasons the process has stalled. In contrast, Uganda’s JSR process is guided by its Sector Working Group (SWG), which is seen as key to the effectiveness of the JSR process.

Where a fundamental lack of clarity persists, or energy is seen to be waning, it may be helpful to conduct a review or assessment of the JSR (as was done in Malawi in 2017). This can both reignite interest in the process, and act as an opportunity to clarify roles. It may also be useful to consider what other steps or activities could help strengthen collaboration among those responsible for delivering the JSR, as effective collaboration is likely to be difficult to achieve if there are broader challenges in cooperation between sector actors. In Eswatini, in the absence of a coordination group that covered both water and sanitation (aside from the high-level National Water Authority group, deemed too senior to commit to meeting regularly for the JSR organisation), a specific committee – the Local Organising Committee - was convened to support the organisation, delivery and follow-up of the JSR. And while the delivery of an effective JSR may be more challenging in situations where a single functional national coordination platform is not already in place, it may also be more rewarding. In Nepal, the JSR’s role in providing a basic coordination function – which in other countries might be met through other mechanisms – is seen as one of its key strengths.

5. Effective engagement by development partners

While government ownership and leadership is the central pillar of a JSR, effective engagement by development partners (both donors and NGOs) is also key.

At their best, JSR processes should offer a means by which development partners can not only *demand* but also *demonstrate* accountability, by adopting ‘system strengthening’ behaviours in line with the principles of development effectiveness. In particular, development partners should themselves adhere to transparent reporting processes (which ensures data and evidence used in the JSR provides a full picture

⁵ Consultant support may be needed to develop the ToR, but must be used with care so as not to undermine ownership of national stakeholders.

of the sector), and use the outcomes of the JSR process to inform and guide their in-country activities.

In contrast, challenges can arise when government leadership is not matched by buy-in from development partners; when development partners try to use the JSR process to push their own agenda; or when they fail to adequately report off-plan or off-budget support, leading to an incomplete picture of sector progress. There is also a risk that development partners see themselves simply as funders of the process rather than active participants. This was a challenge in Eswatini in 2016, where development partners were approached more as potential donors or dignitaries, rather than as active contributors to the process.

Crucially, such failings can also lead to a breakdown in the mutual accountability that is usually considered a key function of a JSR. This has been seen in Malawi and Zambia where donors and NGOs did not prepare plans and reports on their own activities for presentation at the JSR meeting, leaving them open to accusations of being unaccountable, and undermining their ability to hold the government to account. Uganda has faced similar challenges; the lack of scrutiny of donor performance on key issues – such as release of committed funds – created a sense that the JSR was predominantly a forum for accountability from government to donors, which in turn weakened the ‘joint’ and reciprocal element of the processes. However, there are also signs of progress; since 2009, Uganda’s official Sector Performance Report has been supplemented by a separate report on behalf of NGOs – although compiling a completely comprehensive financial picture of the sector remains difficult.

In Nepal, experience to date has been mixed. Some development partners credit the JSR with helping them plan based on commonly-agreed gaps and priorities, and with influencing key shifts in their programming. But others were less positive about the role of the JSR in shaping their own plans (particularly where existing activity pipelines provide little scope to respond to sector discussions), and the Government has expressed frustration that the JSR has failed to translate into better alignment of development partners.

To facilitate effective engagement by development partners, it is often helpful to have an identified lead, to coordinate and represent the development partner constituency. In circumstances where trust and collaboration between government and donors is weak, there may also be value in a neutral party who can play a mediation role.

6. Clear dates and timeline

To be effective, a JSR process should align with a country’s broader reporting, planning, and budgeting cycle. However, in most cases this is easier said than done. It is often difficult to find time that aligns with both reporting and budgeting processes, and there may be a need to find a balance between timing that allows reflection on one year, and timing which makes it possible for activities to feed into the planning cycle for the next. Uganda has grappled with this challenge for a while, recently moving the timeline of the JSR forward to better influence the key priority-setting meeting of the Office of the Prime Minister, and make it easier for the JSR conclusions to be fed into the Government’s annual planning process.

Whatever the schedule, it is key that the timeline is clear and communicated well in advance, and makes adequate allowance for the preparation time that will be needed to deliver an effective JSR. Last-minute organisation can lead to inadequate analysis and poor attendance, and yet this is a common problem in the sector.

7. Regularity

An effective review processes cannot be achieved through ad hoc or one-off JSRs; it requires regularity and consistency over a period of years. This means agreement on frequency of meetings, and adherence to this schedule over the long term. The 2016 World Bank study defines a 'mature' JSR as an established cycle, with more than a decade of regular JSR processes. Relatively few such processes exist in the WASH sector, but Uganda – which held its first WASH JSR in 2001 – is a notable exception⁶.

Other countries have struggled to put such a regular process in place; while Zambia has a commitment for a JSR to take place every 1-2 years, in reality the gap has tended to be closer to 3-4 years. Such breaks in the JSR cycle make it difficult to review progress in a timely manner or ensure accountability for follow-up and delivery of agreed actions. They also undermine efforts to foster a culture of review and adaptation. It is important to think carefully about how such gaps can be mitigated, for example by ensuring the sustainability of human and financial resources for JSR delivery (see below).

8. Adequate human resources

Mobilising enough human resources to support JSR operations is key to both the effectiveness and sustainability of a JSR. Mapping of the capacities required, and where they will come from, is therefore an important first step in planning any JSR. Without adequate staff in place, or when those responsible are burdened with too many other tasks, governments may struggle to fulfil their leadership and coordination role⁷. Such a scenario has been seen in Zambia, where the slow implementation of the JSR has been linked to under-resourcing.

Technical assistance, mentoring, and mediation may need to be provided in some areas (for example facilitation and presentation training) and can be an important enabling factor. The experience of Eswatini – where an external WASH expert was contracted to provide technical assistance to the process – illustrates the added value of technical assistance in guiding and mentoring the presenters to collate and analyse sector information, define objectives, and ensure the presentations are orientated to the JSR purpose.

But to build ownership and avoid the risk of becoming too dependent on outsourcing, any use of consultants should focus on strengthening the government's own capacity to deliver the JSR, so that reliance on external support is gradually reduced (although high staff turnover means that some degree of continued capacity building may be needed in each JSR cycle). Ensuring consultants are supervised by a government-led steering committee, and work closely with the JSR Secretariat, can be a key part of this.

⁶ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

⁷ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

9. Consistent funding

Closely linked to the availability of adequate human resources is the mobilisation of sufficient financial resources to support JSR operations. This requires a clear mapping of expected costs (likely to include staff salaries, communications, transport, and financial support for the attendance of some participants), which is then reconciled with funds available.

Steps should also be taken to ensure nonessential costs are minimised (for example, items such as cocktail receptions, conference bags or t-shirts may need to be cut, to make the budget more manageable), and costs and funding arrangements for the process should be clearly and transparently communicated. Where external support is involved, a delicate balancing act may be required; too much reliance on external support risks undermining government leadership and can create dependency; too little, and the process may never get off the ground, or reach a desired level of quality⁸. To navigate this, joint financing arrangements should be put in place, and there should be a clear plan for transition from donor to government funding to ensure sustainability.

This remains a live issue in Eswatini, where the first JSR was funded by external stakeholders, and cash flow challenges within government made a transition to government financing unlikely for the second. In Malawi, such challenges are even more entrenched, with more than 95% of budgets for previous JSR meetings coming from donors and NGOs, while the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development has no budget line for the implementation of JSR processes. Problems have been further exacerbated by the fact that funding is generally ad hoc and unclear, and tends to be focused on the JSR meeting rather than supporting the broader process.

10. Inclusive, multi-stakeholder process

An effective and legitimate JSR requires the participation of a broad and inclusive group of state and non-state actors, including:

- All relevant parts of government, including involvement of the finance and planning ministries
- All relevant constituencies of partner, including donor partners, water user associations, international and local NGOs, CSOs, the private sector, academia, and the media.

When this works well, it can lead to exciting results. For example, in Nepal the JSR is credited with facilitating synergies, including better donor division of labour, by bringing diverse stakeholders closer together. And yet many countries have struggled to bring all of these groups to the table. For example, Mozambique has secured good representation of donors, but civil society has not been well represented in the JSR process. Even in Uganda – which overall is generally perceived to bring together the right sector actors, with the right balance between meeting size, duration, cost and number of participants – work is still needed to increase participation from private sector players.

⁸ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

Ensuring engagement of all relevant parts of government appears to be a particular challenge. In Madagascar, the JSR process is attended almost solely by WASH sector actors; other departments and sectors are only lightly represented and there is a lack of participation by the Ministry of Finance. Similarly, in Eswatini, collaboration with the Ministry of Health (responsible for sanitation and hygiene) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Energy has been poor, and neither the Ministry of Finance nor the Ministry of Economic Planning were actively involved in the 2018 JSR. Experience suggests that multi-ministerial meetings between ministers or principal secretaries early in the JSR process can play a key role in garnering commitment and collaboration between ministries. In Nepal, thematic working groups – some of which are led by bodies outside the WASH Ministry – have been credited with helping widen government ownership of the JSR process.

Ensuring engagement is not only inclusive but effective also means trade-offs may need to be made: with too many people the process can become too big and unmanageable, but with too few it risks becoming exclusive and opaque. Zambia has struggled with the latter, with a perception that the consultant-led process was leaving people behind. Finding an appropriate balance that ensures both inclusivity and effective discussion therefore requires careful consideration of who needs to be involved, in what way, and at what stages of the process.

11. Strong local-national links and experience-sharing

To ensure the process is grounded in the reality of sector progress, JSRs should incorporate mechanism(s) to draw in the experiences of different districts/provinces for reflection and joint learning. When this is missing, JSR discussions can be disconnected from reality at local level, and ownership of process and outcomes is often limited to national level stakeholders.

This scenario can be seen in Uganda where, despite a high degree of coherence at national level, district level perceptions of the JSR are more mixed. District water offices can still be relatively unaware of the JSR process, and – conversely – there is felt to be a lot of convening at the sub-national level which it is not picked up by national structures. There is wide agreement that holding review meetings outside Kampala, and incorporating field visits, are valuable features of the process that have helped build awareness in the districts (as well as ensuring participants from the centre ‘connect’ with the ground realities).

During the planning process, it is therefore important to consider both how local learning and experience will be incorporated, and how outcomes of JSR will be fed back to district/provincial level. For example, in Nepal the JSR incorporates a four- to six-week intensive process of preparation by thematic groups that incorporates a kick-off meeting, field trips and learning exercises. The field trips are widely praised for strengthening understanding of capacity at regional and district levels, and ensuring lessons from the local level inform national policy discussions. They are also credited with building confidence and breaking down siloes by bringing together different thematic streams. Nepal has also explored the use of distinct, ‘regional JSRs’, although most partners involved in the national JSR process seem not to have been involved in these, and no visible follow-up or report is apparent.

Another approach may be to ensure attendance of local stakeholders in the JSR meeting, but again this must be managed carefully to ensure it is meaningful. Despite the representation of some district administrators and provincial directors in JSRs in Malawi and Mozambique, realities from the field were not felt to have been effectively incorporated into discussions. Likewise, in Esawtini, the involvement of local community members was hindered by the lack of translation services during the JSR event, which was conducted in English.

12. Based on accurate, timely data and analysis

To fulfil their potential, JSRs must be grounded in high quality data and analysis, and closely linked to routine, ongoing monitoring systems. Not only data on sector progress and performance but also data from public financial management systems should be utilised wherever it exists. Other forms of analysis and partner-led or partner-initiated assessments such as UNICEF's WASH Bottleneck Analysis Tool (WASH-BAT), GLAAS, and JMP coverage estimates may also be useful, particularly where country systems are weak. In turn, JSRs should help strengthen existing processes and capacities for monitoring, knowledge management and analysis. In particular, they should provide a space to identify key gaps in knowledge and steps needed to address these, and help build consensus on the need for sector-wide monitoring systems with common indicators.

Challenges can occur both when data is unavailable or unreliable (because country monitoring systems are weak and/or sector partners are not reporting adequately), and when data exists but is not used. For example, in Nepal the WASH sector lacks a coherent joint sector monitoring framework, country capacity in data collection and analysis remains relatively weak, and a review of progress against JSR resolutions is not included in any of the reports most closely associated with the JSR process. In such scenarios, JSRs risk becoming a discussion of unfounded perceptions and speculation. Or – as in Malawi, where data is seen as unreliable, information management processes are weak, and there is no mechanism for comprehensive reporting of non-state actor contributions to sector progress – it can reduce the credibility of the outcomes of the JSR. Issues may also arise when JSRs create parallel processes that duplicate rather than utilise data and analysis that already exists in the sector (a risk that can be exacerbated by the use of consultants).

To avoid such challenges, it is useful to explicitly consider how the JSR will use and strengthen monitoring systems as part of the planning process. For example:

- What information is needed for an effective JSR?
- How can existing sources of data/information be best utilised?
- How will information be presented/used?
- Can analysis be done inhouse, or will consultants be needed? If so, how will sector ownership be assured?
- How will analysis/data be consolidated?
- If/how are academic and research organisations involved in the JSR process?
- Are there any data gaps that need to be filled in other ways?
- What improvements need to be made in the monitoring system?⁹

⁹ See also WaterAid (2019) [From data to decisions: How to promote evidence-based decision making through external investments in country-led monitoring processes](#). WaterAid, London.

13. Effective meeting or gathering

The most visible part of the JSR process is usually an annual meeting or event. Ideally this should be a high-level event that takes place in an atmosphere of openness and honesty, with an effective chair to guide discussion, and a variety of formats (plenary, small groups, field visit, etc) used to allow stakeholders to discuss and verify the evidence of sector progress and agree recommendations. Crucially, the meeting participation and outcomes should be clearly documented.

Delivery of an effective meeting will depend on the foundations outlined through the preceding criteria, supported by well-planned event management. The latter should consider everything from the role of high level participants, to whether or not translation services will be needed and how feedback will be gathered.

Consideration should also be given to ensuring participants are effectively engaged – especially when group sizes are large. In Eswatini, participants were given ‘traffic light’ cards to vote on recommendations and give opinions to various questions, as a way to prompt discussions and provide regular participant feedback.

Challenges may arise if the meeting is not well-structured or chaired, leading the event to become a series of unchallenged presentations, rather than a robust discussion about what is working, and what needs to be done differently. This can also become an issue if a culture of openness and trust has not yet been established. During Eswatini’s first JSR in 2016, presenters initially seemed reluctant to share what was not working, and it took significant effort and preparation (including one-to-one mentoring and feedback with presenters) to get participants to be more frank and open about their areas of weakness.

Another common pitfall is the departure of high level participants after the event opening. Again, this was a challenge in Eswatini where ministers were well represented at the JSR opening ceremony but then departed, giving the impression that participation was optional. Subsequent agreement that a senior representative such as a principal secretary would attend all sessions gave more credibility to the event, as well as helping such officials become more familiar with the sector as a whole. Thinking through what types of high-level representation are realistic – and ensuring the right dignitaries, with the right influence and decision-making power, are present at the right moments – is therefore key.

Finally, it is vital that the meeting is clearly positioned within the context of the broader JSR process, and not portrayed as the sole moment of importance. If the JSR becomes seen as a meeting rather than an ongoing process (as has been a problem in Malawi and Mozambique, where the majority of stakeholders just see the JSR as a yearly event), it will undermine efforts to embed the review as part of a broader cycle of planning, monitoring and accountability.

14. Limited number of SMART, prioritised outcomes

A key output of most JSR processes is a set of outcomes, actions or undertakings that outline the course-corrections and adjustments needed to drive sector processes in key areas such as sector finance and capacity. These outcomes should

be SMART¹⁰, and set ambitious but realistic priority actions for the sector – they should also be clearly captured in some form of JSR ‘aide-memoire’ (see point 16 below).

While most JSRs do succeed in setting a list of recommendations, there are several common pitfalls that can undermine effectiveness. If the list is not clearly prioritised, and rationalised down to focus on the most important bottlenecks, it can become a wish list rather than a useful roadmap. Similarly, if commitments are vague or very broad, without roles and responsibilities clearly allocated, it can be difficult to track progress and ensure accountability. And if priorities are set in a way that allows influential organisations, as well as strong characters, to push their own agenda, they can represent vested interest rather than broad consensus¹¹, undermining both relevance and ownership. Together, such practices can result in commitments that remain unmet – and, in the worst scenarios, are rolled over from year to year.

Many of these challenges can be seen in Malawi, where there has been a proliferation of undertakings since 2012, reaching more than 40 by the 2014 JSR. There has also been a failure to match undertakings to resources, meaning less than 50% of undertakings have been implemented and the credibility of the JSR process undermined. Likewise, in Nepal, a struggle to reach consensus (largely driven by the desire of different stakeholders to ensure inclusion of ‘pet’ topics), meant the country’s second JSR resulted in more than 30 undertakings, with sequencing or prioritisation made difficult by the number identified as ‘high’ or ‘very high’ priority.

To avoid these pitfalls, it is important to agree a realistic and appropriate number of actions that can feasibly be delivered in the allocated time, and ensure this is not exceeded. There is also a need to check undertakings to see if suggestions from different groups are compatible and feasible, while designing a process that builds ownership of, and responsibility for, those issues that are prioritised. Again, Uganda provides an example of good practice, with around 10-12 undertakings that – since the fourth review – have been accompanied by indicators clearly defined in a Sector Performance Measurement Framework¹². In practice, these undertakings are mostly agreed via the SWG in advance of the JSR meeting, where they are then adapted based on discussions and emerging issues. By and large, the undertakings are felt to be made on acceptable evidence, but there are still challenges with bias and some elements unduly reflecting priorities of influential or ‘noisy’ partners.

15. JSR outcomes feed back into sector policies, plans and strategies

As highlighted above, sector progress is greatest when there is systematic identification of bottlenecks linked to a process of course-correction at all levels of implementation. Alignment of the JSR with a country’s broader reporting, planning, and budgeting cycle is therefore critical – and effective procedures to ensure the outcomes of the review feed back into such processes is a key part of this. To facilitate this, it is useful for JSR undertakings to make explicit reference to other processes on which they depend, and for there to be a clear process by which JSR reports are drawn into government planning and budgeting cycles. In particular,

¹⁰ The SMART framework is a useful way to identify quality indicators. It stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

¹¹ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

¹² Danert (2016) *Ibid*

there should be clear links between the JSR and financial planning, to ensure priority actions that require funding are taken up within government, donor or NGO budgets.

Challenges can arise when the JSR is seen as a distinct, isolated process. For example, in Zambia, the JSR is seen as somewhat outside the rest of the WASH sector and does not inform other sector processes. Likewise, in Nepal, most JSR priority actions have remained distinct from broader sector commitments and have not been grounded in annual sector plans.

Alignment may also be more difficult when broader sector processes are themselves weak. In such scenarios, it is also useful to consider not only how JSRs can feed into other processes, but also how the JSR can be used help establish and strengthen these key building blocks.

16. High quality and transparent reporting

High quality, timely reporting – incorporating both performance reports that feed into the JSR, and documentation of the proceedings and outcomes of the JSR meeting – are key to strengthening the feedback links outlined above.

However, the creation of a consolidated sector performance report or sector status report is a highly skilled and time-consuming endeavour, and the incentives for doing so can be low. Uganda is one of the few countries to have consistently produced a sector performance report as part of its JSR process. The report takes about three months to prepare and pulls together data from a wide range of sources including national government agencies, local governments, non-governmental organisations and statistics bureaux. It also examines progress against defined indicators, as set out in the Sector Performance Measurement Framework. Since the fifth review, government staff and political leaders have held a retreat to discuss and adjust the report prior to its finalisation and wider circulation for the JSR meeting.¹³ In contrast, in Nepal, there are three separate reports associated with the JSR¹⁴ but no single consolidated report, leading to an overload of information rather than a clear view of sector progress.

To ensure transparency, reports should be disseminated among all participants, and made publicly available. Failure to share reports is one of the most common weaknesses of JSR processes and undermines mutual accountability. Uganda is praised as one of only four countries to consistently publish their reports on a government website, where they have been downloaded thousands of times¹⁵.

17. Strong accountability for follow-up

The JSR meeting and outcomes report should not be seen as the end of the JSR process; it is vital that all stakeholders are held accountable for their role in the subsequent follow-up, particularly the delivery of identified actions. And yet this is an area of weakness for many JSR processes, and without measures to ensure strong accountability for follow-up, there is a risk that the intensity of the JSR – and the considerable efforts required from those involved – cause momentum to drop dramatically after the meeting, as people enjoy the ‘quiet after the storm’.

¹³ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

¹⁴ These are a Technical Report, a Process Report and a Sector Status Report.

¹⁵ Danert (2016) *Ibid*

Effective follow-up can be encouraged through regular meetings of smaller teams, such as a thematic working group or a dedicated task force. Ensuring the overarching JSR resolutions are accompanied by identification of responsible parties, and having the outcomes report signed by senior representatives of key stakeholders in the sector (such as representatives from government, development partners and civil society) may also help build joint commitment and accountability. For example, in Eswatini, the Local Organising Committee members followed the JSR event with a three-day retreat to review the outcomes report, develop a costed action plan (outlining responsibilities, timelines and indicators for agreed items), and discuss plans for future JSRs.

Most important of all is a clear process for monitoring the implementation of recommendations and decisions made at the JSR meeting. This can be seen in Uganda, where progress on the undertakings is reviewed mid-way between JSR meetings. In contrast, the lack of agreed mechanisms for reviewing the progress is seen as a key factor behind the low rate of achievement of JSR undertakings in Malawi.

18. Alignment with other initiatives and processes

JSRs are a key process for driving accountability and reform at the national and sub-national level – but sometimes they can be supported and reinforced by regional or global processes which also aim to foster improvements in sector performance, such as the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership's Mutual Accountability Mechanism. Likewise, the SWA Partnership's Framework can be used to encourage development partner support for, and engagement in, JSR processes¹⁶.

These initiatives will add most value when they are aligned with, rather than parallel to, the country's own JSR process, for instance when country commitments made at the global or regional level are drawn from undertakings agreed through an inclusive, government-led JSR process. For example, the Government of Nepal used their Statement of Commitment for the 2014 SWA High-Level Meeting to reiterate their support for the JSR process, and JSR meetings have been used as milestones of progress against SWA commitments.

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¹⁶ sanitationandwaterforall.org/priority-areas/swa-framework/