

Final Report

WaterAid SusWASH Programme Endline Evaluation

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Executive Summary

For the last decade, the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector has been grappling with the challenge of poor sustainability of services and behaviour change, whilst struggling to meet the ambitions for universal access to WASH in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Too many ‘projectised’ interventions, decoupled from the broader systems needed to sustain water and sanitation services and hygiene behaviours, have led to a poor record of achievement, and weakened the sector's ability to attract increased levels of finance and to turn these investments into lasting results. In response to these twin challenges, the WASH sector has increasingly adopted a *systems strengthening* approach to improve and sustain access to WASH. This approach is based on the understanding that sustainable and inclusive WASH services require a strong WASH system; that is, all the actors, factors and the interactions between them which influence the achievement of inclusive, sustainable and universal access to WASH.

Promoting Sustainable Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Services at Scale (SusWASH) was a five-year programme¹ in which WaterAid sought to systematically address the key barriers to achieving WASH sustainability in four countries². Building on WaterAid's previous work to support sustainable WASH services, SusWASH worked to understand and address these barriers at a local and national level by working with communities, government institutions, WASH service providers and civil society. A key factor of SusWASH was that interventions in districts should provide a model to be adapted and scaled up more widely within countries. At a global level, SusWASH aimed to draw on the experience gained at the district level to further the WASH sustainability agenda with key stakeholders.

This evaluation has looked back over four and a half years of SusWASH³ to provide an account of the changes the programme has contributed to, and to identify learning to help WaterAid and the wider WASH sector improve future work to strengthen WASH systems. The evaluation has worked alongside WaterAid, local governments and partners in each of the four countries to understand the relevance of the programme, what changes in the WASH system the programme contributed to, and the challenges and successes in the delivery of the programme. This has been complemented by a series of interviews with global WaterAid staff and stakeholders, and a review of project documentation and literature on WASH systems strengthening. The findings of this evaluation can be interpreted and applied alongside the global review of WaterAid's gender equality programming which was undertaken at the same time, and which examined the systems strengthening efforts of two of the SusWASH programme countries (Cambodia and Uganda) through a gender lens.

The SusWASH contribution to change

SusWASH was an ambitious programme for WaterAid. Although WaterAid has a long history of working to improve WASH sustainability, SusWASH was the first programme designed explicitly to go beyond ‘business as normal’ and work cohesively across local, national and global levels to tackle the WASH sustainability crisis. WaterAid was right to be ambitious in this way. There was a clear value in supporting country programmes to take a holistic approach to analysing and strengthening key aspects of the WASH system, where the barriers to progress are complex and often mutually reinforcing. Systems strengthening is increasingly perceived by authoritative commentators, donors and practitioners

¹ Funded by H&M Foundation

² Cambodia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Uganda

³ The data collection for this evaluation took place between November 2021 and January 2022, 6 months before the end of the SusWASH programme. This was to ensure key personnel were available, and to communicate and utilise the learning during the final stages of the programme. This meant that some parts of the final six months of achievement could not be captured in this evaluation.

in the WASH sector as the only credible approach to addressing the twin challenges of achieving universal access to WASH, and improving the poor sustainability of WASH services. The SusWASH approach, initially framed as 'sector strengthening' to address sustainability, subsequently evolved to explicitly embrace systems thinking. Without a clear and thoughtful response to the systems strengthening agenda, WaterAid risked being left behind and being perceived as adrift from the evolution of thinking in the WASH sector. Equally, WaterAid's structure, strategy and size makes it one of the few agencies with the capacity to embark on such a large and comprehensive approach to systems strengthening. WaterAid needs to build on the experience of SusWASH to extend and improve its work to strengthen WASH systems in the countries in which it works, whilst contributing to the growing understanding of systems strengthening approaches in the wider WASH sector.

SusWASH has contributed to changes in elements of the WASH system in all the districts and countries in which it worked, but the extent of these changes varies considerably between country programmes.

In Cambodia, there is evidence that WaterAid has contributed to significant changes in multiple aspects of the WASH system, laying the foundations for additional sustainable WASH services in the future.

WaterAid has contributed to changes in some aspects of the WASH system in Ethiopia and Uganda, but critical weaknesses remain that need to be addressed to support sustainable services. This is particularly the case in Ethiopia where SusWASH worked in an extremely challenging and remote area. In Pakistan, there was a more limited approach to systems strengthening, with specific examples of work to improve isolated aspects of the systems set against a background of a greater focus on direct service delivery. This approach was more aligned to the historic strengths and experience of WaterAid Pakistan than the SusWASH concept, although as the programme progressed, there was an increasing focus on addressing the underlying reasons for poor WASH sustainability.

Evidence of changes supported by SusWASH are clearest in the areas of service delivery and behaviour change, and local leadership and coordination for WASH services. Change in other aspects of the WASH system has been slower, as there are significant challenges to progress on larger institutional or structural constraints, such as monitoring and financing, or ingrained societal or household inequities.

Whilst SusWASH's contribution to change has been positive, there has been a tendency for country programmes to focus on doable actions and not explicitly consider the strength of the WASH system as a whole or where strengthening certain aspects of the WASH system could catalyse wider change. Where WaterAid has been able to build upon and strengthen existing institutions, structures, and processes, and where WaterAid has worked alongside other stakeholders to collectively contribute to change, there has been greater evidence of change. Where work at sub-national level has been complemented by advocacy for sector reform or policy change at national or provincial level, there is a higher likelihood that these changes will be sustained in future. Where the starting point for systems strengthening was weaker, the changes supported to date will need ongoing efforts – by WaterAid or other actors – to strengthen and sustain them.

SusWASH has been successful in driving internal learning on systems strengthening for WaterAid. At a global and country level, the organisation is in a stronger position to think about, design, and implement systems strengthening in the future. The SusWASH team has successfully communicated the achievements of SusWASH and supported the case for making systems strengthening intrinsic to WaterAid's work. This is reflected by systems strengthening being placed at the heart of WaterAid's new global strategy.

However, this success could have been greater if senior leadership had championed systems strengthening and the relevance of SusWASH throughout the programme. The absence of clear senior leadership engagement with, and advocacy for, systems strengthening, has resulted in the perception by some stakeholders that it is a stand-alone approach, rather than central to WaterAid's mission. The choice to integrate and resource a global learning function within SusWASH was clearly justified and provides a model for learning for future global programmes. The internal learning journey is particularly evident on issues of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI). Although SusWASH paid insufficient attention to GESI in the initial programme design and results framework, this shortcoming was recognised and there is strong evidence that country programmes have shown increasing awareness of

how GESI could be included in, and support a systems strengthening approach. Ensuring that this learning is shared with the wider organisation in a meaningful way will be key to building WaterAid's capacity for systems strengthening programming.

Spotlight on key SusWASH achievements at a country level

The overall findings in this evaluation are backed up by evidence from each of the countries. Some of the most significant achievements of the SusWASH country programmes include:

In **Ethiopia**, SusWASH has supported the professionalisation of management arrangements for rural water supplies. The rural utility is now better able to fulfil its responsibilities and raise funds for operation and maintenance. Water supply service levels have been improved.

In **Cambodia**, local government leadership on sanitation has been strengthened through supporting and expanding a successful local leadership programme. This has helped to catalyse a significant increase in sanitation coverage. Research undertaken by WaterAid has contributed to leveraging external finance for safely managed water supplies.

In **Uganda**, there is stronger local political leadership support for water and sanitation. This has contributed to improvements in joint planning and coordination at the city level and in neighbouring municipalities. SusWASH has directly influenced the development of new national guidelines for WASH in health care facilities.

In **Pakistan**, SusWASH involvement has led to the inclusion of school WASH indicators within the Sindh provincial government management information system for the first time. A focus on menstrual hygiene management has meant that MHM manuals are now available in all schools across the province.

The SusWASH Global Learning Report⁴ provides more detailed documentation of the achievements and lessons from each of the country programmes.

Challenges in delivering SusWASH

WaterAid has used SusWASH to develop and trial approaches to understanding changes in WASH systems and the organisation's contributions to these changes. This is a positive development, but the SusWASH experience highlights the need to refine these approaches and support their use consistently across all country programmes as part of organisational monitoring and evaluation processes.

Monitoring and understanding systems change is challenging, and WaterAid was right to identify the need to develop new tools in this area. Whilst none of the tools represents a silver bullet for understanding changes in WASH systems, there is compelling evidence from Cambodia that consistent use of WASH systems building block assessments alongside local stakeholders helps provide valuable insights into shifts in the system, whilst building an understanding among WaterAid staff and local stakeholders of systems thinking. Other SusWASH countries could have learned from this experience and made greater use of the tools to further efforts for systems strengthening. A lack of regular service-level monitoring has made it challenging to link changes in the WASH system to improvements in access to and sustainability of WASH services. Where SusWASH supported baseline data collection, this was not followed by subsequent rounds of data collection. Whilst WaterAid teams are right to be aware of the risks of undermining local leadership on WASH through implementing parallel monitoring processes, a greater focus on service-level monitoring would help provide evidence about the ultimate effectiveness of the systems strengthening approach for WASH.

⁴ <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/suswash-system-strengthening-for-inclusive-lasting-water-sanitation-hygiene>

The ability to demonstrate change has been limited by the timescale necessary for effective systems strengthening. Although the funding for SusWASH was extended from three to five years – longer than many traditional WASH programmes – the complex nature of systems strengthening means that this may not be a sufficient amount of time for concrete changes to be realised in building blocks or wider sector performance. This challenge has been exacerbated by a slow start to the implementation of the SusWASH programme in some countries, and the disruption caused by COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 varied across countries, but in the most extreme cases it prevented substantive work for up to two years as schools were closed. The long lead time for realising the potential impact of systems strengthening on WASH service provision reinforces the need for high-quality monitoring of systems change and WASH service levels from the outset, so as to identify long-term trends.

SusWASH has highlighted that if country programmes increasingly work through a systems strengthening approach this will require changes to how they work. Across all SusWASH countries there is a clear message that systems strengthening requires more staff engagement than more traditional service delivery programmes. Staff need time to engage extensively with stakeholders, understand the WASH systems and changes, and reflect on programme activities' continuing relevance and effectiveness. In Cambodia, the country programme allocated a considerable proportion (up to 50%) of the programme budget to staffing. In other countries, there is evidence that SusWASH was under-resourced to varying degrees, but this is seen most clearly in Pakistan. This under-resourcing directly impacted the capacity of the teams to engage in the monitoring, learning, advocacy and knowledge management aspects of systems strengthening programming, and ultimately narrowed the extent to which SusWASH was successfully able to contribute to changes in the WASH system.

Shifting ways of working will require changes in the organisational culture and expectations for country programmes. SusWASH provided opportunities and flexible funding, which enabled country programmes to evolve how they worked in response to systems strengthening. The extent to which they chose not to make these changes reflects constraints beyond the funding and design of SusWASH. Despite the importance of engaging with a systems strengthening way of working, there is an institutional inertia in some country programmes about what implementation should look like. This includes prioritising a low headcount approach to programme management, and being more comfortable with a linear approach to programming, with unambiguous measures of success. These characteristics are not appropriate for systems strengthening. A low headcount can mean that country offices are too understaffed to engage with systems strengthening in appropriate detail, and clear measures of success can be simplistic to the extent that only immediate short-term gains are tracked, whilst long term impact is ignored. Alongside ensuring that country programmes have the right levels of resourcing and the appropriate mix of skills and capacities, a more adaptive approach to programming will be critical for supporting successful systems strengthening work. The priority for low headcounts has historically been driven by demands from donors for low administration and overhead costs, whilst external reporting requirements can impose severe constraints on what is considered a measure of success. Although neither were true of the donors in SusWASH – which provided considerable budget and reporting flexibility – WaterAid needs to address the incentives for appropriate resourcing (including advocating for changes in donor policies), and senior management at both the global and country programme levels should lead in modelling a more flexible and reflective approach to programming.

SusWASH highlighted shortcomings in WaterAid's ability to effectively coordinate and balance its programming practice and policy advocacy at a national and global level. Gaps in capacity and resourcing for policy advocacy – particularly at a global level – contributed to this shortcoming, but it was underpinned by a somewhat artificial distinction between programming and policy. Work at a district level that identified progress barriers was not always translated into effective national advocacy. Whilst many of the programming interventions at a district level were advocacy engagements – for example on government leadership, citizen engagement, or accountability – a more structured advocacy approach to translating experiences into long-term policy change at a national level would have been beneficial. Whilst learning from SusWASH reached like-minded organisations, particularly in the Agenda

for Change (A4C) coalition, there was no concerted strategy to use the learning and policy implications from across the four countries to influence key official policy-making processes across global and national levels. While there was progress in sharing best practice lessons from SusWASH with some official donors – AusAid and SWA partners – there was not a proactive advocacy agenda to reach the sector more widely, and influence how key actors engage with and support WASH systems strengthening. There is a clear opportunity for WaterAid to enhance the links between programming and policy: the organisation's scale and reach within the WASH sector means that it is uniquely well-positioned to develop an advocacy approach based on practical experience of systems strengthening in numerous countries and diverse contexts.

Building on SusWASH for future systems strengthening work

WaterAid should build on the experience of SusWASH to extend and improve its work to support WASH systems strengthening in the countries in which it works. In line with its new Global Strategy, WaterAid should clearly advance the argument that universal access to sustainable WASH services and behaviours will only be achieved and maintained through strong local and national systems. WaterAid's work to strengthen WASH systems should be seen as integral to the organisation's commitment to advancing the human rights to water and sanitation.

As WaterAid develops its capacity for systems strengthening, it should use this practical experience to inform advocacy for systems strengthening at a national and global level, and contribute to the growing understanding of systems strengthening approaches within the WASH sector. The organisational learning from SusWASH can provide the basis for WaterAid's future work on systems strengthening. The tools and approaches promoted through SusWASH provide a model which other country programmes can adapt and use. However, this needs to be accompanied by shifts in organisational culture and ways of working if it is to support successful systems strengthening.

In building on SusWASH, WaterAid should seek to address the following issues, which will help support successful systems strengthening across the organisation.

- 1. Develop a long-term vision for work at the district level, and conditions for WaterAid's eventual exit, with local and national stakeholders.**
- 2. Identify and prioritise catalytic parts of WASH systems which should be addressed.**
- 3. Continue to develop and institutionalise approaches for understanding changes in WASH systems over time, and WaterAid's contribution to change.**
- 4. Build mechanisms to support a broader culture for adaptive learning and exchanges between country programmes, partners and stakeholders.**
- 5. Continue to develop internal capacity to apply system strengthening approaches at a country-programme level, including in the most challenging contexts.**
- 6. Put in place the right programme delivery structure, including staffing resources and partnerships, to support systems strengthening approaches.**
- 7. Be open to changes in organisational culture that support effective systems strengthening programming, where learning and adaptation from failure are encouraged.**
- 8. Ensure there is cohesion between policy and programme teams, both within countries and globally, so barriers to strong WASH systems can be addressed at all levels.**
- 9. Continue to make the case to donors for longer-term flexible funding for WASH systems strengthening.**

The full evaluation report includes specific recommendations for how WaterAid could seek to address each of these issues at organisational and country programme levels.



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