

Accelerating WASH Systems Strengthening

Background Note for 4-5th October 2023 Meeting in London

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 sets ambitious water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) targets. Vital progress is being made, but [most developing countries will not meet the SDG 6 targets by 2030](#). Robust WASH systems are essential for ensuring safe, sustainable and equitable services for everyone, everywhere, forever, and considerable improvements to WASH systems are urgently required to achieve the SDG 6 targets.

Systems thinking and the adoption of systems-based approaches has accelerated over the last decade. Initially led by a small group of NGOs and practitioners, systems strengthening has fed through to the policy arena. Bi-lateral donors and international organisations cite strengthening sector systems as a central element of their support, and national and sub-national governments are increasingly promoting and leading interventions to address systemic barriers impeding progress towards ambitious sector targets. However, systems strengthening is not yet explicitly or sufficiently embedded in national sector policy and practice, and improvements in the strength of WASH systems are not occurring at the rate required. Put simply, the uptake of WASH systems strengthening needs to accelerate and the WASH sector needs to collectively become more effective at strengthening WASH systems.

Within this context, the October 4-5th meeting will bring together a group of stakeholders to start identifying ways to accelerate the uptake and more effective application of systems-based approaches in the WASH sector. This background note highlights key achievements concerning WASH systems strengthening, outlines areas where the sector has struggled, and explains how these observations are feeding into the October meeting.

What has the sector achieved?

Vital progress has been achieved concerning WASH systems strengthening over the last decade. Key achievements include:

- 1. Uptake and Institutionalisation.** From initially being applied primarily by a small-set of international NGOs, systems-based concepts and approaches have been adopted and promoted by a broader set of actors, including other international NGOs, bi- and multi-lateral development partners, foundations, multi-country coalitions and alliances, and, to a lesser extent, national and sub-national government. The WASH sector is increasingly embracing systems language and a systems way of thinking. More than ever, a diverse range of actors are working to address the systemic challenges undermining sustainable and equitable service delivery. The most recent [GLAAS report](#), which was framed around the importance of strong WASH systems and spotlighted key factors such as finance, human resources, and regulation, is illustrative of this change. Moreover, the Africa Ministers Council on Water has adopted the language of systems strengthening for the upcoming [AfricaSan7 Conference](#) and is increasingly promoting interventions designed to address systemic weaknesses. The growing set of actors implementing systems-based approaches are also making considerable progress developing the organisation-wide buy-in, partnerships, and skills required to [institutionalise systems strengthening](#).
- 2. Applicability.** Systems strengthening started out with a rural water supply and district (or equivalent) level focus. While still relevant to the rural context, the applicability of this concept has progressively been expanded as more organisations (and types of organisations) adopt the approach, and we gain collective experience. Key improvements include placing greater emphasis on sanitation and hygiene in the [WASH system conceptual framework](#) broadly and for specific elements (i.e., [district-level planning](#), [sanitation markets](#)) as well as illustrating how concepts, tools, and interventions can be adapted to [fragile contexts](#). More broadly, resources such as the [Utility Turnaround Framework](#) support the conceptualisation and strengthening of key elements of the

WASH system. Across these elements, a range of [practical examples](#), [guidance documents](#), and [training platforms](#) have been developed.

3. **Impact and Evidence.** The sector continues to improve how monitoring and learning processes capture the impact of systems strengthening. This is resulting in a growing, albeit largely fragmented, body of evidence showing the tangible impact of stronger WASH systems on service delivery. This includes studies on the [impact of specific interventions on service delivery](#), [data on improved service levels in target districts](#), [case-studies of national-level change](#), and practitioner-focused reports on topics such as the [impact of different maintenance service provision models](#). Looking forward, the World Health Organization is hoping to integrate core indicators and metrics on WASH systems strengthening into GLAAS.
4. **Collective Action.** No single organisation can effectively address systemic weaknesses. Delivering systemic change requires collective action – multiple people, agencies, and organisations working collaboratively towards common objectives. Vital progress has been made bringing together actors committed to strengthening WASH systems and using a [range of collective action approaches](#) to enable partnerships, knowledge sharing, and joint advocacy. The [WASH Agenda for Change](#) initiative has focused its work on supporting country-level collaborations while continuing to broaden and deepen its activities promoting systems-based approaches. This is resulting in several noteworthy [examples of success](#). At the same time, leading systems-based organisations have come together in the [One for All Alliance](#) and [Millennium Water Alliance](#), while a range of other examples exist.
5. **Funding.** Although early funding for systems strengthening came from a small set of foundations and a few official funders (i.e., USAID’s [Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership](#)), at present the largest WASH sector donors are increasingly supporting systems-based approaches. FCDO (UK) and BMZ (Germany) are both funding large, flagship WASH systems strengthening programmes, while USAID and DGIS (The Netherlands) have ensured that the WASH programmes they fund contain sizable elements centred on addressing systemic weaknesses. Likewise, the World Bank, African Development Bank, and Asian Development Bank are increasingly embedding systems strengthening interventions into the design of their loans. More broadly, there has been a growing recognition and appreciation from funders of the importance of long-term and more flexible funding for systems strengthening.
6. **Government Leadership.** Ongoing sustainability and equity challenges, as well as processes such as joint sector reviews and building block diagnostics, have increased national and sub-national governments understanding and appreciation of the need to address systemic weaknesses. While government leadership on WASH systems strengthening often represents a key bottleneck, progress has been made. This includes the many countries that have taken the important steps of developing and ensuring alignment behind sector strategies on priority topics such as [financing \(Malawi\)](#), [regulating rural water supply and sanitation services \(Zambia\)](#) and [urban onsite sanitation \(Zambia\)](#), and [service delivery model professionalisation \(Uganda\)](#). It is also illustrated by national government’s spearheading the implementation of interventions such as the push in many countries to [establish or strengthen dedicated regulatory agencies for water and sanitation](#). Finally, it is seen more broadly in increasing government budget allocations for WASH and high-level commitments such as [Presidential WASH Compacts](#).

Box One: The Impact of WASH Systems Strengthening Interventions

From 2013 to 2021, Water for People helped address various underperforming elements of the water system in the northern rural district of Asunción, Perú. These included planning and financing universal services, finance for operations and maintenance, and skills building of district WASH offices and service providers. Critically, these interventions contributed to the percentage of [unserved households in Asunción decreasing from 17% to 3%](#) and the maintenance of service delivery levels at intermediate or high levels. Through these interventions, Water for People demonstrated that improving key factors in the WASH system with local actors can contribute to sustained service delivery levels over time.

Box Two: What does Government Leadership on WASH Systems Strengthening Look Like?

Government leadership is consistently highlighted as the most important factor to accelerating the uptake of WASH systems strengthening and addressing key systemic challenges. Three aspects of government leadership are especially important:

- **Providing Vision and Prioritising Action:** Specifying the priority WASH systems strengthening challenges to be addressed and offering an explicit vision for how they will be addressed is vital for enabling government leadership on WASH systems strengthening. This involves moving beyond top-level policy objectives to developing strategies and plans that development partners, government departments and agencies, and service providers can align behind.
- **Funding.** Increasing budget allocations and disbursements for the WASH sector and shifting the proportion of budgets focused on capital expenditures to expenditures on direct and indirect support is vital to sustainably addressing deep-rooted challenges and demonstrating government commitment and prioritisation.
- **Coordination.** In most low- and lower-middle income contexts, development partners will continue to play a key role in helping to address priority systemic challenges in at least the short- and medium-term. Government-led coordination of these efforts is crucial to ensure initiatives align with governments' own priorities and vision and that cross-organisational lessons are learnt and used to make necessary course corrections and promote best practices for upscaling.

Where has the sector struggled?

Despite noteworthy progress, the sector has struggled to address several crucial factors preventing the required uptake of WASH systems strengthening. Key bottlenecks include:

1. **Government Leadership.** Progress in increasing national and sub-national governments' recognition of the importance of addressing systemic weaknesses has often failed to translate into the development of government-led visions, strategies and processes to address priority systemic weaknesses. For example, in Ethiopia, a federal and vast country where massive infrastructure needs persist, stakeholders have struggled to prioritise – and provide targeted funding for – required systems strengthening interventions or enforce national government commitments at the state level. Additionally, where national government has developed a vision, this is often not followed through with commensurate increases in funding or clearly defined in strategies or processes to guide its attainment. Ultimately, until national and sub-national governments are the ones defining, spearheading, and funding large parts of the WASH systems strengthening agenda, systems-based approaches will remain fragmented and lack the political support needed for meaningful improvements at scale (see Box Two). Understanding the incentives to overcome these bottlenecks is essential if we are to accelerate systems strengthening efforts for WASH.
2. **Evidence.** A wide-ranging set of factors impede the development of a consolidated, quantitative and expansive evidence-base on the value and impact of systems-based approaches. These include the expectations and requirements of different audiences (i.e., government vs. donors), lack of common metrics, long time horizons required to gather significant data, and considerable financial resource requirements. This is compounded by the desire for country- and context-specific evidence and the fact that a huge range of factors impact the effectiveness and value-for-money of systems-based approaches, especially when focusing on higher levels of the WASH system. Commonly cited requirements for further evidence include value-for-money analysis, quantitative evidence demonstrating the attribution of service delivery improvements to specific investments in system strengthening, and cross-organisational and multi-country case-studies from low- and middle-income country contexts.
3. **Collective Action and Communication.** Collective action on WASH systems strengthening has often successfully brought together international NGOs and led to the adoption of a common language, information sharing, a more coordinated approach, and, in some cases, [tangible impact](#). However, [more substantive forms of collective action](#) based on deeper collaboration and integration

(i.e., using shared work plans, funding and monitoring frameworks) and joint implementation and advocacy have rarely been achieved. Furthermore, international NGOs committed to system strengthening often find themselves in direct competition for a finite funding pot. Ultimately, this has impeded efforts to address systemic weakness, communicate a consolidated message to national and sub-national government, and bring larger organisations such as bi- and multi-lateral donors to the table. Agreeing upon and utilising a common framework for assessing WASH systems and advocacy efforts and finding a way to leave behind organisation specific interests and provide more consolidated messaging and support to government were cited as key requirements for enabling more effective collective action. A range of perverse incentives, often related to the demands of funders, impede progress in these areas.

4. **Funding.** Securing funding for systems-based approaches is challenging. Systems strengthening is a long-term, indirect process that contributes to (indeed, underpins) sustainable service delivery but is harder to link directly to near-term outcomes such as increased WASH coverage. This can make it a tough sell to funders seeking clear attribution. Funding for systems-based approaches has increased, but further progress is needed, especially with the largest multi-lateral donors and national governments themselves. Key bottlenecks include the need to quantify the cost and value-for-money of systems strengthening initiatives as well as clear and effective communication.
5. **Institutionalisation and Capacity Development.** Effectively addressing systemic challenges is difficult. As WASH systems strengthening continues to gain greater support and more organisations and actors adopt, promote and upscale the approach, there is a crucial need to institutionalise systems strengthening within these actors. This requires building organisation-wide buy-in and support, identifying and supporting 'systems leaders' in developing capacities and skills, modifying monitoring and learning processes, and supporting and leverage partnerships. In particular, commonly cited challenges include the absorption capacity of organisations to expand often modest systems strengthening activities, as well as having the skillsets to work on more complex aspects of systems strengthening such as utility or private operator strengthening, regulation and financing.

These obstacles are inter-connected, with weak evidence, for example, contributing to low funding levels. Equally, progress addressing one barrier can support progress on others.

Linkage to the London meeting

Lasting systems change is difficult. It requires consistent leadership, a commitment to collective action, sustained funding, and a willingness to question the status quo to adopt new approaches, among other success factors. The achievements and challenges highlighted above are meant to inform the agenda and the discussions in the upcoming meeting in London. Indeed, the convening is being structured around three themes, identified above as amongst the main areas where acceleration is needed:

- **Theme 1.** Stimulating and sustaining government leadership in support of systems strengthening.
- **Theme 2.** Generating stronger evidence on the role of systems strengthening in improving service delivery.
- **Theme 3.** Improving collective action.

For each theme, we aim to have honest, and possibly difficult, conversations regarding key bottlenecks, to showcase inspiring examples and to rise above individual organisational incentives to identify required interventions as a group. Ultimately, we hope to hone in on existing approaches or processes that merit broader application and to generate new ideas that are worth testing and perhaps scaling.