



Visit to the water supply systems in Anosibe Ifody, Madagascar by a potential investor with a delegation from RANO WASH (RANO WASH/Dahery RAZAKA)



**AGENDA FOR CHANGE**  
Strengthening water, sanitation, and hygiene systems together

# Six Conditions for Institutionalising WASH Systems Strengthening

# FOREWORD

Implementing organisations are increasingly aware of the importance of working to strengthen local and national systems to enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services and behaviours; still, there are few concrete examples of what this looks like or the internal and external changes this shift requires. This think piece draws on lessons from Agenda for Change members that have started a deliberate journey to make systems strengthening central to their work, showcasing the experiences of broader members who share similar organisational journeys.

Throughout the paper, members explore how transitioning to systems strengthening requires rethinking how they work, including how programmes are designed, funded, and managed; committing to strong partnerships centred on local actors; and ensuring that organisations have the right capacities, resources, and culture to support successful systems strengthening.

A special thanks to our member Aguaconsult, especially Bill Twyman, for the support to synthesize this critical learning to further sharpen the current approach of systems thinkers and actors, as well as to inform organisations looking to adopt a systems approach to providing WASH services.



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Technicians fitting a pipe in Pampas de San Isidro, Cascas, Perú (Water for People)



## INTRODUCTION

Institutionalising water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems strengthening is a long-term process that varies between organisations based on the scale of their operations as well as their priorities, funding, and focus areas. This document distils learnings from Agenda for Change members' ongoing processes. It details six priority conditions organisations should focus on creating when institutionalising the approach and highlights common milestones.

## CONDITIONS FOR INSTITUTIONALISING-WASH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

The institutionalisation of WASH systems strengthening looks different for each Agenda for Change member, and members have made variable progress institutionalising the approach. Nevertheless, Agenda for Change members' experiences collectively highlight six conditions that need to be prioritised by organisations institutionalising the approach:

- ▶ Building and sustaining **organisation-wide buy-in and support** for applying WASH systems strengthening approaches.
- ▶ **Tailoring** the WASH systems strengthening approach to the organisation's priorities, expertise and the context of their operations.
- ▶ Joining and utilising **partnerships** at the global and national levels to drive the collective action fundamental to building strong WASH systems.
- ▶ Developing required **capacities and skills** to apply WASH systems strengthening approaches effectively.
- ▶ Modifying **monitoring and learning** processes to document impact and enable adaptive management.
- ▶ Securing sufficient flexible and long-term **funding** to implement WASH systems strengthening interventions effectively.

The six conditions overlap with requirements for effectively strengthening WASH systems at scale. Key steps in the institutionalisation process are also documented, and priorities for Agenda for Change and its members for further institutionalising the approach are outlined.



Figure 1: Organisational Conditions for Institutionalisation

## ORGANISATION-WIDE BUY-IN

Adopting WASH systems strengthening at scale within an organisation requires the commitment, buy-in, and passionate support of a wide-ranging set of personnel, including senior leadership (i.e., CEO), country directors, field staff, and fundraisers. Key learnings from members' work building organisation-wide buy-in include:

- ▶ The extent of the sustainability challenge in the WASH sector (and members' WASH programmes) were crucial points used in internal messaging on the need to move away from 'business-as-usual' approaches.
- ▶ Internal messaging on the need to adopt WASH systems strengthening works best when it avoids being overly negative and focuses on the many positives of adopting the approach, existing examples of WASH systems strengthening within the organisation, and tangible examples of impact.
- ▶ The level of detail and rationale for WASH systems strengthening needs to be tailored to the recipient, considering how they will react and their incentives for applying system strengthening.
- ▶ Global or strategic hubs at organisations' HQs were often key in building initial support for WASH systems strengthening. However, for the most progressive organisations, the country programmes lead and shape the WASH systems strengthening agenda.
- ▶ For long-term sustainability, internal champions need to be identified at the country programme level and empowered to promote the approach's upscaling to avoid repeat messaging from the same small set of stakeholders at HQ level.
- ▶ Messaging needs to cover all staff and units within the organisation, including fundraising and communication teams and senior management (see Box 1).
- ▶ Anchoring systems strengthening in global and national strategies can help prioritise support for the approach's further institutionalisation. However, on its own, including WASH systems strengthening in national or global strategies is insufficient to build organisation-wide buy-in.
- ▶ For multi-sectoral organisations, WASH systems strengthening is more likely to be institutionalised and upscaled if systems-based approaches are adopted across the organisation and cross-sectoral learning is strengthened.



Everyone Forever means lasting services for every household, clinic, and school (Water For People)

### Box 1. Water for People's Everyone Forever Approach

In 2011, Water for People began designing and implementing its WASH programmes based on the Everyone Forever approach, which emphasises a district-wide and long-term approach to WASH programming. Since 2011, organisation-wide buy-in for the approach and WASH systems strengthening has been progressively built through:

- ▶ Orientating all staff on WASH systems strengthening and the Everyone Forever approach.
- ▶ Modifying the approach to each country and empowering country programme staff to lead this process.
- ▶ Building the approach into organisational processes (i.e., training, monitoring, learning).
- ▶ Being selective by focusing on target districts and not chasing funding that is not aligned with the approach.
- ▶ Creating new positions and modifying job descriptions and organisational priorities during recruitment.

## TAILORED APPROACH

While WASH systems strengthening requires adopting common principles and ways of working, it is, by default, a complex approach, encompassing a diverse set of interventions that span different sub-sectors and building blocks and a diversity of actors. Organisations that have made the greatest progress in institutionalising WASH systems strengthening have tailored the approach to their expertise and the context in which they operate. Ultimately, systems strengthening should look different for each organisation – if it is not tailored, organisations will struggle to institutionalise (and effectively apply) the approach. Insights from members include:

- ▶ WASH systems strengthening can be tailored to the context the organisation works in (i.e., fragile vs. developmental), the sectors an organisation works in, and the levels and types of actors targeted for WASH systems strengthening.
- ▶ Most members have evolved their own frameworks (like the building blocks) to reflect their organisational reality and operating contexts. For example, placing greater emphasis on gender and social inclusion, highlighting linkages to sectors they also work in (i.e., health, education), and focusing on the levels of the WASH system they most commonly engage with.
- ▶ Based on insights derived from diagnostics, organisations can identify their ‘added value’ and start by focusing on low-hanging fruits and key weaknesses as well as the sub-sectors and building blocks where they have the greatest experience and tailor interventions to their context. For example, Concern Worldwide and Water for Good have both tailored their WASH systems strengthening work to reflect their experience and the fragile contexts they operate within.
- ▶ Developing resources and guidance materials can help to tailor WASH systems strengthening to an organisation’s programmatic focus and the context it works within while also helping to further refine and develop the approach (see Box 2).



Meeting of the Gogunou ACEP, whose president is a woman (Helvetas Bénin)

### Box 2. Using Resources to Tailor WASH Systems Strengthening

When Welthungerhilfe started actively looking to adopt and institutionalise WASH systems strengthening in 2016, WASH systems approaches had a water supply bias and often focused on ‘developmental’ or comparatively ‘stable’ contexts. This did not align with Welthungerhilfe’s emphasis on sanitation and hygiene because of their importance to nutrition security or the primarily fragile contexts where Welthungerhilfe operates. To help better align the approach to Welthungerhilfe’s programmatic focus and the context it operates in and provide guidance to staff, it supported the development of resources on sanitation and hygiene and systems strengthening in fragile contexts.



Systems Academy Training of Trainers in Ethiopia (IRC WASH)

### Box 3. Enabling Government Institutions to Embed Systems Strengthening in Ethiopia

IRC WASH's basic systems strengthening course is helping spread WASH systems strengthening concepts and approaches across Ethiopia. For instance, IRC has been working with other collaboration members and the Ethiopian Water Technology Institute (EWTI) to strategically influence the sector from within. Due to EWTI's mandate to strengthen sector practitioners' capacities and its established ties with education institutions across the country, there is a strong potential multiplication effect in the sector. For EWTI, the collaboration with members provides a welcome opportunity to innovate on its training content and delivery in line with its mandate.

## SUPPORTING AND LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS

Being part of global and national partnerships is essential to institutionalising WASH system strengthening. These partnerships provide channels for sharing learning and expertise, create opportunities to build on other organisations' work, help to foster peer-to-peer accountability, and drive the collective action fundamental to building strong WASH systems. Key learnings from members' actions supporting and leveraging partnerships include:

- ▶ A wealth of resources, best-practice examples, and learnings exist on WASH systems strengthening. Contextualisation is crucial but copying with pride and learning from other organisations' successes (and failures) is also vital.
- ▶ Joining, supporting, and actively participating in global sector partnerships helps to identify opportunities for collective action, ensure access to key insights and learnings, and build evidence and knowledge.
- ▶ National coalitions and collaborations on WASH systems strengthening play a key role in institutionalisation by enabling the sharing of country-specific learnings and expertise between like-minded organisations and facilitating collective action to address specific issues.
- ▶ More formalised partnerships with like-minded organisations can help to accelerate the institutionalisation and upscaling of WASH systems strengthening by enabling the adoption of complementary processes and heightening inter-organisational learning and accountability. For example, IRC WASH, WaterAid Care, and Splash are all part of the Millennium Water Alliance and implementing a systems-driven programme in Ethiopia (see Box 3).
- ▶ Several members have partnered with national civil society networks to strengthen the ability of the WASH systems strengthening programmes they are leading to improve sectoral learning and coordination platforms, promote collective action, and advocate on key issues.

## UPSKILLING AND TRAINING

Effectively implementing systems strengthening initiatives requires a range of skills, including adaptive management, critical analysis, facilitation and collaboration, advocacy, and understanding of public and private finance. Findings from members' efforts in this area include:

- ▶ A range of complementary steps are required to develop the skills required for WASH systems strengthening – it is not sufficient to rely on one form of capacity building and upskilling.
- ▶ There are a wide-ranging set of open-source and interactive courses that can be used to build staff capacity at a range of levels, encourage peer-to-peer learning, and can be referred back to as an ongoing resource (see Box 4).
- ▶ Integrating WASH systems strengthening into the orientation and induction processes for all staff can ensure that understanding of the approach is not limited to practitioners and that a foundational level of understanding exists organisation wide.
- ▶ New positions (i.e., 'national advisor on WASH systems strengthening') will likely need to be created and job descriptions and organograms modified to create organisational structures that can effectively implement WASH systems strengthening approaches.
- ▶ Organisational priorities and requirements during recruitment also need to shift to ensure new staff have adequate skillsets to understand and implement these approaches.
- ▶ It is equally important to share learning with national NGOs and CSOs to implement WASH systems strengthening approaches. Upskilling and training should not be limited to a single organisation's staff, and implementing partners should be helped to meaningfully participate in and co-lead these opportunities.
- ▶ Organisations should compile relevant resources on different aspects of WASH systems strengthening so that these are readily available to staff, partners, and other key stakeholders. For example, Welthungerhilfe developed a dedicated resource library compiling existing resources for country and field practitioners that also introduces key topics and concepts.
- ▶ Partnerships with specialist organisations and technical assistance can ensure access to required expertise on specific WASH systems strengthening topics or to perform tasks such as undertaking diagnostics. However, it is important to avoid becoming overdependent, and efforts must be taken to reduce support requirements over time.



### Box 4. The WASH Systems Academy

The WASH systems academy is a largely open-source learning platform for WASH systems strengthening. It comprises a wide-ranging set of courses that include an introduction to WASH systems strengthening as well as specific courses on topics such as costing sustainable water sources and market-based sanitation. Courses contain case studies from around the world and are interactive, comprising a range of exercises that enable participants to think through and localise key aspects of WASH systems strengthening and learn from each other.





Operator of the drinking water system in the Llimbe community of Asunción, Perú (Water For People)

#### Box 5. Improved Water Service Delivery through WASH Systems Strengthening in Asunción, Perú

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.

## MODIFIED MONITORING AND LEARNING PROCESSES

Organisation-wide monitoring and learning processes are needed to document the impact of WASH systems strengthening interventions, enable adaptive management, support cross- and inter-organisational learning, and improve the design and implementation of WASH systems strengthening programmes. Key learnings from members' actions to develop these processes include:

- ▶ To effectively monitor systems change, monitoring frameworks need to be modified to focus on understanding changes in the underlying strength of the WASH system and the quality of WASH services rather than more simplistic indicators such as the number of beneficiaries or workshops and training sessions delivered.
- ▶ Changing monitoring and learning processes to focus on collective action toward building stronger WASH systems rather than trying to prove direct attribution is crucial.
- ▶ A theory of action can complement a theory of change and aid institutionalisation by ensuring the organisation reflects on and articulates the mechanisms through which the desired outputs, outcomes and impact will be achieved and the organisation's role (as one of several actors) in achieving these.
- ▶ To enable adaptive management and to learn from mistakes, a culture must be created whereby failures and mistakes can be openly presented and discussed. Active leadership from senior management is crucial to establishing such an environment.
- ▶ Dedicated platforms and processes for learning and reflection, such as internal working groups, webinar series, and quarterly and annual pause and reflect sessions, help members to capture learnings from their WASH systems strengthening work and use these to modify their activities and ways of working.
- ▶ Several robust examples of the impact of WASH systems strengthening interventions on service delivery have been developed. Nevertheless, the cost of regular service-level monitoring and addressing systemic challenges in this area represents a key barrier to strengthening the evidence base on the impact of members' WASH systems strengthening interventions on service delivery and, in turn, making a more compelling argument for the approach's further upscaling.

## UNEARMARKED AND LONG-TERM FUNDING

Without reliable and flexible funding, WASH systems strengthening cannot be institutionalised and upscaled. Those organisations that have made the greatest progress institutionalising and upscaling the approach have successfully modified how they secure funding and the types of funding they target. Key learnings from members' activities on this core condition of institutionalisation include:

- ▶ Several members benefitted considerably from accessing external funding specifically designed to support the institutionalisation of WASH systems strengthening. This funding often focused on members' strategic or global hubs at HQ level (see Box 6).
- ▶ Concerted, consistent, and honest dialogue with public and private donors is needed to effectively communicate the importance of focusing on causation over attribution, the need to move beyond reporting focused on overly simplistic headline indicators, and the extent of the challenge of strengthening WASH systems.
- ▶ Securing funding for WASH systems strengthening in fragile contexts remains particularly challenging as there is a greater emphasis on direct service delivery and particular implementation modalities. Nevertheless, these challenges can be overcome. In the Central African Republic, by understanding its role in a fragile WASH system and demonstrating the considerable impact of its circuit rider maintenance model, Water for Good has secured the funding required to significantly upscale its work.
- ▶ Unearmarked internal funds can play a key role in bridging gaps in less flexible funding and have enabled members to continue applying more light-touch systems strengthening approaches between larger programmes.
- ▶ Members have learnt to place greater emphasis on system diagnostics and the proactive seeking of funds for WASH systems strengthening from public and private donors as opposed to responding to donor requests.
- ▶ The absence of a stronger consolidated and quantitative evidence base on the impact and value for money of WASH systems strengthening on WASH services is a key barrier to accessing greater funding levels for the approach.



Headteacher of Mirembe Primary School presents the life-cycle costed WASH budget (WaterAid/James Kiyimba/H M Foundation)

### Box 6. The Value of Securing Dedicated Funding for Institutionalisation

Since 2020, WaterAid's Programme Support Unit has received dedicated funding to lead core aspects of institutionalising WASH systems strengthening. This funding has been used to:

- ▶ Embed systems strengthening in WaterAid's global strategy and, to varying extents, within each country programme's national strategy.
- ▶ Training fundraising teams on WASH systems strengthening concepts and how to communicate the approach to donors.
- ▶ Determining capacity at the HQ and country levels on WASH systems strengthening and designing an internal capacity-building plan.
- ▶ Updating induction modules to reflect WASH systems strengthening.



Activity during Civic Champions program in Battambang Province, Cambodia (WaterSHED)

## MILESTONES IN THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF WASH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

The institutionalisation of WASH systems strengthening looks different for each Agenda for Change member. Nevertheless, several common milestones of success have been achieved across each of the six priority conditions for institutionalising WASH systems strengthening (see Figure 2). Each milestone can be achieved at varying levels, ranging from limited or initial progress to full integration<sup>1</sup>. These milestones are generally broad, and any effort to institutionalise WASH systems strengthening should be tailored to the organisation by identifying more specific target indicators of success.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Tearfund (2005) Mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction: A Tool for Development Organisations' for an example of a more specific set of indicators that cover different levels of mainstreaming.

CONDITIONS	MILESTONES
 <p><b>Organisation-Wide Buy-In</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All staff members support the application of WASH systems strengthening approaches and principles</li> <li>• WASH systems strengthening approaches and principles are at the forefront of organisational programme guidance and frameworks.</li> <li>• WASH systems strengthening has a central role in organisation-wide strategy and, where they exist, country-level strategies.</li> <li>• WASH systems strengthening is implemented across programmes and, where relevant, sectors rather than through individual flagship programmes and pilots.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Tailored Approach</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The building block framework is refined to reflect organisational priorities and experience and the context it operates within.</li> <li>• Diagnostics are consistently utilised to tailor WASH systems strengthening interventions to the context and organisational priorities and experience.</li> <li>• Resources and guidance materials have been developed to evolve and refine WASH systems strengthening in the organisation's areas of experience expertise.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Supporting &amp; Leveraging Partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is a member of – and actively participates in – global and national-level partnerships and collaborations for and closely related to WASH systems strengthening.</li> <li>• Has a formalised partnership with a like-minded organisation or organisations to facilitate collective action and the more effective implementation of systems strengthening interventions.</li> <li>• Collective action is ingrained into the organisational culture and ways of working.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Upskilling and Training</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide-ranging forms of capacity building are regularly utilised for staff and implementing partners.</li> <li>• WASH systems strengthening is included in the orientation processes for new staff.</li> <li>• The skills required for WASH systems strengthening are consistently emphasised during recruitment and a key factor in the selection of successful candidates.</li> <li>• Job descriptions and organograms reflect the skills and support required to effectively implement WASH systems strengthening interventions and principles.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Modified Monitoring, &amp; Learning Processes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theories of change and theories of action have been developed for WASH systems strengthening activities.</li> <li>• Monitoring frameworks focus on changes to the underlying WASH system and WASH services.</li> <li>• Cross- and intra-organisational learning platforms exist and are utilised.</li> <li>• There is an organisation-wide willingness to openly discuss and diagnose failures.</li> <li>• Robust evidence generated on the impact of systems strengthening interventions.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Unearmarked and Long-Term Funding</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated funding secured from a large traditional funder for organisational development related to systems strengthening.</li> <li>• Dedicated funding secured for flagship systems strengthening programme.</li> <li>• Key donors are convinced of the value of providing flexible and long-term funding and consistently provide funding in-line with these requirements.</li> <li>• Systems diagnostics used to proactively seek funds for WASH systems strengthening.</li> </ul>

*Figure 2: Milestones of Success Across the Six Priority Conditions for Institutionalising WASH Systems Strengthening*



Agenda for Change Global Coordinator (left), Bethlehem Mengistu, speaking with Mr. Sokkung Sou of WaterAid Cambodia (right) (Agenda for Change)

## NEXT STEPS

Agenda for Change members' have made important progress institutionalising WASH systems strengthening. However, efforts are far from complete, and members continue to evolve how they design, staff, plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, communicate, and fund their work. Further progress needs to be made across each of the six priority conditions for institutionalising WASH systems strengthening: (i) organisation-wide buy-in and support; (ii) tailored approaches; (iii) supporting and leveraging partnerships; (iv) upskilling and training; (v) modifying monitoring and learning processes; and (vi) securing sufficient unearmarked and long-term funding. Standout priorities for members – and Agenda for Change itself – include:

- ▶ Expanding and intensifying national- and country-level partnerships and collaborations on WASH systems strengthening.
- ▶ Increasing and diversifying the funding WASH systems strengthening receives and building the confidence required from public and private donors to ensure the availability of sufficiently flexible and long-term funding to address identified priorities.
- ▶ Improving how WASH systems strengthening programmes and interventions are monitored and strengthening and consolidating the evidence base on the approach's impact on service delivery.
- ▶ Integrating WASH systems strengthening approaches and principles such as the use of building block diagnostics and the promotion of collective action into all WASH programmes.



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