

Facilitating change in a complex environment: delivering rural water services in Ghana

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Overview

For rural populations to experience reliable access to safe water services, sector actors – policymakers, technical support agencies, regulators, service providers, facility owners, development partners and NGOs – need to work in harmony, guided by an approach that emphasises service delivery rather than simply extending the nominal 'coverage' of water infrastructure.

Between 2009 and 2014 IRC, through the Triple-S project, supported Ghana's rural water agency, CWSA, to build consensus around a new vision of adequate water services that are sustained over time and develop an approach to make that vision a reality.¹ This brief shares some lessons from how CWSA, pilot districts³ and partners were supported to navigate the sector's complex realities.

Summary box

A proactive partnership approach that emphasises shared learning and reflection has been a critical factor in advancing sector-wide change and improving coherence in approaches. Triple-S engaged continuously with sector stakeholders in an iterative way.

Supporting the pivotal state institution from behind has helped to restore national leadership and ownership. As a 'critical friend', Triple-S backstopped CWSA with strategic inputs in policy facilitation and engagement, action research and strategic communication designed to promote the scaling of solutions.

Actors involved at the sector's multiple levels are beginning to cooperate more effectively, with CWSA, districts and partners jointly identifying areas needing improvement. Replication of successful solutions is occurring quite naturally because of the collective investment in defining and reflecting on the experiments to test them.

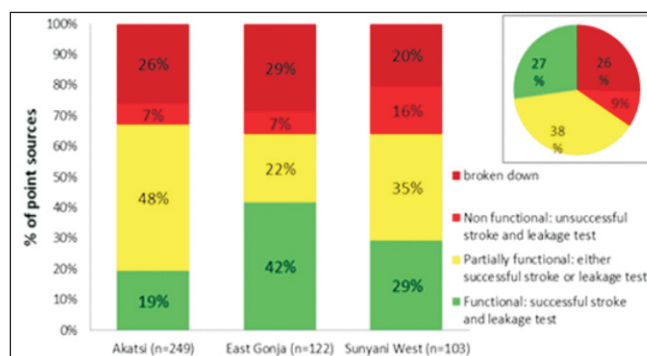
Service monitoring results show marginal improvements, but the direct impact on rural communities (good quality water flowing consistently, with shorter queues) will need more time to manifest. Further, to enhance the project's impact on human health, it will be important to integrate sanitation into the initiative, in line with current WASH practice.

¹The Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S) project was a multi-country initiative implemented by IRC and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In Ghana, Triple-S was hosted by the state institution, the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA).

²East Gonja - Northern Region; Sunyani West - Brong Ahafo Region; Akatsi North and Akatsi South - Volta Region

Background to the project

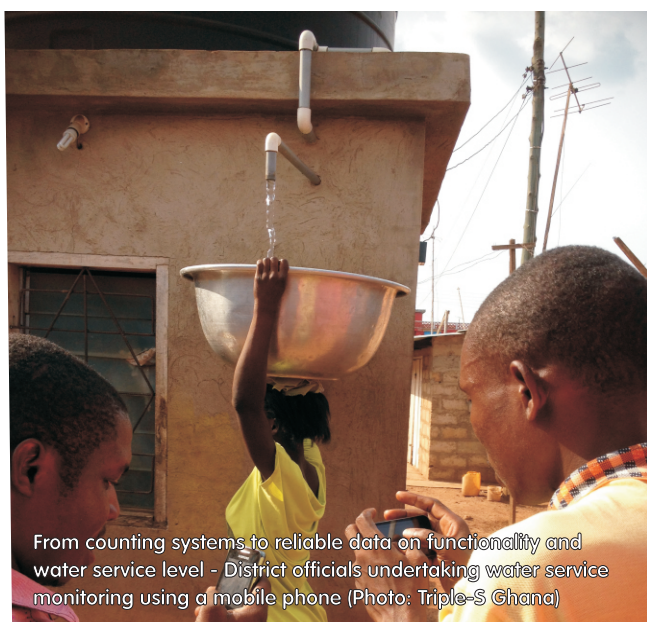
In its quest to meet the Millennium Development Goals, Ghana's rural water sector had been pre-occupied with extending 'coverage' by accelerating the installation of water infrastructure. As a result, water supply has now been extended to 64% of rural households (CWSA, 2013). However, even this modest statistic masks a disturbing reality – that only one-quarter of hand-pumps are fully functional, according to a 2012 baseline study (Figure 1).



Monitoring findings from 3 districts (Triple-S Ghana)

This problem is mirrored across sub-Saharan Africa, where some 36% of hand-pumps are non-functional at any given time (RWSN, 2009), representing between US\$1.2 and US\$1.5 billion in lost investments over the last 20 years. Thus, for millions of rural Ghanaians, the provision of new water infrastructure has tended to provide only transient access to improved supplies.

Over the decades, donors have dominated the rural water landscape, driving the sector through autonomous projects and financing some 95% of all



From counting systems to reliable data on functionality and water service level - District officials undertaking water service monitoring using a mobile phone (Photo: Triple-S Ghana)

rural water expenditure. The convergence between such a high level of dependence and ineffective sector governance arrangements left the government in a weak position to provide leadership to the sector. The multiplicity of actors active in the rural water sector (bilateral and multilateral development partners, local and international NGOs, central and local governments, community-based service providers and the private sector) – each using their own approach – further compounded the problems of a fragmentation. Triple-S undertook a structured, collective change process to refocus sector actors around providing sustainable water services. This process involved action research, joint reflection and ongoing learning, and through it, the goal of service delivery and the associated concepts of functionality, service levels and planning for life-cycle costs are being clarified, socialised and embedded in the culture of the sector. The process and outcomes are outlined in more detail below.

The Triple-S change process

Triple-S's first phase sought to build trust with key actors, foster consensus around the sector's problems and promising concepts, and support CWSA to lead more effectively. The second phase focused on a collaborative endeavour to test a range of promising solutions in three pilot districts. In consultation with sector stakeholders, the project diagnosed the root causes of failed water systems, generated alternative solutions, and interrogated and refined them through experimentation. Through regular feedback and reflection workshops, the models were continually improved and internalised. By providing empirical evidence for informed policymaking, the results of the pilots also served to boost the confidence and leadership capacity of CWSA. The third phase, which outlives the initial five-year project, is working to institutionalise the gains and actively promote scaling of the new pathways to delivering sustained water services.

Whereas previous projects had typically been managed autonomously, the Triple-S initiative was deliberately hosted by CWSA with the view

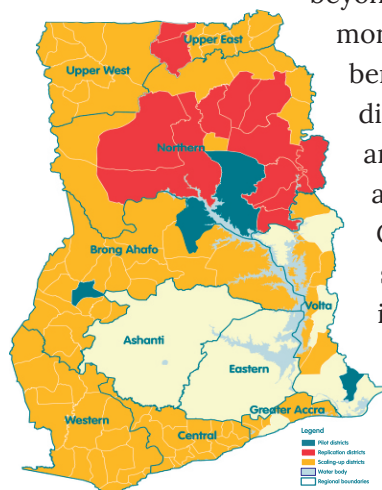
to fostering institutionalisation of the outcomes. Through regular joint learning and reflection meetings, Triple-S supported CWSA to rethink its organisational systems and develop evidence-informed policy documents and tools needed for leading the drive towards service delivery. The project also facilitated regular external reflections with the pilot districts and other sector stakeholders.



As the initiative aimed to influence sector dynamics and dialogue, continuous investments were made in mainstreaming the research conclusions into routine sector practice. Triple-S committed significant resources to communicating its results and to facilitating dialogue around them.

The result is that high-level policy statements now routinely acknowledge a service delivery approach. CWSA has revised its mission statement and published revised service planning frameworks with relevant budgetary provisions reflecting the ethos of the new vision. For the first time too, implementation guidelines include explicit requirements to budget for an extended life cycle

beyond construction. A revised monitoring tool with agreed benchmarks on reliability, distance, coverage, quality and quantity has been adopted by the sector. Commitment to SDA is strong and growing, indicated by key sector donors (the Dutch Government, SNV, UNICEF and the World



Ghana map showing districts where service monitoring has been scaled-up (Photo: Triple-S Ghana)

Bank) agreeing to resource CWSA to scale up the service monitoring model from an initial three (just over 1%) to 131 (nearly 61%) of Ghana's 216 administrative districts. In 2014, Conrad Hilton Foundation also committed to effectively extend the initiative with a three-year grant of US\$3 million.

How much did Triple-S cost in Ghana?

Facilitating change in a complex sector involves considerable iteration, investment in formal and informal networking and learning, and nurturing and allowing the pivotal national institution to steer the process. The cost of the Triple-S initiative in Ghana has been nearly US\$1 million per year, equivalent to some US\$10 million over the ten-year period that IRC estimates is required to achieve durable change in the sector. This excludes earlier investments made by IRC, which Triple-S has built upon.

Challenges and recommendations

While Triple-S has clearly steered the sector closer towards a collective vision of sustained service delivery, the direct impact on rural communities needs time to manifest. Recent service monitoring results are already indicating small improvements. Nevertheless, the functionality of facilities continues to fluctuate, even deteriorating in a minority of cases. Greater attention will need to be paid to identifying and addressing the reasons for slower-than-expected improvement in the pilot districts.

Despite generally respectable support for the SDA, it will require more time, hand-holding, reflection and 'proving the concept' to sustain the momentum, persuade remaining sceptics and fully institutionalise the shift. This effort will be particularly important beyond CWSA's headquarters and the three regions and districts where the pilots ran.

Although there is a desire to redefine CWSA's role from one of implementer to facilitator cum sector regulator, precisely how that role will evolve requires further reflection. Moreover, there are fears that the shift will entail a loss of

fees associated with the implementer role. CWSA will continue to need sensitive support both to rediscover itself in its new role as well as to develop new revenue streams.

Finally, sector financing remains a major challenge, with deficits of the order of 54% and 28% in 2011 and 2012 respectively (GOG, 2010)³ – engendered in part by a decline in grants following Ghana's attainment of lower middle-income status and the declining interest of government to source commercial loans to finance a social sector such as water. Such constraints in financing without a clear alternative public finance to bridge the gap in donor funding, threaten the sector's ability to fund relevant post-construction activities that assure the expected improvements in service delivery. The current Community Ownership and Management (COM) financial management model does not encourage using operating revenues to finance capital and replacement costs. A comprehensive performance audit of the technical, operational, and financial and accountability dimensions of the

management models of the 900-plus small town and limited reticulated systems in particular will be necessary to inform adaptation to a revolving fund for capital cost, maintenance and expansion.



Fortunately, the sector's new partnerships provide some opportunity to proactively respond to the above challenges and explore how to apply the insights gained towards promoting change in the allied sanitation sector.

³These statistics are relative to the amount pledged in the Ghana Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) 2012 Statement of Commitment presented at Washington DC during the High Level Meeting. The annual financial commitment of US\$400 million stipulated in the Ghana SWA Compact (2010) has been revised downward to \$120 million.

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