

IRC

All systems go!

**BACKGROUND NOTE FOR
THE WASH SYSTEMS SYMPOSIUM**

**EXTENDED VERSION WITH
REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**



50 years of IRC.
WASH systems that transform lives.

All systems go! Background note for the WASH systems symposium

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Please cite this background note as follows:

Huston, A., Moriarty, P. & Lockwood, H., 2019. All systems go!: Background note for the WASH systems symposium. The Hague, The Netherlands: IRC

Published by IRC

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When we turn on a tap or flush a toilet, we rarely think about what lies behind these seemingly simple acts. We are blind to the complexity of the system of people and elements that need to be in place to make them possible. As a result, we often underestimate what it takes to provide the basic services that such systems deliver.

Systems are all around us, delivering essential services that we rely on. Get on a bus, go to a hospital, drop your children at school, drive on the motorway – in each case, you are interacting with a system. Some have clearer boundaries and are more obvious than others, but they all have different elements that interact in complex and interdependent ways to deliver some service. In effective systems, people and organizations work with each other and with all sorts of more and less tangible elements, such as funding, policy, institutions, technology and the physical environment, to deliver the services that people want and need. The stronger and more developed the system, the more comprehensive and durable the services it delivers.

When they work well, systems are unnoticed by the people they serve. When they don't, the failure is obvious: the plane is cancelled, the electricity shuts down, the tap opens but no water comes out.

Universal water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services are vital to our collective welfare and development. The goal of WASH services is to save and improve lives. For public services like WASH, service delivery is understood to be a core responsibility of the state, whether the government itself provides the service directly or oversees its provision by others. WASH systems can, and do, come under stress in all countries and regions of the world; all face the challenges of limited support, both financial and political, and limited willingness to pay even as demand grows and expectations of universal service rise. Yet in many poorer countries, the basic elements required for the WASH system to function simply do not exist or do not work as they are expected to. The 'rules of the game' are not clearly established or respected, or individuals and institutions lack the resources to perform their functions.

The Kampala WASH symposium in June 2016, **From Projects to Services: WASH Sustainability through Whole Systems Approaches**, introduced the concept of WASH as a system (Lockwood et al., 2016). In March 2019, **All Systems Go!** will build on the Kampala outcomes, bringing together people from all parts of the WASH sector to exchange ideas, learn from past experience and more clearly see how to strengthen WASH systems.

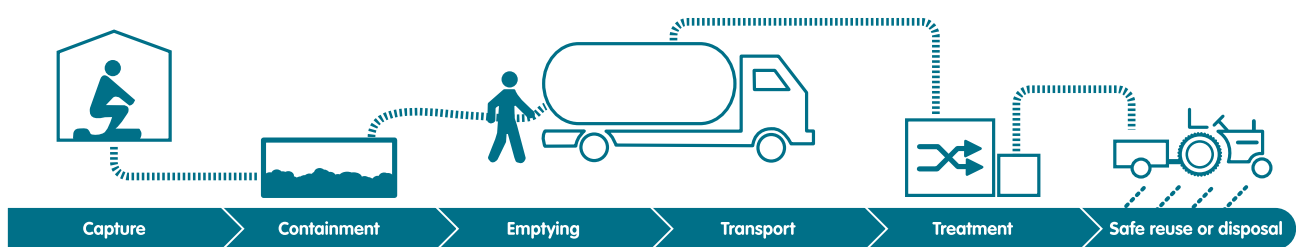


Figure 1: The user may only see a toilet, but the sanitation value chain requires multiple interacting systems to work together to ensure safe sanitation.

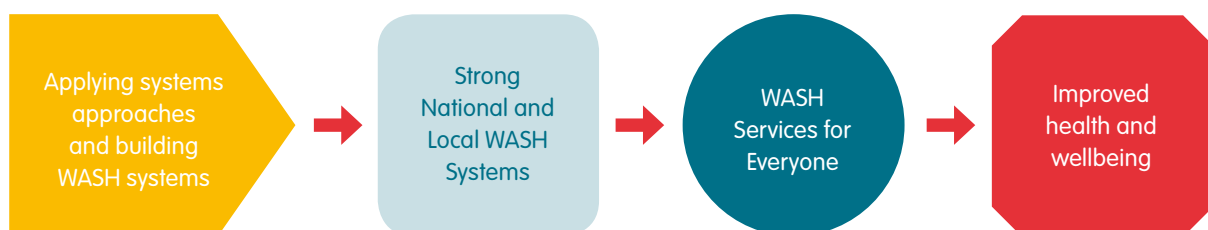


Figure 2: Theory of change for WASH sector

This background note sets the scene for the symposium. It looks at our understanding of WASH as a system and the evolution of systems thinking – why this concept is important and how we can use it to help achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, universal access to water, sanitation and hygiene services by 2030. This note is a slightly extended and more referenced version of the note provided to all participants prior to the symposium.

What progress have we made?

Indicators for global health and development are showing improvement, most of the time, for almost everyone. Since 1990, infant mortality has almost halved globally, and in low-income countries the reduction was almost 60% (UN IGME, 2018). In the same period, the world's gross domestic product doubled in purchasing power terms, including in the least-developed countries (World Bank, 2017). Water and sanitation access has also improved since 1990: the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for water was achieved before the 2015 target date, and progress was made in sanitation, despite it being slower and starting from a lower base (JMP, 2015), even as the world's population grew from 5.3 billion (1990) to 7.5 billion (2015).

As we creep towards universal access – as we are doing at least for drinking water access – the challenge becomes greater: to improve the quality and safety of services and to reach those left behind, who are often the most remote, most disenfranchised and most marginalised people. Progress is slow in the most fragile countries and the poorest regions. Many services are sub-standard: infrastructure fails, water quality is poor, unemptied latrines leak contaminants into the environment.

In the 15 years of the MDGs, primary school enrolment in low-income countries rose from 61% to 100%. Three years into the SDG era, access to basic sanitation in the poorest countries is just 57% – lower than access to primary education in 1990 (JMP, 2017).

Now Sustainable Development Goal 6 sets a daunting new target: 'Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'. Universal access by 2030, with clearly defined service ladders that specify not just access (as in the past) but safety of individuals and the environment (JMP, 2017), would be challenge enough if the world were standing still. But with rising inequality, accelerating climate change, and continuing population growth and urbanisation, the service that meets people's needs today must be adapted, expanded and transformed to meet their expectations tomorrow.

Why is WASH so difficult?

Firstly, WASH is just difficult. It is a technically complex service with unavoidable associated costs. Moreover, the combination of services and behaviours that we refer to as WASH are imbued with social and cultural significance. Water is considered a 'gift from God', and people are naturally resistant to the application of market principles that mean paying for piped drinking water and sewered sanitation. Even the most basic levels of service – point water sources and household latrines – require long and complicated supply chains that someone needs to provide, manage, maintain and pay for. Raising levels of service means more of everything: more skills, more management, more regulation, more cost. To meet the target set by the SDGs, WASH services have to be delivered to every child, woman and man in every household, school and workplace. Unlike education or health care, it's not enough to provide a service and have people come to it – the service has to go to them.

Secondly, WASH is a service to which all people are entitled, and government must either provide it or ensure its provision through investment, direction and regulation. The assumption of universality coupled with the recognition of water as a human right means that government's responsibility is unavoidable. With strong leadership and capable politicians and managers, success is possible. Where such strong political will is in place, major progress can be made. Consider Singapore and Korea, where universal sanitation and hygiene coverage was achieved in a generation (WaterAid, 2016), or India, which has made huge progress in tackling open defecation through the creation of the Swachh Bharat Mission¹, or Ethiopia, with its multi-sectoral and multi-partnership One WASH national programme², which has extended both water and basic sanitation in a country of more than 100 million. But in many countries, the WASH sector – sanitation, hygiene and rural water services in particular – remains a low political priority. Governments have essentially passed responsibility to international development agencies, NGOs, communities and small informal providers.

Thirdly, there is often no shared vision, understanding, agreement or measurement framework for what is to be achieved. Yes, most countries and many international actors are committed to 'universal access', but they too often fail to answer the difficult questions: Access to what type and level of service? Provided by whom (public, private, or community entity)? Against what benchmarks? Within what regulatory environment? Particularly important

is government's role: Is it supplier, investor, regulator or some mix? The results are a lack of clarity, particularly in rural and peri-urban landscapes, and a patchwork of 'anything goes', where sub-standard and unsustainable services are accepted as the norm, and where the poor and marginalised are left behind.

Those three problems are systems challenges that require systems-level solutions.

BOX 1: A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO WASH: CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

WASH system: the whole network of people, organisations and institutions (actors) plus infrastructure, resources and behaviours (factors) that deliver WASH services. The WASH system exists within the wider political economy and interacts with other sectors (Huston and Moriarty, 2018).

Systems thinking: the understanding that it takes a whole system to achieve a given objective, and no individual component can succeed alone. This implies working with the system's dynamic and constantly evolving nature.

Systems approach: any of a range of methodologies that use systems thinking to learn about and drive change. The common thread is an effort to make the entire system – its individual components and their interactions – more effective in achieving the desired outcome.

WASH systems approach: the understanding that WASH services are delivered and used in complex environments that interact with and influence those services, and that improvements require systemic change.

What prompted the shift to a systems approach?

The persistence of a partial and failed system for WASH can be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s, decades when government largely abdicated its responsibility, and development partners encouraged them to do so. Policy measures were expected to solve the problem. In urban areas, privatisation handed responsibility to for-profit companies. In rural areas, the onus was on volunteers and households with no legal standing and limited resources and skills to operate and maintain engineering

infrastructure. The resulting three decades of 'community management', 'household sanitation' and other essentially fragmented approaches have brought us to the point where we are today: more than 50% of people in even the poorest countries have access to some form of latrine, and more than 90% have access to some form of improved water source, but the levels of service are not acceptable, and many of the most vulnerable have been left behind (JMP, 2017).

The good news is that the sector has evolved over the past decade, from emphasising infrastructure alone to recognising that the ultimate goal is delivery of safe and safely managed WASH services. The focus on safely managed services means that the necessary factors must be in place, and it demands a coordinated effort by all, with government in the lead. Although not explicitly speaking of 'systems approaches' or 'system strengthening', this intent is seen in initiatives that seek to strengthen the 'enabling environment' and look beyond initial service delivery. The growing number of 'joint sector reviews' implemented by WASH ministries is one indicator of change; the adoption of broader planning and assessment frameworks, such as UNICEF's WASH Bottleneck Analysis Tool³, and systems mapping tools, such as shit flow diagrammes⁴, is another. On the ground these approaches have been championed by, amongst others, IRC, which promulgated the Service Delivery Approach in the late 2000s⁵; Water Aid, with its District Wide Approach⁶; and Water For People, with the 'Everyone Forever' approach to working at district level⁷. Based on their different experiences, these three NGOs went on to establish the Agenda For Change⁸ initiative, which promotes harmonised district-level efforts to ensure that everyone has adequate WASH services, whilst working to create the national-level systems necessary for all districts in the country to provide sustainable and reliable services for all people.

Collectively, all of those examples reflect a fundamental new step: moving away from one-off solutions to understanding the need to support an entire system. This transition can be found in the slogan 'We don't fix pipes, we fix the institutions that fix the pipes', first made by a senior manager in the World Bank in 2004⁹. The shift is a natural response to learning what does not work, such as projects with short-cycle funding intended to deliver fast results, and models in which unpaid volunteers and households are supposed to manage engineering infrastructure. Such well-meaning approaches were – and to an extent remain – blind to the formal and informal political, economic and social systems that govern human societies.

The shift is also increasingly evident in both donors' criteria and national governments' policies. Bi-lateral donors such as DFID, USAID and DGIS have all established guidelines that explicitly reference strengthening local systems and seek a better balance between investing in infrastructure and supporting WASH systems at both local and national levels¹⁰. National governments are also strengthening district-level systems and investing in regular, government-led sector performance reviews, which are at the heart of efforts to improve WASH services; Uganda is an example¹¹. The Sanitation and Water for All partnership of national governments, civil society, the private sector, academia and donors enshrines the new way of thinking in its framework of collaborative behaviours, building blocks and principles.

What is the value of a systems approach?

In recent years, the thinking has started to crystallise around a more explicit focus on the WASH sector as a complex system delivering WASH as a public service. This shift recognises the global evidence about what does work, such as professional utilities operating in a well-financed and regulated system as is seen in most countries in the global north. Successful public utilities are also increasingly found in the south, like Burkina Faso's ONEA¹², vibrant city-wide sanitation initiatives like in Lusaka¹³, and an increasing number of successful small private operators. All of these positive examples show us that it is possible to deliver a service – provided the building blocks of a system, such as sufficient finance, clear regulatory frameworks and competent operators¹⁴ and authorities, are in place. Collectively, progress across these areas complements efforts to define and strengthen the enabling environment for WASH and recognises the importance of social, political and economic factors alongside engineering inputs.

The shift comes with the understanding of a need for broader systems change to ensure evidence about what does and does not work translates into meaningful organisational behaviour change at multiple levels. It has led to new insights, tools and interventions that improve our capacity for systems thinking, refine our understanding of local and national WASH systems and enhance our ability to drive systems change.

Thinking in terms of the systems necessary to deliver services is routine in health care and education, and other sectors as well have adopted ideas from systems thinking¹⁵. IRC believes it must also become a core competence of WASH actors, at all levels.

BOX 2: FROM SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO SYSTEMS ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Over the past decade, using small-scale, often local private providers to deliver water and sanitation services has received increasing attention. Success stories at the community or social enterprise level abound ... but why have few such enterprises become independent of their 'incubators'?

In a word, systems. Weak institutional and regulatory systems make it easy to experiment at small scale, essentially by flying below the regulatory radar. But scale requires finance, and finance hates uncertainty, and certainty comes only with clear policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks. Who wants to invest in a business if ownership of the assets or duration of a concession is unclear? District governments may welcome offers of a new water supply scheme from an NGO, but what bank will invest in a private entrepreneur seeking to build such a scheme if, in the end, the district can claim the assets and assign a new operator three years later?

Systems entrepreneurship means addressing the enabling environment necessary for an intervention and supporting its development while preparing the enterprise to scale. Unless the wider system is addressed, barriers will remain insurmountable, and the enterprise will never be financially viable – independent of social investors – and sustainable.

What do we know already?

IRC's work with a systems focus over the past several years has led to six insights with practical implications.

1. **Mapping the system shows the way.** Identify the stakeholders, incentives and power dynamics, both formal and informal, in a reflective exercise with thoughtful facilitation. Understand what others are doing and engage actively and constructively with them. Also understand your own place in the system. Development partners are not 'external' actors: they are part of the system, and what they do – as well as what they don't – influences the system. Tested tools for mapping include WaterAid's Political Economy Analysis toolkit¹⁶, which helps to assess the incentives and power dynamics around critical entry points, and the on-going work of the Sustainable WASH Systems Learning

Partnership, which has applied organizational mapping and factor analysis tools to better understand the dynamics within local WASH systems¹⁷. Recognise your own place in the system, too, and how your work relies on that of others: Can my work be scaled up within the existing political economy? Am I pursuing a systems-level change that can achieve a radical shift? Can my successes be sustained?

2. There are no silver bullets. No single root cause drives failure in a complex system. There is no one solution or innovation that can solve systems-level challenges. Rather, a mix of elements (financing, regulation, legislation), models (private, public, self-supply), and networks (sector review groups, learning platforms) must all be improved together and in a manner suited to a country's unique political economy. Yet there are leverage points, both at the top, such as developing strong national political leadership, and at the bottom, through demand creation and behaviour change (e.g., community-led total sanitation).

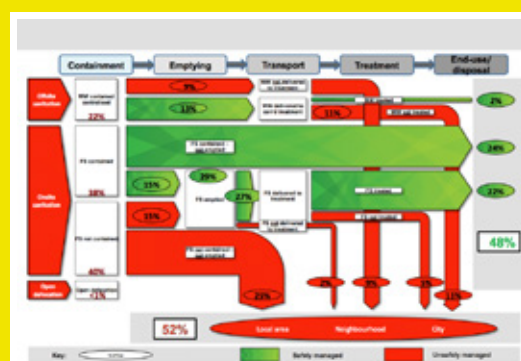
3. Good systems are the same but different. A strong WASH system or systems change process cannot be replicated from a blueprint for a different context – what works in Accra may not work in Kolkata. Nevertheless, functioning WASH systems around the world do share some dynamics and behaviours that promote good performance: clarity of roles, transparency, accountability, adaptability and equity. Functional public service delivery systems all have core functions or building blocks; who fulfils them and how is entirely context dependent.

4. Collaboration is crucial and needs support. Leadership for systemic change often involves multiple people, agencies and organisations working collaboratively from different perspectives. Identify and nurture the right partnerships and collaborations – those with the social or political capital to make change possible at scale. Getting the politics right and daring to work outside your comfort zone with new partners beyond only sector technocrats, such as politicians or civil society groups, can be a game changer. This is 'dancing with the system'¹⁸ – sticking to your principles while adapting and trying new things in the dynamic and humbling environment of complexity. Sustaining active collaboration requires a change hub, an organisation or organisations committed not just to a shared vision of change but also to supporting the process to achieve that change. Hubs convene partners, coordinate communication and generate knowledge to support insight and adaptive change.

BOX 3: FROM SYSTEMS THINKING TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

Strategic plan, action plan, district WASH plan: whatever the term, such documents are crucially important for setting out clear, nationally mandated routes to universal access. They should spell out, at an appropriate level of detail, both the desired end and the routes for getting there. Without these locally owned and politically supported documents that spell out a common vision, it is very difficult to undertake outcome-driven systems strengthening.

Both theory and practice tell us that sustainable service delivery requires strong national and local WASH systems, so an important starting point for improving a WASH system is comprehensive, multi-stakeholder national and local WASH planning. Assessment tools, such as shit flow diagrammes and life-cycle cost assessments, can be a foundation for developing a visioning document or master plan, which eventually must be supported by enabling policy, legislation and regulation. Several organisations have developed and applied such tools, including Water For People, which is working with the local government in Rulindo District in Rwanda (<https://www.waterforpeople.org/where-we-work/rwanda>).



5. Change means experimentation and learning. When we alter the system with an intervention – a new policy, a new business model for service delivery – things change in both expected and unexpected ways. To harness the opportunities, it is essential to create space and allocate resources for collective reflection and continual learning, supported by good monitoring. Embedding experimentation within a well-structured framework, such as a joint sector review for learning, allows development of a shared understanding of the system and provides opportunities to catalyse change and influence its direction.

6. Systems change is slow and hard. Change is the one constant in building resilient systems. The seed for systems change can be found in many places – professional associations, ministries and user groups, to name but three. What matters is that sector actors are involved and multiple perspectives acknowledged. Learning and adaptation to realise change are long and often disheartening processes. Don't give up because some actors are resistant, slow, incompetent or corrupt. Recognise that such problems are as much symptoms as causes of underlying systems failure – and they can be addressed through systems-level solutions like building capacity, altering incentives and auditing.

BOX 4: A HUB FOR CHANGE

IRC is acting as a change hub, a facilitator for change, helping to develop a detailed picture of what successful WASH systems look like, and then asking the difficult questions about how to get there: challenging the status quo, developing tools and placing continual learning at the centre of the process. This work takes place at many levels – globally through ongoing initiatives and events like All systems go! – and most importantly at national, regional and district levels through our commitments in focus countries*.

The change hub is the structure that initiatives, drives and facilitates the change we seek to achieve, but government and other local stakeholders are the final owners of the process: leading it and setting boundaries, direction and vision. The change process builds on the resources, competencies and capacities of local systems as the hub seeks to expand systems leadership capacity by encouraging stakeholders to view the system as a whole, reflect on what they have observed and learnt, discuss the issues with each other, find different ways of working, co-create knowledge, develop a shared vision, and take a forward-looking perspective on the issues. For more information, see Darteh et al. (2019) and Moriarty (2017)

*Current IRC focus countries are Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Honduras, India and Uganda.

There is no inherently right or wrong WASH system – except, of course, the one that fails to deliver an agreed level of WASH services for all, forever. Systems can uphold or prevent realisation of a society's core values; strong systems meet their obligations for human rights, reliable services and environmental protection.

What will I learn at the symposium?

All Systems Go! aims to overcome the systems blindness of the WASH sector and engage more holistically with a **national and local systems-strengthening agenda**. The symposium will present state-of-the-art thinking and practice about how a systems approach supports achievement of SDG6. There are multiple ways of working with systems; the symposium takes a flexible and outcomes-focussed approach to identifying, sharing, learning from and amplifying successes. There are also multiple ways of talking about systems, but our ultimate objective is to understand and amplify approaches that work. At IRC, our emerging theory and practice tell us that strong national and local WASH systems are required to deliver sustainable services. Come and join us – and celebrate our 50th birthday, too!

Symposium presenters will explain the concepts of WASH systems and describe the latest tools for analysing and understanding system dynamics, including finance and technical tools for specific parts of the system. Presentations will address capacity building, monitoring systems and strategy development. The symposium will showcase examples of systems in transformation, spark discussion about what still needs to change and promote an agenda for action relevant to everyone, jointly exploring how we can become better systems leaders. We must be confident in engaging with and supporting the strengthening of WASH systems as whole, not just focus on our own areas of specific expertise.

Systems are adaptive and evolve naturally over time, but purposeful change requires both leadership and collective action, to which we can – and indeed must – contribute if we want to see lasting change.

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Endnotes

1. Swachh Bharat Mission is a public movement launched by the prime minister of India on 2 October 2014. The aim is to improve levels of cleanliness through solid and liquid waste management activities and make all villages open defecation free, clean and sanitised by 2019. See <http://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm>.
2. One WASH National Programme is a sector-wide approach (with both urban and water supply components) whose broad aim is accelerating WASH services in Ethiopia. See <https://www.cmpethiopia.org/page/2694>.
3. UNICEF WASHBAT assesses the elements of WASH sector performance to enable planning for systematic sector strengthening. See <https://www.washbat.org/>. See also the Water and Sanitation Program's Service Delivery Assessment tool.
4. Shit flow diagrammes show the sanitation journey from the moment of capture and eventually back to the environment – either safely or not. See <https://sfd.susana.org/>.
5. See www.ircwash.org/news/service-delivery-approach.
6. See <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sustainability>.
7. See <https://www.waterforpeople.org/what-we-do#everyone-forever>.
8. See <https://www.washagendaforchange.net/>.
9. Junaid Ahmad, World Bank Chief of Staff, on the mission of the World Bank Water Global Practice. He credited the statement as coming from South Africa President Nelson Mandela when he met with the team tasked with bringing Johannesburg out of bankruptcy. See <https://nanopdf.com/download/making-services-work-for-poor-people-water-and-sanitation-december-18-2004.pdf>.
10. For examples, see DFID (2018), USAID (2014) and <https://wash-alliance.org/about/>
11. For reports from Uganda's joint sector performance review process, see www.mwe.go.ug/index.php.
12. Office National de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement. For more information, see AMCOW (2011).
13. Several collaborative initiatives in Lusaka are focussed on sector strengthening. See, for example, https://www.wsup.com/content/uploads/2018/04/02-2018-Towards-citywide-sanitation-in-Lusaka_online.pdf.
14. For examples, see Dalberg Global Development Advisors (2017).
15. For a historical overview of different branches of systems and complexity sciences, see the interactive online map at http://www.art-sciencefactory.com/complexity-map_feb09.html.
16. WaterAids Political Economy Analysis Toolkit, <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/political-economy-analysis-toolkit>.
17. Systems mapping techniques have been applied by the USAID Sustainable WASH Systems partners. See <https://www.globalwaters.org/SWS>.
18. The concept of 'dancing with the system' was developed by systems thinking innovator Donella Meadows, along with 14 related 'steps' for changing systems. See <http://donellameadows.org/archives/dancing-with-systems/>.

Selected ongoing WASH systems initiatives

The following short-list provides examples of collaborations and initiatives that embrace WASH systems approaches. There are others – this list is not meant to be comprehensive. Please send comments or suggestions to the authors about other multi-organisation collaborations and initiatives for WASH systems strengthening.

Agenda For Change

Agenda for Change is an alliance of like-minded organisations seeking to make fundamental changes in how they work together and thereby model progressive behaviours that contribute to changing WASH service delivery. This alliance promotes a systems-wide approach that tackles policy, financing and institutions – three building blocks of the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. Agenda for Change partners also agree to harmonise their work at and support government-led solutions to ensure that the systems are in place – at both district and national levels – so that WASH services reach everyone and the systems are in place forever. Agenda for Change was launched in May 2015 by Aguaconsult, IRC, WaterAid, Water For People and Osprey Foundation and currently has eight member organisations. Agenda for Change has developed a district-level roadmap to guide the work of understanding and strengthening local level WASH systems. See <https://www.washagendaforchange.net/#> and https://www.washagendaforchange.net/sites/default/files/a4c_roadmap_for_universal_access_nov2017_draft.pdf.

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation Safe Water Strategy

The five-year Safe Water Strategy, launched in 2016, is based on co-creating solutions for local WASH systems building with local government's vision and leadership. The focus is reaching the poorest and most vulnerable. The strategy reflects the foundation's belief that the challenges of providing sustainable services cannot be met by one organisation alone; rather, it calls for collective action by multidisciplinary groups that together can test and strengthen new approaches. The Safe Water Strategy provides for a flexible model that can evolve over time to support systemic change in focus districts while driving toward full-scale achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in line with the government's vision. See <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/priorities/water/our-approach> and <https://www.ircwash.org/blog/collective-action-wash-systems-and-services>.

Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)

Created in 2010, Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) is a partnership of governments and development entities, including civil society, the private sector, donors, UN agencies and research and learning institutions. SWA was founded on a belief that government-led, collaborative and multi-stakeholder decision-making processes lead to more sustainable, efficient and transparent solutions. More than 72 partner countries participate in SWA, jointly assessing and strengthening crucial aspects of the system – political prioritization, financing, the efficient use of funds, governance structures and institutions, the enabling environment, mutual accountability between stakeholders, and the use of data to inform decision-making. See <http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/>.

USAID Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership

The Sustainable WASH Systems (SWS) partnership, funded by USAID, is developing a body of knowledge about the cost of different systems approaches, their benefits, and what is needed to sustain them. To do this, SWS works with four 'concept teams' in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda to test innovation in learning, partnerships, financing and maintenance approaches, all in close collaboration with local and national governments. As part of its work, SWS and partners have piloted tools and approaches to mapping WASH systems at the local level. See <https://www.globalwaters.org/resources/webinars/sws/using-network-analysis-understand-and-strengthen-wash-systems>.

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