

# FIXING THE SECTOR, NOT JUST THE PUMP:

A SYSTEMIC INTERVENTION IN MALAWI'S WASH SECTOR



CASE STUDIES FOR CHANGE

## KEY FINDINGS

- Donor and NGO-driven projects can distort incentives and discourage district-led solutions.
- Solutions developed with project money and resources are only sustainable and scalable if they reflect the low-resource reality of districts post-project.
- Sector learning mechanisms can be invaluable for bringing district realities to the attention of policy makers, but only if sector policy forums are designed around learning from district experience.
- Developing relationships with actors and understanding their constraints and incentives are fundamental to being a successful change agent.
- NGOs and donors can contribute to developing a stronger sector—a sector capable of delivering sustainable services at scale—if they take a systemic approach that builds on the sector's strengths and helps address its weaknesses. This kind of systemic change takes time and sustained investment.

When Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada began working in Malawi in 2005, they focused on partnering with implementing organisations and working to build their capacity. In 2008, they shifted to a strategy based on the goal of enhancing the sector's overall effectiveness at providing sustainable rural water and sanitation services.

EWB staff saw a sector that had the requisite funding and administrative structures but could not put the pieces together. Around 100 NGOs and 10 donors were injecting some \$50 million annually into the sector through various WASH projects, but with little impact on the sector's overall ability to deliver sustainable services at scale.

Rather than implement more projects, EWB began strengthening coordination and learning—gaps that were holding the sector back. Field staff work alongside local officials in devising appropriate, low-resource solutions, and team leaders use local experiences to inform the strategies of national and international stakeholders.



We believe transformative change comes from scalpels, not broadswords.”

Michael Kang, former co-director, EWB’s water and sanitation programme, Malawi

This case study describes how EWB promotes sustainable rural WASH services in Malawi. The UNICEF-WHO Joint Monitoring programme reports improved rural water supply coverage in Malawi at approximately 77%, but only 45% to 75% of water points and systems are functional, depending on the district. Similarly for sanitation, Malawi has performed well: reducing open defecation from 35% to 11% between 1990 and 2008; however, improving sanitation facilities and sustaining their use remain challenges.

EWB believes that the failure of the Malawi WASH sector to attain sustainable service is due to project-oriented thinking. Districts’ limited time and resources are often diverted into off-budget, NGO-driven interventions; as a result, district staff tend to act only when donor money is available, and they have little incentive to engage directly with communities to analyse local problems and develop effective responses that can be implemented with the limited resources available.

EWB is working to shift the focus from projects to service delivery. Its staff have built close relationships with districts, national ministries, and major NGOs and development partners. EWB field staff learn the local language, live in the community, and get to know local government workers as individuals. Thus they come to understand the day-to-day incentives, challenges, and opportunities that drive their behaviour.

EWB’s vision: *The rural WASH sector shifts from a project-oriented to a service-oriented approach by thinking critically, learning, and innovating.* Once service-oriented thinking is embedded, EWB believes, the sector will find more sustainable and efficient ways of operating.

### STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS

EWB is focusing on three areas that it can leverage for change.



Before people were just interested in implementing but now there is interest in sharing what they are doing in the field.”

Waki Chunga, District Water Officer (pictured at right)

**Addressing challenges to on-going operations and maintenance.** By demonstrating how districts can develop innovative approaches using existing capacities, EWB is facilitating a shift from donor-driven projects toward sustainable, district-owned solutions.

**Influencing sector financing policy to enable district-led solutions.** Changing how projects are financed has the potential to grow districts’ capacity so that they can identify problems, find solutions on their own and learn from experience. When donors and NGOs understand how project financing affects capacity they can achieve better outcomes.

**Institutionalizing critical thinking and learning in sanitation interventions.** Sanitation stakeholders recognize the need to engage districts more effectively to reach coverage targets. EWB helps this subsector translate that awareness into solutions, integrating sanitation approaches into the routine work of district field staff. Many approaches (e.g., sanitation marketing, school-led total sanitation) can be adapted and implemented without perpetual project funding.

### FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Within these focus areas, EWB carries out several functions.

#### FINDING SOLUTIONS: SUPPORT FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

EWB works with 22 out of Malawi’s 28 districts to define the highest-leverage sustainability problems the districts can solve, given their resources. In most districts EWB takes a relatively hands-off, advisory approach; in some it has part-time support arrangements; in eight districts it maintains a dedicated presence and intense focus. Fourteen districts have asked for full-time support.

Depending on the district and the change being targeted, EWB may work closely with government officials and





With the coming of WIT [Water Investment Triggering], it became a question of a whole community dealing the issues.”

Harold Pondepde, Water Monitoring Assistant, Mangochi District Council

field staff in water, health, environment, monitoring and evaluation, financing, and planning and development.

### ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY: INFLUENCE ON SECTOR POLICY AND STRATEGY

EWB brings its district-level perspective to national sector policy and strategy forums, asking, ‘How will this policy or strategy enable districts to play the required on-going role?’ EWB representatives sit on six national forums—sanitation strategy, sector capacity, sector financing design, performance metrics for districts, sector monitoring, and operation and maintenance of rural water supply—and challenge assumptions about how local governments will respond to a project and carry on after it ends. Analysis of stakeholders’ positions and identification of the real issues at the district level add precision to the national sector’s perceptions of district capacity.

### SCALING UP: STRENGTHENING DISTRICT-NATIONAL FEEDBACK LOOPS

In national forums, EWB fills a learning gap, which should be temporary, helping national-level actors use their own systems and resources for learning. EWB also brokers relationships between national and district leaders so that they can share information about low-resource district solutions. And EWB has encouraged national-level forums to create opportunities for direct input from districts by bringing the field reality into policy debates.

## RESULTS

Although EWB’s work in Malawi is not finished, there is already evidence of progress in coordination, learning, and service-oriented thinking.

### MORE COST-EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

In four districts, the WASH sector is coordinating with other sectors to obtain data on water and sanitation coverage. These districts are using existing public systems to solve the information problem, rather than waiting for donor-funded data collection projects, which are inevitably temporary. The monitoring and evaluation approach was initially adopted by the Salima district. EWB was able to leverage that experience at the national level to convince the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Development, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency to align M&E pilots. In addition, it was able to demonstrate to the Technical Working Group for Monitoring and Evaluation the need to shift their priority



Sande community members discuss borehole functioning with Edwin Mchilikizo, District Water Officer for Chikhwawa District.

from data precision to data updatability by local government using available resources.

### DISTRICT LEARNING THAT PROMPTS INNOVATION

In Malawi’s village-level operations and maintenance programme, communities are supposed to finance repairs to their water points. Because some communities were not paying for repairs, EWB introduced ‘water investment triggering,’ a participatory method for raising awareness that drinking contaminated water leads to the ingestion of faeces, thereby increasing people’s willingness to pay. In the pilot, 70% of communities quickly followed through on commitments to create household payment plans for repairs. The district itself then proposed the improvement that contributed most to effectiveness—having local mechanics select target villages. District officials have also adapted the community engagement technique to address other problems, such as recurrent theft of pump parts.

### APPROACHES THAT MATCH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS’ CAPACITY

The sector must be able to design policies and programmes that can be implemented by local governments. Participating in Malawi’s ‘Open Defecation Free’ Task Force, EWB urged solutions that could work within district budgets. The result was adoption of a strategy in which local governments use traditional social structures and low-resource solutions—for example, integrating community-led total sanitation into field-staff job descriptions—that do not depend on continued external aid funding.



Now we are thinking widely in terms of how to deal with future issues, not just the present ones.”

Noel Khunga, District Environmental Health Officer

## EXIT STRATEGY: EMBEDDING LEARNING CAPACITY

EWB’s theory of change does not include perpetual investment from the organisation. Its exit strategy focuses on embedding capacity in a country’s permanent institutions—the national government, development partners, and the districts themselves.

## LESSONS LEARNED

**NGOs and donors need to know the system they seek to help.** EWB established legitimacy in the Malawi WASH sector by researching the context and the roles various actors were playing before it set programme goals. Its staff understood the issues and placed their own initiatives in the context of the whole system. They also considered the role that permanent institutions would need to play to sustain desired outcomes and defined their programme to build that capacity.

**Becoming part of the community is essential in building trust with everyone who matters for the outcome.** EWB staff work with local people as well as national decision makers and understand the constraints and incentives that determine their behaviour. The organisation designs its programmes around what people value and asks them to help define the problems and devise the solutions.

**Money alters systems.** EWB seeks to use its resources responsibly by anticipating what money would do to the system—and what would happen once that funding ends. It recommends that donors determine how resources affect people’s incentives and whether people would support a project that came without resources.

## COSTS

The Malawi staff of EWB consists of two team leaders and six full-time staff, plus six interns, each of whom works four months per year. The annual budget is approximately US\$350,000. Management costs account for 21 per cent of the budget (\$75,000). That covers salaries, travel, insurance, and other expenses for team leaders. The programmatic work is 79 per cent of the budget (\$265,000): \$75,000 for operations (market research on new strategies, materials and labour for implementation of prototypes, meetings and communication with local, district, and national actors) and \$190,000 for staff (living costs, travel, insurance). Staff salaries are low compared with the aid sector’s norms but competitive within the context of Malawi.



In the Mangochi district, 60% of communities targeted by innovative district management structures have increased payment collection for water point repairs, a common cause of hand pump failure. All without project funding.

## REPLICATION

EWB’s way of working—strongly embedded in an understanding of the sector and home-grown solutions—holds promise for other NGOs and donors willing to invest in creating more effective and efficient sector institutions. The goal of increasing the sector’s ability to deliver sustainable services at scale, instead of simply increasing coverage, and the focus on learning and adaptive capacity—often a weak point—also opens the door for more effective relationships among NGOs, donors and government partners. ■

## ABOUT THE CASE STUDY

This case study was authored by Harold Lockwood (Aguaconsult) with inputs from members of the EWB Malawi team—Megan Campbell, Michael Kang, Duncan McNicholl and Alyssa Lindsay. For more information on EWB’s approach, see their Think Piece at: [www.waterservicesthatlast.org](http://www.waterservicesthatlast.org).