

Supporting institutional sustainability to deliver permanent WASH services in Malawi

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Summary

This case study highlights how an organisation can identify potential threats to institutional sustainability common in an extremely low resource environment, and create a strategy for a responsible operational withdrawal as a project comes to a close, in ways that ensure local stakeholders are well equipped to sustain project gains well into the future. It is based on experiences emerging from development of WaterAid's exit strategy in Salima district in Malawi.

Malawi Context

Malawi has a population of 17 million people, a GDP per capita of USD255, a large majority of the population is reliant on rain fed agriculture, and it remains one of the least developed countries in the Southern African region and the world¹. Since 1994, Malawi has been a stable democracy, though it is still heavily dependent on foreign aid. Estimates in 2014² state that roughly 40% of the national budget was sourced from international donors. However, since then many donors have cut their funding due to the uncovering of a major government corruption scandal in the country, and donor funding now makes up just under 20% of the 2016-2017 national budget³.

Rural water in Malawi is primarily supplied through community boreholes fixed with hand pumps, though in hilly regions, piped gravity-fed schemes supply community taps, and the lakeshore regions have higher numbers of shallow wells. Rural water coverage in Malawi was estimated to be at 84% as of 2014, yet the functionality rate of improved

¹ United Nations Committee for Development Policy and Analysis Division Department of Economic and Social Affairs, May 2016.

² Government of Malawi. 2014. *Rural Water Supply Investment Plan 2014-2020*

³ Government of Malawi Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development. 2015. *Budget Statement 2015-2016*. Available at: <http://www.finance.gov.mw/index.php/budget-statements-and-highlights>

water sources is at around 77% as of 2016⁴. Severe resource constraints make accurate and timely data collection difficult, and current functionality rates are feared to be even lower.

The Local Government Act was established in 1998, stipulating the creation of a local government responsible for providing services to people in rural areas. Of all the functions selected for devolution, the WASH sector has only practically devolved the functions of monitoring and operation and maintenance to district level. The devolution of human and financial resources to implement those functions has been slow to follow.

With decentralisation in mind, the governance structure for the WASH sector has shifted in the last twenty years towards a Community-Based Management (CBM) model that puts the responsibility for operation and maintenance of WASH infrastructure on elected village level committees. National guidelines also state the intention to set up Hand Pump Mechanic networks in all districts, and about three quarters of districts have established these networks to date.

Above the community level, local government District Water Development Offices (DWDOS) are deemed the service delivery authority responsible for the provision and maintenance of water supply and sanitation. They also serve as the secretary for District Coordinating Teams (DCTs) that include representation from other sectors involved in WASH such as environmental health and education. At the national level, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Water Development (MoAIWD) provides policy direction for water supply and sanitation, and their three regional branches provide administrative and technical backstopping to districts in areas such as human resource management and water quality testing. There are also several working groups set out under the Water Sector Wide Approach that aim to coordinate amongst technical bodies and donors at the national level.

The following table describes these key governance roles in Malawi's rural WASH sector, from national level down to community structures:

National Level	Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Water Development. Ministry of Health (MoAIWD)	Water Sector Wide Approach
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides policy guidance and manages large scale agreements with donors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aims to unify sector planning, management, monitoring and reporting between government and non-government actors, particularly donors.

⁴ Government of Malawi Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development. 2016. *Sector Performance Report for Water, Irrigation and Sanitation Sector*

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sets national level goals and long-term vision for the WASH sector. ▪ Works with projects to prioritise need and direct funding on a national scale. ▪ Championing ODF and handwashing with soap strategies at district level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprised of several technical working groups. ▪ Planning department of MoAIWD is the secretariat.
District Level	District Coordinating Team (DCT)	District Water Development Office (DWDO)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ District Council level committee of government officers from WASH-related sectors (water, environmental health, and community development play key roles). ▪ Meets to plan, direct, coordinate, harmonise, and organise supervision of WASH-related work by various non-governmental organisations (NGO). ▪ Lacks its own resources to implement activities, and therefore leverages government sector budgets and NGO funds for selected activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Government office that oversees planning, coordination, and implementation of water and sanitation activities in the district. ▪ Limited numbers of extension workers operate at community level to implement activities, support hand pump mechanics and community groups with technical assistance and problem solving, and collect data from the field. ▪ Often work in partnership with international NGOs, NGOs, and civil society organisations (CSOs) to implement and/or supervise project activities.
Area level (Sub-District)	Water Users Association (WUA)	Area Development Committees (ADC)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Elected committee of community members responsible for managing one gravity-fed scheme, consisting of multiple taps that may span several areas of a district. ▪ Collect regular fees from users to put towards management and repairs of the scheme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Elected committee of community members responsible for liaising with NGOs, CSOs, and government on all development initiatives. ▪ Check-in and provide accountability and motivation to community level groups, and offer support on community-mobilised projects and activities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manages a private local utility operator that conducts operation and maintenance for the scheme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate development priorities of their area to higher level decision-makers like the DCT, for example the need for a major water point rehabilitation beyond the financial capacity of a village.
Village Development Committees (VDC)		
Village level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elected community volunteer group responsible for following up on all development issues across all sectors in a group of villages. One representative from each VDC sits on the ADC. Liaises with other community group structures and the ADC as needed to set development priorities for their area. 	
	Water Point Committees (WPC)	Hand Pump Mechanics (HPM)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteer committees responsible for managing the finances, basic repair, and sanitation of one water point, regardless of type. Collect and save money for spare parts and hand pump mechanic service fee for water point repairs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteers or entrepreneurs, report to extension workers from water office. Catchment area includes several villages. Sign contracts with water point committees to conduct repairs and sometimes preventative maintenance. Collect funds from WPCs to cover spare parts cost.

In the context of radical resource limitations, the government of Malawi struggles to prioritise the provision of the necessary financial and human resources to maintain infrastructure and to create an enabling environment for the Community-Based Management model to work. It also leads to an over-prioritisation of projects that fund new infrastructure and massive capacity training in rural areas rather than the day-to-day work of operation and maintenance support. Many projects still involve government superficially without considering how the human and financial capacity gap will affect the institutional sustainability of these project impacts.

Despite these challenges, leading organisations in the sector such as WaterAid recognise the importance of institutional sustainability, and are working to increase the return on investments by working more intentionally through permanent stakeholders such as local government offices and community-based groups.

WaterAid Malawi and Institutional Sustainability

WaterAid Malawi operates across Malawi, and has been working to build innovative approaches to institutional sustainability into their programming for many years at both the district and national levels. Some of these approaches include WaterAid Malawi's integration of post-implementation support by district level government to communities for operation and maintenance; capacitating community development committees to directly implement hygiene promotion activities; and strengthening district coordinating teams. In recent years, WaterAid Malawi had also partnered with Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) in Malawi on a number of initiatives to pioneer practical approaches to improving the sustainability of rural WASH service delivery.

One of the core principles held by WaterAid Malawi and EWB in pioneering sustainability initiatives has been to find the simplest, most radically low-cost solutions to the challenges of supporting service delivery faced by local government. We have often seen that although massive investments into infrastructure and capacity trainings by projects can seem to significantly and immediately boost indicators on WASH access, the gains made by these investments are quickly lost when they are designed without current constraints considered. It is unrealistic to expect to close huge capacity gaps through a project. It is instead crucial to design the intervention to function within existing constraints.

WaterAid and EWB Partnership in Malawi

WaterAid and EWB have a successful track record of partnership to find solutions to various WASH challenges that are tailored to the resource constrained context in which district councils in Malawi operate. Highlights of previous collaboration include:

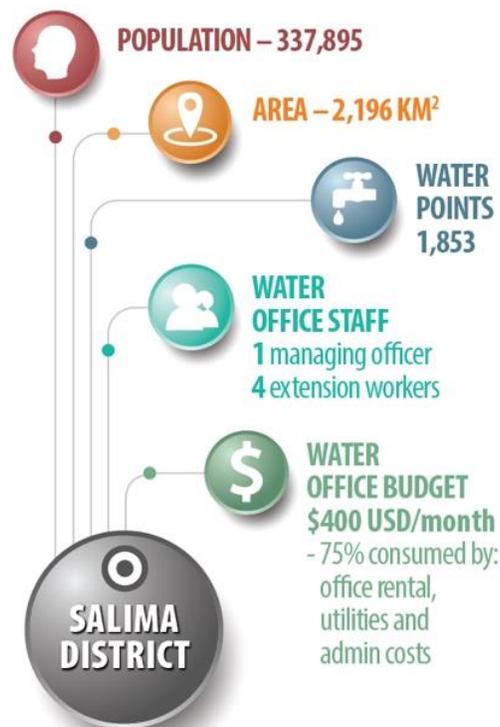
Support to service level monitoring: developing a national monitoring system for rural water supply and sanitation that relies on realistic data collection processes that DWDOs can execute using existing extension workers, finances, and simple Excel-based management. No GPS data was collected, reducing the cost and complications for updating data on a regular basis.

Post-implementation support strategies: increasing the reach of rural water point operation and maintenance services through rigorous DWDO budget reviews to cut down on every operational cost possible including transportation and stationary; setting up realistic and mutually agreed upon roles and responsibilities for community WASH committees and mechanics to work with extension workers; and better coordination with other sectors and organisations to deliver services. This unlocked the ability for DWDOs to play support roles that were previously unaffordable.

Designing and implementing sustainable Open Defecation Free (ODF) verification methods by working with district environmental health offices to clarify roles of those conducting verifications, improving communication lines within the

department, and increasing the capacity of field staff and local chiefs to conduct verifications to avoid the prohibitive cost of relying on managing officers to verify. This allowed district offices to verify ODF villages within two weeks of identification using available resources, rather than creating multi-year delays waiting for donor funding.

In the case of Salima District, WaterAid Malawi had been implementing programs since 2002, focusing on development of water supply and sanitation infrastructure, both being complemented by hygiene promotion activities. After more than a decade of implementation, WaterAid Malawi made a strategic decision to evaluate their impact and exit from Salima. A Post-Implementation Monitoring Survey⁵ and Impact Assessment⁶, (assessment techniques WaterAid uses to evaluate the impact of their work up to ten years post-implementation,) were instrumental in providing the data necessary to make a decision on the timeframe for exiting. The survey and assessment showed that WaterAid Malawi and its partners had provided around 450 new and/or rehabilitated water points in the target Traditional Authorities (TAs) in Salima district during the project period (five TAs total, although one was only a target from 2003-2006). WaterAid Malawi has been the single largest supporter of water points across these areas of the district. The cumulative total number of people who benefited from improved water points that were funded by WaterAid Malawi in Salima from 2002 to 2012 is estimated to be up to 50,000, and WaterAid Malawi has supported around 68,000 people with access to sanitation largely through latrine construction and community-led total sanitation approaches.



Throughout the duration of this project, Salima district had also benefited from the establishment of a strong network of hand pump mechanics, through support from InterAide. This network of 34 mechanics stretches across the district, and at the time of WaterAid Malawi's decision to exit, InterAide was also in the midst of handing over the management of the hand pump network to the district council, specifically the district water office. UNICEF has been a major funder in non-WaterAid Malawi-supported areas of the district, with other organisations like World Vision and Malawi Red Cross Society implementing smaller projects recently.

⁵ Shaw, D. and Manda, J. 2013. *Post Implementation Monitoring Survey, Salima District, WaterAid Malawi*

⁶ WEDC and WaterAid. 2013. *Salima District WASH Impact Assessment for WaterAid Malawi*

Despite WaterAid Malawi's successes, it was clear that there were significant threats to the sustainability of infrastructure gains as well as behaviour changes. Both were at risk of regressing due to challenges associated with the capacity of permanent local stakeholders to effectively manage and maintain these services and behaviours within their low-resource post-project context. The issue of institutional sustainability therefore became a clear priority for WaterAid Malawi, as part of a responsible exit strategy out of the district.

To ensure effective facilitation of the post-implementation phase, WaterAid Malawi sought out a new partnership with EWB. WaterAid Malawi recognised the specific skill set and experience of EWB to work with district government to overcome practical financial, human, and capacity barriers to better management of rural WASH service delivery. As part of the transition phase, WaterAid Malawi would provide strategic oversight and advice, as well as resources, and EWB would facilitate a process involving the Salima District Council, extension workers, community development committees, as well as the implementing NGO (Evangelical Lutheran World Services) under the project.

Note on Exit Strategy and Transition

An **exit strategy** can be considered as a sustainability plan – it describes how a project will ensure that the impacts achieved will be sustained once the project ends.⁷ Strong exit strategies often incorporate a **transition phase**, where the transition between project and post-project environments is a facilitated process with permanent stakeholders, ensuring that permanent institutions like local government and community-based management systems are able to preserve the service levels achieved through project investment. It should be factored into programme design at the outset but if it hasn't it can be incorporated as part of a post-programme transition phase.

The Transition Process in Salima District

The focus of the two-year transition phase at the end of the project in Salima District was to set up permanent district and community level managers of WASH services to both *understand* their necessary post-project role, and to be able to *execute* this role. Three groups of WASH managers in Salima were identified as the focus of transition strategy efforts:

- District Coordinating Team
- Extension Workers
- Area Development Committees (ADCs)

⁷ Gardner, A., Greenblott, K. and Joubert, E. 2005. *What we know about exit strategies: Practical guidance for developing exit strategies in the field*. C-SAFE.

The realistic level of resources and capacity of each of the three management groups in the post-project environment was a key consideration throughout the implementation of the following three stages of the transition phase. This transition process involved three stages, highlighted here and elaborated on below:

1. **Envisioning post-project roles:** built an understanding across the three groups of WASH managers on their role in sustaining WASH services after projects leave, and assessed the skills they needed to do so effectively.
2. **Bridging the skills gap:** improved skills needed to play service-sustaining role from stage one, through targeted capacity-building exercises, simultaneously strengthening relationships between the three groups of WASH managers.
3. **Arms-length follow-up and monitoring:** assisted with practical application of improved skills to various situations, through a series of follow-up meetings.

Stage One. Envisioning post-project roles

At the beginning of the transition, it was crucial to **understand in detail the regular operations of the three levels of WASH service management** identified above. To which activities was their time allocated? Why did they feel committed to their jobs? What did they feel were their strengths? Which NGO practices did they find helpful or unhelpful in playing their roles as managers or planning for WASH activities? What challenges were they facing in fulfilling their day-to-day WASH responsibilities? After discussing the current situation, each group was asked to imagine how they would need to continue to play a role in supporting WASH service delivery to communities. Once these **ideal post-project roles were conceptualised**, they were shared amongst the three groups, so that expectations about realistic performance and operationalisation of roles could be challenged by colleagues and agreed on.

With these roles in hand, **core competencies required to play respective roles were identified**. Afterwards, an **assessment of each stakeholder's ability to execute these roles based on core competencies** was facilitated. This assessment led to **identification of key skills gaps** to address during the remainder of the transition phase. The table below highlights some key roles identified during this transition process for each target stakeholder group, as well as the skills gap discovered:

Transition Stage One Outputs		
Stakeholder-envisioned roles and accompanying skills required, developed by each stakeholder group via consultation and facilitation by EWB		
Stakeholder Group	Select Post-Project Roles in Salima	Identified Skills Needs
District Coordinating Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating district-level progress reviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct internal WASH planning meetings regularly for more

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management of operation and maintenance (O&M) stakeholders including hand pump mechanics, extension staff, NGO implementers, politicians, as well as WPCs trained in basic repair. • Prioritising and geographically-allocating NGO WASH activities based on service need, as well as providing guidance on project design and exit strategies. 	<p>effective cross-sectoral collaboration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate and provide technical support to hand pump mechanics under the network set up by InterAide.
Extension Workers from WASH sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively taking part in planning Area Development Committee work and offering technical advice on WASH issues. • Facilitating community-led total sanitation triggerings and Community-Based Management trainings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debrief managers on field level activities. • Develop short-term work plans. • Strengthen communication between community development extension staff and ADCs.
Area Development Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing technical and conflict resolution support to builders, mother groups, and water point committees. • Ensure NGOs are following correct implementation policies and procedures, including plans for exit strategies. • Working with chiefs to promote hygiene practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct self-directed action planning. • Identify root causes to challenges of WASH implementation at ADC level. • Development of meeting agendas.

Stage Two. Bridging the skills gap

In a series of facilitated exercises over a six-month period, ADCs **learned how to conduct a root cause analysis of WASH issues faced by communities** that were brought to the ADC for resolution. Several examples were used, such as allocation of new infrastructure, disputes over water points, or conducting complicated repairs, and the ADCs practiced making tangible, actionable work plans using a template.

Secondly, extension staff from the community development office were brought together with ADC members. As attendance of community development extension workers at ADC meetings had been traditionally low, they **participated in a workshop where expectations were made clear about their participation and their critical role**

relaying information back to the district council on behalf of the ADCs. **Mitigation strategies were set in case this extension worker could not attend**, clarifying how important information would be communicated to the community development extension worker over the phone. Additionally, they clarified how urgent community issues needing council intervention, such as interference in water point siting by traditional chiefs, would be communicated by these same extension workers to the community development office.

Thirdly, the District Coordinating Team (DCT) **developed a new budget structure** for their monthly meetings that is **secured entirely from council funds**, instead of from erratic NGO funds. The DCT also participated in an **analysis of their hand pump mechanic network management** structure by the district water office. From there, they **developed a way to share technical advice with hand pump mechanics through existing monthly follow-ups meetings** with the mechanics by the water office, instead of relying on expensive all-in-one refresher trainings. This management now happens entirely within the district government water office's recurrent budget, and ensures technical skills are retained by hand pump mechanics in the absence of project funding.

Stage 3. Arms-length follow-up and monitoring

After the skills building stage, **monthly follow-up field visits were conducted by EWB** to ensure that each management group were actively applying their strategies to new situations, communicating with each other, and that they were preparing to be independent from the project. It was helpful to have **open and honest discussion about road blocks to progress and possible mitigation strategies** that could be followed up on during future field visits. Follow-up evaluations were conducted in 2016, and a final impact evaluation of this transition work will be conducted in 2017.

WASH managers: Key behaviour changes observed from this work

Key behaviour changes observed as a result of the work conducted in this transition phase are:

- **District Coordinating Team:**
 - **Conducting monthly management meetings with hand pump mechanics** (at 40 USD per month, this is now within the water development office government budget), to ensure that repair contracts signed with water point committees are collected and that technical issues can be discussed.
 - **Understanding the importance of discussing their role in project impact sustainability**, and committing to sharing this work with new NGOs coming to their district.
 - **Developing a budget and agenda for meeting regardless of external funding**, ensuring that important WASH issues can be tackled by that group when required.

- **Extension Workers:**
 - **Improving their communication with ADCs**, one example being by extension workers phoning the ADC when they could not attend the regular ADC meeting, to ensure that important information discussed was still relayed back to the district.
- **Area Development Committees:**
 - **Clearly articulating transition theories to colleagues**, and the necessary steps of a good transition.
 - **Visiting water point committees to encourage collection of funds** for preventative water point maintenance and urgent repairs from water point users. This resulted from a root-cause analysis of why water points were not being repaired, followed by the ADC using action planning strategies learned in stage 2 of this transition.
 - **Enforcing meetings with all NGOs in two areas to discuss the transition strategies** of those NGOs, ensuring the ADCs are able to appropriately support any new services.
 - **Marketing the repair services of the local hand pump mechanic** to water point committees in their areas, after having assessed there was weak community trust of these mechanics.

Looking Forward

A number of initial recommendations have been compiled from this work in Salima that shed light on how organisations can practically work with permanent institutions like local government to improve sustainability of project impacts. Each phase of a project, from design, through implementation, and finally transition, offer unique opportunities to ensure institutional sustainability. The specific opportunities for each phase are highlighted below, followed by the recommendations themselves:

Design Phase: The design phase is an ideal place to **build a common vision** and start **strategizing effective ways to build the planning, management, and communications capacity of permanent institutions** gradually throughout a project rather than addressing them at the end of the project. By considering these aspects earlier on it also provides the opportunity **to secure a budget** and other resources required to carry out capacity building throughout the project. It is also a time to **examine the practical challenges** that permanent institutions will face after the project closes and to consider these as constraints in every aspect of the project that will continue or need to be managed after exit.

Implementation Phase: In addition to implementing core WASH activities of the project, the implementation phase allows organisations to **fill cross-cutting and management capacity gaps** they have identified within districts through

assigning responsibility beyond supervision for the execution of project activities and through mentorship. Ensuring that project activities actively **link key managers of WASH across multiple levels** of the district system from the community up to the council level and **improving district coordination** will lessen the workload of fixing these communication channels during final transition.

Transition Phase: A transition phase gives the opportunity to **re-assess management capacities** and ensure that district government and local actors are prepared to fill roles that extend beyond the life of the project. **Final communication of exit is critical** at this stage, clearly demarcating the time when the project is no longer operational and permanent stakeholders are independently responsible for their roles. Although communication of exit is important at the beginning, the manner in which it is done at project close sets the tone for the lasting perception of the project, and influences motivation for permanent stakeholders to continue supporting WASH activities. The latter part of the phase can be used for the implementing organisation to gradually step away from an active role and **provide arms-length support** to overcome major hurdles.

Key Recommendations for Project Design

1. From project conception, **define the enabling environment required** (responsibilities, relationships, and communication between permanent institutions such community groups, extension workers, and district officers) to independently sustain the intended project impacts/outcomes after project exit, and consider the financial and human resources that will be available post-project.
 - **Problem:** project impacts can often only be sustained in high-resource and high capacity environments, which rarely considers the current and immense financial and human constraints of permanent institutions such as government.
 - **In Practice:** with all groups involved in supporting WASH services, hold a workshop and/or series of field meetings to: define the intended service outcome of the project; discuss how this impact might collapse post-project (threats to sustainability); discuss how people could work differently to prevent collapse; ask what is reasonable given constraints, and then re-evaluate the intended outcome if needed. Consideration of all service outcomes need to include the finances, capacity, policies, and coordination required to execute each in a post-project context, especially consistent, cost effective communication between community groups and the district council to facilitate support for WASH services.
2. Develop a mechanism to evaluate and subsequently **build the necessary enabling environment throughout the project.**

- **Problem:** project-controlled management and a common focus on building WASH-specific technical knowledge leaves a management skills (soft skills) gap amongst government and community partners. This results in a situation where permanent stakeholders are unable to effectively manage processes, procedures and communication channels in the long-term.
 - **In Practice:** evaluate the gap between the enabling environment needed to sustain project impacts and the current environment as a basis for identifying roles, linkages, and skills that need to be built habitually as part of the project, rather than adding new activities to already strained stakeholders.
3. **Dedicate and financially allocate for a transition phase**, ceasing all further infrastructure implementation during this time, and specifically focusing on system strengthening
- **Problem:** projects often leave immediately after the implementation phase, committing to “hand-overs” but do not commit to troubleshooting how the system left behind will continue to manage without the project’s support.
 - **In Practice:** plan for a transition phase within the timeframe and budget of the project from the beginning. Depending on the nature of the project, projects should aim to design transition phases not less than 20% of the project implementation phase. This phase allows the enabling environment to be observed without being artificially propped up by project support, and project staff will still be able to help people fulfil their roles in a mentorship role. Avoiding new infrastructure implementation or technical trainings during this period is crucial. Costs for this phase are minimal compared to costs for the implementation phase and help protect gains made during the project.

Other Key Design Considerations

4. Throughout implementation, **encourage project staff to mentor extension workers to implement activities rather than simply involving them in monitoring and supervision roles**, to transfer real skills and real practices from temporary project staff to permanent government staff. This can be as simple as supporting extension workers to develop a work plan for follow-ups, instead of project staff developing this work plan independently and sharing.
5. **Technologies, approaches and materials used should be those that are most common in the district.** For example, Afridev pumps were used in Salima because the spare parts supply chain is well-managed nationally, requires few spares as a relatively simple technology, and are financially accessible to communities. Maintenance services for non-standard pumps can be hard to contract due to poor or non-existent spare supply chains as well as lack of local knowledge to maintain them. Extension staff had already been trained in CLTS

facilitation, and therefore the project reinforced those existing facilitation skills. Instead of fragmenting the knowledge of effective WASH management, the project worked within existing procedures to reinforce the mechanisms that ensure service delivery.

6. **Avoid project funding of any activity or behaviour that is expected to continue after project exit.** Doing so will set the expectation that this activity or behaviour can only occur with that higher threshold of resources. Even district coordination meetings, if required to continue indefinitely, should not really be funded by the project.
7. **Monitor achievement of project goals relating to the enabling environment throughout the duration of the project.** This will allow additional efforts to be put on building skills and capacities if these are not growing at the desired pace.
8. **Collaboratively envision necessary post-project roles at the outset of the project (rather than at the end), and have permanent institutions re-affirm commitments to the post-project roles at the end of the project.** As a final activity before complete exit, clarify necessary roles of permanent institutions, and set clear and realistic expectations about any future involvement of the implementing NGO.

Avenues for Scaling

The facilitation of this transition has generated many insights for how organisations can practically build institutional sustainability into their projects. As this specific body of work comes to an end in 2017, there are many ways by which we intend to scale these approaches. These avenues are highlighted below:

1. **In Situ Scale:** permanent institutions such as local government and community groups in the district of Salima change how they interact with future projects due to their knowledge of this transition strategy.
For example, community groups and district government learned that a transition strategy can help them to identify their ongoing responsibilities in sustaining services, and subsequently demand discussions with NGOs to define these roles in the future.
2. **Horizontal Scale:** small implementing organisations working at district level (or in contexts similar to Salima district) change how their projects are designed, implemented, and transitioned while working with permanent institutions.
For example, Participatory Development Initiatives (PDI), a small local NGO in Malawi, is now working with EWB to build approaches and lessons from this transition work into a three-year neonatal and maternal health project currently underway in the districts of Machinga and Nkhotakota.

3. **Vertical Scale:** organisations change how they support institutional sustainability through their programming and through policy and advocacy efforts nationally and internationally.

For example, WaterAid Malawi is applying higher level recommendations from this project to their regular program support and using the transition phase in sector influence strategies, and this transition strategy will continue to be shared internationally with other organisations.

Conclusion

When development actors leave, it is ultimately the responsibility of local permanent stakeholders to ensure services last. However, in the context of the least developed countries, there are often major financial and human capacity barriers to the institutional sustainability of these services that are not obvious at first. This case study outlined how WaterAid Malawi's project in the district of Salima took proactive steps to facilitate an effective transition phase as part of an exit strategy to mitigate these long-term challenges. This strategy enabled local permanent institutions like district government and community groups to understand their roles in the post-project context, as well as to assess and improve the necessary skills of these actors to continue to manage the project impacts in a radically under-resourced environment. The authors hope that the insights from this case study can be adapted for use by other organisations to ensure institutional sustainability of project impacts.