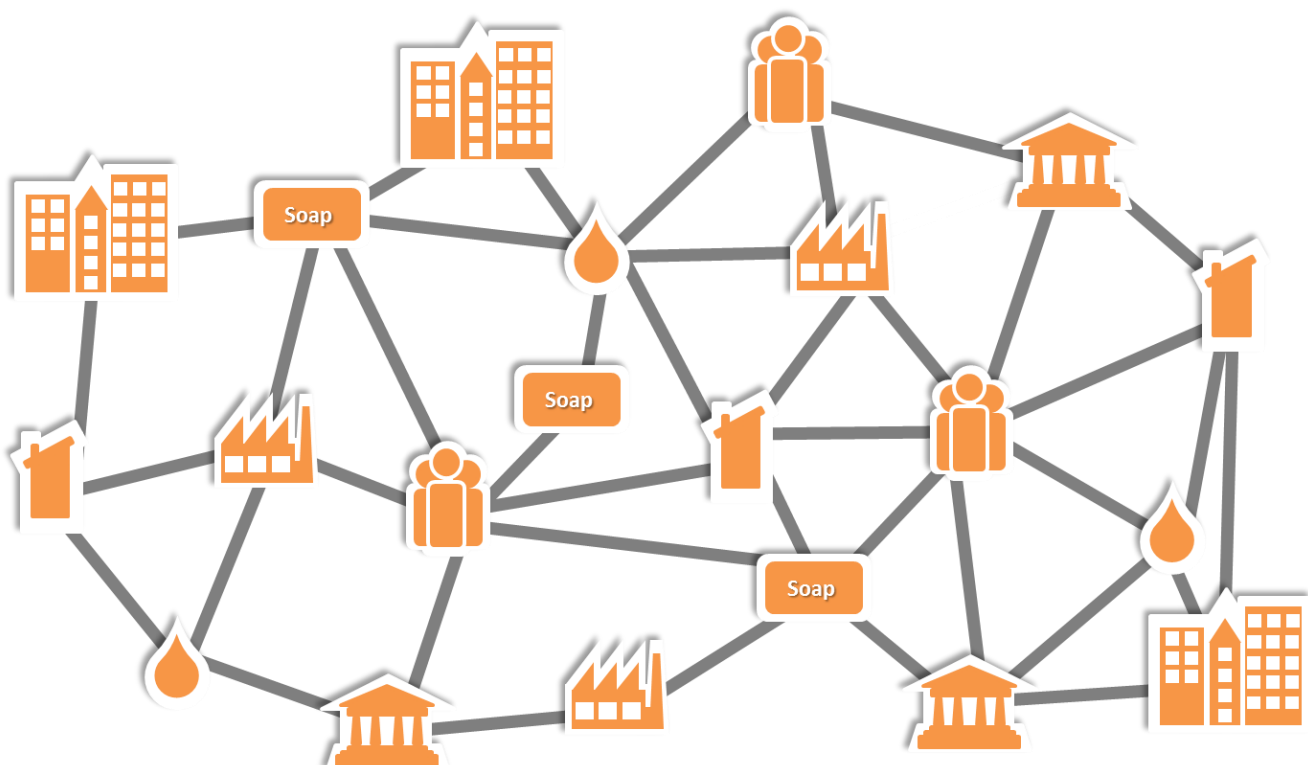


KAMPALA WASH SYMPOSIUM BACKGROUND NOTE

BRINGING TOGETHER THE 21ST SUSTAINABLE SANITATION ALLIANCE (SUSANA) MEETINGS AND THE 2016 WASH SUSTAINABILITY FORUM

8 MARCH 2016



sustainable
sanitation
alliance



INTRODUCTION TO THE FORUM

By 2030 the world has committed to providing universal access to sustainable water and sanitation services. How can we do this? How can we ensure that new water and sanitation services last not just for a few years, but for generations? What is our role in achieving this goal? And more importantly, how must we change what we are currently doing to reach it?

Over the past five years a series of Sustainability Fora and SuSanA meetings have brought hundreds of experts, government representatives, practitioners, donors, and other WASH stakeholders together to explore how each can better play a role in making water and sanitation services truly sustainable. As we kick off the fifteen-year countdown to the new global goals it becomes even more critical that leadership for achieving full coverage and indefinite sustainability of services is taken up by governments, civil society, the private sector and academia from and within the countries who committed to the Goals. And that the development partners – the NGOs, philanthropic organisations, donors and multi-laterals – who seek to support countries in the South also support this leadership.

To this end the Kampala WASH Symposium, to be held in **Uganda in June 2016**, will look beyond the conventional notion of 'projects' to explore how we, as WASH actors, can and should work together within the wider complex systems that deliver services. With participants and presentations from governments, donors, researchers, and practitioners, this event will bring emerging thinking on how to **drive whole-system change** and support the building of **robust national systems** at scale capable of providing universal access. It will focus on the changes that are necessary for how externally supported WASH interventions are conceived, implemented and sustained over time.

In this short background paper we set out the critical issues to be discussed at the forum and why we believe that only by understanding our place in such complex systems will we be able to overcome the long-standing challenges in the sector.

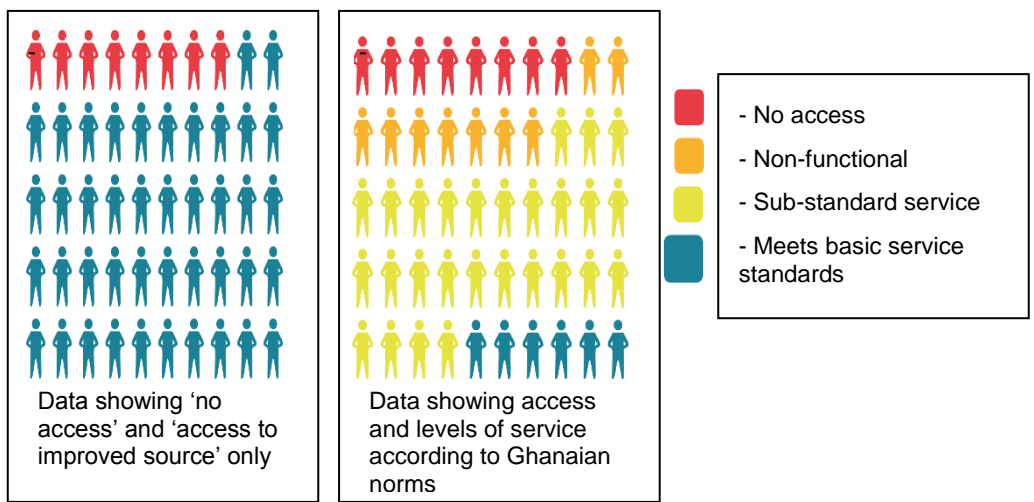
WHY WE NEED TO THINK AND ACT DIFFERENTLY

The period spanning the Millennium Development Goals (that ended in 2015) brought important momentum and focus to the sector and, at least superficially, impressive progress in access to water supply; for example, since 1990, the number of countries with less than 50% coverage has decreased from 23 to 3 (JMP 2015). However, when we look more carefully at our successes the picture gets more complex with many countries still facing a major struggle to deliver continuous levels of basic services to everyone all the time; this is illustrated well by the snapshot of the situation (figure 1) facing rural water service delivery in rural districts in Ghana.

In addition to the one in ten people globally who still lack first time access to improved drinking water sources (around 663 million people) there are a huge (largely unknown) number for whom access to a service is patchy at best. The sanitation challenge is far worse, with one in three (2.4 billion) people still lacking improved sanitation facilities and one in eight people (around 946 million) practicing open defecation. It is shocking that in 2015, at the end of the MDGs, 47 countries have less than 50% coverage of improved sanitation. And given these stark statistics it is hardly surprising that the expected improvement to health that access to water and sanitation should bring remains so elusive.

The data from Ghana, and experience from many other countries, demonstrates that apparent success can be illusionary and fragile. As we are on the cusp of a new, and rightly ambitious global framework and set of goals for the SDGs, we cannot continue with the same approaches that fail to address sustainable service delivery. In the period spanning the MDGs, the world has become a far more integrated and inter-connected place. The knowledge, skills and technology that make water and sanitation services work in many countries are transferrable commodities in a way that would have been unthinkable previously. Money can be a limiting factor in some contexts, but often this is not at the root cause of our failure to progress. The challenges of the last few decades' point to the need for a radical re-assessment of *how* we can achieve such ambitious goals, and in turn how we understand the complex environments in which we all work, in order to secure truly sustainable service provision.

Fig. 1: Breakdown of service delivery in Akatsi District Ghana (Source: IRC; 2014)



UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE WHOLE SYSTEM

The world is an increasingly complicated place. Change is inevitable and happening all around us. Climate change, demographic and economic growth and population movement, rising standards of living (and demand), rapid advances in technology, but also growing political uncertainty - we work in a world where complexity, inter-connectedness and uncertainty are growing exponentially. Change also occurs in 'unseen' ways, with cultural preferences and expectations being shaped and re-shaped by the rapid flow of information and the blurring of old divides. Change is inevitable, but it is also unpredictable and today's solutions probably cannot be counted on tomorrow.

Modern societies are, by definition, made up of **complex and interlinked systems** of people, laws, political and financial institutions, private companies, technologies, markets and regulations all constantly interacting, both formally and informally and responding to different sets of incentives, sanctions and influences. This is how they work, and this is how they provide services to their citizens. This is as true for the water and sanitation 'sector' and the services they deliver as any other part of a modern economy.

The overarching theme of the 2016 symposium is that tackling the failures and challenges of the past

- moving away from dependence on aid and charity, building robust national capacity to deliver (and to keep delivering) services - means accepting and embracing this complexity, and with it the need for strong national systems. It means understanding that simply "capacitating communities" be they rural or urban, has not and cannot lead to universal and sustainable access alone. It means that robust national systems for service delivery require all of the elements at all different institutional levels – from households and communities to local government and national ministries to private companies and aid agencies to politicians – to work together effectively to achieve scale. That getting to universal access means engaging with and strengthening those systems in their entirety and not focussing only on one small entry point in a piecemeal manner without regard for the wider system.

Understanding the world through such a systems-based perspective is not new and much work has been done to understand how the elements of a system interact, including analysis of social networks, pandemics, biodiversity, global food systems and local traffic patterns. Taking this perspective allows the possibility to shape the whole system toward a specific reform outcome, such as national health care systems in the United Kingdom and Canada, the Police in the Netherlands, educational reform in the United States and in integrated water resources management initiatives in many countries (Casella et al; 2015). A key outcome of reform for the WASH sector that we could expect through taking

such a perspective is not that services never fail, but that there are the systems in place to enable such services to recover.

What are the lessons behind engaging with the whole-system?

The piecemeal and siloed approaches used in the past have not succeeded in delivering sustained improvements in public goods and services and there is a growing tide of voices calling for an approach that acknowledges and embraces the need to build robust systems. There is also a growing body of work and discourse around understanding complexity in the context of development aid¹. From this work we are already able to identify aspects of the systems approach that may be helpful for our own sector:

- **No silver bullets:** Solutions can never be unilateral and are rarely linear. Because a system, with all its constituent actors and elements is constantly interacting and changing (a process termed co-evolution) it is impossible to precisely predict what the next evolution of the system will be, simply because there are too many variables all at work influencing the outcome. The key lesson given this complex picture is that we should not assume, or expect, one action, or even one set of actions, to directly result in ‘the solution’ even though we may know the general direction of travel.
- **Work with the whole system:** by corollary, only by considering – and trying to engage with – the ‘whole system’ do we stand any chance of success. We know for example that lasting solutions are more likely when there is as wide as possible consultation and engagement in a shared process of learning and collective action.
- **Complexity requires flexibility:** Given the inherent complexity of the system, it makes little sense to predict that Intervention A today will solve ‘Problem B’ in five years. Rather, a flexible and iterative approach is required based on a clear vision of what is to be achieved and a programme of action

¹ For example the UK’s Overseas Development Institute and the Institute for Development Studies and the World Bank are all exploring the theme of complexity in aid and taking a whole system approach; UNICEF has also explored this in the child protection arena (UNICEF, 2010). See also IRC blog: <http://www.ircwash.org/blog/cautiously-optimistic> and SuSanA Thematic Discussion: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/categories/218>

embedded in a strong culture of monitoring, experimentation, adaption and learning. For development partners this means a shift from logical frameworks to theories of change. In this way, collective action becomes a continuous process of experimentation and learning, in which ‘failures’ are embraced as a positive step to understanding what does not work, on the way to finding out what does.

- **Local ownership:** donors and NGOs as well-meaning outsiders seeking to influence change and improve services, but must recognise that approaches should be locally owned and led. Likewise, national stakeholders need to put themselves forward and lead processes. Whilst externally-driven interventions (i.e. development aid programmes of donors and NGOs) can bring in new ideas and help to catalyse change, they cannot and should not displace local stakeholders such as national and local government or civil society.
- **Support the process of whole-system change:** Understanding and engaging with the system in all its complexity is difficult, requires collective effort and takes time. It requires money and patience to support not just individual interventions (which remain essential) but the process of change itself; something that has historically not been seen as a ‘justifiable’ investment. It also means changing the profile of people working in the sector: leading whole-system change requires people - and particularly leaders - who can understand the world with all its complex reality and work effectively within it.

WHOLE-SYSTEM CHANGE IN THE WASH SECTOR?

As with the broader trend in development thinking, there are signs that organisations and individuals in the WASH sector are embracing the ideas and practice of taking a whole systems approach to solving some of our most pernicious challenges. Indeed, countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda are already moving in this positive direction with strong national leadership, in spite of continuing challenges. On the development partner side, some would argue that elements of such an approach have been known for some time; for example, IRC of the Netherlands has long-

championed the learning alliance approach to action research for example (Moriarty et al, 2005,).

Other NGOs have supported locally-led solutions that embrace systems thinking these include Water For People, WaterAid, Engineers Without Borders, Canada, the Millennium Water Alliance and WASH Alliance International. The larger donor agencies are increasingly placing an emphasis on building national capacity and supporting national systems, for example WSP/World Bank, DFID and USAID, while the BMZ² has supported national systems strengthening for over a decade in a number of countries. We are steadily building insights into what it actually means to take a whole systems change approach and the nuts and bolts of how it can be done, both in the rural and urban sectors.

Indeed, the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership - our apex political platform – is increasingly embracing a system building agenda, calling for support to nationally-led processes and for more collaborative behaviours from external actors.

A comprehensive assessment of taking a whole-systems approach comes from the work of IRC in Ghana, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, where an analysis of five years and more of work was carried out to learn lessons about what it takes to facilitate a change process (Lockwood, H. and Duti, V.; 2015). The key lessons from this study include, the importance of a common understanding of the problem (in this case low levels of functionality and poor service delivery); the role of continuous learning and reflection; the need to identify and involve champions (at senior technical and political levels) and the importance of a facilitator or 'broker', also referred to as a 'backbone organisation'. The study highlights the serious investments needed to take such an approach, suggesting a minimum ten-year time horizon to see positive change emerge and a cost of some \$1 million per year to support and facilitate the change process. This change will never fully materialise without domestic resource mobilisation and the firm commitment to building local systems and capacity over the long-term.

This may appear a high price tag, but when compared to the tens of millions of dollars spent each year on new services and the poor results in

terms of access to services (as illustrated in the figure shown earlier) we would argue that it is in fact a good value proposition if it can lead to lasting systemic improvements. The continuing outcome of this change process in Ghana is now directly influencing additional funding from other organisations, including government, of around US\$190 million for mutually reinforcing activities towards achievement of a common goal of sustainable rural water service delivery.

FINDING OUR PLACE IN THE SYSTEM

The idea of the world – or even just the WASH sector – as a complex, constantly adapting place can be overwhelming “*How can I understand such a system, let alone influence it?!*”

Yet it doesn't have to be, and indeed the first step to engaging with whole system change is simply to recognise the WASH sector as complex and 'messy' reality in which we are but one actor among many and where the ultimate success of our intervention relies on our ability to work collaboratively with others.

Practical ways in which governments, individuals and organisations can start to shift their thinking and actions include:

- Mapping the system and locating your place within it; understanding what others are doing and engaging actively and constructively with them;
- Realising that your presence and actions – either as a permanent actor, or a 'temporary' development partner – implies you are already part of that system;
- Recognising and working to support – and never displace or duplicate – national and local leadership and systems (especially national monitoring systems);
- Being open to, and collaborating with, collective action that starts by developing a shared understanding of both vision and challenges with as wide a group as possible – and then moving to a shared programme of learning and adaptation;
- Arguably most importantly and requiring the biggest shift - being open and willing to support (financially) the costs and processes required to support collective action;

² German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Answering the question: “*what can I do differently to support whole-system change and the creation of robust national systems?*” lies at the heart of this year’s Kampala WASH Symposium.

Perspectives on this question will vary depending on whether you represent government, civil society or an international development partner, and there will be different implications in terms of time horizons and incentives to act. And of course what

any one of us can do, and how far we can change our own thinking and behaviours, depends on who we represent and what our influence is within our own organisation. Often, those with the greatest power to influence, for example in government or international financial institutions, may be those who are most bound by rules and bureaucracy. Yet achieving universal access by 2030, and ensuring that once achieved services can be sustained through strong and effective national systems requires that we do indeed change.

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AUTHORS

This background paper was drafted by Harold Lockwood of Aguaconsult UK with inputs from Ingeborg Krukut, IRC The Netherlands, and significant revisions by Patrick Moriarty, IRC The Netherlands and Heather Skilling, independent consultant. USA.

For more information, please contact info@aguaconsult.co.uk