



PRINCIPLES FOR WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

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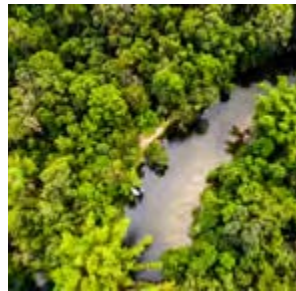
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INTRODUCTION

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services are the product of complex systems comprised of many interacting factors and actors. Over the past ten years, it has become widely recognized that an intentional and coordinated strengthening of these WASH systems is essential to realising Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. A quadrupling of current rates of progress is required to achieve SDG6 by 2030. A systems strengthening approach is vital both to accelerating progress while ensuring services will be climate resilient in the long term.

In April 2023, representatives from UNICEF, IRC, and SIWI came together for a two-day workshop to discuss UNICEF's emerging WASH systems strengthening framework. During this workshop, the importance of understanding WASH as a system was discussed and a set of principles to guide action for WASH systems strengthening was developed.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING ACTION ON WASH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING

These seven principles are informed by the existing literature on systems change as well as the experiences of UNICEF, IRC, and SIWI in water, sanitation, and hygiene systems around the world. The principles can be considered as guidance and inspiration for decision making and self-reflection. For organizations engaged in systems strengthening, it is valuable to revisit these periodically to reflect on one's own behaviour and identify areas for continued growth. It is also important to discuss these with new partners when initiating a new programme or collaboration.

Several frameworks exist for depicting *what* the WASH system is and how it functions; such frameworks are helpful for identifying systemic bottlenecks and making plans to address them. These principles complement such frameworks by focusing on *how* to engage with the system, what behaviors and philosophies to consider, when setting out to change a system for the better.



PRINCIPLE 1

See and understand WASH as a system (see ourselves in this system)

The first principle is about learning to see the system and its context when working with WASH. This means building the ability to perceive the interconnectedness and underlying dynamics of a complex system in service delivery, including relationships and patterns of behaviour. This means looking outside your immediate technological focus to explore why potential solutions may not be leading to intended results.

Complex systems interact with and are influenced by their surroundings. Seemingly simple dynamics in WASH are deeply influenced by several interconnected social, environmental, and political factors.

Seeing WASH as a system also means understanding where we ourselves fit, and being aware of how our identity as individuals or organizations affect the way our actions are received. Power dynamics are always present and can play out in ways that affect the outcome of a multi-stakeholder systems assessment.

This is all part of the context that WASH systems leaders must learn to sense and respond to. Seeing the system in WASH services aids decision making, fosters holistic problem solving, and helps to anticipate unintended consequences. It can be empowering and can reduce frustration by revealing the underlying causes for persistent challenges. A holistic view of the system can help unlock ideas for how anyone, at any level in the system, can engage with it and try to change the dynamics to improve outcomes.

Tip: Include experts on these contextual issues in your planning and reflection. Take the time to try to understand power dynamics. Take time to reflect on the human and behavioral aspects of change, and how these may change overtime with a changing climate and other factors.

PRINCIPLE 2

Embrace interconnectedness and explore boundaries

Embracing interconnectivity can transform the way we design WASH programmes, react to unexpected events, and develop strategies to make change.

The principle of interconnectivity challenges us to constantly zoom in and out of the parts of the WASH system we are most comfortable working on to observe the interrelated systems and factors that affect them and that they influence. WASH policies, strategies, and interventions are important pathways to achieve progress in areas such as health, nutrition, education, economic development, environmental protection, peacebuilding, and gender equality. WASH systems strengthening should seek to maximize these synergies and avoid the notion of trade-offs that forces us to think in “either-or”. A case in point is climate and development finance for poverty reduction, which offers a way to progress on resilient WASH access.

Boundaries are a tool to avoid getting overwhelmed by the many interconnected factors that affect WASH service delivery. Playing with boundaries allows us to discover leverage points, these places in systems where even small changes can boost overall progress for WASH. Interconnectedness enables us to get outside our siloes and forge new alliances that lead to systems shifts.

PRINCIPLE 3

Consider time and scale; plan for long-term commitment

Simple problems may have simple solutions, and complex problems, well, often have complex solutions. It’s important to be realistic about the complexity of the challenge when we are trying to solve big problems with too little time, too few resources, and at too little scale. Exploring time and scale helps us be creative about bringing seemingly disconnected processes together to craft solutions that match the scale of the problems that we face.

When starting a WASH systems strengthening initiative, be sensitive to the scale you are working at and the likely scale of impacts within the time that you have. Explore ways to leverage your experience to have impact at a larger scale and consider how you can inspire others to invest in systems change knowing that it may be a long-term effort.

One powerful way to work with—rather than against—time and scale in WASH is to make long-term commitments to working with specific institutions or administrative areas. Such commitments can then be transformed into concrete roadmaps and plans for action. Make use of the fact that WASH systems are geographically bound—e.g. to the service area of a utility, the mandate of a government entity, the boundary of a watershed, or the administrative area of a planning unit. Rather than offering ‘too little input, for too short a time’ in many areas, work to have systemic impact on a single area, then leverage learning, influence, and partnership to multiply or scale up those results.



PRINCIPLE 4

Know resources and finance are required

Effective interventions demand resources, and this principle acknowledges the necessity of financial and human investment in WASH systems strengthening. Actions aimed at strengthening systems might not be immediately visible, but any intentional effort requires time and money.

This principle calls for honest and transparent communication of the costs, many of which have historically been referred to as “overhead,” for activities such as internal capacity building, coordination, partnership meetings, and strategic planning sessions. This principle also calls systems change leaders to be sympathetic to the costs incurred by other stakeholders and partners, including government, when they are invited to engage in a collective action process. Understanding the resource landscape, mobilising funding for capital and recurring costs, and managing resources efficiently are fundamental to sustaining systems strengthening initiatives over a long enough period to have impact.

PRINCIPLE 5

Change is a continuous, adaptive process. Experiment iteratively

Change in a complex system is not a one-time event. Even a seemingly immediate shift, like doubling of the national budget for WASH, is the result of dynamics and smaller changes that have built up over time. Change also requires continuous adaptation—if one thing doesn’t work, try another. By remaining flexible in strategies and approaches while remaining focused on pursuit of the end goal, stakeholders can respond to shifting circumstances and follow emerging opportunities. Embracing approaches based on a solid understanding of practical and political realities on the ground, context specificity, continual learning, pragmatism, and flexibility ensure that efforts remain aligned with evolving needs.

This principle makes it safe to fail, safe to be honest about a need to pivot, safe to communicate uncertainty and risk at the outset of an expensive intervention. The word “experimentation” is not intended to make us detached about the outcomes; it’s about being realistic about the uncertainty and need to monitor evidence and adapt as we go.

Embracing this mindset may require changes to planning and reporting processes. Once internalised, it enables organizations to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges, refine interventions based on real-world feedback, and align their efforts with the evolving needs of the system they are working within.

PRINCIPLE 6

Foster inclusivity and equitable voice while respecting the role of duty bearers

To develop WASH solutions that truly resonate and endure, inclusivity is essential. So is legitimacy. This principle is about ensuring engagement of concerned people to foster lasting and meaningful change in public services.

Inclusivity means engaging all the affected stakeholders, valuing their insights, and ensuring representation. By fostering an environment where all voices are heard equally and all perspectives are respected, organizations can enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of their initiatives while addressing potential biases and imbalances. This does not mean tokenism or simply getting everyone to the table. It requires continuous and proactive efforts to invite quieter voices to speak up, to identify and counteract power imbalances that prevent inclusion, and the willingness for those naturally at the centre to step back and create space for others.

Governments have a key role in shaping public service systems particularly with regards to creating large scale systems change. By recognizing governments as the primary duty bearer with the mandate and resources to change formal systems, development partners can work in tandem with governments to introduce and implement more sustainable solutions.

This principle sometimes requires handling specific stakeholders with care. Where the legitimacy or ethics of a key stakeholder are in question (be it a government or private company), a careful analysis of the risks of engagement is important. This issue is best approached through pro-active deliberation, honest conversation among collaborators, and periodic reflection and adaptation.

PRINCIPLE 7

Promote collective action and a culture of shared results

When we talk about systems change for public services it is almost always connected to a discussion of collective action. This is because complex socio-technical systems like WASH cannot be transformed by the work of a single actor. Government has a key role, but its ability to effectively implement its policies and achieve its goals is influenced by public opinion, economic conditions, market actors, and many other factors. Effective transformation thus hinges on collective effort.

The most exciting part about living out this principle is not the decision to collaborate; instead it's the nurturing of a culture that prioritizes shared outcomes over individual agendas and egos. It might mean putting effort into a result which may not get you in the spotlight. Sometimes it means taking your brand off a shared product.

A culture of collective action in WASH helps to harness synergies, reduces duplication of efforts, and leads to sustainable changes that transcend personal interests. It doesn't mean all actors need to be fully aligned on all ideas; divergent opinions managed well often lead to better results overall. It does mean honest and non-competitive dialogue and conflict resolution. When a co-creation process is in place, change can be driven in all parts of a system by partners simultaneously—faster and further together.



FINAL THOUGHTS

We have elaborated seven principles to guide action on WASH systems strengthening. Our experience is that living these principles helps us to understand connections, anticipate challenges, and continue to adapt ourselves to become better attuned to the needs of each context in which we work.

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Change is a continuous, adaptive process. Experiment iteratively.

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Foster inclusivity and equitable voice while respecting the role of duty bearers.

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Promote collective action and a culture of shared results.

MORE RESOURCES AND READING

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UNICEF (2022). **Strategic Directions for WASH Systems Strengthening in the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025**, UNICEF, New York.

UNICEF WASH Systems Strengthening: framework (forthcoming)

UNICEF WASH Systems Strengthening: practical guide for programming (forthcoming)

