



Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership

## Defining Collective Action Approaches in WASH

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The term “collective action” is becoming more prevalent in the international water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector. As the WASH sector is increasingly looking to systems approaches to build sustainable services, many partners are applying collective action approaches to build strong local systems that consistently deliver WASH services. Systems approaches seek to understand the complexity, interactions, and interdependencies among actors and factors; takes action based on this understanding; and regularly adapts to feedback and changing conditions. Collective action approaches are one type of systems approach.

Given this growing interest in collective action approaches, many are wondering, “What are collective action approaches?” and “Should we be using collective action approaches in our activities?” Research conducted by the [Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership \(SWS\)](#) aims to help donors, practitioners, and local governments better understand and make informed decisions about the use of collective action approaches within WASH programming. This brief presents a definition of collective action approaches and a working typology of the range of related approaches. This work is based on a literature review and interviews with experts and SWS partners who are working to implement collective action approaches to improve the sustainability of WASH services in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, and Cambodia.

### Definition of Collective Action Approaches for WASH Service Delivery

A collective action approach can be defined\* as a process in which sector stakeholders regularly convene and take joint actions to address shared problems, in which:

- problems are complex, and their solutions require deliberation and action by many actors;
- members agree on a shared vision and shared problem definition; and
- stakeholders clarify responsibilities and hold each other accountable for actions.

\* This definition was synthesized from multiple sources<sup>1-9</sup> and adapted to reflect SWS experiences.

## A Typology of Approaches

Implementers<sup>3</sup> and scholars<sup>9</sup> refer to a wide range of approaches that bring together sector stakeholders in a collective manner as “coordination,” “collaboration” or, sometimes, “collective action.” Yet, approaches differ in expected results, resources required, and degree of dependence among members. Not all coordination falls within the definition of a collective action approach. SWS developed a typology that allows WASH activity implementers to identify what level of collaboration might be most appropriate for a given context.

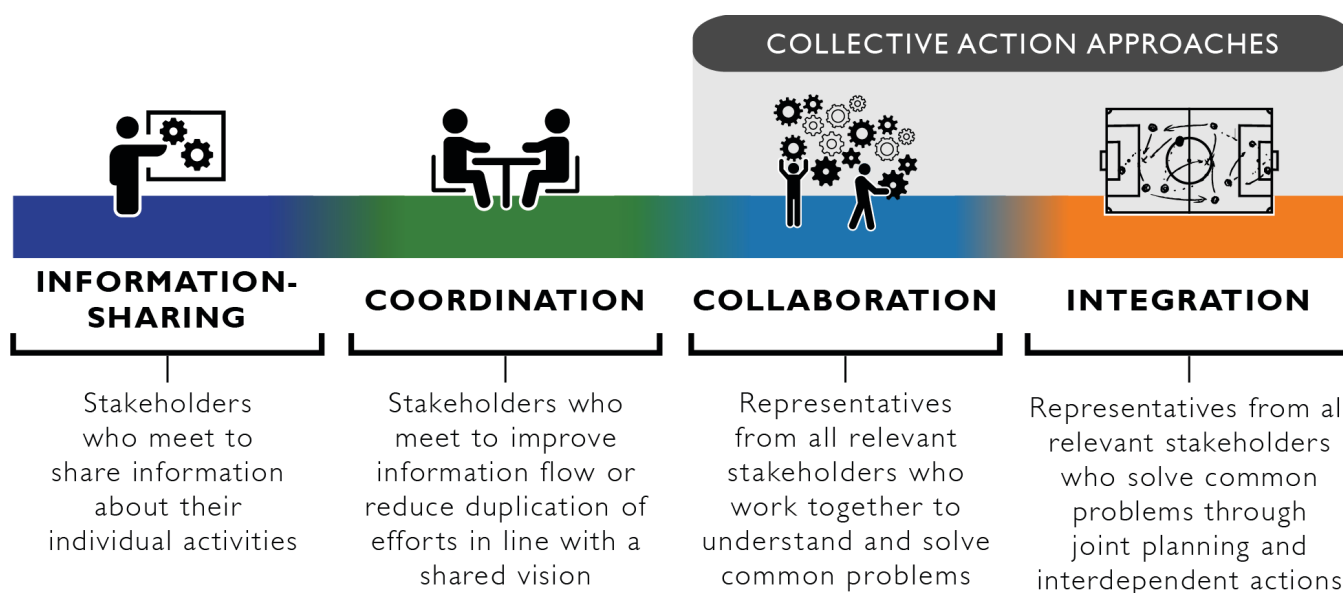


Table I describes some of the key differences between the four approaches, including common orientation, coordination of actions, accountability mechanisms, and member autonomy. It is based on a number of previously published frameworks.<sup>6,9,10,11</sup> Moving down the table, each type of approach is more complex and resource-intensive than the former. Further, each encompasses aspects of the former; for example, *Integration* would include aspects of *Collaboration*, *Coordination*, and *Information-Sharing*. The most intensive type of approach, *Integration*, involves collective problem solving, planning, and implementation. This approach increases interdependence among organizations and thus calls for stronger accountability mechanisms, which in turn introduces shared risks and ultimately reduces member autonomy.

From our typology, only the *Integration* and *Collaboration* approaches meet our definition of collective action approaches because they both meet the criteria of having a shared vision and problem definition, as well as the aim to clarify responsibilities for service provision while building accountability among stakeholders. Although the *Coordination* and *Information-Sharing* approaches do not meet our definition, these can still be effective strategies to bring stakeholders together without a loss of autonomy or more significant commitment of resources.

Table 1. Typology of Approaches

Type	Common Orientation and Planning	Coordination of Actions	Accountability Mechanisms	Shared Risks	Member Autonomy	Collective Action Approach?
Information-Sharing	None	Individual actions informed by knowledge of others' actions	Some accountability to show up and share information	None	Retain full autonomy	No
Coordination	Common vision established	Individual actions aligned toward the same goal so as to not duplicate or contradict others' work	Some accountability to carry out actions	None	Retain full autonomy	No
Collaboration	Collective problem solving	Collective problem solving leads to decisions on what actions should be implemented	Accountable for individual actions and results	Risks associated with higher transparency and accountability	Members have some influence over each other's activities	Yes
Integration	Collective planning	Highly interdependent, mutually reinforcing actions part of a shared workplan	Accountable for individual and group actions and results	Additional risks associated with shared workplans and funding	Members have strong influence over each other's activities	Yes

An example of an *Information-Sharing* approach would be a monthly meeting at which implementing organizations report on new water schemes installed. This approach would be classified as *Coordination* if it also identified a common vision, such as universal access to rural water services, and then identified locations where schemes were needed and coordinated new installments. A *Collaboration* approach would be if the group used more complex forms of problem-solving, such as bringing water scheme mechanics and government offices together to discuss the underlying causes of water service failures and jointly agreed to each take specific actions. If that group of stakeholders were to co-develop a shared workplan and shared set of indicators, this would be considered an *Integration* approach because of increased dependency and accountability. A popular form of an *Integration* approach is the Collective Impact<sup>5</sup> framework. While this example described a single group evolving through all four types of approaches, in practice, groups may take any of these forms and adapt to be more or less collaborative as appropriate to the situation.

### Next Steps and Future Work

SWS will continue to learn about how collective action approaches work, when and why to implement them, how to monitor them, and what outcomes can be expected from them. SWS will undertake a cross-case comparison to assess a variety of applications, including learning- and action-focused groups in Ethiopia and Uganda, government partnership meetings in Uganda, and county-level WASH multi-stakeholder forums in Kenya.

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### About the Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership:

The Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership is a global United States Agency for International Development (USAID) cooperative agreement to identify locally-driven solutions to the challenge of developing robust local systems capable of sustaining water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) service delivery.

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