Making sanitation happen:
turning 'political will' into action

Policy brief

In a change from historical trends, more and more governments are voicing their commitment to achievement of universal access to sanitation. How can governments take this beyond rhetorical political will and drive real progress? One essential step is to translate this high-level political commitment into prioritisation of sanitation across government levels and departments, and into course correction processes that enable identification of and adaptation to implementation challenges. In this policy brief, we analyse the incentives that shape these processes and suggest ways to turn political will into action.

Key recommendations

Two key recommendations emerge for national governments committed to delivering universal access to sanitation, as well as for external stakeholders trying to foster political will.

First, to cascade political prioritisation to lower government levels and across critical ministries. How?
- Foster buy-in by aligning with the world views of those involved, linking sanitation with notions of nation-building and modernity.
- Tap into personal aspirations, ensuring sanitation efforts receive recognition and result in career progression.
- Enlist authoritative figures to drive prioritisation across all ministries and departments.
- Work with the financial, legal and political realities of decentralisation affecting decision-makers at local levels.

Second, to invest in timely course correction to address bottlenecks. How?
- Invest in reliable verification systems to reduce misreporting and build trust in data.
- Nurture a culture of learning, providing space and flexibility for trial, error, learning and adaptation.
- Use informal sharing and reporting mechanisms, such as WhatsApp groups, that cut across hierarchies and enable a rapid and regular flow of information.
- Set up review mechanisms, ensuring quality over quantity and involving those with decision-making power as a way to ensure it all leads to progress-chasing policy implementation.

Introduction

Historically, the key blockage to sanitation progress has been lack of political will behind the sector. But over the past 15 years, at the global level, it has gradually increased, at least in the form of high-level statements of support.[1,2] The clearest example of this is the ambitious sanitation and hygiene target under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 – to 'achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation' by 2030.

Aligned with this target and its ambition, a growing number of countries are showing commitment to sanitation progress at the highest levels of government. However, this alone is not sufficient for real progress towards universal access. Previous research on the experience of South-East Asian countries[3] shows that two steps are crucial for that commitment to translate into outcomes: prioritisation of sanitation, penetrating throughout government machinery; and establishment of 'course correction' processes that identify emerging implementation bottlenecks and effect rapid policy adaptations. If prioritisation were the engine driving progress in sanitation, course correction would be the rudder, enabling responsive adaptations through policy, legal, and institutional reforms. Both are necessary to successfully navigate the complexities of sanitation and advance towards a strong sector able to deliver universal sanitation services.

Research evidence that touches on these issues typically focuses on the presence of specific elements such as dedicated targets, clear institutional roles, budgets, capacity, and monitoring and learning systems.[4,5,6] Not enough attention has been paid to the incentives that shape the two key steps mentioned and which would lead to those elements being instated and made to work in practice. WaterAid commissioned the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to conduct research

in three countries to bridge this knowledge gap. The research focused on how incentives shaped the translation of high-level political commitment into prioritisation through different layers of government and course correction to tackle implementation bottlenecks.

The research draws on case studies of urban sanitation in Indonesia and of rural sanitation in Ethiopia and India (focussing on the Indian state of Chhattisgarh). The three case studies show evidence of high-level political commitment. For instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made sanitation a top priority of his tenure, and senior civil servants within Indonesia's Ministry of National Development Planning and elsewhere put urban sanitation on the political agenda. In Ethiopia, commitment to sanitation is more diffuse, shown by the involvement of several ministers
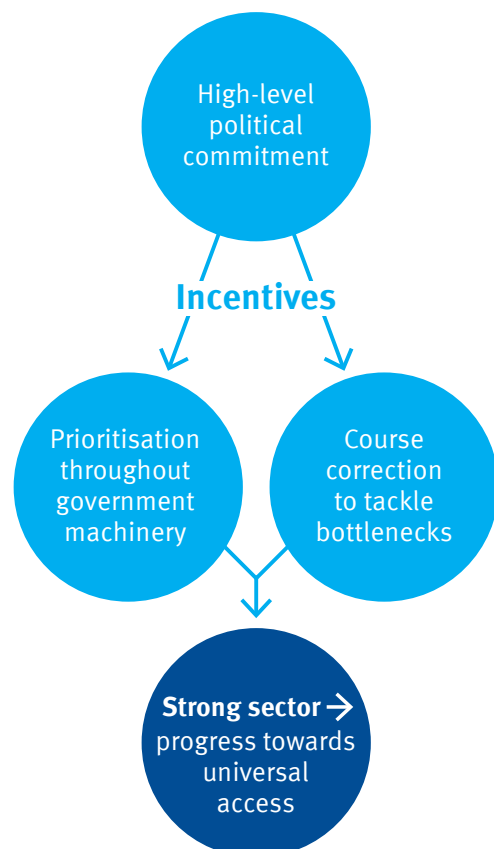
Research framework (WaterAid)

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Table: Open defecation and improved sanitation rates in the case study countries.

	Ethiopia (rural)			India (rural)			Indonesia (urban)		
	2005	2015	Ranking*	2005	2015	Ranking*	2005	2015	Ranking*
Open defecation	68%	34%	4th	73%	61%	21st	15%	13%	39th
Improved sanitation	14%	28%	15th	20%	29%	41st	68%	72%	40th

Source: Based on data from WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme www.wssinfo.org
* Relative performance of the country in rates of reduction in open defecation and increase in improved sanitation.

and senior civil servants. As a result, the three countries have achieved substantial progress in delivering sanitation, even though more is needed to ensure universal sanitation services

Findings

Values of modernity, along with political and professional advantage, can help galvanise prioritisation of sanitation.

In all three countries, two broad sets of incentives seem to have been instrumental in translation of high-level political commitments into prioritisation of sanitation throughout government machinery.

One set of incentives works by **aligning sanitation with the world views of elected leaders, officials, and implementers** – through an appealing narrative, they are encouraged to ask themselves: **'Do I believe in this cause?'** and to play their part. Examples include using ideas around modernity and economic competitiveness to create political buy-in. To a lesser extent, governments used political and campaigning messaging that tied into symbols of historical and cultural heritage. For instance, the deadline of India's rural sanitation programme Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G) coincides with the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, and the logo features his distinctive spectacles.

In India and Indonesia, interviewees mentioned the Economics of Sanitation Initiative, which quantified the economic costs of inadequate sanitation[6] as a driver of the high-level commitment on sanitation. However, broader ideas of modernity and economic competitiveness were used for prioritisation in lower tiers of government. In the words of one interviewee in Indonesia: "At the local level it is not the economic cost (…) that drives the agenda forward; instead, it is linked to the image of the smart/modern city that [Mayors] want to portray."

Credit: Sanitation and Water for All

Another set of incentives created political buy-in through the **prospect of personal and professional advantage – 'What is in it for me?'** These incentives tap into desires for political gains, career advancement, and personal renown.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi joins a walkathon as part of the launch of a nationwide cleanup campaign in New Delhi, 2 October, 2014. Millions of schoolchildren, officials, and the public joined the campaign to clean parks, public buildings, and streets.

Credit: Associated Press.

In India, some interviewees regarded prioritising the programme as a potential route by which politicians could win votes. Within the bureaucracy, officials perceive sanitation as a route to career progression, given its political importance. In Indonesia, inter-city competition encouraged leaders to prioritise sanitation. Since 2014, the Government has granted awards to recognise city leaders' initiatives such as increasing budget allocations or developing service delivery innovations. The incentive is more prestige among peers than the award's value.[8]

Competing incentives and power relations undermine prioritisation.

The positive incentives identified are necessary but not always sufficient to create prioritisation of sanitation in policy implementation, as this can be hampered by many competing incentives.

To translate prioritisation of sanitation from **national to local levels** of government, local officials need authority and budget. But officials' choices can be affected by how much autonomy they believe they have, which is often shaped by subtle and more informal political and legal rules.

In Indonesia, infrastructure for sanitation and water is often built by the Public Works Ministry using national budgets, and notionally transferred to district government ownership. However, district officials can be reluctant to take ownership of and responsibility for operation and maintenance, in a context of strict public expenditure rules and unclear legal ownership status.

Because sanitation is a multi-sectoral issue, there is a dual risk of it becoming an orphaned sector or being isolated if prioritisation is confined to one ministry. Efforts to avert this risk by increasing **prioritisation across government** – among responsible ministries or departments at the same level – commonly face challenges around perceptions of relative power and status of institutions and programmes. These perceptions can affects how far key bodies are willing to collaborate and implement policy.

In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Health is designated as lead for rural sanitation at federal level. Sanitation is therefore somewhat buried within a wide portfolio, overseen by a Hygiene and Environmental Health Case Team below directorate level. This relatively low status of the institutional sanitation lead affects its ability to drive prioritisation of sanitation across ministries and among wider WASH stakeholder groups.

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Incentives linked to professional and political advantage are crucial for course correction.

Incentives linked to world views ('Do I believe in this cause?') that lead to prioritisation have a positive influence on course correction. However, incentives linked to professional and political advantage ('What is in it for me?') have a more decisive influence. For instance, they can increase the likelihood of stakeholders at lower levels sharing information from the ground for policy review in the first place.

Nurturing a learning culture and creating robust verification reduces perverse effects of these incentives on reporting.

These advantage-related incentives can also have a negative effect if honest reporting is perceived to result in political or professional disadvantage. Effects can include officials over-reporting to gain prestige or career advancement, or under-reporting to attract extra resources.

In India, WhatsApp groups are facilitating interaction between lower-level and higher-level officials. This exposure to political superiors outside formal and very hierarchical reporting lines gives juniors an opportunity to increase their profile and prestige (for career advancement), motivating them to participate actively in day-to-day information sharing. SBM-G's mission director in Chhattisgarh uses these groups daily to reviews district-level progress; district officials engage in monitoring and reviewing activities, deploying staff to share reports in a designated WhatsApp group.

In India, top-down pressure to deliver – which becomes an incentive linked to career advancement – has driven prioritisation but undermined course correction. The target-driven push, coupled with weak verification, hindered review and adaptation, which was typically reflected in high rates of over-reporting of toilets constructed. In Ethiopia, several interviewees expressed doubt about the veracity of sanitation data, for example because some health extension workers completed quarterly reports on existence and use of latrines without independent, trusted observation.

Credit: WaterAid/ Dermot Tatlow/ Panos Pictures.

Delegates at the High Level Meeting, Washington DC, April 2012.

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The research highlights two elements that can offset these perverse incentives. First, a **learning culture,** with the flexibility and resources needed for trial, error and adaptation at the local level. Second, **reliable verification mechanisms** that ensure data can be trusted – only then will decision-makers use them as the basis for course correction decisions.

Giving the right people a stake in gathering and analysing information can incentivise them to use it for policy adaptations.

The information and data gathered need to be analysed and acted on to further sanitation progress. The case study countries have many of the sector learning and review mechanismsnecessary for this. These mechanisms can be informal and ad-hoc, for example the Mission Director in Chhattisgarh conducts regular review of SBM-G progress, via phone calls and visits to districts. More formal mechanisms include Ethiopia's cycle of joint technical reviews and multi-stakeholder fora.

However, many formal mechanisms are not as effective as intended. Part of the challenge is around the high number of learning events, which often have busy agendas. One interviewee in Indonesia believed this excess is "dispersing attention and focus, with most stakeholders limiting their level of participation due to time limitations and a sense of effort duplication."

Another part of the challenge is to drive follow up on review decisions, when the mechanisms or the participants lack sufficient power or status to ensure agreed actions are realised. Involvement of decision-makers in the development and analysis of sector reviews was shown to yield stronger uptake in Ethiopia, suggesting that giving people a direct stake in learning activities can encourage them to act on the results.

Since 2006, Ethiopia has attempted to hold biannual technical reviews of WASH sector progress, conducted jointly by Government and partners, and accompanied by a multi-stakeholder forum. The review and/or forum have taken place most years. Major advances to which these processes contributed – at least by publicising and ratifying decisions – include the establishment of Community Led Total Sanitation and Hygiene as Ethiopia's overarching approach to rural sanitation in 2009, and the One WASH National Program launched in 2013.[9]

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What can decision-makers do to turn political will into action?

For national governments committed to deliver universal access to sanitation, and for external stakeholders trying to foster 'political will' and translate it into action, two broad sets of recommendations emerge:

1. To cascade political prioritisation to lower government levels and across crucial ministries by:

1.a. Fostering buy-in by **aligning with the world views** of those involved, linking sanitation with notions of nation-building and modernity, or other context-specific values.

1.b. **Tapping into personal aspirations**, ensuring sanitation efforts receive public recognition and are a factor considered in professional progression.

1.c. **Enlisting authoritative senior figures** to drive prioritisation of sanitation in ministries and departments that are crucial but don't have the lead role.

1.d. Examining and **working with the financial, legal, and political** realities of decentralisation affecting the autonomy and willingness of decision-makers at local levels to engage with and champion the sanitation agenda.

2. To invest in timely course correction to address bottlenecks by:

2.a. Investing in reliable third-party **verification** systems to reduce perverse incentives to mis-report and to build trust in monitoring data, so that they can be used for decision-making.

2.b. Nurturing a **culture of learning**, where the challenges of sanitation are recognised and those leading the efforts on the ground have the space and flexibility for trial, error, learning and adaptation.

2.c. Using **informal sharing** and reporting mechanisms, such as Whatsapp groups, that cut across hierarchies and enable rapid and regular flow of information.

2.d. Setting up **review mechanisms**, ensuring quality over quantity. This includes involving those with decision-making power, improving follow up, and ensuring it all leads to progress-chasing policy implementation.

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The synthesis report and the case study reports are available at www.wateraid.org/fromwilltoaction

Cover image:

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon addressing the participants of the Ministerial Dialogue on Sanitation and Water, Washington DC, USA. April 2012.

Credit: WaterAid/ Dermot Tatlow/ Panos Pictures

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