

# Research and Learning Agenda WASH Systems for Health

2024-2028

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# 1. Introduction

This is the Research and Learning (R&L) Agenda for the FCDO WASH Systems for Health programme. This R&L agenda seeks to support governments in up to 6 initial countries, including Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania, and provide evidence to the global Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector to strengthen the systems needed to establish reliable, resilient and inclusive WASH services.

The programme's focus on systems marks a fundamental shift in the UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) past approach to WASH. Like many development partners, they had previously focused on projects that aimed to increase first-time access to basic WASH services. This new focus on strengthening core government systems aims to enhance the sustainability of WASH services by going beyond service provision; ensure that women and vulnerable groups are empowered to take informed decisions about the services they receive; and, to attract new public and private finance to accelerate progress towards SDG 6 WASH targets – including universal access to safely managed WASH services.

Supporting the implementation of this new FCDO programme, a R&L Agenda on WASH systems strengthening will be established and will ensure lessons learnt are captured and widely communicated from the programme to the global WASH sector.

The R&L Agenda covers Phase 2 of the overall programme, which runs for four years from April 2024 to December 2027. It is managed by the WASH Systems Facility, which is a consortium of partners including IRC WASH, the University of Leeds and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). The Facility will manage and coordinate the strategic delivery of the wider programme, including monitoring (Objective 2), technical assistance (Objective 3), and the research and learning (Objective 4), in support of, and in partnership with, FCDO and implementing partners.

This report introduces the aim, objectives and guiding values that shape the R&L Agenda. This is followed by the introduction of a research and learning framework used to anchor and structure the agenda. An overview of activities related to 1) synthesis and research; 2) knowledge sharing; and, 3) global influencing are provided.

## 2. Aim, objectives and values

Our overall aim is to deliver research and learning on WASH system strengthening that emphasises climate resilience, social equity and health, and which supports evidence-based changes in policy and practice to strengthen international and national WASH systems in service of these goals.

The R&L Agenda has three objectives:

- **1) Synthesis and research:** Undertake targeted, global and programme-aligned research and conduct evidence synthesis on WASH system strengthening to support evidence-based changes in policy and practice to strengthen the climate resilient, social equity and health dimensions of WASH systems.
- **2) Knowledge sharing:** Develop and implement a proactive learning component designed to strengthen sector capacity and WASH System for Health implementation to deliver safely managed WASH systems underpinned by resilience, equity and health.
- **3) Global Influencing:** Take an active role in global partnerships and engage in influencing spaces to champion evidence-based change for resilience, equity and health in WASH systems.

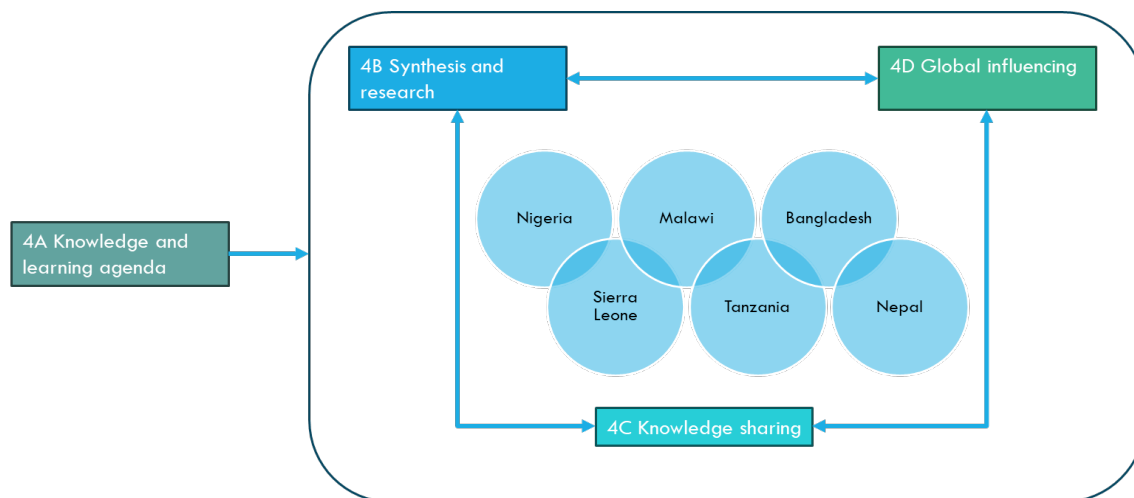


Figure 1 Schematic overview of the R&L objectives illustrating interconnection.

Our overall approach to realising these objectives will build on the collective knowhow of implementing partners, FCDO and allied partners recognising that there is significant expertise and aligned activities happening in the sector. The values we will follow therefore emphasise the importance of **collaboration** between the WASH Systems for Health facility, implementation partners, FCDO, governments and wider stakeholders, so to ensure we coordinate, avoid inefficient duplication, and maximise opportunities for delivering on shared goals.

We are committed to fostering practical and impactful solutions, which means working in **continuous global-national learning cycles**. This involves ensuring learning from national implementation informs and pragmatically grounds global discourse and thinking on WASH system strengthening, and implementation work on the ground is informed by the latest global evidence and insight.

Finally, we adopt a **comparative** approach to learning and research. The WASH Systems for Health programme provides a unique opportunity to identify and distinguish between contextual and

generalisable principles of systems change across six countries enabling us to advance knowledge, methods and theory related to WASH system strengthening.

## 3. Framework supporting the R&L agenda

The R&L Agenda is designed around an overarching framework that builds on the values set out above. This section articulates that framework as well as provides broader conceptual underpinning to the approach, to help anchor and guide the overall R&L strategy.

### 3.1 WASH systems strengthening for WASH systems change

Whilst there is a great deal of evidence about the risks to sustainability associated with a conventional approach to WASH service delivery (e.g. Chowns, 2015; Hutchings et al., 2015), there is less evidence about the effectiveness of a systems-based approach in improving service sustainability and it is not always clear what a system-based approach means in practice (Pugel et al., 2022; Valcourt et al., 2020). There are several underlying reasons: the concept is relatively new; time is needed for systemic change to manifest as intended increased access to quality WASH services; and, whilst there are a wide variety of approaches to systems strengthening are being implemented, there is a lack of information to evaluate their performance. Finally, it is difficult to attribute improvements to services to a systemic intervention since by nature the intervention is contributing to or influencing the system rather than creating a change in isolation.

The R&L Agenda recognises these tensions and that there are different definitions and ways of conceptualising WASH systems. Similarly, we understand WASH systems as operating within a broader systemic context which intersect across sectors, especially health, environment, and education. Therefore, some aspects of WASH system strengthening necessarily engagement within those broader systems. Building on these points, our starting point for thinking about WASH systems comes from the WASH systems building blocks approach that is defined at its broadest level as: “the social, technical, institutional, environmental and financial factors, actors and inter-relationships that influence WASH service delivery in a given context” (Huston & Moriarty, 2018).

Actors are the key stakeholders that directly or indirectly influence the system, most obviously the public (who use and pay for WASH services); service providers (responsible for the day-to-day operation and management of a service, for example, a water utility); service authorities (responsible for WASH services within a defined area, for example, a branch of local government) and national authorities (responsible for aspects such as legislation, policy and regulation). Whilst factors are aspects and dynamics of a system that influence its delivery or sustainability. A building block is a recognizable sub-system within the larger WASH system that influences sector-level outcomes (including both actors, factors, and their interactions).

A systems approach focuses on the inter-relationships between building blocks which are often unique to a particular context and can change over time. The precise number of building blocks and their definitions are subjective, and it is important that individual building blocks make sense for the local WASH actors who work with them, and that the complete set captures all functions and relationships (actors and factors) required for a sustainable and effective WASH system. A starting framework for categorising building blocks is shown in Figure 1 (IRC WASH and Water for People, 2021).

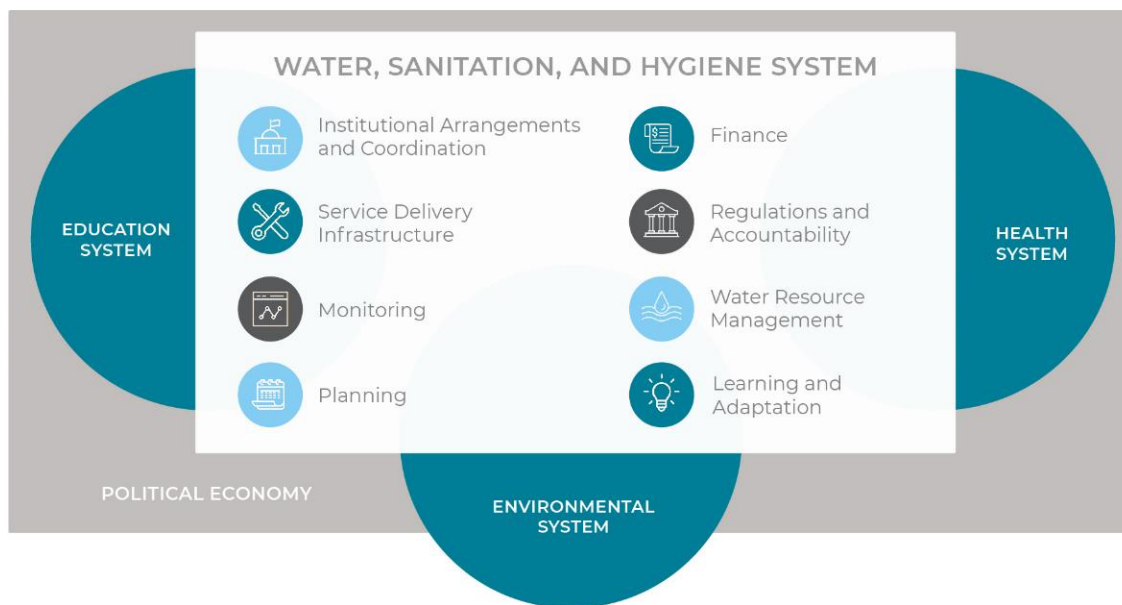


Figure 2 - Agenda for Change WASH System Building Blocks as visualised by One for All.

Whilst the building block approach is a useful way to think about the constitute parts of the WASH system, we recognise that implementation across the six initial countries included in the WASH Systems for Health programme will focus on different building blocks and aspects of systems strengthening. Therefore, we propose a shared focus on the stages of WASH systems strengthening, which we believe can be loosely conceptualised into key phases of any intervention design and implementation. These stages include: 1) building value and political support, 2) diagnosing bottlenecks, 3) identifying leverage points, 4) delivering change, 5) measuring change and 6) institutionalising change. The conceptualisation of these stages has been informed by the latest WASH sector learning on systems change (e.g. Water for Women, 2023). We provide working definitions of these in Table 1 below but welcome comment on them and expect that we will iterate and add to them as the programme develops.

Table 1 – Six stages of WASH system strengthening

Stages of WASH systems strengthening	Definition
<b>Building value and political support</b>	Building shared understanding and support for a systems strengthening initiative, including the necessary domestic political backing and on-going commitment to change.
<b>Diagnosing bottlenecks</b>	Analysing systems to developed shared understanding about barriers to change and developing plausible strategies for improvement.
<b>Identifying leverage points</b>	Recognising and identifying the strategic intervention areas that that can maximum impact through key points of influence, high-impact leverage or other cascading mechanism.

<b>Delivering change</b>	The form, quality and context of implementation activities that initiate and contribute to WASH systems change.
<b>Measuring change</b>	The ability to learn from, understand, monitor and evaluate systems strengthening approaches, so to promote continuous improvements and accountability.
<b>Institutionalising change</b>	Ensuring that the improvements made in the WASH system become integral components of the organisational and systemic frameworks of partner countries.

## 3.2 Research and learning priority areas

Climate resilience, social equity and health are the deeply interrelated global challenges (Deivanayagam et al., 2023) that should guide WASH system strengthening efforts. The effects of climate change, including hazards such as extreme weather and shifting precipitation patterns, jeopardizes global progress towards universal WASH access (Charles et al., 2022). Building resilience in these services is fundamental to global adaptation efforts, as stressed in the latest COP28 adaptation statement (CoP 28, 2023).

Climate resilience is impossible without gender and social equity, as vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by climate change (Deivanayagam et al., 2023). Addressing gender and social disparities within WASH systems and the impacts of inequitable access to water supply and sanitation, is a precondition for ensuring gender and social equity more broadly (SWA, 2021). Equitable access and use of WASH systems in turn is a foundational condition for broader public health and wellbeing (Wolf et al., 2023), further strengthening the importance of prioritising these principles together.

Guided by these principles and informed by a comprehensive evaluation of WASH system strengthening research gaps being undertaken as part of this programme<sup>1</sup>, as well as learning from the country assessments within the programme countries (undertaken under Objective 1), we have identified four priority areas to focus research and learning activities for the WASH Systems for Health programme. These are:

- Integrating Gender, Equity and Social Inclusion in WASH Systems
- Building Climate Resilient WASH Systems
- WASH Systems Change from Basic to Safely Managed Services
- Enhancing the Understanding and Measurement of WASH Systems Change

A discussion of key issues for research and learning for each of these priority areas is now provided.

### Integrating gender, equity and social inclusion in WASH systems

While there has been progress, in varying degrees, on expanding access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene services, there remains a significant number of households from marginalized communities without basic services (UNICEF-WHO, 2022). The impact of lack of WASH services is exacerbated for

<sup>1</sup> The WASH Systems Strengthening Research Gap Analysis has involved a scoping literature review of academic research and grey literature on WASH system strengthening and deriving key learnings from two global WASH sector conferences (UNC Water and Health 2023 and the All Systems Connect 2023 symposium). We expect to publish an academic paper detailing the full results later in 2024.



women, girls and people with disabilities. This is due to their biological needs and cultural constructs in different contexts. In most countries, women and girls are responsible for collecting and carrying water, they can feel unsafe in walking to access shared sanitation facilities, and they are often responsible for childcare and domestic chores that involve water use and hygiene. Moreover, due to a lack of hygiene facilities, private spaces and menstrual products, many women and girls face barriers to good menstrual health (Hennegan et al., 2021).

UNICEF's Gender Action Plan (2021) prioritises WASH by committing to working towards equitable WASH systems that are gender responsive and accessible, and which support dignified menstrual health and hygiene. Further, in programming guidance, UNICEF (2017), emphasise that taking a gender-responsive approach to WASH, includes: ensuring strategic planning is informed by information on gender (and wider social inclusion) based barriers, bottlenecks and opportunities; implementation consider gender responsive interventions aligned to the level and goals of the programme; and, monitoring and evaluation includes approaches that help capture the impact on women, girls and other marginalized communities. For inclusion of other groups that are marginalized, similar issues are relevant to consider.

Having an equitable and inclusive WASH system requires action across all building blocks. Some of the aspects to consider while working on system strengthening include

- **Policy** – enabling policies that promote equitable access to services including not adding to women and girl's labour burdens and promoting positive discrimination where appropriate.
- **Institutions** – ensuring equitable representation across levels and functions, rolling out education and support mechanism at work place. Engaging men and people in positions of power in the agenda.
- **Planning** – plans that factor in the needs of women and other marginalized groups in planning for services. Consider the type of participation carefully not to burden women and girls.
- **Finance** – ensure gender budgeting taking into account allocation, expenditure, transparency
- **Infrastructure** - considering women and other communities in the planning, implementation and maintenance of infrastructure.
- **Monitoring** – ensure gender disaggregated data to inform planning and decision making (access, use, ease/time to access)
- **Learning and Adaptation** – promote South-to-South learning and sharing on root causes, solutions tried, challenges and lessons learnt.

The assessments in the six programme countries captured the government's efforts that varied on issues related to gender equity and social inclusion, and highlighted the need to prioritise within implementation. The significant questions regarding how to build prioritisation, monitoring capacity and to institutionalise gains related to gender equity and social inclusion, are key issues to explore in this area:

1. What are the systemic implications of building gender equity and social inclusion within WASH systems, i.e. how do building blocks need to change and adjust to ensure prioritisation and performance in these areas, and how does this vary across sub-sectors of water supply, sanitation, hygiene and across urban and rural areas.
2. The drivers of inclusion. How do different actors in the system drive or prevent the realisation of inclusion, and subsequently what can the actors do more or differently to support it.

We expect an emphasis on equity aligns well with a number of key sector partners and initiatives:

- Development partners, such as UNICEF and Sanitation and Water for All (SWA), prioritise reaching and ensuring the human rights of the most vulnerable. Research and learning that

evidences the role of system strengthening in delivering inclusive system outcomes aligns strongly with their strategies and initiatives.

- Discussions on the post-SDG agenda. We are aware that informal discussions are starting to happen around what a post-SDG agenda would look like for the water sector. We anticipate that whatever future agenda will have a strong focus on equity and evidence on the WASH systems aspects can inform these discussions.

## **Building climate-resilient WASH systems**

Climate-related risks, such as drought, flood and sea-level rise, can have significant direct and indirect impacts on WASH services. They can reduce water availability, disrupt the functionality of infrastructure, contaminant water resources, and change water consumption patterns. This makes the WASH sector a key focus for global climate adaptation efforts (CoP 28, 2023). A consolidating evidence-base also highlights the role that the sector has to play in climate mitigation, with WASH services, particularly related to sanitation and wastewater, being a globally significant source of greenhouse gas emissions (Johnson et al., 2022).

The Global Water Partnership and UNICEF Strategic Framework for WASH Climate-Resilient Development (2022) calls for an approach that:

- Ensures that WASH infrastructure and services are sustainable, safe and resilient to climate-related risks.
- Ensures that resilient WASH systems contribute to helping build community resilience to the impacts of climate change, while reducing existing inequalities.
- Works towards a low-carbon WASH sector by improving water and energy efficiency, improving sanitation practices (safe containment and transportation of faecal sludge) and, where possible, using renewable energy for water and sanitation services

Taking a climate-resilient approach to WASH therefore requires responsible authorities to analyse climate-related risks and implement preventive measures within WASH systems, to understand and minimise greenhouse gas emissions, develop management and service delivery models that can cope and respond to crisis, and to have robust water resource management plans to ensure reliable supply.

The realisation of climate-resilient WASH systems requires action across all building blocks. The latest GLAAS (2022) assessment shows that most national WASH policies and plans do not address climate-related risks. The gap within regional and local implementation is even wider, with only 20% of countries routinely reporting the roll-out of climate change preparedness approaches such as climate-risk assessments (GLAAS, 2022). Even where plans exist there are significant gaps in the national monitoring of climate-resilient actions.

As the links between WASH and climate change have been made starker, there is a growth in ODA disbursements which have climate resilience as an objective (GLAAS, 2022). The assessments in the six programme countries highlighted both the need for climate resilience and a growing prioritisation from national governments. Yet there remains significant questions regarding how to build, monitor and institutionalise resilience, which this research and learning priority area seeks to get a better understanding of:

- 1.** What are the systemic implications of building climate-resilient WASH systems, i.e. how do building blocks need to change and adjust to build resilience, and how does this vary across sub-sectors of water supply, sanitation, hygiene and across urban and rural areas.
- 2.** The drivers of the transition. How do different actors in the system drive this transition, and subsequently what can the actors do more or differently to facilitate the transition.

We expect that research area aligns well with a number of key sector initiatives:

- Alignment with WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) and WHO GLAAS. JMP is charged with global service level monitoring and GLAAS on WASH systems aspects, such as governance and finance. Both agencies are refining and developing approaches for climate-resilience WASH monitoring.
- Discussions on the post-SDG agenda. We are aware that informal discussions are starting to happen around what a post-SDG agenda would look like for the water sector. We anticipate that whatever future agenda will have a strong focus on climate resilience and evidence on the WASH systems aspects can inform these discussions.

### **WASH systems change from basic to safely managed services**

The assessments in the six countries participating in WASH Systems for Health showed that they have systems that have largely been focused on the provision of basic services (as defined by the JMP service ladders), such as community management of water point sources, or ones focused at triggering that households develop their own toilets. These countries have needs and ambitions to move segments of their population up the service ladder towards safely managed water and/or sanitation services. This transition is often driven from multiple levels: citizens demanding and claiming higher levels of service; service providers seeking to provide better services, anticipating it may generate more revenue; and governments setting targets and investments in higher levels of service as part of their SDG commitments.

The transition from basic to safely managed service provision has requirements that cut across a number of building blocks. Most obviously, safely managed services imply different types of infrastructure development (piped supplies with household connections instead of point sources of piped supplies with communal access points; infrastructure along the entire sanitation value chain). The management of such infrastructure requires often more professionalised service delivery models, or even different institutions managing different parts of the value chain. That in turn poses implications for the way services are financed (e.g. different tariff structures or payment for sanitation services) or regulated.

The transition also poses critical questions on equity and social inclusion. An often-heard concern is the extent to which (public) investments in higher levels of service for those already enjoying a basic service goes at the expense of the currently unserved. Or, where higher levels of services are being provided, low-income users may be excluded as they cannot afford the associated higher costs.

This research and learning priority area seeks to get a better understanding of:

1. The systemic implications of the transition from basic to safely managed services, i.e. how do building blocks need to change and adjust to facilitate that transition, and doing so in a way that it considers equity and social inclusion
2. The drivers of the transition. How do different actors in the system drive this transition, and subsequently what can the actors do more or differently to facilitate the transition.

We expect that research area aligns well with wider sector initiatives:

- Alignment with UNICEF's approach to system strengthening and in particular its new Game Plan to Accelerate Safely Managed Sanitation for All
- Alignment with WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program (JMP). JMP is charged with global monitoring and forms the primary source of data and insight on the extent to which this transition is happening.
- Discussions on the post-SDG agenda. We are aware that informal discussions are starting to happen around what a post-SDG agenda would look like for the water sector. We

anticipate that whatever future agenda will have a strong focus on moving towards higher levels of service, as more countries reach universal coverage with basic service and have more ambitious targets.

### Enhancing the understanding and measurement of WASH systems change

All actors who support systems strengthening need to invest time and resources into monitoring how WASH systems are changing, what is driving the change, and how they are contributing to this. The long-term indicator of success in systems strengthening will be sustained improvements in WASH access and service levels. However, the precursors to this success are changes to the strength of the WASH system – something which can be much more difficult to define and measure. Understanding how the WASH system is changing will help stakeholders understand if progress is being made towards establishing the conditions required to support sustainable services. This will require a shift from thinking about change as a linear process of cause and effect, to considering the myriad and complex pathways of change.

Developing an understanding of the system- its actors, factors, strengths, gaps, and political economy surrounding it- is an essential point when trying to change a WASH system or improve its performance. Analysing the status of the system using the building blocks, to analyse the performance of the system in terms of service levels or sector outcomes allow us to measure change in systems strengthening along the Theory of Change (Figure 1).

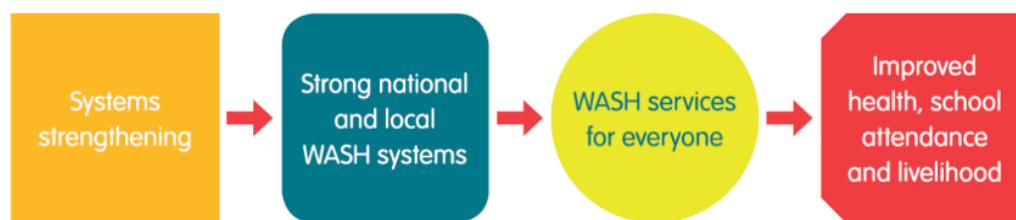


Figure 1. Theory of Change for the WASH Systems Strengthening Approach (source: IRC WASH)

There has been a rapid expansion of systems approaches for addressing the multitude of interconnected factors that affect WASH systems. However, there is a lack of systematic analysis and characterisation of the evidence-base for effective systems approaches, in particular, what outcomes have resulted from their application (Valcourt et al., 2020). Measuring change can be used to assess the interconnected factors of WASH services, including collective action coalitions, multi-criteria decision analysis, market-based approaches, composite scoring and systems dynamics, among others.

Several organisations have developed building block assessments tools, which often include indicators and benchmarks of what the minimum and/or optimum functions of a WASH system are and determine the extent to which these aspects are in place and functioning effectively within the system. Generally, the assessment tools are (and should be) scored in a participatory way, engaging with and in collaboration with relevant stakeholders (government authorities, community associations, NGOs, etc) over time. The tools have been found to be a valuable mechanism for stimulating critical dialogues among stakeholders around gaps and areas of improvement. The tools can be used periodically as a means of tracking changes in the WASH system over time. It should be also noted that many tools only provide indirect measures of the strength of the WASH system and may need to be complemented by additional evaluations if they want specific answers.

Examples of tools that measure change in WASH systems include:

- IRC has [tools](#) that can be used individually or in combination with other tools to conduct a systems analysis
- The Sustainable Services Initiative has developed a [checklist](#) to identify progress as new opportunities for change.
- Water for People has a [monitoring framework](#) that includes annual service monitoring and sustainability.
- WaterAid uses a [tool](#) that categorises building blocks in terms of their support needs, with categories ranging from weak to moderate to desired.

Increased reporting and a plan for monitoring and reporting impacts over time are needed across WASH system strengthening programmes. And, methods to do so are required, and required in a way that are diverse in their techniques, scope and application; explicitly consider factors of building blocks and factor interactions; and, clearly document the effects of efforts on WASH service delivery. External organisations and donors will need to be comfortable moving away from attributing results to specific interventions or investments, towards thinking in terms of how they have contributed to change.

New approaches will need to be developed to track both the change and the contribution, but at times, the changes will be incremental, and part of a collaborative effort, where quantifying the extent of any single contribution may be impossible. Measuring change in WASH systems within the WASH Systems for Health programme (as part of the strategic monitoring in Objective 2) will aim to answer some of the emerging questions across the sector and inform programmes in real time, and we hope to generate cross-sectoral learning for use in other settings that will be disseminated through regional and global platforms. For example, we will share knowledge and evidence that aims to answer the following questions on the effects of WASH system strengthening:

- **Functional sustainability:** Can WASH system strengthening approaches show how they will ensure services remain operational in the long-term, including aspects such as appropriate design, quality of construction, the availability of spare parts, supply chain development?
- **Equity:** Do WASH system strengthening approaches show that they have assessed whether vulnerable groups are benefiting from the interventions, and to understand whether there is any exclusion?
- **Institutional sustainability:** Do WASH system strengthening approaches show how they will support and ensure organisations and structures (public, private, community) are in place to support functional, financial and environmental sustainability, and that these are aligned with country norms?
- **Financial sustainability:** Do WASH system strengthening approaches demonstrate that funds collected will be sufficient to meet annual recurrent and periodic costs?
- **Environmental sustainability:** Do WASH system strengthening approaches demonstrate that have assessed the impact on water resources and of the potential impacts of climate change and built climate resilience and adaptation into the design of technology or systems?

## 4. Synthesis and research

The report so far has described the background and scope of the R&L agenda, in this and the following sections we move onto describing what we will do to achieve the aims and objectives set out above. We start by focused on objective areas 4b synthesis and research.

The research and synthesis component of the R&L Agenda aims to maximise the research potential of data that is being collected as part of the wider programme activities, including the strategic monitoring and wider learning data. It couples this with a programme of global, programme-specific and targeted research activities to answer research questions informed by preliminary work but wherever possible co-produced and prioritised with implementing partners.

### 4.1 Global research on systems change and measurement

A long-established research gap space related to WASH system strengthening relates to methodologies for reliably measuring WASH systems change and robust impact evaluation-quality evidence on the effectiveness of WASH systems interventions. The global research component of this R&L Agenda will help address this gap.

To date, the WASH Systems for Health Facility has conducted a wide-reaching systematic review of the published literature (both peer-reviewed and grey literature) and use of participatory methods to identify key research questions and gaps on approaches used in WASH system strengthening. The study team have reviewed the evidence and suggested research questions, and work is already well advanced on a global review of WASH system strengthening research gaps. This will lead to the production of a consensus-based, consultative, sector-wide research agenda for advancing knowledge on system strengthening in the WASH sector. This activity will deliver a report, known as the “Global WASH Systems Strengthening Research Gap Analysis”, and will lead to a peer-reviewed manuscript submitted in 2024.

After the identification of the research gaps, we will then endeavour to conduct a systematic review on the effects of WASH system strengthening. Current understanding on the outcomes (e.g. on service delivery, on health, on equity etc.) that result from WASH systems strengthening approaches have not been systematically recorded. This activity will consolidate the types of effects measured and may allow, if outcomes are comparable, an analysis of the magnitudes of change / effect sizes resulting from WASH system strengthening approaches. This activity will lead to a peer-reviewed manuscript submitted in 2025.

Informed by these two activities, demand from the sector and discussions among the WASH Systems for Health Facility, we will lastly develop a “methodological toolkit” for measuring WASH system change. This could include development and piloting of techniques, as well as work to develop the sector-wide practices and standards for designing and reporting on system strengthening within monitoring and evaluation. For example, through the development of more standardised intervention descriptions, reporting templates and/or a compendiums of practices that are evidence-based. This activity will lead to a compendium of WASH system strengthening approaches published between 2026-2027.

### 4.2 National programme research and insights

During the course of the WASH Systems for Health programme, we will conduct two streams of research at the national level. The first stream will largely involve the combined analysis of programme monitoring data and broader, contextual evidence from each country programme.

In the first instance, we will analyse the programme monitoring data, which uses an adapted version of the WASH Systems Building Block Assessment Tool (IRC, 2021), called the WASH Systems Index, to measure and understand programme effects on WASH systems strengthening. Regular monitoring will enable us to track changes in the WASH system within and across countries and make assessments about the relative contribution of the intervention and the underlying mechanism of change.

Contextual evidence to support our understanding of the programmes successes and challenges as depicted by the WASH Systems Index will be additionally collected from country programmes. This will provide points of comparison between and among national approaches used in the programme, we will frame our data collection on the six stages of WASH systems strengthening. Figure 3 below provides an overview of the approach and highlights an emphasis on what we are calling horizontal learning between programmes and vertical learning within them.

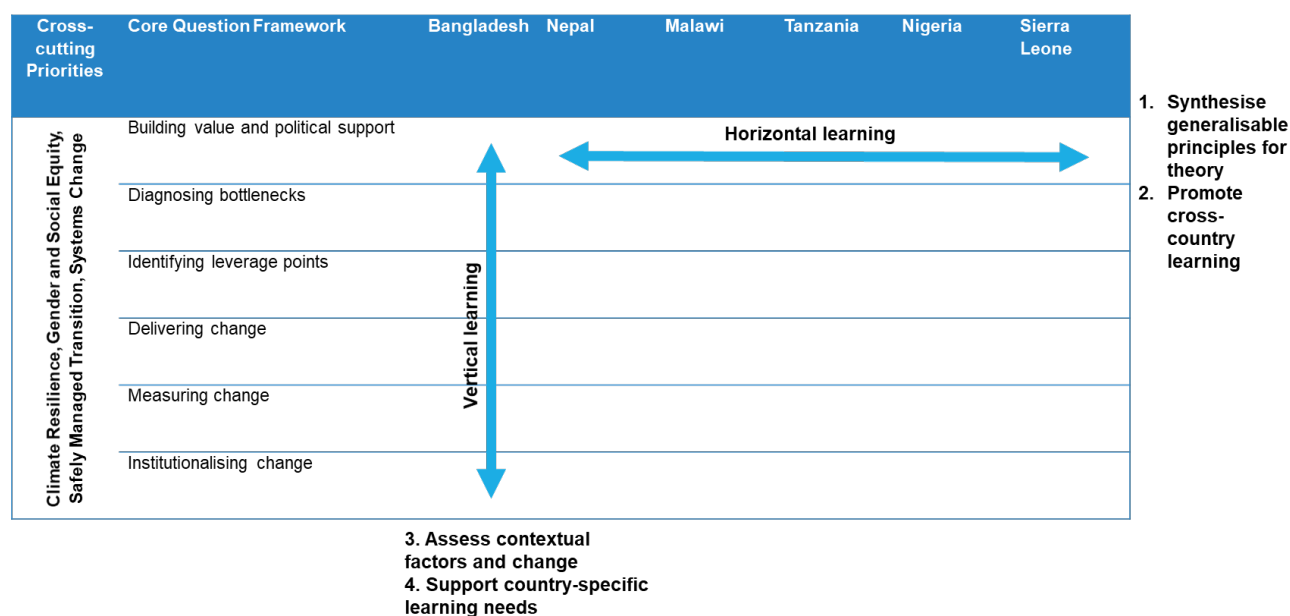


Figure 3 - Vision for vertical and horizontal learning using the R&L framework

Working across these two axes, we can identify generalised principles for theory, and assess processes of change within a country. Recognising that this will mean comparing across different implementation modalities and contexts, we do believe it offers a unique opportunity to identify generalizable and contextual factors in systems change helping to develop the theoretical understanding in this area. The additional data collection across these six stages may include desk reviews of implementing partner reports, key informant interviews with implementing partners, online surveys or other methods, dependent on the setting and if pre-existing data exists.

It is anticipated that this first stream of work will lead to the production of two peer-reviewed manuscripts submitted in 2025 and 2027, that will focus on understanding the mechanisms of systems change and practical insights into how such change can be measured and learned from.

The second stream of national research will be research generated through assistance provided to implementing partners for their own intended research objectives and outputs. Each of the programmatic lots has specified that they will be conducting some research and learning during their programme. However, at this time, further engagement with partners is needed to fully understand their plans.

We aim to establish a working relationship with all implementing partners during the course of the programme to assist in the design and analysis, and dissemination of their research studies. Allocation of consortium partners and their time to the research will depend on the topic, study design and upon request of the implementing partners. It is anticipated that we will be able to articulate the support required and support we are able to provide later in 2024 once our relationship with partners has been established.



### 4.3 Targeted opportunities for in-depth research

Within the programme, there are opportunities to conduct a series of more focused, structured research activities to answer critical questions beyond those we can answer from the programme data. The targeted research questions will be identified from the WASH systems strengthening research gap analysis, implementer input and alignment with FCDO priority areas.

We aim to deliver 3-4 pieces of structured research over the course of the programme. Three of these will be delivered within the six initial countries identified for the programme. This on average means one structured piece of research per programmatic lot. Given resource constraints, these will be targeted and discrete pieces of work, and will typically involve primary data collection to provide novel data and analysis to help unlock improvements in WASH systems intervention design and implementation. Examples could be to understand the priorities and needs of an excluded population; to characteristic the systematic conditions for climate resilience or other goal within a particular setting; or, to determine the system dynamics in a particular sub-sector.

There will be at least one globally focused piece of research that reflects the importance of political will and support for WASH systems change. For instance, this will focus on the Heads of State Initiatives, which is led by the Government of Netherlands, IRC WASH, SWA and UNICEF. The research will analyse the challenges and limitations of previous Presidential commitments and help identify what does it take to make these sorts of campaigns work to strengthen WASH systems.

Overall, it is expected that these activities will lead to 3-4 peer-reviewed manuscripts submitted between 2025-2027.

## 5. Knowledge sharing

The knowledge sharing aspects of the R&L agenda are focused on strengthening sector capacity and WASH System for Health implementation to deliver safely managed WASH systems underpinned by resilience, equity and health. The principle is as much as possible to facilitate and encourage peer-to-peer learning with focused activities and outputs to inform and bring key lessons from the global sector.

### 5.1 Learning forums

An annual programme-wide Learning Forum will form a central pillar to the knowledge and learning approach of the WASH Systems for Health programme. The events will bring together implementing partners, host governments and other selected partners, to share experiences, knowledge and skills related to WASH system strengthening. These forums are a key mechanism for delivering learning, consolidating experiences, producing data for research and synthesis, and contributing to national level influencing goals.

The Learning Forum will run in hybrid format, over a week, and with a changing host each year. We intend to host at least one Learning Forum in each programmatic lot (e.g. South Asia, West Africa, East Africa) with specialist in-person sessions designed for the host country and a wider programme of online events for all partners and stakeholders.

We will follow a peer-to-peer participatory approach with the agenda and facilitation of sessions. In each year, sessions throughout the week will focus on the R&L core priority areas of gender equity and social inclusion, climate resilience, safely managed services, and systems change, but with an annual theme linked to the cycle of stages of WASH systems strengthening (Table 1). The current plan for annual themes stands as follows:

- **Year 1:** Building value and political support
- **Year 2:** Diagnose bottlenecks and leverage points
- **Year 3:** Change mechanisms and measuring change
- **Year 4:** Institutionalising systems change

We will retain flexibility to incorporate and co-produce ideas with implementing partners, governments, FCDO and others, in terms of identifying additional content to run.

Wherever possible, we will align the Learning Forums with wider WASH Systems for Health Facility objective areas, such as our role in strategic monitoring (Objective 2) or providing technical assistance (Objective 3). For example, we will derive learnings from the strategic monitoring process to identify learning needs and areas of good practice which can be showcased in the forum.

The Learning Forums provide a valuable opportunity for implementers to reflect, share and learn about their experiences of implementing WASH System Strengthening. There are various mechanisms which will be embedded into the events, and as part of the preparatory and follow-up work, which are designed to promote 'side-ways' learning between implementers.

The specific programme will be developed for each year, but will likely involve:

- Introduction and icebreaker sessions
- Country snapshot sessions providing overviews of implementation and challenges
- Interactive learning workshops bringing together people from different programmes to discuss collective challenges and ways of working
- Planning workshops with people from the same consortium to develop action plans for implementing key learnings.

- Invited keynote and expert panel discussions to provide broader input and thought leadership on key issues.

We recognise that there can be significant challenges in the logistical organising of these types of workshops and have dedicated a high level of resource for running them. We will work closely with partners to identify the right participants for these events taking into account the importance of having people that can “ground” discussion about system strengthening to a particular working context. We will consider the language and connectivity needs of participants and work to provide an inclusive experience for all prospective participants.

## 5.2 Learning briefs

Four Learning Briefs will be produced that consolidate the latest evidence on climate resilience, gender equity and social inclusion, basic to safely managed services and measuring systems change. The WASH systems strengthening literature review databases produced as part of the research activities will be mined to ensure the Learning Briefs cover the latest evidence and best practice ideas related to their topic.

The Learning Briefs will be written in accessible language and targeted at practitioner and policy-maker audiences. Where possible, they will follow a standardised format following the proposed model of WASH systems change – building value and political support, diagnosing bottlenecks, leveraging change, change mechanisms, measuring change and institutionalising change. They will provide practical examples of change at each level. They will be between 10-15 pages in length with an accessible executive summary upfront and links to further resources provided.

## 5.3 WASH Systems Academy courses

Building on the Learning Briefs, three practitioner-focused courses will be developed and rolled-out over the course of the programme. These will be developed as WASH Systems Academy Courses.

The WASH Systems Academy is a global and multi-lingual platform that strives to make courses accessible and relevant. They synthesise the latest thinking on system strengthening for WASH and support it with concrete practical examples and tools from around the world. To date, over 3,600 people have enrolled on a WASH Systems Academy Course.

The Learning Briefs will be used to orientate the courses which will then be developed over six months, including testing with participants. The course will be developed in the first instance as a global online course with the opportunity to tailor it to specific geographies or contexts depending on demand.

We will develop three new courses on gender equity and social inclusion (2024-2025), basic to safely managed systems (2025-2026) and WASH systems change (2026-2027). A climate-resilient WASH services course is already in development by the WASH Systems Academy, so we will support the roll-out of that course and make iterative changes to the content based on learning from this programme.

## 6. Global influencing

Reflecting on the overall WASH Systems for Health business case and Theory of Change, we focus influencing activities on the outcome related to ensuring global development actors use evidence generated by the WASH systems for health programme. However, we recognise that another key influencing target for a change focused systems strengthening agenda are countries where most policy and financing decisions relating to the provision of WASH services should be made. In this programme, influencing within the six focus countries is led by the NGO implementation partners. We will adopt a supportive approach to implementation partners in national influencing efforts, but this section of the report focuses on the global influencing aspects which we will lead on. The global activity is a critical mechanism to scale impacts beyond the focus countries, with the potential to also reinforce influencing in the focus countries.

### 6.1 Global influencing targets

Informed by previous influencing experience, we believe that at the regional and global level, countries work with their peers, and through numerous partnerships, platforms and intergovernmental processes, to develop their approaches to address major global challenges like access to water and sanitation. The policies of major financiers and funding instruments can be particularly influential. Countries including leaders and experts may also be influenced by major conferences, by landmark publications or by academic and training institutions, consultancies, networks and think tanks.

We will adopt an approach whereby evidence generated by the programme is presented at relevant events, circulated in appropriate formats and across influential networks, and targeted at influential actors, so that we maximise opportunities for positive influence.

Within internal planning document, we have identified priority regional and global influencing targets for systems strengthening by the WS4H programme. FCDO has a long history of providing support to many of these institutions and initiatives. Rather than strictly influencing targets, some of these agencies are also potential allies or partners with respect to ultimately influencing countries. Our initial mapping is not exhaustive in all areas, for example, if required more influencing activity might be focused on Asia for example, or reach in other languages than English. However, it provides an opening steer on the key actors we will seek to influence and a description of our approach.

### 6.2 Global and regional influencing events

Global and regional events, such as conferences, are key sites for influencing activities. Table 2 lists selected global events in 2024 which align with the WASH System for Health priority areas and which we might to seek to engage with.

The highest priority events for 2024 are Stockholm World Water Week and UNC Water and Health conferences. In 2024, we will organise a side event at Stockholm World Water Week bringing together influencing targets, such as UNICEF, to work on gender equity and social inclusion aspects of WASH systems. We will launch the related Learning Brief at the event and build demand for the WASH systems academy course. At UNC Water and Health, we will present the findings from the WASH System Strengthening Research Gap Analysis and launch the associated report. The aim being to catalyse wider actors to align their work with our evidence-based research agenda.

Our engagement with global events will be planned on an annual basis. In addition, to the formally planned work, we will seek additional opportunities to present and share WASH Systems for Health evidence. For example, when being discussants on panels at conferences, such as those listed in Table 2.

Table 2 - Global WASH events which could be targeted in 2024

Event	Dates	Possible focus for WS4H involvement
<b>Highest priority events</b>		
<b>Stockholm World Water Week</b>	25-29 August 2024	Side event, panels, or a more interactive e.g. sofa session. Hybrid event.
<b>UNC water and health</b>	Oct 2024	Organise session, contribute to panels, posters or papers from country cases. Engage USAID and other global and US based actors
<b>Other events</b>		
<b>Planetary Health Summit 2024</b>	16-19 April 2024	Engage in panels on work across WASH/ health silos. May be too near to prioritise
<b>10th World Water Forum</b>	18-25 May 2024	Limited WASH component with main focus on water resources. Finance stream organised by ADB may be of interest. Not confirmed yet, but may be Heads of State involvement in Bandung Spirit Water Summit with links to Heads of States Initiatives.
<b>43rd WEDC International Conference: Water and Climate Resilience</b>	9-13 Sep 2024	Potential for side event or input to panel discussions.
<b>World Health Summit</b>	13-15 Oct 2024	Strategic forum for health. Hybrid event.
<b>COP29</b>	11-22 Nov 2024	At COP28 linkages between climate and health, and climate and water had higher profile and similar opportunities are expected. Bonn climate adaptation forum provides space to prepare and influence.
<b>2024 G20 Rio De Janeiro summit</b>	19-19 Nov 2024	Potential Heads of States Initiatives engagement e.g. side event as at UN water conference 2023. Focus on equity and sustainability.

We will also target national or regional events in which global and cross-programme WASH Systems for Health research, lessons and good practice can be shared. We will work with implementing partners in the upcoming year to identify opportunities in their national or regional working areas. We expect to present evidence in at least one event per year in each programmatic region (East Africa, West Africa and South Asia) from the 2025-2026 period onwards.

## 7. Summary

This document provides an overview of the WASH Systems for Health R&L Agenda. It covers the aims and vision of the agenda and justifies the focus on the priority issues of equity, climate resilience, safely managed services and systems change. An overview of the approach to research and synthesis, learning and knowledge and global influencing is provided.

For more information on the WASH Systems for Health R&L agenda, please contact the objective lead:

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