Deep Dive into WASH Systems Strengthening

A WASH Systems Community of Practice event during Stockholm World Water Week
August 26, 2019

About 80 people attended this event at the beginning of Stockholm World Water Week. It was co-organized by Agenda for Change, Millennium Water Alliance, and WaterAid, and was intended to build on the momentum from the 2018 Morning of Systems event. Last year's discussions focused on actors in systems. The year's event focused on systems strengthening themes to build common understanding of different lenses and entry points for systems strengthening. Figure 1 shows some different ways of framing systems.
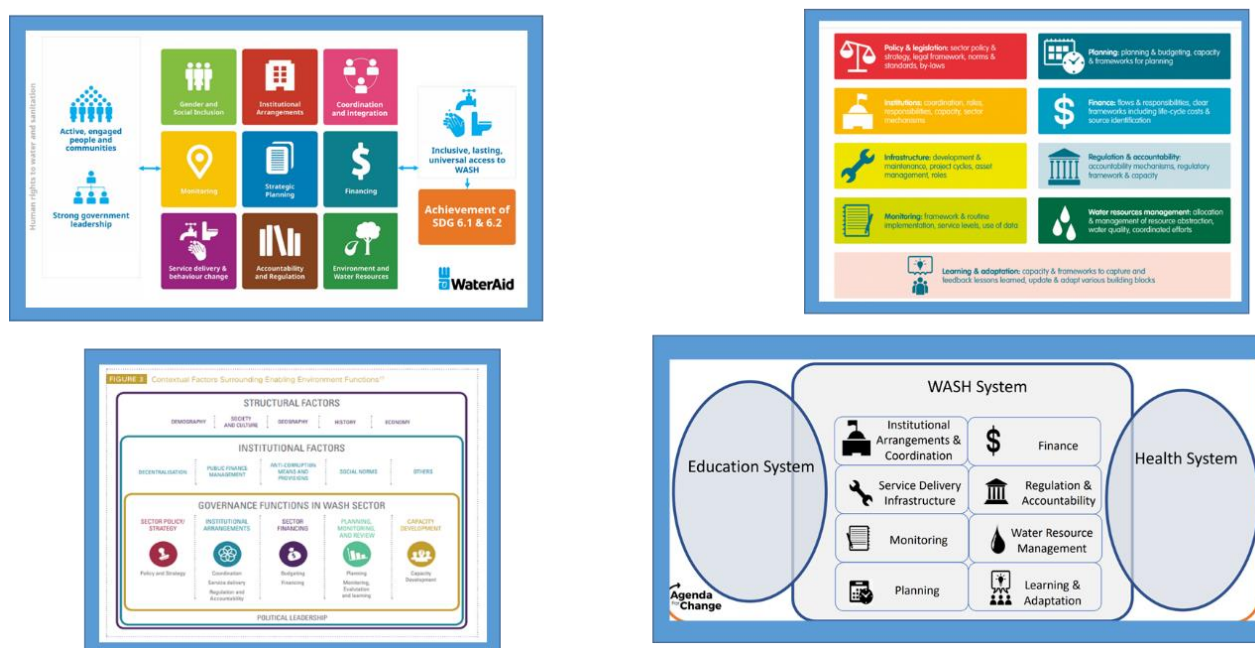

Figure 1 Different ways of framing systems. Source: Vincent Casey, WaterAid

Each of the six table hosts gave a brief pitch for their theme: methods for measuring systems change; how to support local authorities in remote areas with minimal resources; the role of empowerment in systems strengthening work; how systems strengthening approaches underpin inclusion; systems approaches for sanitation and hygiene; and systems approaches and refugee and humanitarian response. Participants had the opportunity to join two different table discussions. Below are framing questions and highlights from the discussion.

Highlights from theme discussions

Methods for measuring systems change
Table host: Kelly Latham, Water For People

Framing question: How are people are currently monitoring systems strengthening efforts?

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Discussion highlights:
- There are many tools available to measure the strength of systems. Any one tool in isolation is not enough; tools must be combined with other aspects such as service level monitoring. The Academy of Systems Change has measuring tools that could be adapted and applied to WASH.
- Examples of organizations or governments using data on systems strength are limited. The goal of measuring changes in systems is to have clear information for evidence-based decision-making. The inherent complexities in systems measurement must not get in the way of this important goal.
- Systems measurement is complicated, and it is necessary to use both qualitative and quantitative information. It is easy to miss critical points.
- It is helpful to integrate directional indicators into classic monitoring and evaluation (e.g., systems mapping, roadmaps). This can be challenging if there is a perception that it pulls budget from other activities. In this case, it is necessary to demonstrate the value of systems measurement to donors and partners.
- It is useful to distinguish between measuring strength and measuring strengthening. Strength can be measured with ad hoc sustainability checks or looking at government systems. Strengthening should measure the change in strength over time.
- There are challenges between rigorous measurement versus time, cost and consistency of data gathering.
- Traditional monitoring systems often do not capture informal systems strengthening efforts (e.g., a WhatsApp group in Latin America where extensive learning and networking is taking place).

Resources:
- [Beyond Building Blocks: Identifying and monitoring dynamic drivers of WASH sector performance](#) (also in [French](#))
- [How do we know if we're strengthening the system?](#) (blog)
- Mapping the current and emerging reality of a social system (4D mapping exercise [video](#), 8 minutes; [documents](#))

How to support local authorities in remote areas with minimal resources?
Table host: Franck Flachenberg, Concern Worldwide

Framing question: Even when they are convinced about the WASH system strengthening approach, it is sometimes difficult for the WASH program managers to work closely with local authorities. The lack of resources allocated to such authorities and their low pay can lead to requests for daily allowances and lack of motivation. How can we react to these practices?

Discussion highlights:
- Providing incentives to government can create bad precedents, but it is difficult sometimes to keep government representatives involved without paying them. There is a need to coordinate with other actors to create a consistent policy on this.
- To determine motivation, it helps to ask about the roles and duties of local authorities and to understand all of their activities, such as supply chain studies.

- Helping to make government look good to their constituents is good practice because "everybody wants to be a rock star." One method is to accompany government representatives to communities they serve to raise their profiles. Sometimes local authorities cannot afford to get to remote communities.
- Fully understanding their constituents' needs can be motivating to government representatives.
- External agencies can support the co-financing to bring on new staff for local governments.
- There is a need for more transparency of practices.
- Because it takes time to build trust, external actors need to commit to longer time frames vs. the typical short-term funding for fragile contexts.
- External actors can support gathering and interpretation of data for local governments to make evidence-based decisions.
- Strengthening efforts need to link to regulating and supporting local markets.
- Better advocacy at the national level is needed about the importance of financing local governments.

The role of empowerment in systems strengthening work
Table host: Priya Nath, WaterAid

Framing question: Access to water and sanitation are human rights, but does this status make any difference to how these essentials are provided in public services?

Discussion highlights:
- Working with existing community groups and structures is helpful. External actors should not create parallel groups or systems, but instead strengthen and engage existing entities or structures. It takes a lot of time to build trust, relationships, and common understanding.
- System strengthening and empowerment are connected to political dynamics and tensions. For example in Ethiopia and Kenya, it can be challenging to use this language. However, approaches can always be found, such as adapting language: "Informal pit emptying: make it a dignified profession."
- Carefully consider the "how" of encouraging citizens to speak up, perhaps through use of toolkits for service management committees and water resources management. Due to power dynamics of local groups, it can be hard to create space for all voices and not just the powerful leaders. It can be helpful to enable space for women only discussions.
- It is critical to work with organizations that focus on empowerment of people with disabilities to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met, particularly in institutions.
- Help local government officials and community representatives understand each other's roles and responsibilities. This can help service users to respect the systems and workers in the system.
- Budget tracking for local government and institutions can be very helpful as an advocacy and information tool.

Resource: How do human rights strengthen government systems for sustainable, equitable water, sanitation and hygiene access?

How do systems strengthening approaches underpin inclusion
Table host: Kelly Alexander, CARE

Framing question: How can we bring an inclusion lens to systems strengthening efforts?

Discussion highlights:
- We need to consider that informal systems could be disrupted by external actors' efforts. This could have both good and bad unforeseen consequences. Before engaging, it is important to understand the existing systems and barriers in the community and whether communities even want these barriers removed.
- Working with women to collect data can change what you see; women are more likely to express the true picture to other women.
- It is important to have consultative processes that are inclusive and involve multiple stakeholders, with data collected in different ways (e.g., risks to women). It is critical to consider who perhaps cannot come to the table. Often we think about how systems work for an able-bodied man, not a disabled person, a woman, a girl, a minority, etc.
- We need good ways to provide subsidies so that private sector still want to reach the most marginalized.

- It can be helpful to engage with faith leaders and communities that been helpful in sustaining behavior change. Understand and recognize local taboos; what we think (and hear) is a social norm may actually not be in practice.
- Power dynamics can be dependent on the attitudes of people and are not always solely about the policies and regulations.
- It is challenging to get funding to support empowerment and inclusion.

Systems approaches for sanitation and hygiene
Table host: Robert Gensch, German Toilet Organization

Framing question: What are the key differences between water supply, sanitation and hygiene that may affect systems strengthening approaches?

Discussion highlights:
- Hygiene is hard to address through a systems perspective; behavior change takes time. WASH in schools can be an entry point.
- Sanitation seems to be more fragmented at the national government level than water, which means the Ministry of Health and/or Environment need a coordination mechanism.
- Sanitation system strengthening often involves other sectors (e.g., energy sector for biogas, private sector for market-based approaches). There are advantages to advocating for linkages to other sectors: agriculture, climate, water security advantages.
- Water is considered a public good, but sanitation is a private good, paid by households, so it needs a market approach. Public private partnerships (PPPs) and other regulations need to be addressed to create an enabling environment to support market based sanitation options.
- The sector is not as professionalized as water; sanitation work has some stigmas attached. An entry point is capacity development of staff in sanitation business.
- Shit flow diagrams can be used as advocacy tools and can help to develop a common language.

Resource: Strengthening sanitation and hygiene in the WASH systems conceptual network

Systems approaches and refugee and humanitarian response
Table host: Keith Wright, Millennium Water Alliance

Framing question: There are more displaced people in the world than ever before and over 40% of them are in long term situations of years if not decades. How can we bring systems mindsets to what are typically considered short-term responses?
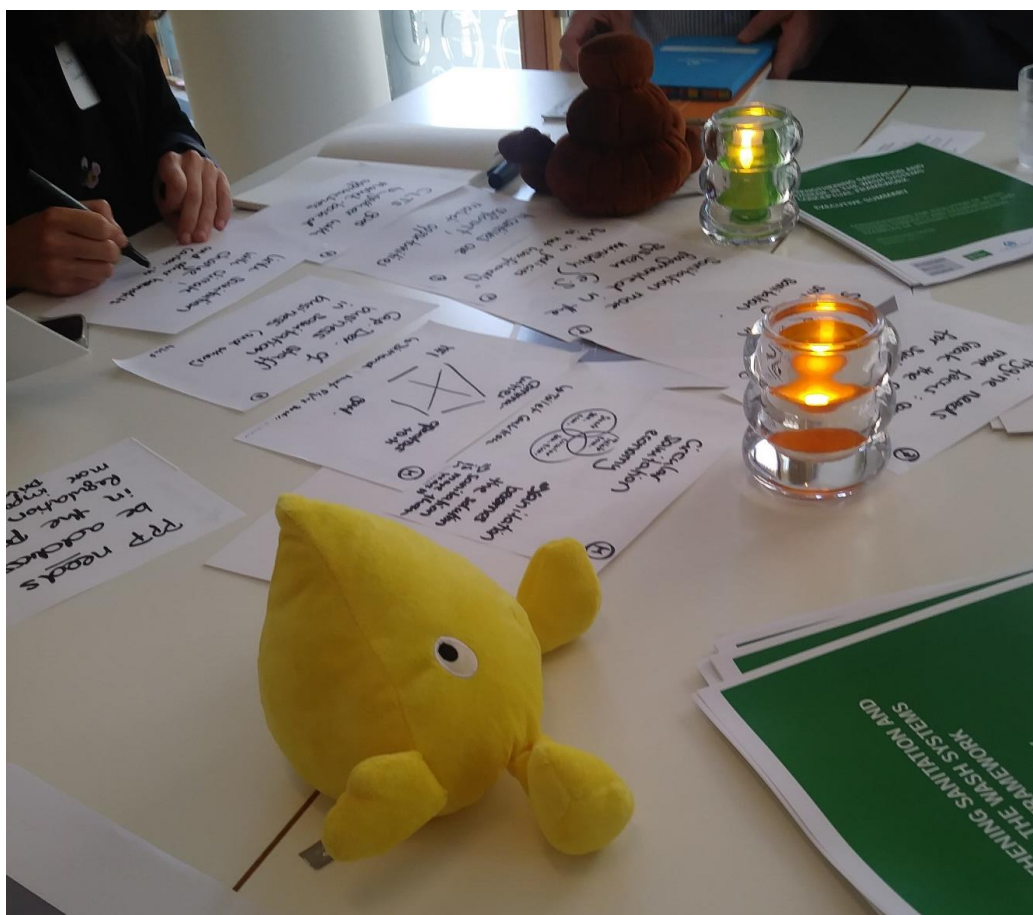
Discussion highlights:
- There is a shifting role of government, donors, etc. from short-term response towards longer-term investment and development as we realize displaced people situations are often not short-term. However, the time frames and priorities for funding can make systems-focused support challenging.
- Governments, NGO, and businesses sometimes create parallel systems and do not communicate enough. Political will needs to be intercommunal; there can be an expectation for NGOs to take care of refugees.
- We need to promote an advocacy role for local government.

- We can tap into donor interest in resilience to support systems strengthening in these contexts.
- Engage end users in design, e.g., refugees can manage operations and maintenance.
- An increasing focus on market-based approaches can help. One example of something that can support refugees while avoiding resentment or conflicts with the host community is water ATMs that use a water chip.

Resources: [The Global Compact on Refugees](#)

Continuing the momentum

These small discussions at conferences are useful, but we want to continue the conversation outside the room. Agenda for Change and Millennium Water Alliance have offered to support making the WASH Systems Community of Practice more purposeful and inclusive. The intent is not to create new platforms or networks, but to bring more focused attention to this theme through existing networks. Discussions are underway with the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN) and the Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA) about further collaboration. If you have ideas for the community of practice or WASH systems strengthening resources to share, please email info@washagendaforchange.net.