

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A WASH INVESTMENT PLAN IN NALOLO DISTRICT, ZAMBIA: AN INTERVIEW WITH WATER FOR PEOPLE'S SENIOR MANAGER OF WASH FINANCING & SUSTAINABILITY

Background: Water For People staff visited Zambia in October 2019 as part of a program funded by the Vitol Foundation. This program provides a pot of funds for Agenda for Change members to provide technical assistance to some Vitol Foundation grantees as they build their WASH systems strengthening work. Water For People is assisting Village Water Zambia to introduce a water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) investment planning process in Nalolo district in a workshop with key stakeholders. This is the full interview.



Nalolo district stakeholders, including district council members, Ministry of Development, Sanitation, and Environmental Protection staff, and Village Water Zambia staff assess the strength of the WASH system in Nalolo using a building block assessment tool (Water For People / Laura Burns)

Alec Shannon (AS), Content Strategist, Agenda for Change: Tell me a bit about the workshop in October and what your goals were going in.

Laura, Burns (LB), Senior Manager of WASH Financing and Sustainability, Water For People: The goals of the workshop were to introduce a WASH systems approach, develop buy-in from key district government decision makers, and review monitoring and costing tools available to develop a WASH investment plan for Nalolo district. We had both local government staff from the district, as well as the more technical staff, in attendance during the two-day workshop.

Two of the key questions guiding our workshop discussions were 1) how can we plan differently for water and sanitation services in a district, and 2) what kind of tools and thought processes are required to do so? We spent our first day getting buy-in for the systems approach and more broadly for a district investment plan for WASH services. Then, we introduced the specific tools that we thought could help with developing an investment plan and ensured that the district staff felt they were appropriate and would be comfortable using them.

AS: What were the initial reactions of the workshop attendees?

LB: Everyone was a little apprehensive at first because it was their first experience with an investment plan. Nalolo district is in the Western province of Zambia and financially their resources, as well as their human resources, are slim. Based on our discussions, and because Village Water have received a grant to do this work, we came to an understanding that they [Village Water] will be financing the majority of the work; meanwhile, we also stressed that the district government should also be co-financing the project in some way to ensure they are financially involved as well.

Everyone at the workshop seemed excited about the systems strengthening approach, and one official said, “you’ve opened our eyes to a completely new way of thinking.” They talked about how strengthening the whole system makes sense – the lack of coordination on WASH work had been ineffective, and they saw a need to better coordinate for improved WASH services. Part of the baseline monitoring we will do as part of this project will help us determine where to start.

AS: I would assume you would want the national government involved as well, since they would ultimately work with the district to take this project forward, right?

LB: Part of our scope of work is to look nationally at what channels there are for increased collaboration, as well as for potential replication by the national government. Following the workshop, we had a few meetings with national level government officials, which Village Water helped to set up. What we found out during these meetings is that WASH services in Zambia are decentralized, and if a district is receiving a lot of money or support from NGOs then their budget from the national government will be much smaller. Most of the budget for WASH services in Nalolo district is coming from NGOs currently. Furthermore, there is not much collaboration between NGOs in Zambia.

We also found out that there are WASH clusters at the national level where groups of individuals from different government ministries are meeting to talk about WASH services. We are thinking that these existing WASH clusters could potentially be an avenue for collaboration and replication, particularly to present on what is happening in Nalolo district in the hopes that it could eventually be scaled up. Because of challenges we see with collaboration between NGOs right now, we thought that the existing WASH cluster that's managed by the government could be the best entry point for increased collaboration.

AS: Okay. At the national level, are government officials aware of the system strengthening approach? And what were their general reactions to your plans for work in Nalolo district?

LB: They were excited about it. The official we spoke to at the Ministry of Water and Sanitation was eager to know about our plans in Nalolo and was hoping we could present on the project in the future. It is unclear at this point how far we can take that initial interest, but we will certainly be following up.

AS: So you’ve had the workshop, introduced the tools, and worked on getting buy-in from both district and national level stakeholders. What’s next?

LB: Our first step was to contextualize the survey tools for monitoring. Next, we need to collect baseline data (from households, institutions, service providers, water points, etc.) to understand what work is required, and how much it will cost to achieve universal water services in Nalolo district. Right now, there’s very limited data about the district, the most recent data we have was collected years ago and only has a few sampling points so the main output of this baseline monitoring is to understand how much it will cost to achieve universal WASH surfaces in Nalolo district.

AS: What experiences and learning are you duplicating from scaling similar WASH investment planning in other contexts, and how does that apply in Nalolo?

LB: I co-led this workshop with my colleague Joseph Mongolia, from Water For People Malawi. The reason we chose Joseph is because the context is very similar between Nalolo and where we're working in rural Malawi. So, we did briefly discuss our experiences with systems strengthening

approaches in other countries, but most of the experience we were drawing upon was Joseph's experience in Malawi.

AS: Did anything come out of those workshop discussions that surprised you?

LB: One thing that was surprising was how quickly workshop attendees agreed to the importance of the Water Investment Plan. Given the human and financial resources required to develop and implement the plan, our assumption was that district officials would be resistant; however, many of them were the first champions of the plan, with several highlighting the need not just to develop it, but to fully ensure that it would be used to guide decision making and investments (e.g., that it wouldn't just "sit on a shelf").

AS: Did you find any tools were useful for introducing certain concepts?

LB: We shared presentations and tools from various Agenda for Change members. For instance, we pulled from a training that IRC did in Malawi, a guide to district investment planning that AquaConsult worked on with Water For People Rwanda, and tools (some designed with IRC) for monitoring, costing, and building block assessment. Our goal was to show the workshop participants what we had to work with and then leave it with them to assess what would work in the context of Nalolo district. We really tried to steer away from it being too presentation heavy and tried to focus more on discussion amongst the group.

One exciting outcome of these conversations was an idea from the group to create several WASH clusters within the district to focus on elements of creating the district investment plan. For instance, one cluster would focus on the monitoring process, another would focus more on the administration and moving forward various approvals, and the district WASH council would provide overall coordination and approval.

AS: That's great! It seems like the key district players are putting an emphasis on working collectively. I realize COVID-19 has likely thrown a wrench in your plans moving forward, but could you just give us a quick overview of what's coming up next?

LB: We were supposed to be back in Zambia in March for a separate training and launch of the baseline monitoring, but those plans have been postponed and the assignment right now is on complete hold. We had originally talked about the possibility of doing this monitoring training remotely, but ultimately decided it would not work and we really cannot continue without this being a participatory approach.

The hope is maybe monitoring could start in July or August, but it will really depend on various factors whether that ends up being the case or not. For now, we are monitoring that situation and then picking up where we left off as soon as we can do so. When we do meet again, we plan to extend the length of the next workshop to have a refresher session on what our goals are, how we can pick back up on that original momentum, and just generally get everyone back on the same page and excited about this project again. That is something that is on everyone's mind: the need to rebuild momentum and regain trust when we start again.

Laura Burns is Senior Manager of WASH Financing and Sustainability at Water For People and is in charge of supporting Water For People's sustainability initiatives with a focus on tariffs and financing. In addition, she is also supporting a new initiative for Strategic Advisory Services, which provides technical assistance to other nonprofits and governments seeking to implement a systems wide approach for WASH services.