



SYSTEMS LEARNING EXCHANGE

Presented by Agenda for Change

THEME 1 SUMMARY

WASH SYSTEMS AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

JUNE 2020

BACKGROUND

The Systems Learning Exchange was created to highlight the voices of Agenda for Change member (“Member”) representatives in country programs, and to encourage conversations across Members and countries. A dedicated [webpage](#) hosts all related materials.

The theme for the first discussion was *WASH Systems and Emergency Response*. Speakers described how they have applied a systems approach in fragile or emergency contexts. All speakers prepared a video presentation for viewing in advance of a live, facilitated discussion held on June 24.

Ben Blumenthal and Agnes Montangero, Helvetas:

SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING AND EMERGENCY RESPONSES: HELVETAS’ EXPERIENCE IN BURKINA FASO AND NIGER

[Watch Video](#)

Farel Ndango and David De Armey, Water for Good:

WASH SYSTEMS AMID CONFLICT, FRAGILITY, AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

[Watch Video](#)

Gian Melloni, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) WASH Consortium (led by Concern Worldwide):

STRENGTHENING WASH SYSTEMS FOR LONG-TERM SERVICE PROVISION IN DRC

[Watch Video](#)

FULL DISCUSSION

[Watch Video](#)

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The discussion had simultaneous interpretation in English, French, and Spanish to enable broader participation from across the membership. Representatives from 13 Members across 30 countries registered.

Each speaker highlighted the challenges of strengthening WASH systems in contexts where underlying chronic issues are often compounded by rapid onset crises, such as disease outbreaks or political and social instability. Supporting local actors to sustain longer-term operations, maintenance, and financing of WASH services while reconciling the need for delivering results quickly in emergency situations requires effective coordination and communication, as well as rapid adaptation to programs. These lessons are particularly important to share during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DRC WASH Consortium Lessons

The DRC WASH Consortium's program focused on the sustainability of rural WASH systems for 600 rural communities in seven provinces in DRC. One program component promoted financial sustainability of water services through an adapted life-cycle cost approach where communities raised finances to operate and maintain their water points. While the program covered initial capital expenditure and direct support costs, at the end of the program in 2019, at least 70% of the communities were able to cover basic operations. Some communities were able to finance larger repairs or cover replacement costs. Melloni shared how several factors influenced the success of this approach:

- **Revenue-generating activities** contributed to communities performing better;
- **Using a portion of water fees to pay community members** who managed water points yielded better results than where a purely voluntary approach was used;
- **Water fee exemptions for vulnerable households** did not jeopardize success rates.



DRC WASH Consortium team on the ground in Village Mande, Manono (Concern Worldwide)

A proof point of the durability of this approach was that even after some communities were internally displaced, people continued water management practices and the collection of water fees when they returned. A sustainability check conducted 2 years after the program started, in 2015, found most water points were still actively managed with 90% in regular use.

Helvetas' Lessons

Working in Burkina Faso, Niger and other fragile states, Helvetas works in a systemic way to strengthen existing institutions and processes. Blumenthal and Montangero shared four key operating principles:

- **Strengthen government leadership, planning and prioritization** during emergencies and in times of normality. External responses (NGO, UN agencies, or private) that parallel or replace the government's role can weaken the system and undermine credibility and ownership;
- **Consult local actors and networks in designing and implementing responses.** Such actors can be part of early warning systems to identify where support is most required;
- **Strengthen and rely on local markets and supply chains** so they can respond during a crisis (e.g., through skills development and organizational skills to set up federations);
- **Engage in a continuous dialogue with all relevant stakeholders,** especially on nexus issues. (e.g., establish monitoring systems with municipal WASH agents

“THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR HAS NO MEMORY OF WHAT IS DONE IN A COUNTRY”

-FAREL NDANGO

to promote coordination with service operators).

Water for Good Lessons

In the Central African Republic, Water for Good focuses on the development of sustainable access to water. By training local technicians to do regular maintenance, they supported the creation of a large network that covers several prefectures. The technicians collect community financial contributions and may eventually become private water system owners. When humanitarian aid arrives spontaneously to provide services, it is often free, which sends a contradictory message to the community. To address these challenges, Ndango highlighted the importance of:

- Building close, collaborative relationships with national level authorities and institutions as well as other stakeholders;
- Regular coordination and proactive communication with governing authorities and the humanitarian sector, especially as the latter does not always know what happened in the past and does not have an existing agreed agenda with the government;
- Participation in humanitarian response cluster meetings to repeat messages and challenge the contradictory approach of providing free, emergency water services.

Discussion Highlights

One participant referred to a quote Ndango made in his video, “*the humanitarian sector has no memory of what is done in a country,*” and asked, what could development and emergency response agencies do differently in humanitarian response to maintain and strengthen WASH systems? Speakers emphasized the importance of good collaboration, coordination, and communication to bridge the gap between emergency response and long-term development actors. For example, Montangero highlighted the value of having response cluster meetings co-chaired by a government representative or an entity like UNICEF that typically

has an ongoing presence in a country.

Anchoring humanitarian responses with local actors and institutions can build on existing government WASH plans and priorities, and on local knowledge, to inform response interventions and maximize resources. For example, Ndango noted the importance of humanitarian agencies having access to water service level data so they know where facilities exist, which water pumps may need rehabilitation, or when maintenance might be due. This prior knowledge could inform humanitarian priorities and allow for ongoing monitoring and maintenance by local actors, such as Water for Good, once a crisis subsides. This could also ensure that institutional knowledge is not lost after an emergency response, but resides with local development stakeholders to enable the continuity of services.

Another participant asked how the WASH development sector can monitor and document any negative outcomes of emergency response work and what can be done to learn from such experiences. In response, Blumenthal drew attention to Helvetas' conflict-sensitive project management approach which goes beyond the principle of "do no harm," by proactively considering all potential consequences of a

specific action and discussing them with local partners before making decisions.

Melloni emphasized that the sector would benefit from better documentation and dissemination of outcomes whether good, average, or bad. He added that there is often organizational discomfort in sharing negative outcomes due to concerns over reputational damage; plus, there is a tendency in all sectors to highlight only positive outcomes. The DRC WASH Consortium engaged dedicated knowledge management and learning staff to support the sharing of their outcomes, and to promote program learning and adaptation.

Due to time constraints, the speakers could not discuss in detail all the pre-submitted questions or additional points raised during the discussion; these additional questions and comments are included in Annex 1 with some initial reflections from the speakers. Agenda for Change will consider ways to continue the conversation on these questions and comments.

The video of the full discussion can be viewed [here](#).

Jean Albert Garangao conducts a community data collection session for Water for Good's prefecture wide baseline assessment in 2018 (Water for Good)



ANNEX 1 – ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

What are the tricks used to innovate the financing of operations and maintenance of water infrastructure in this period of global economic paralysis?

Blumenthal noted that emergency interventions should be coordinated with government to make sure that they build on local development plans. However, this alignment alone does not guarantee the long-term sustainability and durability of services. Engagement with other local actors, such as water user associations, and ensuring they fulfil their roles is also important. This cannot be done during an emergency where activities are accelerated; this requires longer-term development over several years during which capacities can be strengthened and all actors are aware of and fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

Montangero reflected on how the COVID-19 crisis has consequences on food prices and the ability of people to pay for their water services. In Niger, the government declared that water services would be free for a few months, so some municipalities have been covering water operators' costs in the meantime. This may not be viable over the longer-term. Hence, Helvetas has been promoting income-generating activities at the community level, to make sure that the population has enough funds to continue paying for water in this period of crisis.

What has been your experience in writing in (proposals) some transitioning activities into emergency responses?

Melloni noted that there has been a certain 'mixture' of emergency relief and longer-term development in many of the settings where he has worked, although it has been a transition from emergency to development more often than vice-versa. A current example in the COVID-19 context is from SNV Nepal, where one of their donors made available a response envelope via a competitive process. SNV was able

to integrate a 'crisis response' component within an existing longer-term development perspective.

How might emergency responses build institutional memory, retain relationships, and align short-term projects/interventions with systems strengthening approaches and government-led sector plans?

Melloni responded: Firstly, emergency responders/INGOs should systematically embed knowledge management resources in all their country offices. It should be a core function, like administration or programs. Secondly, and as important, donors should push implementers to do the same: they should require implementers to achieve knowledge management and learning objectives alongside 'operational' objectives and should provide them with the little extra resources needed for that. It would represent value for money.

Training on soap production in May 2020, Bourgou village, Burkina Faso (Helvetas)



Most humanitarian programs are 3–12 months in duration and sustainability of services is a challenge. Results measurement also call for robust systems and data use is limited. What has been your experience in the DRC?

Melloni noted that investing in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), within reason, is money well spent, especially if an organization can integrate findings into programming. The DRC WASH Consortium prided itself for having a rich and complex M&E system, which was at the basis of much of the learning that was shared and still discussed now, more than a year after project completion. However, the issue persists of how to monitor results after implementation, as most funding cycles end when the project ends.

Helvetas, you mentioned that you tried to involve the government agency in the district WASH plans, but are the district WASH plans owned by local government? Or are they owned by Helvetas?

Montangero noted that they support the municipality or district in their efforts to develop a plan and implement it. Helvetas does not typically use district WASH plans and lets the community lead instead.

Other Questions for Further Discussion

- Sustaining access to safe drinking water supply is a daunting challenge in the humanitarian context! Amidst the stakeholder coordination this remains a challenge... what tested approaches have been successful?

- In the current pandemic, are there in the countries where you work a response plan for water and sanitation? Have your organizations been involved since the plan development stage?
- A couple of the speakers referred to specific ways women are involved in WASH responses, such as through income-generating activities like brick-making and liquid-soap making as well as representation on WASH committees. In other countries, especially in time of crisis or internal conflict, we've seen backlash and cases of gender-based violence from the community or family members towards women who are earning extra income or that have taken out WASH micro-credit loans. Have you experienced, or heard any reports of, any backlash to women's engagement in these country contexts during the repeated crises? If so, how have you been able to mitigate this through working with local actors and to protect the gains you've made to women's empowerment?
- In each case, the countries experience ongoing crises and disease outbreaks, how have the speakers managed to work with existing systems and stakeholders to rapidly consult, adapt and disseminate updated Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and to promote good health and hygiene in these changing circumstances? (Especially for Ebola and COVID-19.)
- How are organizations addressing targeting of vulnerable persons (i.e., persons with disabilities, female-headed households), and how have they brought them to the decision-making table?