



SYSTEMS LEARNING EXCHANGE

Presented by Agenda for Change

THEME 2 SUMMARY

STRENGTHENING WASH SYSTEMS: THE NEW NORMAL

JULY 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](#). To build on this, the second theme explored how Members from four countries are continuing to strengthen systems in their mid-term COVID-19 response and how they are adapting to The New Normal. All speakers prepared a video presentation for viewing in advance of a live, facilitated discussion held on July 29:

Avo Ratoarijaona, CARE and Rodolphe Rakoto-Harisoa, WaterAid:

PROMOTING WASH SYSTEMS APPROACHES FOR SUSTAINABLE, INCLUSIVE SERVICES DURING COVID-19 IN MADAGASCAR

[Watch Video](#)

Yogesh Pant, Helvetas:

WASH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING ALONGSIDE COVID-19 RESPONSE IN NEPAL

[Watch Video](#)

Martín Rivera, Para Todos Por Siempre:

NETWORKING APPROACH: THE TRIGGER FOR THE WASH RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN HONDURAS

[Watch Video](#)

Cate Nimanya, Water For People:

THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDER COORDINATION: KAMWENGE DISTRICT COVID-19 RESPONSE IN UGANDA

[Watch Video](#)

FULL DISCUSSION

[Watch Video](#)

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Helvetas Nepal

The Integrated Water Resources Management Program, led by Helvetas Nepal, has been working since 2000 to develop and strengthen systems for WASH services and resource management in five districts in Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces. Although the program ceased operations for a few weeks at the beginning of a countrywide lockdown, it swiftly resumed activities with a focus on COVID-19 response. As of July 2020, they are operating as before – constructing WASH facilities and supporting water resources planning – and adapting their approaches to account for COVID-19. Pant shared several recommendations for adapting to the ‘new normal’:

- Provide remote support to local partners in the field to strengthen collaboration and coordination.
- Enhance capacity of local government, non-governmental organizations, and community-based organizations to adapt to the long-term impacts of COVID-19 (e.g., promoting safe community mobilization, building and using local skills and technicians, etc.).
- Establish/strengthen supply chains and markets for both WASH and personal protective equipment.
- Include COVID-19 prevention advice in WASH awareness campaigns for behavior change.
- Use innovative, locally produced technology – such as pedal-powered handwashing stations.
- Implement protection measures during field implementation (social distancing, mask, gloves, etc.).



Community members use a locally manufactured foot-operated handwashing station (Helvetas Nepal)

Para Todos Por Siempre, Honduras

In Honduras, the [Para Todos Por Siempre](#) (PTPS, “Everyone Forever”) movement consists of 26 government and non-governmental organizations working together to reach Sustainable Development Goal 6. PTPS promotes a systems approach by implementing coordinated advocacy strategies, knowledge management, building partnerships, and supporting organizational development at both national and municipal levels. With the arrival of COVID-19, PTPS re-activated a temporarily inactive working group for WASH in emergencies, in coordination with UNICEF and other local organizations, to develop a cross-sectoral response plan. Alongside monthly monitoring of the plan, the group holds regular virtual meetings to exchange information and experiences, and to expand partnerships for coordinated action at the local level. Rivera highlighted the importance of networking to:

- Promote coordinated learning and sharing as the pandemic evolves.
- Support ongoing engagement with municipal authorities and technicians to assess and address current needs and improve planning and coordination at the municipal level.
- Conduct joint advocacy – for example, the Honduran association of urban water service providers joined the PTPS movement to engage a Senator to champion a new sustainable WASH services bill with the National Congress.

**“THIS IS THE NEW
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- YOGESH PANT

RANO WASH, Madagascar

[Rural Access to New Opportunities in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene](#) (RANO WASH) is a 5-year consortium project funded by USAID and co-led by CARE, WaterAid, CRS, Sandandrano and Bushproof. Each consortium member brings its expertise to focus on different components of a systems strengthening model (i.e., WaterAid’s building blocks framework). Initially, the consortium was concerned that the pandemic would disrupt and complicate their efforts to strengthen the system. However, from April to June 2020, the COVID-19 response has built on existing efforts to: improve WASH sector and intersectoral coordination; mobilize stakeholders for collaborative COVID-19 response activities; and support WASH service data collection and monitoring. Ratoarijaona and Rakoto-Harisoa shared several lessons learned to date:

- The leadership demonstrated by the Ministry of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene has facilitated planning, monitoring and reporting at regional and national levels through simple and accessible tools.
- A shorter ‘monitoring – planning – funding’ cycle is required for crisis management – this illustrates the benefits of working in a coordinated way to address sector gaps across development actors.
- Coordination actions (e.g., weekly meetings, frequent WASH service level data collection through a simplified monitoring system, access to local resources, etc.) are feasible even during emergency response.
- Strengthening support to private operators and research institutions brings additional benefits and innovations, such as handwashing devices, payment facilities for water services and the production of disinfection products.
- Perfect and time-consuming plans are not required, and improvements can be made as the context evolves and as more information or models are available.

Water For People, Uganda

Nimanya shared the experience of stakeholder coordination in addressing emerging WASH problems through a case study of Kamwenge District Local

Government and their response to COVID-19. Water For People’s support focuses on strengthening the capacity of government, public utilities and private service providers, non-governmental organizations, and communities in the district to deliver efficient WASH services. At the onset of lockdown in March 2020, a multi-sectoral Task Force convened to provide guidance on a coordinated response. The group, comprising 25 members, meets weekly to mobilize resources, monitor water service functionality levels at healthcare facilities, manage communications, support social mobilization, and conduct joint COVID-19 response activities. Nimanya highlighted various factors that have led to the successful response:

- Using an existing, active coordination platform as the basis of the Task Force – so that members already knew and trusted each other and were used to cross-sectoral coordination.
- Capitalising on the benefits of existing formalized relationships with district local governments and their awareness of and appreciation for WASH needs.
- Ability to build on the current district WASH master plan to support coordination and leverage existing co-funding for the construction of water sources and distribution of handwashing stations in public places and healthcare facilities.
- Before COVID-19, Water For People had ongoing interventions in all public healthcare facilities, which helped them to quickly support the installation of

handwashing stations in key patient areas and to train personnel on COVID-19 prevention.

Live Event Discussion Highlights

The discussion had simultaneous interpretation in English, French, and Spanish to enable broader participation from across the membership. Representatives from nine Members across 26 countries registered.

Participants asked how the **institutional coordination mechanisms** set up to organize COVID-19 responses in each country had been convened and/or reactivated, and if ad-hoc or pre-existing coordination mechanisms are the best option moving forward. Nimanya highlighted that during previous crises – such as with Ebola response or supporting refugees from the Congo – the health department would typically take the lead; with COVID-19 there was an opportunity to build on an existing, multi-sectoral district water and sanitation coordination committee which Water For People had supported for the last four years. This committee had grown from a couple of Kamwenge District departments initially, to having all departments and non-governmental organizations working in the district represented. This made it easier for them all to come together and adapt plans for COVID-19 responses.

Rivera noted that the Honduras WASH emergency working group has existed since 2015 but was not a permanent collaboration. PTPS influenced UNICEF to re-activate

Trainees of the Biguli Branch Water Operators Mentorship Programme accept their certificates of completion alongside Water For People Uganda Country Director, Cate Nimanya (Water For People Uganda)
 Note: this picture was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic.



the group and to allow new members to join, including water service providers. Making the most of existing relationships and platforms enabled the response to build on the expertise, trust, and working dynamics generated by previous collaborations.

Some asked how ongoing **planning and monitoring** could be actively pursued during COVID-19 response and if there were models from previous emergencies or health crises that could be adapted. Ratoarijaona and Rakoto-Harisoa shared that in the case of Madagascar, they could not wait for a ‘perfect’ plan, rather iterative response needs for different regions were discussed in weekly stakeholder meetings, including how COVID-19 tools (such as those created by UNICEF) could be rapidly adapted to the local context. The government, UNICEF, and RANO WASH developed a user-friendly joint data gathering and monitoring system that collects a simple weekly report from each organization to assess and rapidly adapt the COVID-19 response. Previous system strengthening activities have supported the development of data collection and sharing structures, so COVID-19 response data could be fed into an existing website and dashboard on a regular basis.

In terms of **ongoing service delivery**, Pant noted that Nepal had a nationwide 100% open-defecation free declaration in September 2019, meaning everyone has access to a public or private toilet. Since then, including during the COVID-19 response, efforts have been made to improve the quality and sustainability of sanitation services.

WASH technician taking a sample for water quality analysis (Para Todos Por Siempre)



One participant asked whether the crisis has enabled stronger collaboration between the **WASH and health sectors**. Ratoarijaona responded that RANO WASH has been working with private water operators for service delivery as well as on water treatment such as electrochlorination systems. During the pandemic, RANO WASH created linkages between the private operators and health centers and schools to ensure they have ongoing access to water treatment products. Nimanya added that in Uganda, the health sector was instrumental in providing technical advice on disease transmission related to WASH and surveillance of improved hygiene behaviors.

Another participant asked how PTPS structures its **advocacy** to ensure responses from government are not just a one-off exercise. Rivera responded that the main challenge in Honduras has been changes in government and each administration’s civil service structures every four years. Hence, institutionalising government participation in advocacy platforms provides an important space for ongoing dialogue between civil society, academia, and government stakeholders. The PTPS platform also supports the development of a sectoral ‘institutional memory’, by demonstrating to new administrations how cross-sector dialogue and advocacy can further promote the prioritization of WASH and its financing.

A final question inquired if speakers had seen examples of **WASH systems strengthening in healthcare facilities** as part of the new normal, and if there has been increased collaboration on infection prevention and control in healthcare facilities. Nimanya noted that COVID-19 has led to a greater than normal accumulation of waste at healthcare facilities, so Water For People has been promoting better waste management. The Kamwenge District Local Government has prioritized and mobilized resources for having waste incinerators on-site at each healthcare facility. Water has also been in greater demand at healthcare facilities for cleaning and infection prevention and control requirements. However, many healthcare facilities have not been able to cover the costs of the resulting high water bills. Water For People has paid some of these bills and is exploring ways to address this in the longer-term.

Questions and comments that were not addressed in the live discussion are included in Annex 1 with some initial reflections from the speakers.

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

ANNEX 1 – ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

It seems that a lot of actors are supporting temporary handwashing facilities. Why not permanent solutions instead?

Nimanya responded that there has been a lot of debate around the design of handwashing facilities. Many designs were not specifically for healthcare facility wards or operation theatres where there is the potential for high infection and usage. Many healthcare facilities do not have the space for a permanent sink or a connection to a piped water supply. Water For People has been advocating for the prioritization of WASH services in healthcare facility planning and budgeting.

Rivera responded that in the initial stage of the emergency in Honduras, it was decided to install temporary or portable handwashing stations in health centers and public places due to restrictions on the transport of materials and builders, physical distancing, and potential risk of contagion. However, the construction process of permanent washing stations in health centers, schools, and community centers has already been started.

Is there anything from the new or expanded coordination processes that you hope to bring forward into the ‘new normal’?

Nimanya suggested that a joint annual district operational plan works well and can be brought forward. Rivera added that the protocols and coordination mechanisms in an emergency response plan must be regularly reviewed and updated. An improved government information system allows better coordination and response to emergencies. There is greater WASH sector interest in strengthening disaster preparedness and mitigation actions, and in a coordinated response to emergencies.

Pant highlighted that in Nepal, the role of the local governments, urban and rural municipalities, and the local non-governmental organizations is very important in fighting COVID-19 in their respective areas. They are in the forefront of this fight and

this should be continued in the days to come as well. Therefore, government and non-governmental organizations should further enhance the capacity of these organizations so they can continue to adapt over the long-term.

Ratoarijaona and Rakoto-Harisoa added that the possibility to meet remotely and bring together actors from different administrative levels (national and regional) to accelerate information sharing was vital. This has also helped to highlight key actors for change who are not at the forefront of sector exchanges. Another opportunity to build on is the capacity of sector actors to agree on the implementation of a common plan, to behave as part of a single sector, to exchange frequently for the follow-up of interventions and the change of context. This is easier in times of emergency but very difficult in normal times.

Avo Ratoarijaona speaks at a RANO WASH Consortium training (CARE Madagascar)
Note: this picture was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic.



How did you find the Government of Nepal is focusing on setting the enabling environment? Do you have a suggestion that government can think about?

Pant responded that the government of Nepal has encouraged people to use protection and sanitation materials such as face masks, handwashing soap, sanitizers, and handwashing stations. This has created huge demand. The Government's role so far is supportive in setting up an enabling environment for promoting the market for protection and sanitation materials. This is fine to begin with; however, more effort will be needed for policy reform and infrastructure development, to grow and sustain the market system. Pant recommends that the government now also promote entrepreneurship in remote, rural areas to produce these materials locally and maintain an effective supply chain.

Nimanya and Rivera, you mentioned that the non-payment of water fees is an ongoing challenge for water service providers. What options are there to mitigate the risks beyond government loans/ grants?

Nimanya responded that the challenge remains but education and sensitisation of communities through various media (radio, social media, etc.) towards the risk and burden of accumulating bills has helped to mitigate the risk in Uganda. Payment plans have been drawn up with some of the large customers/users (e.g., healthcare facilities and washing bays). The challenge has renewed the discussion on appropriate technologies like pre-paid meters; where they are installed, operators and users have continued to pay. Rivera added that it was necessary to sensitize the Honduran population to give priority to paying for water services, even if only partially. Efforts should be made to find alternative ways to pay electronically; negotiate with

suppliers, postpone or make partial payments for electricity and other services. The Water Boards could expand community volunteer work as a form of payment.

Do you feel that the current building block frameworks address issues of resilience / emergencies?

Rivera noted that they do not do it explicitly or directly. The issues of emergencies, vulnerability and adaptation to climate change are factors that should be included in all building blocks, but they have not been emphasized enough. Pant added that, as COVID-19 is still new, the current frameworks / interventions seem to focus more on preventing the spread of the disease, and relief works are carried out with the assumption that everything will soon be back to normal. However, this may not be enough to adapt and build resiliency in the long run.

Adding their perspective, Ratoarijaona and Rakoto-Harisoa said: Conceptually, yes, but in practice, the current building block frameworks do not address issues of resilience / emergencies. The emergency mode of operation has been considered in their progress measurement tool as the bad example not to follow. The importance of sustainability and institutionalization has been emphasized, whereas joint commitment – the need to coordinate to have tangible results in a short time – should be the minimum to achieve, and this is really what was missing in the so-called normal time to create real change. The issue of sustainability and institutionalization must always be elemental, without forgetting these minimum bases of efficiency and capacity to respond to emergencies and adapt to contexts.