



SYSTEMS LEARNING EXCHANGE

Presented by Agenda for Change

A LOOK BACK AT THE SYSTEMS LEARNING EXCHANGE

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.

Three interrelated themes were discussed by Members from 10 countries over the course of three months. Inputs to each theme included pre-recorded short videos from Members, with sub-titles in English, French and Spanish, followed by a live discussion:

1. [WASH Systems and Emergency Response](#) (June 2020): Speakers from three countries described their systems approaches in fragile or emergency contexts and the impact of COVID-19.
2. [The New Normal](#) (July 2020): Members from four countries discussed their efforts to strengthen systems in their mid-term COVID-19 response and how they adapted their approaches.
3. [Recasting our WASH Systems Boundaries Post COVID-19](#) (September 2020): Members from four countries shared perspectives on the ongoing programmatic shifts required to address WASH, health, and education sector needs.

OVERVIEW

The Systems Learning Exchange’s interactive, online platform allowed a diverse array of members to share their experiences.

Some highlights of the series:



239 MEMBERS



FROM 70 COUNTRIES



LEARNED FROM 13 PEERS



FROM 10 COUNTRIES



IN 3 LANGUAGES

THANKS TO OUR **MANY COLLEAGUES** FOR THEIR **TIME** AND **CONTRIBUTIONS:**



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Sovattha Neou and Geoff Revell,
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WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Several common takeaways emerged on how Members are continuing to strengthen systems in contexts where rapid onset crises like the COVID-19 pandemic make underlying chronic issues worse. Speakers highlighted that existing systems strengthening activities enabled them to react and respond rapidly to the additional challenges posed by the pandemic, including:

- Strengthening existing local actors and institutions to ensure robust supply chains, ongoing operations and maintenance, and government leadership;
- Facilitating collaboration, coordination and communication across and amongst WASH sector stakeholders;
- Building the skills and capacity to be flexible and adapt rapidly to shifting contexts.

STRENGTHEN EXISTING LOCAL ACTORS, INSTITUTIONS, AND PROCESSES

Speakers provided many examples of how existing support to local service providers enabled them to sustain supply chains and markets for protective equipment, longer-term operations and maintenance of water services, and the financing of WASH services during the pandemic. Members described how they had provided tangible (i.e., personal protective equipment) and remote social support to local partners in the field to respond to COVID-19. Members' systems strengthening work meant they had strong existing relationships with local actors and networks so that they could swiftly jointly design and implement responses. In addition, their previous work strengthening government leadership was vital to ensuring the credibility and ownership of responses.

- In Central African Republic, [Water for Good's](#) existing network of trained local technicians was able to respond to COVID-19 and continue their existing maintenance role.
- [The Democratic Republic of Congo \(DRC\) WASH Consortium](#) presentation highlighted the importance of consulting local actors, networks, and communities in designing and implementing COVID-19 responses.
- Helvetas' support to federations in [Burkina Faso and Niger](#) helped strengthen local markets and supply chains for distributing handwashing stations, soaps, and disinfection products to communities during the crisis.

- The 10-step approach of Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) [Clean Clinic Model](#) in DRC and Madagascar is structured around capacity building and ownership across local partners, including health facilities and government ministries, and these existing relationships were essential to sustaining WASH services in health care facilities during COVID-19.
- The [Rural Access to New Opportunities in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene](#) (RANO WASH) program, co-led by Members CARE, CRS, and WaterAid in Madagascar, supported leadership by the Ministry of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, which led to more efficient planning, monitoring, and reporting of the COVID-19 response at regional and national levels.
- WaterSHED's [Civic Champions](#) program in Cambodia cultivated leadership behaviors in local government officials to advocate for better sanitation, and found that these officials were able to respond directly to COVID-19, without the need of external support.



WaterSHED provided skills training for female WASH entrepreneurs as part of their Civic Champions program in Cambodia (WaterSHED). Note: this photo was taken before COVID-19.

FACILITATING COLLABORATION, COORDINATION, AND COMMUNICATION

Regular coordination and continuous dialogue with governing authorities and the humanitarian sector has enabled many Members to build close, collaborative relationships with authorities and institutions and other stakeholders. These pre-existing relationships with government and other sector stakeholders helped Members facilitate the integration of system strengthening tools and WASH services in their COVID-19 responses. Using existing, active coordination platforms proved vital in several contexts as stakeholders already knew and trusted each other and were used to cross-sectoral coordination.

- [Water For People Uganda](#) worked with the Kamwenge District Government on COVID-19 response. At the onset of lockdown in March 2020, a multi-sectoral Task Force convened 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.
- In Honduras, the [Para Todos Por Siempre](#) (“Everyone Forever”) movement influenced UNICEF to re-activate a WASH emergency working group, which had existed since 2015 but was dormant, to allow new members to join and to develop a cross-sectoral response plan. This enabled better coordination, monitoring and learning from response activities.

FLEXIBILITY TO ADAPT RAPIDLY

Enhancing the 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.) will prove vital over the longer term.

- The Integrated Water Resources Management Program, led by [Helvetas Nepal](#), has been working since 2000 to develop and strengthen systems for WASH services in five districts in Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces. Existing local partners and supply chains were able to respond to the crisis and implement protection measures during field work (social distancing, mask, gloves, etc.).
- Madagascar speakers highlighted that a shorter ‘monitoring – planning – funding’ cycle is required for crisis management – as they could not wait for a ‘perfect’ plan. The government, UNICEF, and RANO WASH partners 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.

- Splash’s [Project WASH in Schools for Everyone](#) (“Project WISE”) in India worked in collaboration with the West Bengal State education department to revise WASH and menstrual hygiene training modules that they co-created six years ago, to include COVID-19 considerations. Splash is also changing the design of existing handwashing and drinking water stations to accommodate sanitizer dispensers and foot pedals, which address new government Standard Operating Procedures.

POST COVID-19

Looking to the future, several speakers highlighted how COVID-19 has spurred greater WASH sector interest in strengthening disaster preparedness and mitigation actions, and for a coordinated response to emergencies. The coordination mechanisms, information systems and operational plans used to respond to COVID-19 will ideally remain in place and continue to ensure preparedness in the longer-term.



The water, sanitation, and hygiene team gathers for a discussion in Village Mande, Manono, Democratic Republic of the Congo (Concern Worldwide). Note: This photo was taken before COVID-19.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The videos are available on the Agenda for Change [YouTube channel](#) and related resources are on the [Systems Learning Exchange](#) page.

Agenda for Change is exploring how to support a more inclusive community of practice dedicated to WASH systems strengthening that includes WASH colleagues and other professionals whose systems strengthening work intersects with WASH (e.g., health, agriculture, climate change). Please [contact us](#) if you have ideas or recommendations.



Local women in Narharinath Rural Municipality, Kalikot district, with face masks and handwashing buckets provided by Helvetas Nepal (Birendra Adhikari, HURUNDEC)