



Editorial: Doing WASH well – a set of principles for implementing agencies and their evaluators

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Many of the readers of this journal work in national and local governments and non-governmental organizations. With financial and in-kind support from communities, from national budget allocations, and from funds provided by external donor agencies, they aim to improve water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services at household and community level, and across entire local government administrative areas.

For organizations and individuals, especially those newly entering the field, it is not always obvious what constitutes good working practice. As a consequence, organizations may sometimes end up working independently of government procedures, so running the risk of introducing approaches which conflict with nationally agreed practices.

Those who evaluate the work of such organizations could usefully benefit from having a clear and succinct articulation of good programming principles, so that the reasoning behind their conclusions is transparent.

In the course of two recent evaluation assignments, the authors of this extended editorial drafted a set of principles which could (a) guide WASH actors, and (b) form such an evaluation benchmark.

Naturally not all professionals and organizations working in the WASH sector would be expected to concur with every word of what follows (and so we invite feedback and comment). However, as the principles reflect sector initiatives such as Sanitation and Water for All (Box 1) and the WASH Agenda for Change (Box 2) we believe the consensus in the profession over the majority of the statements and arguments made here would be strong.

Box 1 Sanitation and Water for All (SWA)

Sanitation and Water for All is a global partnership committed to achieving universal access to clean drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Sanitation and Water for All outlined a set of sector building blocks: policy and strategy; institutional arrangements (coordination, service delivery, regulation, and accountability); sector financing (budgeting, financing); planning, monitoring, and review; capacity development.

It also includes a set of collaborative behaviours including:

- Enhance government leadership of sector planning processes.
- Strengthen and use country systems.
- Use one information and mutual accountability platform built around a multi-stakeholder, government-led cycle of planning, monitoring, and learning.
- Build sustainable water and sanitation sector financing strategies that incorporate financial data on all 3Ts (taxes, tariffs, and transfers), as well as estimates for non-tariff household expenditure.

Box 2 Agenda for Change

The Agenda for Change is an alliance of agencies that sign up to the district-wide, systems-strengthening approach that tackles policy, financing, and institutions. It promotes harmonized district level work. It works to strengthen national level systems in order to enable all districts in the countries to reach everyone and ensure that services continue forever.

Current member organizations of Agenda for Change include Aguaconsult, CARE, IRC, Splash, Water For Good, Water For People, WaterAid, and Welthungerhilfe.

The principles set out below refer to WASH programming by international non-governmental organizations (non-profit INGOs, multilateral agencies, and other implementing partners) in low- and middle-income countries. They refer to development contexts, as opposed to humanitarian interventions; the latter are addressed in the Sphere Standards and related guidance.

Relevance

It is essential to understand, respect, and respond to global and national contexts.

Globally this means recognizing and working within the consensus expressed in, among others, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Human Rights to Water and to Sanitation, and the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan (and its precursors in Rome, Paris, and Accra). Nationally it means respecting the mandate and leadership of government, and actively working in support of national and local government policies and guidelines. Where governments are weak or policies flawed, the imperative is to find ways, in collaboration with others, to strengthen and influence those institutions. Working around or independently of national systems is only defensible in highly fragile situations where the rule of law and the reach of government are essentially absent.

Good programmes are relevant to need and based on sound assessments of those needs.

Generic approaches which are insufficiently adapted to specific context and need are likely to be ineffective or inefficient. A sound assessment embraces a clear understanding of global need, detailed analysis at country level, and the specific needs of target populations.

Programmes should be designed with sufficient intensity of the intervention and length of time in the programme area to raise access (coverage) and sustained utilization of services to very high levels (exceeding 70 per cent).

Low levels of coverage and use (especially in the case of sanitation) render it highly unlikely that lasting impacts – especially on health – can be achieved.

Effectiveness

Measures should be taken to ensure that WASH services are used and improved behaviours are actually practised.

Technology and infrastructure which stands idle, and knowledge of good hygiene behaviour which is not habitually practised represent wasted investments. It is only through the use of water and sanitation services and the practice of good hygiene that health and other benefits can arise.

Since the behaviours of service users are critical for achieving health and other benefits of WASH, specific and systematic behaviour change initiatives are needed.

Behaviour change initiatives should promote user actions such as using water and sanitation services correctly; paying for maintenance, repairs, and replacements; and practising good personal and home hygiene. Behaviours of whole communities, those in leadership and in local and central government may also need to be addressed in behaviour change programming.

Good practice emphasizes the importance of high quality infrastructure, while recognizing that it is simply one piece of a wider system which delivers services.

Technology and physical infrastructure are necessary to provide services. Consequently, their quality is of great importance. However, technology itself is never enough. The knowledge, skills, institutional arrangements, procedures, and financial resources to maintain, repair, and replace technology are crucial. A focus on the wider enabling environment around physical infrastructure is therefore essential.

Efficiency

A balance must be struck between the quality and the cost of interventions.

Whether work is undertaken directly or through partners and contractors, the least-cost solutions are rarely of sufficient quality. It is often better (in terms of inclusion and sustainability) to spend more over longer periods of time to achieve better quality of intervention – but this trade-off is often a matter of judgement.

Organizational overheads should be managed to acceptable levels.

This means operating in modest but functional offices, with efficient ICT services and utilities; using vehicles which are fit-for-purpose; and remunerating staff at realistic levels. A balance should be struck between unnecessary extravagance on one hand and excessive cost-minimization which hinders effectiveness, on the other.

The challenge of (dis)continuity

Despite the inherent challenges of short-term project funding, efforts should be made to design-in continuity.

Operational realities frequently mean that organizations receive short-term restricted funding to undertake specific actions in designated areas. Once projects finish, it is difficult to achieve the continuity which is necessary to achieve deep and sustainable change. Despite this real challenge, efforts should be made to deliver continuity of collaboration, support, capacity development, and other aspects of programming, and to document these over time.

Sustainability

An essential outcome of all WASH programming should be water and sanitation services and hygienic behaviours which are enjoyed with no time limit.

Sustainability refers to the time dimension of beneficial change which programmes bring about. Once an improvement in service or behaviour, or the capacity of organizations to deliver such changes has been achieved, that forward momentum must continue. Every effort should continue to be made by the implementing agency and government extension workers to minimize 'slippage' or regression.

Gender equality and social inclusion

An essential outcome of all WASH programming should be water and sanitation services and hygienic behaviours which are enjoyed by all.

Inclusion refers to the SDG objective to 'leave no-one behind'. Numerous marginalized groups and individuals are left behind by 'business-as-usual'. These include people in the lower wealth quintiles (the poor); women and girls; rural populations (as opposed to urban); those in minority ethnic, caste, or religious groups; pastoralists; people living with HIV/AIDS or with mental or physical disability; LGBT people; prisoners; and others, depending on context. Special measures may need to be taken to facilitate representation and participation by such groups, and to serve them well.

Innovation

It is essential that organizations implementing WASH programmes constantly seek new and better ways of addressing issues in the sector.

However, while innovation is important, especially in designing, piloting, and scaling up approaches and technologies which address intractable problems, a balance needs to be struck with implementing tried-and-tested solutions. If too many organizations are innovating in too many aspects of their programming, there is a danger that well-established good practices may be neglected, or that mixed messages are conveyed to governments and communities. In all WASH

programming, care should be taken to avoid doing or risking harm to those who are intended to benefit, or to those not directly targeted by WASH programmes.

Partnerships

Good programmes actively seek out collaborative and respectful relationships.

Good relationships are most important with governments (central and local), and also with other WASH sector organizations, large and small, with different statuses and functions. Working together makes it possible for external organizations to influence policies and strengthen capacities in ways that are not possible when they 'plough their own furrow'.

Unity and diversity.

It is understandable that organizations wish to retain their own identities and brands, but there is much value too in collaboration among implementing organizations. The informal peer review of approaches which results from working together also helps to ensure that individual organizations stay on message and on task. This balance is sought in the WASH Agenda for Change coalition.

Good programmes build the capacity of all collaborating partners.

'Capacity' refers to all the skills, knowledge, procedures, and resources required to work effectively. Capacity starts with the skills and expertise of individuals, extends to the organizations and organizational systems within which those individuals work, and reaches out to the wider context or 'operating environment' which may enable or disable effective action. If aspects of that operating environment need to change, it is important that all interested stakeholders collaborate to advocate for relevant change.

Advocacy and influencing

Practical know-how and policy relevance go hand-in-hand.

Effective organizations have strong on-the-ground practical experience of 'what works' in the sector. They combine this with a sound understanding of what needs to be articulated in legislation, policy, regulatory frameworks, and sector guidance. Understanding of WASH practice gives organizations the credibility to influence policy, while improvements to policies in turn help to reinforce their own and others' practices.

Impact

Large impacts on health from improved WASH services and behaviour changes are unlikely in the short term.

Wider impacts (including on time-saving, privacy, dignity, and safety) may be sought and realized, but the fundamental reason for improving WASH is that it is a matter of natural justice in which all people are equally valued. The normative standing of

adequate WASH services and practices are enshrined in the human rights to water and to sanitation, and in the SDG ambition to ‘leave no-one behind’.

Integration

There is value in implementing water, sanitation, and hygiene together; and in undertaking WASH interventions within wider development programming.

Integrated WASH programming refers to implementing water, sanitation, and hygiene practices in the same area at the same time. Sanitation and hygiene interventions may be limited by inadequacies in water services; and the health impacts of water programmes are likely to be limited in the absence of attention to sanitation and hygiene; consequently good practice often requires that all three aspects are addressed together.

Integrated programmes can usefully implement WASH in the broader context of development interventions in the fields of health, education, nutrition, livelihoods, agriculture, and disaster risk reduction.

When WASH is undertaken within wider programming, however, it is important that good practices and high standards still prevail, and that compromises over quality are not made.

Monitoring and evaluation

WASH implementing organizations should maintain simple, lean, accessible, and relevant monitoring systems recording their own work.

These should contain a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures of outputs and outcomes. They should be designed in such a way as to reflect both the organization’s own activities, but also to enable straightforward delivery of data into national databases where these exist. Where such national databases do not exist, organizations should work with others to build such systems.

Monitoring is of little value without adaptive and responsive action.

Consequently, monitoring should explicitly link to organizations’ own ways of working, and to adjustments in these. In cases where, for example, the performance of water and sanitation services is monitored and deficiencies are found, then appropriate action should follow.

Baselines and post-project evaluation should be normal, with at least a sample of evaluations attempting to assess higher level outcomes and impacts.

While most evaluations provide evidence of the achievement of planned outputs or deliverables, more searching evaluations should make professional judgements also about the achievement of inclusion and sustainable outcomes, and the likelihood or otherwise of contributing to higher level impacts. From time to time reviews should

also assess the extent to which strategic ambitions have been fulfilled and what adjustments to strategic approaches may be necessary.

Capturing learning

Documentation of experiences and learning is frequently neglected in the pressures to win funding and to deliver projects.

This results in much valuable learning being lost. Good ideas do not become known by others who may have the potential to implement them. Unreported failures get repeated by others. This neglect of documentation should be resisted as far as is possible, and organizations should work to ensure that lessons are identified, captured, and shared beyond the organization.

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Websites

Agenda for Change <<https://www.washagendaforchange.net/>>

Sanitation and Water for All <<http://sanitationandwaterforall.org/>>

Sphere <<https://spherestandards.org/>>