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Learning from and preventing failure in WASH

*Rebecca C. Sindall (independent consultant) and
Dani J. Barrington (The University of Western Australia),
with Esther Shaylor (UNICEF)*

THE UNIVERSITY OF
**WESTERN
AUSTRALIA**

**institute of
development
studies**

About the issue

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) failures continue to be discussed mostly off the record, with professionals the world over repeating one another's mistakes. Failure is difficult to talk about, but WASH failures have negative impacts – money is wasted and sometimes people are harmed. We need to acknowledge that not everything we try will succeed, but that if we learn from one another, we can continuously improve our work.

Since 2018, we have attempted to foster this change through the 'WASH Failures Movement'. This issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* is a compilation of what we've learned about why WASH failures happen, how we can address them, and how we can facilitate a culture of sharing and learning from failure in the WASH sector.

About the authors

Dr Rebecca Sindall is an international public health researcher with participatory research expertise in water and sanitation, injury prevention, learning from failure, and risk reduction.

Dr Dani Barrington is a Lecturer in the School of Population and Global Health at The University of Western Australia. Her research uses inclusive participatory methods that encourage people to talk openly about sensitive sanitation issues, particularly menstruation and incontinence.

Esther Shaylor is a WASH engineer working at UNICEF's Supply Division in Denmark, within the product innovation team. She has worked in both emergency and development contexts and focuses on finding working solutions to identified WASH needs.

Photo credits

Front cover and this page: *School sanitation facilities, Eastern Cape, South Africa, 2014.* **Credit**: Esther Shaylor

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) failures continue to be discussed mostly off the record, with professionals the world over repeating one another's mistakes. Failure is difficult to talk about, but WASH failures have negative impacts – money is wasted and sometimes people are harmed. If we are going to achieve universal water and sanitation we need to do better. As a sector we need to innovate if we are going to achieve universal water and sanitation by 2030. We need to acknowledge that not everything we try will succeed, but that if we learn from one another, we can continuously improve our work.

Since 2018, we have attempted to foster this change through the 'WASH Failures Movement' (Box 1). This issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* is a compilation of what we've learned about why WASH failures happen, how we can address them, and how we can facilitate a culture of sharing and learning from failure in the WASH sector. It primarily focuses on practical examples in programme settings, but many of the recommendations can be applied to all types of WASH activities, including research and policy development.

These recommendations build on research conducted with frontline WASH professionals in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Malawi (Barrington et al. 2021), which highlighted the influence of funders on WASH successes and failures. During the development of the present publication, the authors conducted additional interviews with funders (many of whom work in multiple regions of the world). The majority of quotes used in this publication come from these two pieces of research.

Box 1: The WASH Failures 'Movement' (pun intended)

We aren't the first to encourage WASH professionals to talk about their failures (for example, the UK Sanitation Community of Practice[1] and WASHaholics Anonymous[2] have both done so), but we hope that we will be the last! Since 2018 we have been fostering a culture where it is acceptable to talk about things that go wrong in WASH. We have achieved this through:

- **Listening to the experiences of 108 frontline WASH professionals in the research project 'Amplifying local voices to reduce failure in the WASH sector' (Barrington et al. 2021).**

- **Discussing how failures are addressed with 20 WASH funders in the research project 'Amplifying WASH voices: a focus on funders'.**

- **Compiling 'The Nakuru Accord', a manifesto for WASH professionals who are committed to improving transparency in their work (see Box 9).**

- **Running 'Blunders, Bloopers and Foul-Ups: A WASH Gameshow' at a variety of online and face-to-face events (see Figure 3).**

- **Facilitating Twitter discussions through our handle @FSM_Fail.**

- **Editing a Special Collection of *Environmental Health Insights* on '<u>Failures in Environmental and Public Health Research</u>'.**

- **Taking part in online discussions, webinars, and conference panels.**

Resources, photographs, and publications related to these activities are available online.[3]

A note on terminology

'Failure' is not a popular word. When our work on WASH failures began to gain momentum, many people voiced concerns about the use of the word 'failure': it was too extreme, too negative, people would not want to admit to failure due to the shame. Several alternative phrases were suggested including 'challenge', 'unintended consequence', and 'learning opportunity'. As a team we decided that 'WASH Failures' was most appropriate for our reporting: language is important in these discussions and if we had to choose one term to embody our work, and reflect the seriousness when things go wrong in WASH, we needed to use frank and transparent language that did not shy away from the issue. With that in mind, we use the word 'failure' throughout this publication, but recognise that other phrases may be more appropriate in different contexts (see 'How to talk about failure').

Who defines 'failures'?

Stakeholders have different ideas of what success looks like. This means that they also have different ideas of what failure looks like. For example, an NGO may consider a project successful because each household in a village has a pit latrine at the end of the contract. Residents of the same village may consider this only a partial success as some residents envisaged a flush toilet in each household. An evaluator may consider the project a failure because two years after completion, half of the pits have collapsed and the intended users have reverted to open defecation.

Understanding the needs and expectations of different stakeholders (even within a single organisation) can help to show how some events may be seen as a failure to one while not being seen as a failure by another. This was described by one WASH funder in sub-Saharan Africa:

1 See www.bpdws.org/web/d/DOC_360.pdf%3FstatsHandlerDone%3D1
2 See www.washaholics.wordpress.com/about/
3 See www.waterwomenworld.com/wash-failures/

> *"I do think people who don't have [a] good understanding of the project, or are far removed from the project might have a different perception [of failures]... And that's why you need to have buy in for your project... So for example, you might have leadership like who are tracking different metrics from what the project is looking at. And if there's no alignment between those metrics there's going to be a lot of problems."*

At the outset of any WASH project, programme, policy, or other activity, it is essential that all stakeholders – particularly those intended to be users – are in agreement of what 'success' will look like.

Why failures happen

The responses of frontline WASH professionals in our initial research project allowed us to group failures based on seven main causes (see Barrington et al. 2021 for definitions of each cause). In our follow-up research for this publication, representatives of organisations that fund WASH work recognised and agreed with these causes and added an eighth: a 'lack of holistic approaches'. This is based on the observation that the sector continues to emphasise infrastructure and technical solutions without the education, behaviour change, and systems strengthening required to ensure that service delivery is sustainable (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Main causes of WASH failures as identified by frontline professionals and funders

Unrealistic funder expectations

Idealistic planning

Poor coordination & communication

Initiation: identifying the project

Planning: organising & preparing

Execution: carrying out the work

Closure: ending work & reporting

Lack of holistic approaches

Inadequate community engagement

Politics & bureaucracy

Insufficient capacity

'Project' mentality
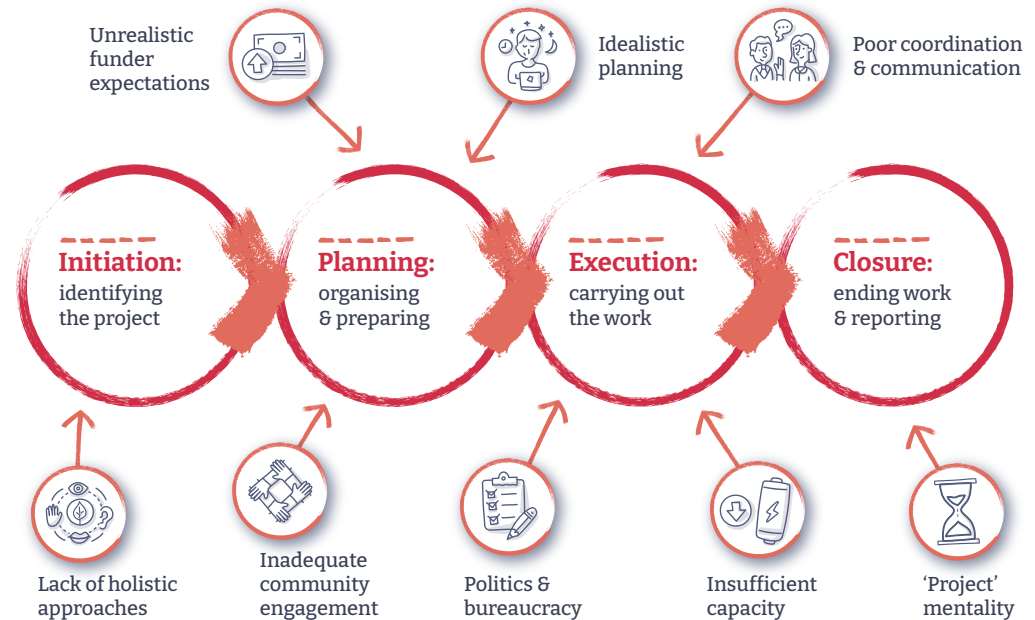
Source: Author's own

How to address failures

WASH professionals need to anticipate and prevent more failures before they happen, be able to manage them if they do occur, and reduce the size of failures that cannot be prevented. Although failures may present learning opportunities, addressing failures must include reflection on how to avoid similar failures in the future to capitalise on these opportunities. Actions that allow us to create those shifts fall into five categories: co-designing with intended users, allowing space for flexibility and experimentation, encouraging transparency and accountability, taking a systems-based approach, and addressing failure in funding processes.

Co-design with intended users

Failures are often embedded in project designs. An insufficient grasp of the needs and priorities of the community – and the wider systems that the work will sit within – often means that projects are destined to fall short.

It is vital to understand intended users' priorities when scoping and planning a WASH activity; if an activity doesn't address the needs of the intended users then it has already failed. The importance of working closely with communities are highlighted by this WASH researcher from South Africa:

> *"A real strong characteristic of this project was the community meetings, the decisions that were made by the community in trying to manage the system... This project, it's recognised as having all the right routes, all the sense of listening, of engaging, of empowering... and giving people access to the resources that are required."*

Funders could provide small pots of funding for the development of proposals and design of projects during the inception phase. Currently there is very limited budget for developing projects in ways that allow for proper co-design. When thinking about co-design, it is important to ensure that all users are considered, to recognise that different people will have different needs, and to understand that what works well for some, may not work well for others.[4] Budgets for co-designing from the proposal stage onwards will reduce the probability of failures being inherent in projects and increase the probability of potential failures being anticipated by those who best know the context.

Understanding user needs involves observing their actions as well as listening. Human-centred design concepts can be adopted to ensure that the needs and challenges of different types of users are captured and considered in a project's design (Ideo.org 2015). Of course, engaging with users should not be restricted to the design phase. For users to have their voices heard and to have a real input, they must be involved at all stages of a programme (Box 2).

Box 2: Continuous co-design using the Sani Tweaks approach

In 2018, Oxfam found that an average of 40 per cent of women and girls were not using emergency latrines built by humanitarian agencies (Bastable and Farrington 2022). The common issues or failures that contributed to this were a result of agencies failing to properly consult with latrine users.

To address these common failures, Oxfam developed an interactive approach to training and documenting best practice. The core approach of Sani Tweaks is to consult users before starting a latrine-building programme in an emergency, to modify the design of the latrines and the programme based on their feedback, and to keep adapting it as the programme evolves. This includes having a system in place to continue to gather feedback while the latrines are in use, and to make provisions for ongoing repairs. To guide these activities, Sani Tweaks produced open-source resources including a checklist for agencies implementing latrine-building programmes. They also delivered training on the approach at the field level (in-person and online).

By consulting with and involving communities at every stage of the design and implementation process, and ensuring that community members can continuously provide feedback that results in ongoing changes throughout programmes, humanitarian agencies are more likely to design and implement facilities that are better suited to users' needs.

All Sani Tweaks resources are available online.[5]

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4 For ideas on how to practically achieve this see many of the past issues of *Frontiers of Sanitation*: www.sanitationlearninghub.org/series/frontiers-of-sanitation/

5 www.oxfamwash.org/en/sanitweaks

Allow space for flexibility and experimentation

Development is messy and often there is not a clear answer, but instead a range of possible solutions with little evidence as to which is the best way forward. In this situation, experimentation and iteration can create a safer way to proceed. In fact, most innovation is incremental with continual slow, steady improvements made over time (Norman 2013). For this to occur, it's vital that we learn from each iteration and apply that learning the next time around, as highlighted by an NGO worker in Zimbabwe:

> "I tell people nothing works first time. Do not expect anything to work first time. So you've got to experiment. You've got to try. You've got to go back. You've got to research and yeah, learn from experience."

Investing small amounts of money into trialling prototype solutions before selecting which option to move forward with can be a more cost-effective approach than investing in the 'wrong' solution from the start (Box 3). Another important aspect of flexibility is allowing frontline professionals sufficient flexibility and autonomy to make certain decisions rather than having to pass all decisions via their managers. This reduces some of the bureaucracy of larger organisations, a sentiment well-summarised by an NGO worker in Malawi:

> 'The other problem with WASH is that decisions are not made by people on the ground but the ones in the offices.'

When working in partnerships, it is crucial to be clear at the start of the partnership what decisions will be made by which partners, and at what level. There must be agreement on which partners need to be involved in making different decisions. Responsibility assignment matrices,[6] which define what role each stakeholder plays at each stage of a project, are useful tools to document this.

Box 3: Building innovation into service delivery in eThekwini

Between 1996 and 2001, the municipal boundaries of eThekwini municipality (around the city of Durban in South Africa) expanded to include an additional one million residents, mostly in under served rural areas and informal settlements. To address the sanitation backlog with waterborne sanitation would have cost in the region of USD 5 billion. New and creative approaches were needed to ensure service delivery, with the many practical, financial, and environmental challenges that this entailed.

Working with the universities, civil society organisations, and the private sector based in the municipality, the eThekwini Water and Sanitation unit built multi-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder partnerships using their skills and knowledge to identify and implement different types of service delivery for different customer segments.

The municipality and their partners recognised that there would not be a 'one size fits all' solution to service delivery and that they would have to trial multiple promising technologies to understand their strengths and weaknesses for different customers. The universities were able to offer the municipality research capacity, while the municipality prioritised which research areas were of most importance to them. They were also able to provide access to facilities and support with community engagement.

The partnership makes use of a 'fail fast' approach – if an approach is assessed as having an 80 per cent chance of success, a pilot trial is carried out. Researchers will use the pilot to identify where the challenges and bottlenecks are, then recommend and test solutions to those challenges. If the changes lead to smooth operation, both socially and technically, then the approach is rolled out at scale.

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6 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsibility_assignment_matrix

Encourage transparency and accountability

Being transparent about failures, and accountable for putting things right when they occur, makes it easier to learn from failures, and builds trust among stakeholders. Practical tips on how to talk about failure are covered in the next section.

Participants in both of our research projects consistently highlighted that all stakeholders need to be clear about what WASH activities are being conducted in each area – perhaps by registering work with an agreed and relevant stakeholder. It is also necessary for budgets to be transparent to all stakeholders from the outset, particularly with regards to allowances (for users as well as other stakeholders, e.g. government staff).

Many funders now require the documentation of challenges in project reporting – challenges, along with the lessons that have been learned, are included in annual reports and end-of-project evaluations. However, as this WASH funder based in Europe suggests, building transparency into reporting can begin as soon as grantees are identified:

> *"We must look at more transparency and this is more critical. But I think in order to get that, this is part of the early discussions we have now with our grantees to go over all these types of things, what challenges they expect, what risks they're taking, what are the smooth expectations of implementation of the project."*

Some funders have also taken a lead in discussing failures and sharing lessons learned; funders have access to numerous grantees and some power to shape the work they do and how they do it. Some are using their networks to develop best practice guidelines, and the braver funders are being open about projects that go wrong.

External mechanisms that hold organisations to account can also be helpful. These can include coordination bodies that have oversight of the work carried out by different organisations, watchdog organisations that regulate the performance of service providers, or civil society accountability mechanisms such as Asivikelane in South Africa (Box 4).

Box 4: Holding government to account via the Asivikelane initiative

The Asivikelane initiative allows residents in informal settlements in South Africa's major cities to voice their concerns about access to water, toilets, and waste removal services. Each month, residents of 400 informal settlements across ten municipalities are asked several questions via SMS or telephone about their access to water, sanitation, and waste removal. They are encouraged to provide details of their experience of these services and to include photos and videos. These responses are collated and grouped by municipality. Municipalities are given a traffic light rating based on access to services. These results are published as single-page easy-to-read scorecards, supported by more detailed results with comments and specific locations, so that municipalities can improve service delivery in those areas. The scorecards are shared on social media, and relevant municipal departments receive the scorecards and the more detailed results. All data is available on the Asivikelane website.[7]

Asivikelane shares impact reports approximately every six months. Although they are clear that attribution is challenging, these reports demonstrate that service delivery has improved considerably since Asivikelane started, with many of the service delivery problems having existed for many years with no change prior to the campaign. At a national level, the Department of Human Settlements and the National Treasury use results from Asivikelane to inform their interaction with municipalities when discussing the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme. Many municipalities have interdepartmental discussions about the Asivikelane results when they are published.

7 www.asivikelane.org/
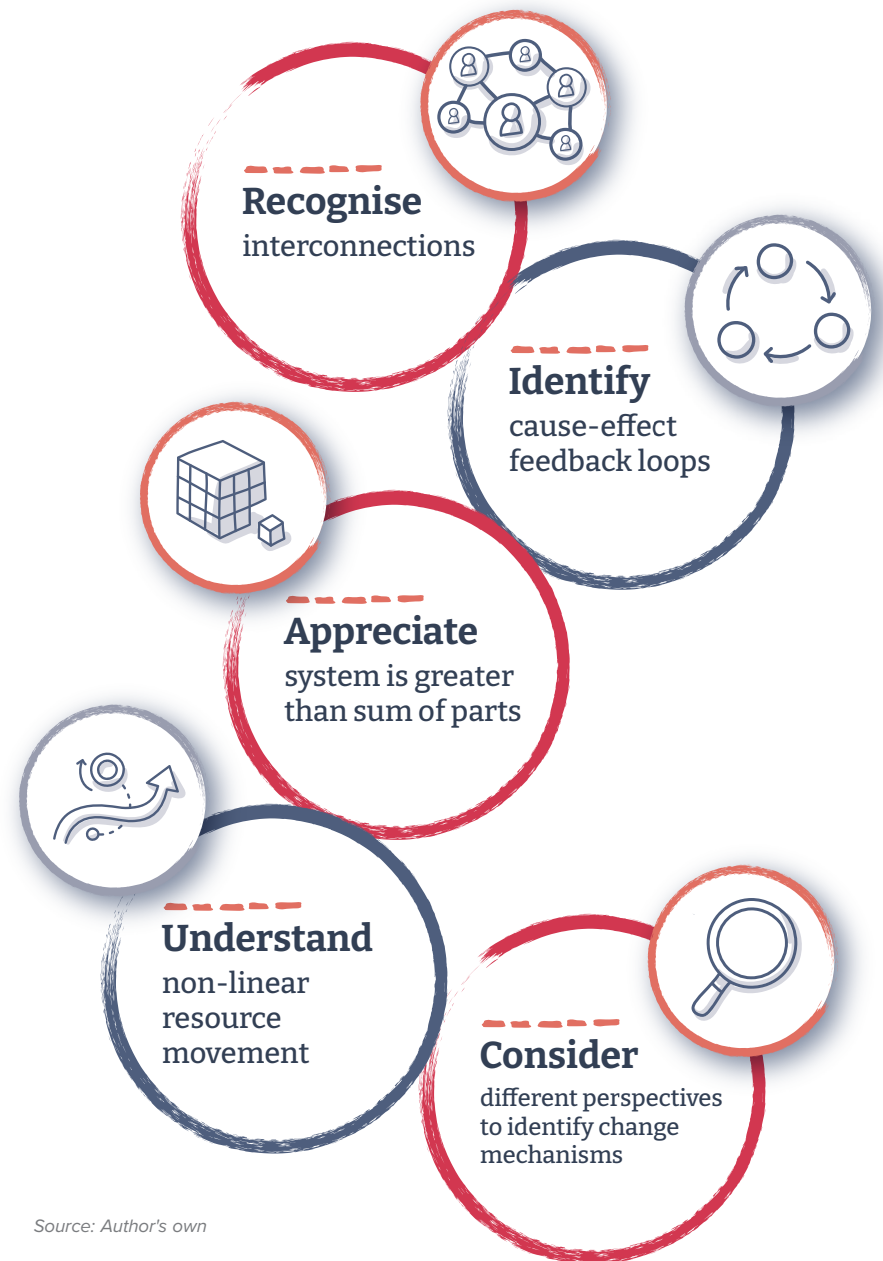
Take a systems-based approach

WASH doesn't exist in a bubble. Understanding the wider systems (e.g. of infrastructure, policy and legislation, institutions, finance, regulation, monitoring and water resources)[8] that projects fit within can help to identify levers for maximising the benefits of interventions. It can also help with identifying pain points that could result in challenges unless addressed. An intergovernmental organisation based in North America puts it like this:

> *"In the WASH sector we are very focused on output results like number of people reached with water… and if we want to be more focused on the system strengthening changes that are needed, you know, whether that's budget allocations, financing, monitoring systems etc., we would probably see improvements on*
> *the sustainability of our results. But often, you know, this isn't the sort of thing that people want to talk about."*

By using a systems thinking approach (Figure 2), the interactions between WASH stakeholders and with other sectors that have an impact on people's lived experience of service provision can be better understood and accounted for in programme design (Neely 2019). Transforming a system is about transforming the relationships between people who make up the system, and for WASH provision that requires us to consider how an approach may impact users' wider lives (Box 5).

8 www.ircwash.org/washsystems

Figure 2.
Overview of systems thinking approaches

Recognise
interconnections

Identify
cause-effect
feedback loops

Appreciate
system is greater
than sum of parts

Understand
non-linear
resource
movement

Consider
different perspectives
to identify change
mechanisms

Source: Author's own

Box 5: Considering users' livelihood priorities in water supply design

Traditionally, water supply planning in Zimbabwe has focused on meeting basic domestic needs, with user communities responsible for financing the maintenance of their water points. Rural communities can rarely afford maintenance costs, which results in long downtimes when a water system breaks down.

In one area of rural Zimbabwe, organisations that provide water access have begun to recognise the importance of people's multiple water needs beyond domestic use, for example, in generating income. This increased attention to productive water use has resulted in the re-design of water points as multi-use supply points, with communities using water for activities such as community gardening, brick moulding, and livestock watering, so that water can help to support their livelihoods.

This practice has positively changed how water points are managed by communities. Water points used for multiple purposes are more sustainable than those which are for domestic use only. Where communities are selling garden produce, financial contributions towards the operation and maintenance of water supply systems has improved, as community members have both money to invest and incentives to do so. Although gardening may provide small amounts of income against the time invested, the income is considered to be steady, enabling households to make monthly financial contributions. Community gardens are regarded as dependable socio-economic safety nets for household food and financial security where water points are used for multiple purposes.

The inclusion of productive as well as domestic uses of water has also increased the participation of men in water management meetings, as the value of water is seen to be higher. This facilitates cooperation among water users. More vulnerable households are also found to be participating in water management as they have been targeted for training on productive water use. As such, community gardens have created space for the inclusion of poor and vulnerable households in the management of water resources.

Address failure in funding processes

Many funders are beginning to recognise the role that their organisations inadvertently play in suppressing the sharing of failures, as described by this WASH funder based in Oceania:

> *"Funders are partly to blame also. We have driven this kind of short-term infrastructure led [approach to WASH projects] – send me a picture of someone smiling and you know, kind of called it success. We have not created an enabling environment to allow for people to experiment and to fail. I think we've made failure actually not okay."*

When grantees are reliant on meeting project metrics to ensure that they can access future funding opportunities, there is no driver to encourage an open and transparent conversation about addressing failures and preventing future failures. Mechanisms for this need to be built into funding calls and rules, which instead encourage sharing and adaptation.

Funders should also provide more transparency on how they assess budgets when they release funding calls. To be competitive, potential grantees often create budgets that are more aspirational than realistic; they would like to know how funders really assess value for money versus the achievability of deliverables.

Funders should also anticipate that there are likely to be challenges or small failures during projects. Some funders include contingency funds of 10–15 per cent to allow grantees to respond to these challenges. Others do not include contingency in the budget but have discretionary funds that can be used to address challenges if requested. Some funders even provide unrestricted funding (Box 6). Allowing grantees to show how they have previously adapted to failures could be part of the selection process to provide funders with greater confidence in their funded partners.

When failures occur, most funders we interviewed want to have open discussions with the grantee, and sometimes other relevant stakeholders, to identify the root cause of a failure and options for addressing it. Funders can often use their networks, including their grantee portfolios, to help grantees identify best practice or potential solutions to failures. In some cases, they can offer access to experts for support on key issues.

Finally, the most common form of failure we encountered during our research was a lack of sustainability after WASH activities 'ended'. There is a need for better planning, on behalf of both funders and implementers, of how ongoing monitoring, operation, and maintenance will be funded.

Box 6: The case for unrestricted funds

Many of the challenges that frontline WASH professionals associate with unrealistic funding are linked to the restrictions that are placed on its use. Some of the smaller funders we interviewed give unrestricted funds. Instead of funding a specific project, they consider the organisational scope and operation of different potential grantees, who they refer to as 'partners'. Selected partners are given full flexibility to use allocated funds for anything that will help them progress towards their goals.

Many of the challenges of restricted project funds are removed: funding can be used for experimentation and piloting new innovations, where there is a recognised risk of failure; aspects of WASH work that may be traditionally difficult to fund, such as system strengthening, can easily be financed by unrestricted funds; and changes to implementation programmes can be made as service delivery is adapted for different contexts or increased scale, without requesting a change of scope from the funder.

Funders that provide unrestricted funds see local organisations as having a far greater understanding of the WASH challenges that communities face, and the relevant solutions. There is still a need for an open and transparent relationship between funders and their fund-receiving partners. These funders often require extensive due diligence on organisations to be confident that they are selecting partners who they can trust to spend funds in line with their principles. This can lengthen the partnership-building process.

How to talk about failure

Robust discussions of failures must include the building of rapport between individuals. Achieving this depends on context. To facilitate deep discussion and learning, those sharing must be comfortable and there cannot be individual repercussions for sharing. Building trusting relationships is an important part of encouraging the sharing of and learning from failures. Ideally, trusting relationships will be built before failures occur so that individuals feel able to share issues as soon as they arise. People who are empowered to share are more likely to give full and accurate descriptions of the challenges that they observe, and to provide that information sooner.

Building rapport is particularly important where there are power dynamics at play. Aside from hierarchies within organisations, there are also power imbalances to consider between organisations, particularly between implementers and those who regulate, research, or fund work. In these situations, the onus is on the person or organisation with greater power to nurture a relationship where sharing is possible, and to create space for these conversations to take place. This takes time, as highlighted by a funder based in Europe:

> *"I like to think that when we have trusted relationships with partners, and we work together in the same context, that it is possible to have that [discussion about failures] and that partners feel that we're open to it. But of course, in a new partnership, that's more difficult. It takes a little bit of time to develop that trust and understanding."*

Ideally, there should be incentives for sharing, which could be as simple as support to find a solution to the problem (see 'How to Address Failures').

Selecting appropriate language for discussing failure

Language is important in conversations about failures, but how language is used differs between people and places. Along with the original interview guide for our initial research project, we designed a workshop where members of the core research team based in sub-Saharan Africa worked with data collectors to understand the purpose of the interview guides and adjust them as appropriate for context, so that interviewees felt comfortable discussing this topic. In many cases this included providing a range of locally used words and phrases that would be considered as failures under the definition used in the project, so that interviewees understood the scope of what we wanted to discuss. The workshop, as well as the original interview guide, are available online for use as a starting point for conversations.[9]

Sharing within groups

In our research, participants recommended that the best way for them to share failures, both in real time and retrospectively, was through cross-organisational, in-person platforms – as described by this government representative from South Africa:

"When you go to these conferences or when we go and have, even if it's a Zoom chat as well or whatever it is, we start networking and we start learning 'Hey, that guy is working on a similar project to mine, maybe I should liaise with him', or he'll liaise with you and you can work and speak together and maybe solve the problem."

Some interviewees were already involved in such platforms and found them useful, particularly in the case of district coordinating committees and the Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WESNET) in Malawi (Box 7). WESNET's existing role as a coordinating body that represents the views of the WASH sector across the country to government and offers learning forums to generate and implement best practice, means that stakeholders feel they are sharing with peers through a network that they trust. Furthermore, they see the benefit of sharing their challenges: there are opportunities for others in the network to recommend solutions based on their experience, and if there are recurring issues that require government intervention to address, WESNET can present those views to the government.

Box 7: Sharing and learning in Malawi's WASH sector

The Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WESNET) is a membership-based civil society organisation that coordinates the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in WASH in Malawi. The network emphasises the importance of coordination in providing sustainable WASH services. It coordinates WASH activities across its membership, as well as fostering close collaboration with the government, private-sector actors, and donors. This provides network members with clear benefits for joining and helps to build trust in the network and between its members.

At the national level, WESNET's secretariat has a Research and Knowledge Exchange Thematic Working Group (TWG) composed of interested NGOs, public universities, and private-sector actors, which supports the network's efforts to learn from failures and to establish best practice. The TWG establishes the learning agenda each year and organises annual national and regional learning forums to share research and best practice for scaling up in the WASH sector. At the regional level, the TWG collaborates with WESNET regional chapters to host these events. These events have become valuable platforms for professionals to talk to their peers about challenges and to find potential solutions. Some of the event outcomes are critical for providing evidence to influence national sector policies, strategies, and programmes.

Workshops can be a good way of sparking conversations that lead to learning from one another's failures. Well-designed icebreakers can be a first step to building rapport and breaking down power barriers between participants in order to encourage openness. We developed 'Blunders, Bloopers and Foul-Ups: A WASH Game Show', where contestants compete in teams to win novelty prizes (e.g. golden toilet brushes) (Figure 3). The game show is an elaborate icebreaker that introduces the topic of failures and, although it results in laughter, it can be followed by a serious discussion on WASH failures in small groups. The resources for facilitating this game show are available on our website.[10] Note that the game show may not be appropriate to all contexts and has mostly been trialled at international conferences.

Figure 3.
a) Delivering the game show at an international conference
b) prizes for game show contestants

Dani hosts the 'Blunders, Bloopers and Foul-ups' game show at the 2019 IRC WASH Systems Symposium. *Credit*: Robert Tjalondo for IRCWASH   *Credit*: Author's own

Sharing and learning in organisations

We need to ensure that organisations are set up to learn from failures, not just experience it. We need to balance the negative cost of failures against the positive benefit that may come from proper learning. This recognises that talking about failure is insufficient: it presents a learning opportunity, but acting on that opportunity is necessary in order to change our practices. Failures are often discussed in small groups among people of similar rank within organisations. Wider sharing of failures within organisations and across hierarchies seems to be rare, likely linked to a fear of reprimand if managers were to blame their employees for things that have gone wrong.

The same principles of making individuals feel comfortable to share and not fearful of repercussions apply in organisations. Additionally, sharing and learning within organisations should not take a large amount of time and should be embedded within a person's work duties. This needs to be coupled with ensuring that we incentivise and reward identification and learning from failure.

Within organisations, our goal should be to anticipate and prevent failures (Box 8). In our special collection on 'Learning from Failure in Environmental Research and Public Health', Weekly (2021) developed a framework for how organisations can build an enabling environment for anticipating and learning from failure when it does occur, consisting of a foundation level, skills and behaviours, and formal mechanisms (including external accountability) (Figure 4). In the same collection, Vernon and Myers (2021) developed a typology of failures (Figure 5) which can be used to identify the types of failures people are willing (and unwilling) to share, and help actors think through ways these can be learnt from rapidly. They recommended that organisations use Rapid Action Learning to anticipate failures in real time and correct course to control them. Both recommendations have the same core principle: we need to speak about and act on failures as a routine part of our work, and sooner rather than later.

10 www.waterwomenworld.com/wash-failures/wash-game-shows/

Box 8: Anticipating failure with 'pre-mortems'

In the planning stage of projects, teams are often focused on their aspirations for outcomes, not the challenges that they may face along the way. One tool to ensure that project plans are properly scrutinised and risks identified is a 'pre-mortem'.[11] This is an exercise where the team deliberately imagine that the project has failed. After being briefed on the project plan, they are asked to imagine stepping into the future to the end of the project, to discover that the project has failed. Each person is asked to write down why the project has failed and all these reasons are shared and captured. Similar risks can be grouped and are then voted upon to identify the biggest risks, by severity or likelihood.

Once major risks are identified, ways to address them can be considered and added to the project plan. The goal is to strengthen the plan to prevent the identified failures from occurring, or at least develop a strategy to address these issues when they do arise.

Fostering a culture of openness about failure from the outset of the work means that project team members see that they can share issues and challenges and be rewarded with gratitude for their courage and insight, rather than facing repercussions.

Figure 4.
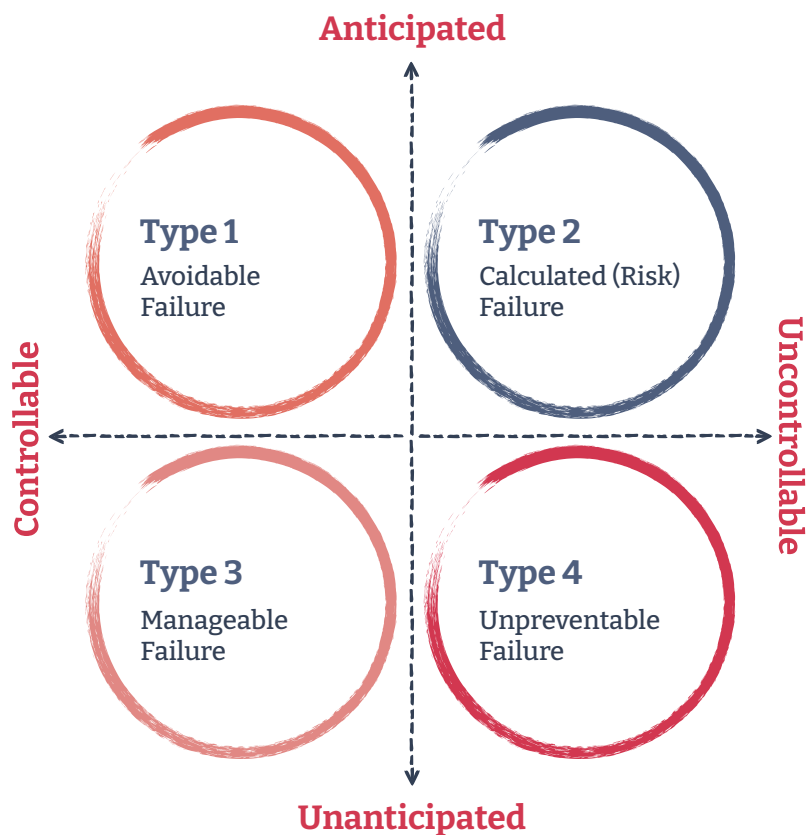**Framework for organisations to build an enabling environment for learning from failure in development**
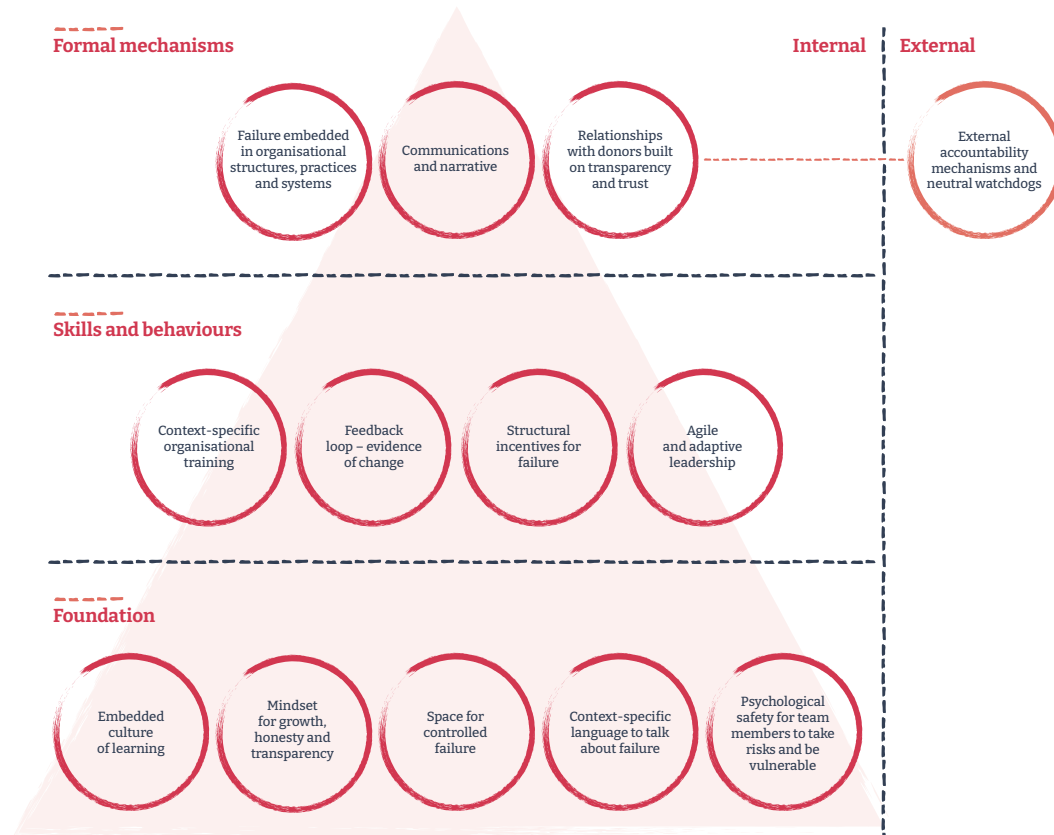
Source: Adapted from Weekly 2021, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/11786302211044348

11 www.riskology.co/pre-mortem-technique/

Figure 5.
Typology of failures based on whether they can be anticipated or controlled

Anticipated

Controllable

Uncontrollable

Type 1
Avoidable
Failure

Type 2
Calculated (Risk)
Failure

Type 3
Manageable
Failure

Type 4
Unpreventable
Failure

Unanticipated

Source: Vernon and Myers 2021

Sharing and learning within the sector

Unlike within organisations, there are no processes in place that determine how failures 'should' be shared among organisations in the WASH sector. WASH professionals often don't have time to retrospectively share their failure experiences in a formal way, and those that do may not have suitable platforms. Although conferences offer a useful way of sharing for many people, they are only accessible to an elite few. In a bid to reach a wider audience, several individuals and organisations have attempted to share their experiences via blog posts, setting up online failure repositories, or making reports available online. However, there is little evidence that these online approaches to sharing reach their intended audience.

The Sustainable Sanitation Alliance[12] (SuSanA) website includes a forum where WASH professionals can converse with one another. There are often questions posed about challenges in projects, with active engagement from WASH colleagues around the world. It is a platform where WASH professionals can help one another in real time to avoid challenges turning into larger failures. Although the retrospective sharing of failures is not the core purpose of the SuSanA forum, it is an existing platform with thousands of engaged members. If WASH professionals do want to share failure with peers and feel comfortable doing so in a moderated forum, they can easily do this via SuSanA and similar forums, without the need to create a new blog or website.

Since setting up our Twitter account, @FSM_Fail, several professionals in the WASH sector have started tagging us when they see discussions or reports of WASH failures online, contributing to our goal of making such sharing more mainstream. The simplicity of tagging a social media handle, rather than adding to a new website or submitting to a newsletter, is a simple way to keep conversations going.

Ultimately, however, sharing online is a short-term solution to fill a gap while more institutionalised solutions can be built. The importance of the latter is highlighted thus by an academic in South Africa:

"[To create a culture of sharing and learning in WASH] First of all, we, we need to, most of all strengthen our institutional structures, it's important that they are driven by institutional structures that are recognized and trusted."

Within specific geographical areas, there is a need to strengthen partnerships and existing coordination mechanisms to support learning and sharing. The examples from WESNET (Box 7) and Asivikelane (Box 4) demonstrate some coordinated approaches to failure that can be

12 www.susana.org

used to reduce duplication and identify and prevent avoidable failures from occurring. Strong leadership and coordination at global, national, and subnational levels is necessary to develop institutions that integrate learning from – and address failures at – all levels across the sector.

Embedding sharing and learning in the sector

Talking about failure more widely in the WASH sector requires a cultural shift.

The *Nakuru Accord: Failing better in the WASH Sector* (Box 9) was co-created by WASH professionals in 2018. The original idea for a 'WASH failures manifesto' was proposed by audience members at the first 'Blunders, Bloopers and Foul-Ups: A WASH Game Show', in Nakuru, Kenya. Ideas from the audience were shared and further input was gathered from WASH professionals online.

The purpose of the Nakuru Accord is to create a space in WASH for serious reflection on our roles as individuals. WASH professionals, organisations, and event representatives are encouraged to sign the accord and abide by its principles.

The Nakuru Accord captures many of the ideas that are recommended within this issue of *Frontiers*. A sector-wide culture shift is required to embed sharing and learning from failures, and culture is created by many individuals acting in similar ways. The more WASH professionals who adopt these behaviours in their day-to-day work, the more likely it will be that sharing and learning from failures becomes the norm.

It would be ideal if all WASH professionals felt comfortable sharing their failures in real time and retrospectively, and we have attempted to nurture this culture. Although there are many professionals who have found our game shows and Twitter account useful outlets for sharing, there are still too many power and resource barriers for many to engage meaningfully. We call on those who manage WASH funds and programmes to themselves nurture such sharing within their organisation's day-to-day activities and encourage, or even require, the sharing of failures without repercussions for the individuals who bring them to light.

Box 9: Text of 'The Nakuru Accord: Failing better in the WASH sector'

Transparency and accountability are necessary for achieving sustainable, positive impacts from water, sanitation, and hygiene. As a WASH professional, I believe that we can achieve this through a culture of sharing and adaptation when things go wrong. To support this, I will:

- Promote a **culture of sharing and learning** that allows people to talk openly when things go wrong.

- Be fiercely **transparent** and hold myself **accountable** for my thinking, communication, and action.

- Build **flexibility** into funding requests to allow for adaptation.

- Design **long-term monitoring and evaluation** that allows sustainability to be assessed.

- Design in sustainability that by considering the **whole life cycle**.

- Actively **seek feedback** from all stakeholders, particularly end-users.

- Recognise that things go wrong, and willing to **share these experiences**, including information about contributing factors and possible solutions, in a productive way.

- Critically **examine available evidence**, recognising that not all evidence is created equal.

- Write and speak in **plain language**, especially when discussing what has gone wrong.

To sign the Nakuru Accord, visit www.waterwomenworld.com/nakuru-accord

Moving forward

- Different stakeholders will have different ideas of what constitutes success and failure, so it is essential that all stakeholders agree on what success and failure look like at the start of a programme.

- Failures often result from: a lack of holistic approaches, inadequate community engagement, unrealistic funder expectations, idealistic planning, politics and bureaucracy, insufficient capacity, poor coordination and communication, and a 'project' mentality.

- Co-designing services with the intended users, and recognising that different users have different needs relating to these services, prevents us designing failure into WASH activities from the beginning.

- Where there are many options to solve a problem and little evidence of what will work best, allowing for experimentation and flexibility in projects, timelines, and budgets can enable teams to learn as they go.

- Transparency and accountability are vital for learning, and although it is important to build these into organisations and partnerships, external mechanisms to hold organisations to account can also be helpful.

- WASH must be considered within wider systems of service provision to identify how to maximise benefits of interventions as well as recognise where challenges may arise.

- Funders can encourage sharing and learning by being transparent about how they allocate funds, providing flexibility in their funding approaches so that grantees can respond to failures, and having honest discussions about what sustainability means when discussing services and how it can be achieved.

- Sharing failures can be challenging and those in positions of power must work hard to build trust, rapport, and space for conversations about failure with those with less power.

- Discussions of failure can be sensitive, and most people prefer to have these conversations in-person and in constructive ways that provide opportunities to learn from others and address problems.

- Within organisations, learning must be formalised through the adoption of tools and processes that embed it into day-to-day work, and identifying and sharing failures should be incentivised and rewarded, rather than punished.

- Sharing online is challenging as it is not clear whether the intended audience is reached, but it can act as a short-term solution until more institutionalised sharing mechanisms are built into the sector at global, national, and subnational levels.

- Changing your individual approach to sharing and learning from failure is the best way to start a cultural shift in the sector. Ideas for how to achieve this are captured in The Nakuru Accord.

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About The Sanitation Learning Hub

The Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH) undertakes timely, relevant and actionable learning and research to achieve safely managed sanitation and hygiene (S&H) for all. Our mission is to enable the S&H sector to innovate, adapt and collaborate in a rapidly evolving landscape, feeding learning into policies and practice. Our vision is that everyone is able to realise their right to safely managed sanitation and hygiene, making sure no one is left behind in the drive to end open defecation for good.

For over ten years, the SLH (previously the CLTS Knowledge Hub) has been supporting learning and sharing across the international sanitation and hygiene sector, using innovative participatory approaches to engage with both practitioners, policy-makers and the communities they wish to serve. SLH aims to continue this work supporting and strengthening the sector in tackling the complex challenges it faces through timely, relevant and adaptive learning.

Learning from and preventing failure in WASH

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) failures continue to be discussed mostly off the record, with professionals the world over repeating one another's mistakes. Failure is difficult to talk about, but WASH failures have negative impacts – money is wasted and sometimes people are harmed. We need to acknowledge that not everything we try will succeed, but that if we learn from one another, we can continuously improve our work.

Since 2018, we have attempted to foster this change through the 'WASH Failures Movement'. This issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* is a compilation of what we've learned about why WASH failures happen, how we can address them, and how we can facilitate a culture of sharing and learning from failure in the WASH sector.

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