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SLH Learning Brief

Strengthening sub-national systems for area-wide sanitation and hygiene

Introduction

From late 2020 to early 2021, the Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH) collaborated with local government actors and development partners from three sub-national areas to explore ways of increasing local government leadership and prioritisation of sanitation and hygiene (S&H) to drive progress towards area-wide S&H. For some time, local government leadership has been recognised as key to ensuring sustainability and scale and it is an important component of the emerging use of systems strengthening approaches in the S&H sector. It is hoped that this work will provide practical experiences to contribute to this thinking.

Case studies were developed to capture local government and development partners' experiences supporting sub-national governments increase their leadership and prioritisation of S&H in Siaya County (Kenya, with UNICEF), Nyamagabe District (Rwanda, with WaterAid) and Moyo District (Uganda, with WSSCC), all of which have seen progress in recent years. The cases were then explored through three online workshops with staff from the local governments, central government ministries and development partners involved to review experiences and identify levers and blockages to change. This document presents key findings from this process.



Credit: Jason Florio

Why focus on sub-national systems strengthening?

To progress from scattered open defecation free (ODF) villages to safely managed sanitation in high-burden countries at scale, governments need to take the lead, display political leadership, and match commitments with the necessary human and financial resources (World Bank Group et al. 2019). Following widespread decentralisation reforms, including across Africa (Cabral 2011), responsibility for S&H often sits with sub-national governments. Recent years have seen an increase in commitments towards achieving total sanitation and ODF status from sub-national governments in a number of countries across the world. However, of the 62 countries with over 5 per cent open defecation, only 18 are on track to be ODF (UNICEF 2018). If we are to reach Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.2, we need to drastically pick up the pace.

Support for government leadership is recognised as an important component of systems strengthening, moving from direct implementation to supporting governments more broadly to deliver services (Casey and Crichton-Smith 2020; Gensch and Tillett 2019). However, many development partners are grappling with how best to operationalise systems strengthening and most of the literature to date is based on experience in the water sector, with a focus on the national level (Gensch and Tillett, 2019). Recognising this gap, the work presented here aimed to explore practical experiences of strengthening government leadership for S&H at sub-national levels.

Emerging themes to focus on

Systems strengthening frameworks are often described in terms of 'building blocks'. While several frameworks exist,¹ each with their own specific building blocks, there is significant overlap between them. This work focused on supporting sub-national governments to increase their prioritisation of and leadership on S&H, but beyond that did not prescribe a focus on specific topics, instead letting themes arise from the case studies as they were being explored. In that way, the following four areas emerged as key themes to focus on in work to increase local governments' prioritisation of and leadership on S&H:

- 1. Increasing political will and supporting leadership** – *needed to establish an enabling environment for S&H.*
- 2. Local government resource allocation (financial and human)** – *needed to ensure S&H is realistically resourced among multiple competing sub-national government priorities.*
- 3. Government-led monitoring, reporting and data use** – *needed to support advocacy and motivate leadership, inform planning, and track progress.*
- 4. Leaving no one behind** – *needed to ensure context-specific support for those who may be most vulnerable.*

Further rationale, analysis and examples of these are summarised below.

1. Increasing political will and supporting leadership

In all three case studies, **a strong enabling environment with clear policies and strategies for S&H at a national level emerged as key to increasing S&H prioritisation locally.** Activities to support this included:

- A series of sanitation conferences in Kenya, aiming to recommit the national and county governments to their ODF targets.

- **Advocacy with the national WASH parliamentary forum in Uganda**, which helped to increase political prioritisation of S&H at the national level.
- **Declaring sanitation as a human security issue at the national level in Rwanda.**

At a local level, it was clear that sub-national S&H decision making and programming involves **elected officials and technical staff, sometimes spread across multiple departments, with different motivations and interests.** These differences impacted the entry points used to engage sub-national governments on S&H:

- **In Siaya, Kenya**, the Ministry of Health targeted mid-level county public health staff first who then worked to increase focus on S&H at both higher and lower levels.
- **In Moyo, Uganda**, political and technical leaders at the district (highest local government) level were targeted first to get their buy in. They were encouraged to be a role model by improving district S&H facilities, before leading similar processes at more local levels.

When considering how to increase political leaders' prioritisation of S&H, it was recognised that **political motivations can interfere with technical decisions.** For example, S&H 'software' activities may not appeal to political leadership if subsidised infrastructure is perceived to be more popular with voters. Presenting **compelling S&H data that speaks to different leaders' motivations in concise, visual ways** is particularly effective in engaging them (see also 3. *Government-led monitoring, reporting, learning and data use*). Sharing select information concisely was found to be important when working with busy leaders who have multiple competing demands on their time. For example:

- **In Kenya**, UNICEF developed short, easily accessible county sanitation profiles using census data, which gave busy leaders a snapshot of the county's sanitation situation, position in sanitation 'league table', and estimated budget to reach ODF status.
- **In Siaya, Kenya, and Moyo, Uganda**, health data was shared with leaders to emphasise the health benefits of improved S&H, and the long-term cost effectiveness of disease prevention, helping to increase leaders' prioritisation of S&H.

Other techniques used to engage leaders included:

- **Inviting political leaders to sanitation meetings to increase their buy in** by raising awareness of the situation and S&H work being done and involving them in discussions.
- **Promoting competition between sub-national governments**, for example through leader boards or exchange visits.

¹ For example, from [Sanitation and Water for All](#), and [WaterAid](#). (All links accessed on 11 February 2021.)

- **Running early institutional triggering.**

Once engaged, **holding leaders to account on written (or other) commitments, including across changes in leadership** (which can be challenging for continuity) is important. Some partners also emphasised the need to ensure leaders were themselves good S&H role models (and the challenges of this if, for example, leaders or sub-national offices do not have good S&H facilities). To encourage this:

- In **Siaya, Kenya**, leaders were encouraged by the Director of Health and UNICEF to sign a large public banner committing to supporting S&H programmes. They were also encouraged to document decisions and commitments, which has helped leadership transitions.
- In **Moyo, Uganda**, leaders participated in monthly clean-up days to demonstrate their leadership on S&H publicly and encourage citizens to follow their example.

Strong partnerships between sub-national governments and development partners were identified as key to supporting government leadership and ensuring their efforts strengthen local capacities for sustainability. Support is typically required over long periods and can include providing financial support, leveraging local government resources, and providing technical support for sub-national S&H plans and

monitoring mechanisms.

- Local governments and development partners in these case studies worked together for approximately ten years.

2. Sub-national government resource allocation (financial and human)

The process for allocating resources for S&H varied between the three cases and needed to be understood to influence allocations. For example:

- In **Kenya and Uganda**, local governments use a district-wide approach whereby the government and partners pool resources and develop plans and budgets at a district level. (In Kenya, local government annual workplan and budget is published online to help make sure it is followed).

It was also found that **existing structures are often used** to implement S&H programmes at community level and that resource allocation may need to fit with these. Sub-national governments may also have existing processes for allocating or disbursing funds. For example:

- **Siaya, Kenya and Nyamagabe, Rwanda** made use of performance contracting to support progress towards targets.
- In **Moyo, Uganda**, release of funds to districts is not performance based and funds are released even when targets are not achieved.



A latrine in Hells Gate community, Nakuru county, Kenya. Solomon Ndungu a CLTS coordinator and Ekrah Wairimu a local Village Sanitation Committee member inspect the latrine and hand washing station along with Peter Murugu, Public Health Officer.

Credit: Jason Florio

As is to be expected, there were often many **other priorities competing for funds** at sub-national level. **Political will may therefore be a precursor to resource allocation** (see 1. *Increasing political will and supporting leadership*).

Even if funds are committed, experiences suggest that **funds may not be released in full or may be late or redirected**. To overcome this:

- In **Siaya, Kenya**, a letter from the governor protecting S&H priorities helped reduce redirection of funds.
- Again, in **Siaya, Kenya**, policies that allowed funds to be channelled towards S&H were developed at the county level to increase the range of budget lines/sources that S&H funding could be drawn from. To support this, a prototype County Environmental Health and Sanitation Bill was developed and used by counties as a guide to draft their own legislation.
- In **Moyo, Uganda**, health facilities were sent an instruction (not guideline as previously) to use a fixed percentage of their non-wage recurrent funds for S&H.

Finally, how funds and human resources are allocated can support or detract from programme quality. For example, use of financial incentives to motivate staff/facilitators can impact other stakeholders.

- In **Siaya, Kenya**, S&H budgets included stipends for community health volunteers, to motivate them to conduct regular household sanitation visits and follow ups.
- In **Nyamagabe, Rwanda**, S&H budgets did not reward community participation, making it hard to maintain approaches that required regular time-consuming voluntary activities and meetings. However, periodic voluntary work through monthly community work days (known as *Umuganda*) was found to work well.

In other contexts, payment of per diems/financial incentives for staff to conduct community-level activities that community members are expected to attend for free has also served to demotivate community participation (Jiménez et al. 2014).

3. Government-led monitoring, reporting, learning and data use

Data was identified as essential to achieving political buy in and leadership of good S&H (at both national and sub-national levels). It is used for multiple purposes, including to:

- track and report progress,
- highlight gaps,
- inform direction and support context-specific programming and budgeting,
- map partners and support coordination, and

- increase motivation, and inform and strengthen advocacy (for example, for resource mobilisation).

Monitoring data and systems need to be easy to use and ideally produce data in real-time (or close to real-time). Digital systems can work well. To achieve these aims:

- **Nyamagabe, Rwanda** has two monitoring systems: a central digital monitoring information system (MIS) to update national progress, with annual data collection; and cheaper, weekly data collection by local government frontline staff using the Human Security Issues data collection tool to inform rapid district decision-making.
- **Siaya, Kenya** used a real-time MIS to track ODF progress and status, with regular data entry by local government staff. Based on success in Siaya, the MIS was scaled for use across Kenya.

As well as the data itself, **how and when data is presented is key to its use**. Presenting select information visually was identified as important for encouraging policy makers and decision makers to engage with data.

Learning activities were also recognised as important. Exchange visits were highlighted as being particularly valuable as they can support programme quality, advocacy, and motivation. For example:

- In **Siaya, Kenya**, County Public Health Officers were sent to different districts and counties to learn from their successes. This exchange of monitoring teams may also have motivated people to work hard to make sure others found 'their' area progressing well.
- In **Moyo, Uganda**, politicians travel to different districts on learning journeys to see what others are achieving and increase motivation and commitments; community champions are engaged in learning exchange visits across sub-counties and villages to motivate and encourage greater adoption of good sanitation practices; and sanitation champions and village health teams are supported to go on radio talk-shows to share their experiences.

4. Leaving no one behind

Individuals, households, and communities may be vulnerable for multiple and intersecting reasons. As such, **it is important to understand who may be vulnerable and why in a sub-national area and develop context-specific approaches** accordingly, including plans for households who cannot afford appropriate S&H services. Examples of those who may be most vulnerable in these contexts include:

- People living along the lake in **Siaya, Kenya**, largely due to difficult terrain/soil conditions, flood-prone area, and nomadic lifestyles.
- People living in very hilly areas and areas prone to frequent floods and soil erosion in **Nyamagabe**,

Rwanda.

Within the three case studies, there was an emphasis on communities' responsibility to look after the most vulnerable and to ensure that everyone benefits from improved S&H. However, it was recognised that **community support is important but has its limits**. Governments (sub-national or national) were increasingly allocating budget to support the most vulnerable, for example:

- In **Rwanda**, different levels of support are available depending on households' wealth. Households are categorised into wealth quintiles, with those in the lowest quintile eligible for (general, not S&H specific) financial support from the central government and households in the lowest two quintiles eligible for support through community work days (Umuganda).
- In **Uganda** there are talks at national level to ensure national budgets make provisions for addressing the sanitation needs of vulnerable groups.
- In **Siaya, Kenya**, clear budgets and targets were made available for vulnerable groups before achieving ODF status (but there is no specific support to vulnerable groups post-ODF status). This includes budget provisions for reconstruction of toilet facilities in flood prone areas and areas with loose soil.

Persistent challenges

In addition to the examples presented, the following persistent challenges were identified, for which limited solutions were found in the cases examined:

- **The difficulty of maintaining political commitment to S&H, particularly across political leadership transitions and beyond achieving ODF status** (with the latter exacerbated when targets stop at achieving ODF status).
- **Late disbursement of funds and interference of government processes with implementation timelines**. Other than considering existing government processes wherever possible in plans, there were few suggestions on how to overcome this.
- **Adequate resourcing to develop, maintain, and update monitoring systems**. It is important that these can be updated to reflect emerging priorities, for example to ensure S&H efforts continue post-ODF status and are aligned with SDG indicators. This requires resources that are not always available. To overcome this:
 - In **Nyamagabe, Rwanda** local government funds for digital MIS are limited so a cheaper system is used in parallel to the national one to collect data for regular local decision making.
 - **Kenya** relies on development partners to fund upgrades to the national monitoring system.

However, it was recognised that neither relying on parallel systems nor being dependent on external funding are ideal.

- **Identifying who may be most vulnerable, particularly if there is a lack of diversity among those assessing this or gaps in their understanding of contributors to vulnerability**. For example:
- A challenge identified in **Nyamagabe, Rwanda**, was the lack of women represented in decision making and the lack of inclusion targets at the district level.
- In **Siaya, Kenya**, incontinence is a gap in the current understanding of vulnerability.

Emerging lessons

- **Conduct stakeholder analysis** to plan institutional triggering and determine who to focus on, at what level, when, and how to target them to achieve maximum impact/influence.
- **Follow up with leaders to hold them to account on actions they have committed to**.
- **Find and support S&H champions who will remain in place across political transitions**, who can lobby new S&H leaders and hold them to account throughout their term (for example, the media).
- **Document plans and commitments with all stakeholders to support continuity across transitions**.
- **Encourage decision makers to demonstrate public leadership on S&H**, for example through participation in global celebration days.
- **Use healthy competition to motivate local governments to prioritise S&H**.
- **Use well-presented data to support arguments for S&H at local (and other) levels** (for example, on ODF and S&H coverage, adding disease trends if available – presented in accessible formats).
- **Map the people and processes involved in resource allocation and design influencing activities to target and fit within these**.
- **Add SDG and post-ODF indicators to monitoring systems**.
- **Advocate for investment in timely, easy-to-use monitoring systems at local and national levels**.
- **Consider the use of learning exchanges to support triggering, advocacy, motivation, and implementation**.
- **Hold regular review meetings with development partners to resolve issues, share lessons, document best practices, and support coordination**.
- **Conduct formative research to understand who may be vulnerable and why in a sub-national area and develop context-specific approaches accordingly** (including beyond being ODF).

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