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## SLH Learning Brief

# Local government leadership in sanitation and hygiene: experiences and learnings from West Africa

### Introduction

Between July and October 2021, the Sanitation Learning Hub worked with government representatives and development partners to develop, share, and cross-analyse case studies looking at local system and government strengthening in four local government areas across West Africa: Benin (N'Dali commune), Ghana (Yendi municipal district), Guinea (Molota commune), and Nigeria (Logo LGA).

The initiative focused on examples of local leadership in sanitation and hygiene (S&H), with case studies developed in collaboration with development partners (Helvetas in Benin, UNICEF in Ghana and Guinea, United Purpose in Nigeria) and the local governments they partner with. The goal was to cross-analyse examples of local government leadership in S&H, looking at what led to the prioritisation of S&H, and identifying commonalities and transferable knowledge through a participatory cross-learning process.

The case studies identified positive change occurred in local government leadership in S&H, and analysed the contributions to change, via document review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Table 1 provides an overview of the case study contexts.

This learning brief shares the learnings and recommendations that emerged from the case studies and through the three participatory workshops that followed. A draft of this brief was reviewed by participants involved in the initiative. The first sections describe the main stakeholders and local government actions in S&H, while the latter sections focus on the levers and barriers to change, and on recommendations.

**Table 1:**  
Contexts of the four participating local governments

**N'Dali, Benin**, is a mostly rural commune in the north of Benin, with a population of about 113,000. Open defecation remains prevalent, and improved toilets are rare. The actions of the mayor and the local assembly have helped to bring sanitation to the fore and start the uptake of improved household toilets.

**Logo, Nigeria**, is a Local Government Area (LGA) in Benue state. It has 195,000 inhabitants, mainly farmers. Logo was the first LGA to become ODF in Benue, and the seventh in Nigeria. Key contributions have been the support of traditional leaders and the establishment of a water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) technical unit by the local government, encouraged and enabled by state authorities.

**Molota, Guinea**, is a commune in the Kindia region. Its population of around 14,000 people relies mostly on farming. The commune was certified ODF in 2018, and a community-based open defecation monitoring system promoted by the local government has helped Molota maintain its ODF status to date.

**Yendi, Ghana**, is a municipal district in the Northern Region. Farming is the source of income for most of its 164,000 inhabitants. Mechanisms such as an open defecation free (ODF) league table and result-based financing have contributed to the local government taking action. Yendi is now among the best districts in the region for sanitation coverage.

## Why local government leadership

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) system-strengthening approaches seek to address the complexity of reaching everyone with sustainable WASH services by understanding where the system's strengths and weaknesses are, so that programming can be designed accordingly (Hollander et al. 2020; Huston and Moriarty 2018). These approaches recognise the centrality of government leadership and political will (Casey and Crichton-Smith 2020; Sanitation and Water for All, n.d.).

However, guidance on how to encourage political will is limited, and there is little practical documentation on ways to foster political will in S&H. This gap is particularly evident at

the local government level, where the responsibility for S&H implementation often sits (Cabral 2011; Carrard et al. 2020; Ekane et al. 2014; Jiménez et al. 2014; Gensch and Tillet 2019). This research and learning initiative aimed to bridge this gap by providing concrete examples of local government leadership in S&H and by putting forth recommendations on how to strengthen it.

## The stakeholders

All case studies and follow-up workshops highlighted that S&H is a multi-stakeholder sector, including at local levels, with several actors contributing in different ways.

**Table 2: Stakeholders**

<p><b>Local politicians</b></p>	<p>Mayors and assemblies or councils can have the power to drive change, and the sustainability of S&amp;H outcomes depends quite strongly on their leadership and commitment. Examples of the personal engagement of local politicians were identified in Molota, Guinea, and N'Dali, Benin, where mayors have show high levels of personal commitment.</p>
<p><b>Technocrats within local governments</b></p>	<p>They can ensure day-to-day commitments, helping protect S&amp;H progress from shifts in political will and from election cycles. For example, an active WASH unit in Logo, Nigeria, helped mobilise change makers at the grassroots level and supported the implementation of community-led total sanitation.</p>
<p><b>State and central governments</b></p>	<p>These actors can create pressure from the top, typically through financial and reputational incentives, for local governments to take action in S&amp;H and be held accountable. In Ghana, ODF league tables are updated annually, ranking districts according to sanitation coverage, and are widely publicised among the population. Similar mechanisms exist also in Benue state, Nigeria. Also in Nigeria, pre-requisites set by the government for LGA selection were a motivator for local governments to progress in S&amp;H.</p>
<p><b>Communities and local civil society</b></p>	<p>Communities and civil society can create bottom-up pressure to keep local governments accountable at election time and throughout political terms. They can undertake advocacy initiatives towards local leadership, influencing budget allocation and governmental commitment, and take up fieldwork, adding up to the government workforce and contributing with innovative approaches. In some cases, community-level solidarity helps S&amp;H, for instance through support by diaspora members or through assistance to vulnerable groups (Molota, Guinea). Traditional and religious leaders also play a role, by spreading key messages and raising awareness among the population.</p>
<p><b>Development partners (and donors)</b></p>	<p>Development partners and donors provide funding, capacity, and strategy support. The weight of this kind of input to move local governments to action remains crucial. In Ghana, UNICEF funds a sanitation results-based financing scheme, with financing conditional on districts reaching agreed targets. In Molota, Guinea, donor money is used to finance remuneration of community health volunteers. In N'Dali, Benin, a sanitation marketing programme by Helvetas has been a key factor for local change, galvanising local government support and promoting sanitation improvements.</p>

## The positive change

The case study contexts presented differences in socio-economic settings, governance models, institutional arrangements, access to resources, and ongoing barriers. However, all four case studies provided concrete examples of change happening at the local level, with local governments committing to and taking action towards S&H progress. This translates into a favourable enabling environment around S&H, with a clear sense of commitment and purpose by local governments, supportive leadership and collaborative technical departments and technocrats, and the buy-in of traditional and religious authorities and the population.

In **N'Dali, Benin**, municipal sessions and a dedicated quarterly municipal sanitation committee have been established by the local government to discuss sanitation issues and progress, and an S&H line has been created in the municipal budget. The perseverance of the local mayor was mentioned as crucial to bringing sanitation to the fore, representing a key asset in the sanitation marketing programme supported by Helvetas. Through his leadership as well as that of the local council, the mayor has raised awareness among the population on the importance of having a toilet at home and on the affordable but durable toilet model (Watè Alafia) promoted by the programme.

In **Ghana**, Regional Coordinating Councils play a role in moving governments to action in S&H, via technical assistance, monitoring, and competition. An open defecation free (ODF) league table is updated and publicised every year, comparing the sanitation progress of different administrative divisions; while successful districts are praised, less successful ones are 'shamed'. A UNICEF-backed results-based financing (RBF) mechanism makes disbursement of funds conditional on performance against agreed targets, while a District Sanitation Fund supports households to acquire improved toilets through revolving loans and targeted subsidies for the poor and vulnerable. Although the ODF league table and the RBF are separate mechanisms, the league table is thought to contribute to performance under the RBF programme. Both initiatives encourage local governments to take action and achieve results in S&H, and have been successful in Yendi.

In **Molota, Guinea**, ODF status was achieved in 2018 and has been maintained since. Instrumental to this, the commune council and mayor have put in place a community-based monitoring mechanism (with external financial support), involving district chairpersons, civil society, and community health volunteers to monitor the uptake of household toilets. Community health volunteers report their observations to the mayor for follow-up action to be taken. Quarterly meetings of the commune council are used to praise the districts showing good ODF standing.

The example from **Logo, Nigeria**, shows the importance of strong local technical departments. A long-term process included the creation of an environmental sanitation task force, where a Local Government Area (LGA) government committee flanks development partner action. Vulnerability and baseline studies were carried out with the support of a development partner (WaterAid). At the inception of a sanitation programme supported by United Purpose, the local government strengthened the WASH unit by seconding staff from different departments. The technical WASH unit is thought to create know-how and foster continuity of action in sanitation, independently from political cycles. State level authorities were a key driver too, by providing support and encouragement to the LGAs. Logo LGA has achieved and sustained ODF status.

### The levers of change

The change processes that have produced increased leadership of local governments in S&H, as well as better sanitation coverage at the local levels, vary from context to context. Although several different levers of change are at work, some considerable similarities and recurring themes emerged.

### Reputation and pride

In all the cases analysed, the direct engagement of development partners with local elected officials (both at the municipality and the district levels) and the collaborative development of strategies with these two parties has proven essential to fostering local leadership in S&H.

In most case studies, processes of '**institutional triggering**' proved effective in raising awareness among elected officials and civil servants. Such processes help local governments realise the importance of moving towards better sanitation conditions and services and the leading role they can play in this. Institutional triggering makes use of emotional levers (such as shame or disgust of open defecation) in ways not very dissimilar from community triggering in community-led total sanitation

(CLTS). Similarly, the practice of carrying out baseline studies and discussing their outcomes (including poor sanitation coverage) with mayors and local councils, was mentioned as an effective triggering tool, for instance in N'Dali, Benin. In the Ghana case study, institutional triggering targeted multiple stakeholders: elected officials, local influencers, civil servants, district chief executives, district assembly departmental heads, traditional leaders, elected assembly members, and religious leaders. The process entailed an analysis of the sanitation situation with a focus on sub-district areas, and sought commitments from the participants towards actions for sanitation improvement.

A cross-cutting factor in the four contexts analysed was the strong role of feelings of pride in good results and of shame in not-so-good results for local government representatives, linked to **reputation and competition** dynamics. This applies not only to elected officials but also to technical services, and not only to initiating local government action in S&H, but also to maintaining it. Mechanisms such as the ODF league table in Ghana seem to be successful in this sense (see Box 1).

Comparable mechanisms take place in other countries: in Benue state, Nigeria, public ODF celebrations give recognition to local governments and communities, with highly coveted certificates endorsed by the federal ministry provided to ODF areas. In Molota, Guinea, upper-level authorities decided to hold sanitation week celebrations locally as a reward for the S&H progress made in the commune.

#### Box 1

An ODF league table, updated annually, ranks states and smaller administrative divisions on the basis of their progress (or lack thereof) towards eliminating open defecation, compared to neighbouring administrative divisions. This process happens to some extent in the public eye, as the league table is publicised on radio stations, social media, and at live events. Public praise for virtuous districts and 'name and shame' tactics for the laggard ones generate competition, motivating local governments to engage in S&H and emulate successful neighbours. Yendi district has moved up to the top three in the region. Accountability and scrutiny

### Accountability and scrutiny

Accountability, scrutiny, and monitoring mechanisms are other prevalent levers for change, closely linked to pride and reputation. In the four cases studies, these mechanisms take place **from the top down and from the ground up**, and involve several stakeholders.

The ODF league table in Ghana is an example of top-down scrutiny, as are similar systems in Nigeria, where upper-tier authorities monitor and exert pressure on lower administrative divisions to perform in S&H. Bottom-up mechanisms tend to involve communities and civil society, sometimes through civil society organisations (CSOs), exerting pressure on local governments to show concrete action. In Molota, Guinea, community sanitation monitoring groups independent from the local government and from development partners represent an accountability tool for eliminating open defecation. In N'Dali, Benin, council sessions and other regular occasions allocate time for the mayor and his fellow representatives to report back to the population about the S&H status at the commune level.

Often, for instance in the Benin and Nigeria case studies, traditional and religious leaders have proven valuable allies to help keep governments and populations on track. In Benue state, Nigeria, some traditional leaders contributed to the reversal of a political decision that would have moved technical staff away from the WASH unit.

Additionally, the case studies highlighted the importance of setting out clear and **formal commitments** to S&H objectives with local government representatives, through implementation plans or memoranda of understanding. When these commitments are made public, they contribute to keeping local governments answerable over time. Generally, an aware and well-informed civil society seems to be an effective lever for local governments to keep their promises about S&H progress.

### Access to funding

Transfer of funds, mostly from donors, development partners, or central governments, remains a core input to spur local government action in S&H. In some cases, access to funding is also an **incentive towards continued local governments leadership**.

A typical example is Yendi and other parts of Ghana, where UNICEF backs a results-based financing District Sanitation Fund. The RBF mechanism makes disbursement of funds conditional on performance against agreed targets: if a district does not achieve a certain proportion of the targets (measured through a performance assessment tool), they will not receive further S&H funding. On the contrary, if the threshold is met, the programme is extended with additional funding. This mechanism, which seems promising in Ghana and has been successful in Yendi, clearly stimulates local governments to achieve results in order to gain further access to funding.

Access to funding is also an incentive for stakeholders operating in communities. In Molota, Guinea, community health volunteers are remunerated (thanks to donor money) for their monitoring, awareness-raising, and reporting activities. Similarly, in Ghana, districts provide some minimum post-ODF monitoring funding to field officers, and the District Sanitation Fund supports households (with a 12-month payback period) to upgrade their existing toilets or build new ones. In N'Dali, Benin, micro-entrepreneurs receive development partner capacity support and incentives to grow their businesses into the sanitation sector and help increase sanitation coverage.

### The barriers

Despite these strategies to foster local government leadership in S&H, case studies and workshops identified certain barriers that also exist in achieving this over the long term.

Unreliable access to external resources, and **low capacity to mobilise local resources**, were issues in all the cases studied. Local governments, be it at the municipal or district levels, lament a chronic shortage of funding, in general and for S&H specifically.

In cases where funding comes mainly from donors or development partners, many of the well-functioning S&H mechanisms established locally tend to depend on input from those sources. Local governments and development partners alike dread the moment when such input ends, like in the examples of N'Dali in Benin (end of a development project) or Molota in Guinea (reliance on international funding for community health volunteer remuneration). Alternative

resource mobilisation avenues seem unavailable, unknown, or unexplored.

In cases where local government action relies slightly less on external transfers and more on transfers from upper government levels (such as in the examples from Nigeria and Ghana), political cycles and **shifting political will** represent an ongoing challenge to continued local leadership. New representatives might have little interest in S&H issues, and political calculation can push elected representatives to focus on 'fancier' sectors that provide easier wins and better visibility, especially in post-ODF settings. For instance, Nigerian LGAs depend on political decisions made by the state: LGA-level governments will have limited influence if state-level decision makers decide that S&H is not to be prioritised, and this risks reducing their agency and leadership.

Likewise, **institutional arrangements** can hamper local governments' effective leadership, such as when WASH budget responsibilities are over-fragmented (several government departments with overlapping budget management responsibilities), or when upper government tiers do not live up to the commitments made to local governments. In the example of Benin, a sector reform presently under discussion risks creating uncertainty on the future role of local governments in sanitation.

All these barriers limit the prospects of sustainable and equitable S&H and, particularly in poverty settings, they are compounded by the low and unsteady income of the population. In these contexts, the issue of **affordability** tends to persist. Many households remain unwilling to pay for anything more costly than 'traditional' toilets, which have poor hygiene standards and limited durability (Molota, Guinea, or Yendi, Ghana). Limited willingness to pay can generate challenges to the success of local governments towards improved sanitation coverage.

This links to the issue of equity in S&H: what strategies could support local governments, as duty bearers, to ensure that 'all individuals and population groups are able to progress' and **no one is left behind** (UNICEF 2021)? On this issue, case studies and discussions provide fewer examples of successful strategies. In some cases, subsidies to households in need are mentioned (Ghana); some believe area-wide approaches can ensure no communities are left behind (Nigeria); and others see CLTS as an intrinsically inclusive methodology (Guinea). In some cases, efforts are made to promote accessible and affordable toilet models (Benin), and intra-community support systems are encouraged, such as youth associations building toilets for the elderly (Guinea). However, these solutions seem somewhat **limited in scope and in outcome**. All stakeholders may place stronger emphasis on equity and inclusion to strengthen local governments to become 'leave no one behind' champions.

Similarly, the issue persists of how to expand and adapt successful practices such as those discussed in the case studies and in the workshops to **low-performing areas and challenging contexts**. For instance, RBF mechanisms may be difficult to apply in areas that do not perform well in sanitation coverage or that are identified as 'laggards' in sanitation rankings. In extreme poverty settings, triggering institutions and communities towards S&H in a sustained way can prove particularly challenging due to competing priorities and a lack of resources on the part of communities and local governments alike.

## Recommendations

The four case studies show concrete avenues for local governments to take the lead in S&H. This section summarises the recommendations emerging from the case studies, as discussed with development partners and local governments in the participatory workshops that followed case study development.

### Reputation and accountability

- Development partners, as well as central governments, should consider ‘**institutional triggering**’ processes, involving both politicians and technocrats, as central to moving local governments to action in S&H. For instance, this could be started by leveraging feelings of shame and disgust towards open defecation, not unlike in CLTS approaches, and by using sanitation data as an entry point for dialogue, highlighting the differences with areas with better sanitation coverage.
- Development partners and central governments can **encourage dynamics of ‘healthy’ competition, pride, and reputation** through initiatives such as ODF league tables or sanitation celebrations that monitor and rank local governments according to sanitation progress. This should be publicised among the population, for instance via radio stations and social media, in order to enhance visibility and emulation. These initiatives should be carefully designed so as not to exacerbate gaps between high-performing and low-performing areas.
- Local governments may be prompted to formalise their **commitments in writing** and make them public. This fosters **accountability**, scrutiny, and monitoring.
- A strong **civil society** can take up a leading role to keep local governments answerable for their actions and accountable to their promises. Community groups and CSOs should be strengthened to have agency and carry out advocacy and monitoring from the ground up.

- **Peer-review mechanisms** and learning initiatives should be established, in which same-tier local governments (elected officials and technocrats alike) compare results and keep each other mutually accountable. Regular review forums would contribute to making this happen.
- Accountability from the top can be enhanced by putting in place agreed **roadmaps**, which would help state-level or central governments monitor local government performance.

### Institutional arrangements and synergies

- Development partners should **work closely with both technocrats** and technical departments and elected officials. This would contribute to shielding S&H progress from political cycles, by fostering continuity across election cycles or if political engagement dwindles. For the same reason, local governments should embed **WASH technical units** as appropriate.
- Local governments can promote continuity and accountability by passing **by-laws** to enshrine S&H objectives, roles, and obligations.
- Local governments should **ringfence budget** for WASH (or for S&H) in their books, as a way to ensure S&H is not forgotten when it comes to planning and allocating resources.
- Local government leadership would be strengthened by **better interplay with multiple stakeholders**. S&H is multidimensional and as such should be linked with actions on education, health, livelihoods, and gender equity. Engaging with traditional and religious leaders can facilitate communication with communities. CSOs can play central roles, by partnering with local governments and devising innovative approaches.



- Development partners should engage more closely with **multiple government tiers**, for instance at central, state, and district (or more local) level, and work together to mitigate the risk of divergent priorities that would hinder S&H progress.
- Development partners and national governments should make efforts to **capture and share** learnings from across different local areas within a country, focusing on good practices: this would contribute to local government capacity and to further institutional triggering.

#### Finance and resource mobilisation

- Development partners, donors, and governments alike might consider a **variety of context-appropriate S&H financing models** to strengthen local governments, such as matching funds with contributions from local and national (or state) governments and the use of results-based finance. Better collaborations and arrangements between multiple government tiers would improve local access to financing.
- Local governments, upper government tiers, and development partners or donors may explore **solidarity mechanisms for those in need**, including loans, targeted support, or social funds. Diaspora groups, local

associations, or well-off community members could also be mobilised where appropriate.

- Local governments should consider actions to strengthen local incomes via **income-generating activities**, which in turn can support sanitation affordability, for instance for household toilets. They should also consider **cross-subsidies** to S&H from water supply revenues or other sources.

#### 'Leave no one behind'

- Case study analysis and discussion did not flesh out any clear success stories or strategies to 'leave no one behind'. It seems that all S&H stakeholders (donors, development partners, national and local governments, civil society) should do more to put **equity and inclusion at the forefront** of planning and decision making, and should work to strengthen the leadership of local governments in this domain.
- Development partners and national or subnational governments alike should look into **area-wide programming** as a way to expand S&H programming to all communities – including challenging contexts such as hard-to-reach areas or extreme poverty settings – and to contribute to equitable progress in S&H.






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