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SLH Learning Brief

Improving Rural Sanitation in Challenging Contexts

Introduction

Of the two billion people worldwide lacking access to at least basic sanitation, seven out of 10 live in rural areas (JMP 2019). Whilst progress has been made on increasing rural sanitation, as access levels rise, challenges remain in reaching the 'last mile' or some 10 to 20% of the population (Apanga et al. 2020, UNICEF 2015).

The factors affecting the ability of households to construct and use toilets, as well as the challenges sanitation programmes face in reaching specific groups, are highly diverse. Applying blueprint approaches has proven not to work, therefore more nuanced, adapted and targeted approaches are needed to ensure the universality element of the Sustainable Development Goals and that no one is left behind. (Cavill et al 2016). However, it is recognised that challenges can be persistent and there are limited documented examples of how to overcome these challenges at scale.

The Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH), UNICEF and WaterAid commissioned a study to map rural sanitation approaches in challenging contexts and the guidance currently being used, drawing out emerging experiences and lessons. The initial landscaping study identifies gaps that need to be addressed and provides recommendations on how to address some of them. All three commissioning organisations aim to work with the wider sector to explore the gaps and opportunities in more detail in a second phase of this work.



Latrine and shower shelter + hand-washing facility, Jeldi, Ethiopia. Photo credit: The Sanitation Learning Hub/Maria Gerth-Niculescu

This rapid desk review collated preliminary findings across five broad 'categories' of challenges: (i) poverty & social mobilisation, (ii) entrenched social norms & beliefs, (iii) tough physical environments, (iv) lifestyles & livelihoods and (v) fragile contexts. It involved Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 44 interviewees, and consulting over 180 documented resources.

This Learning Brief provides an overview of the study findings. The longer report can be found here: <https://sanitationlearninghub.org/resource/rural-sanitation-in-challenging-contexts-findings/>

Key findings

Information sources and monitoring systems

Findings relating to data and information sources, and also processes that organisations use to identify potentially disadvantaged persons or areas include:

- The WASH sector relies on national censuses and surveys such as Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) for its secondary data. While other data sets are available, for example from other sectors (social protection and agriculture), they are not commonly used by WASH professionals. Whilst disaggregated information is collected and at times presented, the level of disaggregation and the geographical resolution of such disaggregation is limited. Efforts to spatially analyse and disaggregate WASH sector monitoring data, to map inequalities are limited, with some notable exceptions¹.
- There is no single method used to identify potentially disadvantaged groups or challenging contexts. Formative research, user-centred design (UCD) and barrier analysis help WASH organisations better identify and understand potentially disadvantaged groups and obstacles to inclusion. Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) includes a process of community vulnerability self-identification, but this is less formalized for other rural sanitation approaches. Monitoring systems are often geared towards tracking progress, not to track or analyse metrics such as slippage amongst different groups or the impact the different challenges have on sustained toilet use;
- Targeting for external subsidies often follows government social welfare-related poverty identification and systems where available; in the absence of such systems, or where they are perceived to be unreliable, organisations define their own project or organisational criteria. Identification of those in need of support, the engagement of those people, and delivering the support mechanism, is often resource-intensive;
- There is interest in tools or online resources that could help to access and collate a wider range of data sources to enrich the existing sector analysis, support targeting, and help in programme design in country.

Findings relating to the ability of organisational and sector monitoring systems to identify and track progress in reaching potentially disadvantaged groups include:

- National surveys risk missing certain groups, such as displaced persons, minority groups and migrant workers. Few national surveys include intra-household data disaggregation;
- Numerous WASH sector organisations (NGOs, CSOs, UN) have their own equity focused monitoring systems, although they are often not routinely applied beyond specific 'projects' and may focus only on certain groups. There is often scope for improvement in the utilisation of monitoring data for decision making². Most monitoring systems look at inclusion only at the community level, whilst some also look at aspects higher within the WASH 'system' (such as SNV's Performance Monitoring Framework (SNV, 2019)).

Existing guidance and documentation about the challenges

Overall, it was found that the balance of documentation and guidance varies considerably across the five challenge categories.

While it is recognised amongst WASH practitioners that multiple challenges and barriers impact on households' ability to access sanitation services, the relationship between these challenges has not been systematically explored or documented.

In depth analysis of the awareness and usage of the various toolkits and studies by sector actors at national and sub-national level is beyond the scope of the study.

However, proxies of potential appropriateness to the reader can be used: of the documents reviewed with page numbers listed, the (mean) average length was 30 pages (many >60), and 18% of these had summaries. Guidance materials are not always translated to local languages (or beyond English).

¹ Pullan et al (2014) used monitoring data to undertake a spatial analysis of inequalities in WASH across Africa.

² Organisational and project monitoring data is not routinely shared with the wider sector or used for sector analysis and learning processes.

Challenge categories

Poverty and social marginalisation



Entrenched attitudes and beliefs



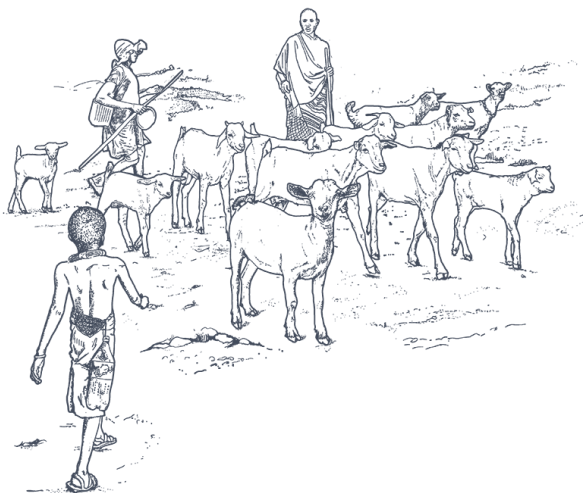
Fragile contexts



Tough physical environments



Lifestyle/livelihoods



FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS ON EXISTING DOCUMENTED RESOURCES

Poverty & Social Marginalisation

- There is a large volume of guidance on this topic, with some dimensions (e.g. gender, physical disability and age), better documented than others (e.g., HIV & mental health).
- Whilst there are many useful recommendations for good practice in inclusive programming, the volume of recommended actions and considerations (particularly in the guidance looking only at certain potential disadvantages - e.g. only gender or only disability), may be beyond the means of many WASH programmes;
- Most guidance covers the need for considerations on infrastructural designs, whilst there is an increasing trend to also emphasise the aspects of inclusion through the intervention process. Most inclusion-related guidance documents focus on community-level actions, with less looking at actions that can be taken at higher levels of the WASH 'system', or in addressing issues of exclusion from more of a political economy, systems or rights-based perspective;
- Whilst there is guidance on wider support mechanisms, specifically regarding subsidies, the limited documentation that exists is more related to study findings (some with recommendations), than on providing practical evidence-based guidance on the design of subsidy mechanisms.

Entrenched Social Norms & Beliefs

- Relative to other challenge categories, there are limited specific documents on this challenge category, although there is a growing body of guidance and tools regarding UCD, including the emergence of resources specific for sanitation and those that can be used for humanitarian contexts;
- As most social norms and beliefs are context specific, practitioners need flexible tools to identify social norms and beliefs within communities, and also skills to adapt programme approaches and technologies to address the issues identified, this is not an area where rigid guidelines are useful.
- Some of the resources covering social norms theory, have been perceived as overly theoretical and challenging to apply in practice;

Tough Physical Environments

- Issues emanating from tough physical environments are often dealt with locally, finding localised solutions, and the limited documentation of these solutions are not generally documented and shared;
- While limited tools were identified to support practitioners assess the physical environment of targeted areas as part of their design process, UCD tools and processes are being increasingly used to develop adapted technical options for different terrains and contexts ;
- Available guidance resources focus primarily on technological adaptations, with more limited guidance as to how to integrate such measures into wider service delivery models (beyond local construction skills and supply chains) and wider financing implications.

Lifestyles & Livelihoods

- There is a clear gap in documented sector knowledge and guidance on this challenge, although there are some upcoming efforts to address this;
- The limited amount of documentation regarding sanitation in pastoralist and fishing communities is largely restricted to Eastern Africa, although there may be francophone resources that were not reviewed;
- There is very limited robust evidence-based guidance on these topics, with most documentation based on context description and suggestions on what may work.

Fragile Contexts

- There are limited resources providing guidance on strengthening the connectedness between humanitarian and development programmatic approaches;
- There is increasing focus and documentation on cash and markets approaches in the humanitarian sector, although with limited examples to date on its application on rural, out of camp settings
- Documentation on applying more 'developmental' approaches in fragile contexts is limited, and largely based on limited experiences.

Efforts and experiences in addressing the challenges

A brief analysis of how organisations and programmes have sought to overcome the challenges in various programmes and countries is presented in the table below.

Poverty & Social Marginalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common experiences were identified relating to efforts towards inclusive programmes: tendencies to address issues such as disabilities primarily from a technological perspective; efforts can tend to be narrow in focus and siloed on specific issues and not always integrated; orientation of staff and stakeholders should not be a one-off exercise, and that deliberate inclusion efforts throughout the intervention cycle is expensive; • Examples of application of inclusive approaches are often localised and focus on a small number of specific potential disadvantages. There are limited examples of significant upscaling of inclusive approaches across multiple potential disadvantage dimensions; • Addressing social exclusion requires efforts to address beliefs and stigmas, both within implementation teams and within communities; • Certain barriers cannot be solved by the community alone (e.g. lack of land) and require multi-stakeholder efforts to address them.
Entrenched Social Norms & Beliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a gap in documented experiences in encouraging toilet use where raw excreta use is linked to livelihoods or where terrains make existing OD practices a perceived 'better option'; • Tools and methods to customise behaviour change approaches are increasingly more user friendly and cheaper to apply, even for humanitarian contexts, meaning there is increasing scope for practitioners to apply more nuanced and less blanket approaches; • Social norms vary spatially, posing challenges for extrapolating common lessons to other contexts.
Tough Physical Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responses to challenging terrains have primarily been technological which are often more expensive. Additionally, as those living in such environments may be poor and marginalised, they can be a low priority for government assistance; • Many examples highlight the importance of developing local skills and providing guidance and technical support to households to overcome terrain challenges; • Efforts to address challenges are often highly localised, and not well documented, which may be one reason why there are limited examples of overcoming the challenges of terrain issues at scale; • Where there are examples of efforts to address such challenges at scale, these are where support has been provided to develop specific sector strategies (based on mapping and articulating the 'challenge') and developing sector guidance.
Lifestyles & Livelihoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This category represents a strong example of intersectionality between challenging contexts; • There are common themes across the different livelihood groups: the potential relevance of linking sanitation approaches to livelihoods and value chains; taking a more 'urban' approach for mobile heterogeneous populations; considering timing, and who is involved (and are decision-makers) at the community level; and in the case of pastoralist contexts being pragmatic when expecting that all populations should use permanent toilets, all of the time; • Considering the prevalence of these types of socio-economic groups worldwide, there is limited documented experiences relating to them and how to effectively work with them at scale.
Fragile Contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong silos exist between humanitarian and development actors and interventions. There is limited cross-learning between the silos and challenges in ensuring 'connectedness' between actions during humanitarian and development phases; • Opportunities for greater complementarity and introduction of longer-term approaches for rural sanitation seem to exist in the 'protracted' phase of crises; for example once immediate humanitarian needs are met to a basic level and there is more time to consider means to increase service levels (e.g. to domestic toilets) and take a market-sensitive approach; • Documented experiences of out-of-camp approaches to rural sanitation are limited, relatively constrained to CLTS, and somewhat anecdotal. As 'fragility' manifests itself differently in different countries, it may limit the ability to extrapolate best practice between areas.

Common barriers to addressing the challenges

Organisations and programmes face diverse challenges ensuring inclusion. The reasons identified were:

- Organisational incentives are driven by a number of internal and external factors, including donor priorities, cost, risk, and the organisational and staff awareness of challenges faced by households;
- National strategies often focus on low hanging fruit and reaching large numbers, rather than tackling challenging contexts systematically. Restrictive policies prevent pragmatic use of support mechanisms;
- Building sufficient capacity and knowledge amongst frontline workers on how to address the wide variety of potential challenges, is difficult to achieve and maintain.
- The WASH sector lacks different strategies to identify and address challenges that affect the majority of the target population versus those that impact a minority or very small number of those targeted³.
- Resource constraints (skills, budget and time) impact the ability of organisations to reach minority groups or adapt approaches to address challenges faced by fewer households or communities.

Addressing the challenges at scale, and through rights-based and systems approaches

Below is a summary of how rights-based approaches have been used in this context:

- Rights-based concepts and language can be challenging to grasp, however there are increasing efforts to address this and make rights-based approaches more ‘tangible’ for practitioners;
- Partnerships with specialised rights-holder groups (such as disability or elderly representative organisations) can help in rights-based efforts at both the local and sector level.
- Examples of initiatives that have sought to address challenges at scale include:
- There are a number of commonalities between government programmes that are addressing inclusivity and overcoming challenges at scale, including: area-wide targets and strong political will to achieve these; policy-sanctioned pragmatism on support mechanisms, and the role of local government in discretion on and/or financing of these; the need to ensure that the model for scaling up includes local-level structures for review, learning and adaptation and experience sharing on ‘local solutions’ between local governments, and; where specific ‘challenges’ are widespread, developing specific strategies to explicitly address these;

- ‘Pilot’ programmes are not always designed considering scaling pathways (and costs) from the outset, and hence suffer from challenges of ‘handing over’ or institutionalising projectised processes or approaches;
- A distinction is made between scaling a specific solution or approach to a challenge, versus ensuring that the institutional model for upscaling of rural sanitation provides the space and incentives for the local identification, adaptation, learning and sharing of approaches to overcome these challenges;
- Four distinct pathways were observed for non-governmental organisations achieving scale in overcoming challenges, including:
 - testing and demonstrating approaches locally, then sharing this nationally to stimulate replication;
 - delivering activities with and through government, aiming to inform the implementation of the nationwide rural sanitation programme;
 - integrating inclusion within the wider business and service delivery model (e.g. in market-based approaches), and;
 - working at the sector level, undertaking formative research to inform strategy and developing guidelines on specific issues;
- To date, enabling environment and systems approaches have not made a clear link with objectives of inclusion at scale.

Below is a summary of how learning practices influence inclusion at scale:

- Effective learning processes are essential in upscaling of local solutions. There is a need to decentralise learning processes and provide examples of efforts to strengthen learning flows both horizontally and vertically in the sector. There are also global initiatives which generate learning on certain challenges.
- There are also key gaps, such as: the learning and exchange between humanitarian and development ‘silos’ and between WASH and other sectors (such as social protection); sector knowledge products, guidance and research may not always be customised for more local audiences; global learning processes have been biased to Anglophone audiences; that learning processes and events are often one-off; and there are clear gaps in learning within and between countries on certain challenges, such as pastoralists.

³ For example in a national programme, strategies are often not developed for contexts which affect a relatively small proportion of the population, e.g. minority ethnic groups with specific beliefs, or specific geographical or livelihood contexts.

Recommendations

The study identified a range of opportunities for strengthening the foundations for the rural sanitation sector to make inclusive progress and to overcome the various programmatic challenges, at scale. Recommendations are summarised below:

1. Address the key knowledge gaps identified in the study and strengthen sector learning processes.

- a) Undertake research and collate experiences on the identified gaps in evidence and guidance, including:
- The design of targeted support mechanisms to reach disadvantaged households; the wider systems strengthening required for these to work cost effectively at scale; means to overcome persistent social norms and to address common terrain challenges and moving beyond infrastructural solutions to including adapted technologies within wider models of service delivery.
 - Effective, evidence-based approaches for specific livelihood groups, such as fishing and mining communities, and for pastoralist settings; appropriate approaches for supporting sanitation for out-of-camp displaced persons; adaptations to conventional approaches to rural sanitation to maximise effectiveness in chronically fragile settings.
 - Means to increase connectedness of humanitarian and development actions. Means to institutionalise and scale up approaches to address a range of potential disadvantages /challenges facing large programmes and use systems approaches; and how rights and market-based approaches are linked.
- b) From this, develop customised means to share this learning and guidance at different levels of the sector, and across different regions, mindful of study findings on the effectiveness of guidance documents;
- c) Strengthen global and country-level processes of learning and adaptation; ensure learning processes are decentralised, have rapid, frequent feedback loops, and effective flows of knowledge vertically and horizontally;
- d) Strengthen dialogue and learning across 'silos' (Humanitarian - Development, WASH - Social Protection)

2. Build the evidence base to identify who the 'last mile' is, quantify these groups and understand the barriers they face. Increase access to such information to help in sector targeting.

- a) Identify, define, quantify, and map areas and groups that are potentially disadvantaged. This may include detailed analysis of existing data, in addition to formative research;
- b) Enrich sector efforts on tools and information platforms where relevant sector information is aggregated to enable evidence-based targeting and programme design. Promote widespread sector usage of such tools;

3. Develop approaches, models and products that are inclusive and can address challenges at scale.

- a) Undertake formative research to understand barriers for potentially disadvantaged groups and develop evidence-based, customised approaches and means of support to overcome such barriers;
- b) Undertake sanitation market assessments in challenging contexts and engage market-based actors to develop incentive structures, service delivery models and products that could address challenges at scale.

4. Build in-country capacities to effectively address challenging contexts and build the business case and commitment of stakeholders to prioritise and include – last mile groups.

- a) Strengthen awareness and capacity at different levels to identify and include different disadvantaged groups. Strengthen capacities of CSOs and media to track and advocate for inclusive progress;
- b) Develop policy positions, including economic and Value for Money case, for prioritising last mile groups

5..Harmonise definitions and help governments to develop specific targets and strategies for challenging contexts and strengthen their monitoring and review processes to track progress.

- a) At the global and country levels, work on harmonising definitions and indicators of challenging contexts and disadvantaged groups and define priority groups to be captured in disaggregated monitoring and analysis;
- b) Support the development of country targets and strategies for challenging contexts and specific groups;
- c) Strengthen country monitoring systems to better include and identify potentially disadvantaged groups and strengthen capacities for data analysis and feedback loops so that monitoring data triggers barrier analysis and potentially support mechanisms. Review inclusiveness of progress during Joint Sector Reviews.

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