



USAID Global Water Coordinator Christian Holmes visits the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands of Marsabit, one of five sites where the Kenya RAPID program is promoting sustainable management of rangelands, water, and crops, and increasing the contribution of livestock to pastoral livelihoods. Photo credit: USAID/Kenya

The Impact of Strategic Water Programming: Reflections on Accomplishments, Approaches, and Learning

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As we begin a new year and my tenure at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) draws to a close, I cannot help but reflect on the challenges, new approaches, and accomplishments I have seen during my time as the Agency's Global Water Coordinator.

Meeting global water needs is an enormous, daunting, and humbling challenge. Throughout the developing world, hundreds of millions of people still lack access to clean water and adequate sanitation. Far more often than not, water resources are limited, infrastructure is inadequate, funds to improve facilities and services are insuf-

ficient, and governance is weak. In the face of these inadequacies, millions of people suffer. One half of hospital beds in Africa are filled with patients suffering from waterborne-related diseases, and in sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 40 percent of children under age 5 are physically and cognitively stunted for life due in great part to diarrheal disease caused by unsafe water.

Addressing the global water challenge is complex. Our efforts link the provision of water supply, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and water management with other development assistance such as food production, education and nutrition, the treatment of HIV/AIDS and neglected tropical diseases, and conflict mitigation. In so doing we support critical financial, regulatory, governance, and policy interventions to help achieve long-term sustainability. We are fortunate that we can draw upon a wide range of expertise in the public and private sectors to develop and implement a strategy that seeks to have systemwide impact on these challenges.

We have indeed accomplished a great deal. By “we,” I mean our USAID colleagues in Washington and USAID missions; our U.S. Government partners, particularly our Department of State colleagues in Washington and their embassies, as well as the professionals in such agencies as the Department of Defense, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Geological Survey, NASA, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; members of Congress and their staff who provided advice and guidance as we developed and implemented the USAID water strategy; our partners in the field, including NGOs, contractors, universities, businesses, and representatives of developing countries at the community, regional, and national levels; our donor and international organization partners; and finally, and most importantly, the recipients of our services — the millions of men, women, and children in developing countries whose courage, wisdom, and resilience inspire us all.

Working together, we have developed and implemented programs reaching more than 55 million people with improved access to WASH. Towards that end, since 2008, USAID has spent more than \$2 billion on WASH programs. And more importantly, the Agency’s 2013 Water and Development Strategy along with the Senator Paul Simon Water for the World Act of 2014 provide strategic guidance for our water programming.

Our work is part of the continuum of decades of efforts by the U.S. Government and its private and public sector partners to meet the WASH needs of hundreds of millions of people. As this USAID Water & Development Timeline demonstrates, the 2005–2016 period has proven to be a particularly critical and effective time in developing and implementing approaches to meet global water needs.

In 2010, the then USAID Administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah tasked me with leading the effort to develop and implement a global water strategy. I have seen the Agency’s water and sanitation portfolio undergo a period of rapid growth, with the annual funds directed by Congress for WASH programming increasing from \$295 million in 2008 to \$400 million in 2016. With consultation from an interagency group, USAID’s Water and Development Strategy in 2013 was an important step in defining the goals: “to save lives and advance development through improvements in WASH programs and through sound management and use of water for food security.” These goals have given us a hard focus on environmental health in the context of protecting

human health and the environment. The strategy has also increased the effectiveness of our programs by focusing on priority countries and emphasizing resources go to those most in need.

The two objectives put forth, Water for Health and Water for Food, have also given us a measurable way to track our progress. Explicit targets were set for minimum numbers of people to be reached over the five-year period: 10 million with sustainable water services, 6 million with sustainable sanitation services, and 2 million benefiting from improved water management for agriculture to enhance food security. In just two years of implementation, we exceeded expectations with more than 6.8 million receiving improved access to drinking water supply; more than 4.3 million receiving improved access to sanitation facilities; and more than 3.2 million benefiting from improved agricultural water management by the end of 2015. While our strategic approach played a critical role in meeting these targets, none of this could have occurred without the skilled, courageous, and diligent work of our private and public sectors partners, including in particular our developing country partners.

Without question the strategy has affected funding for water programs and the number of people reached globally, but its impact doesn't stop there. It has also made it easier to communicate the goals of our water programming both inside and outside the Agency. As a result, it has fostered a better understanding of that programming and helped increase support from the public, implementing partners, NGOs, and Congress.

The strong bipartisan support in Congress for water programming has grown since the launch of the strategy, with the passage of the Senator Paul Simon Water for World Act in December 2014. The bill had more than 100 bipartisan co-sponsors and was passed by the full U.S. Congress, ensuring current investments in WASH programs will continue.

I have served in the U.S. Government in many agencies and capacities, but until now, I have never been part of an effort where a global strategy was both effectively developed and implemented and the underlying principles were included in a statute, namely the Water for the World Act. To move from a strategy to a statute in less than two years is an enormous tribute to the fine work undertaken by the USAID team and its partners.

Having an Agency-wide strategy focused on water and sanitation has also influenced the culture of USAID. Since its release, an interagency group meets weekly to go over its implementation. This continuous communication and monitoring has kept the document's principles at the forefront of water programming and helped the strategy go from a highly centralized Agency mechanism to a more unifying system working across missions, bureaus, and Washington. This was something none of us could have predicted when we sat down together to design an agency water strategy.

Laying a Strong Foundation

Key to the success of the water strategy has been to set a strong foundation. This includes providing clear direction and targets, designating accountability, providing leaders and staff with authority, building an effective structure, and applying the learn-

ings of what has worked and not worked. In so doing, we have improved the lives of millions of people and fundamentally changed the way in which USAID does business in the water sector.

The clear and overarching goal of the strategy is to save lives. To reach this goal, we set clear objectives and related targets. We also made leadership and organizational adjustments to meet our targets. This included designating for the first time a USAID Global Water Coordinator in 2011, accountable for the success or failure of the global water strategy, and creating a new Office of Water with the Agency in 2012. It has been my privilege to serve in this position, which is mandated in the Water for the World Act of 2014, and take responsibility for overseeing, directing, guiding, and coordinating USAID's global WASH portfolio.

Nothing ever happens, however, without great people. A critical element to developing and implementing the program has been drawing upon a wide range of experts with long-term USAID experience in the water sector, as well as hiring new staff with unique perspectives, experience, and skill sets. The mechanisms for allocating resources, developing, and implementing programs are another critical foundational element. To implement the strategy, USAID created the Water and Development Initiative (WADI) mechanism, which can provide support for up to \$1 billion in WASH programs and other Agency priorities. We also awarded a series of centrally managed contracts to enable USAID missions to access technical support in key program areas. And finally we have expanded monitoring and evaluation of our ongoing activities and have initiated for the first time the systematic evaluation of WASH projects that no longer receive USAID support. Simply put, the Agency now has a range of technical support, knowledge, structure, and direction that build on our experience and position us to have significant development impact moving forward.

Putting Learning into Action

Perhaps the most important result in creating and implementing the water strategy has been learning. The knowledge we have gained from our more targeted approach has informed our programming design, support, and implementation. Some of our key approaches, activities, and accomplishments include:

Encouraging Integrated Programs — It has become apparent that integrating the Agency's water efforts into broader development strategies is essential to improving the outcomes of the Agency's programming. This has led to the incorporation of water and sanitation into efforts to build resilience, educate children, grow food, and improve public health.

What We Are Doing

Launched in 2015, the Tanzania Water Resources Integration Development Initiative (WARIDI) activity integrates funding from multiple sector resources, including water, biodiversity and the U.S. Government's Feed the Future initiative to achieve improvements in health, water resources management, agriculture, and the environment in the Wami-Ruvu and Rufiji river basins.

Making Better Use of Partnerships — USAID's water partnerships have significantly expanded the scope and impact of the Agency's water programming. Part-

nerships have helped increase water available for food production in highly stressed areas, supported the development of new water treatment technology, and helped improve water supply in many priority countries. Over the last decade, private-sector partners have committed more than \$113 million to the Agency's water-focused public-private partnerships.

What We Are Doing

Kenya Resilient Arid Lands Partnership for Integrated Development (KRAPID) is a five-year, \$35 million development program bringing together public and private institutions and communities to increase access to water and sanitation for people and water for livestock, and to rebuild a healthy rangeland-management ecosystem.

Increasing the Role of Women in Programming — A deep interest in the fate of women and how their search for water and sanitation impacts them spurred bipartisan Congressional support for both the strategy and the Water for the World Act. As a result, both specifically call for significant improvements in women's health and economic and educational opportunities. We are working to better understand and develop a workable approach and methodology to address issues around gender and social inclusion in water programming and project implementation to improve the lives of women.

What We Are Doing

The recent memorandum of understanding between USAID and GAP links sustainable water and health to better employment for women and is a transformative opportunity for our programming. In India, we are partnering with Coca Cola and Plan International to provide WASH to 60 schools; this will help young girls stay in school as they will have the necessary access to clean water, sanitation, and privacy for menstrual hygiene management.

Emphasizing Technical Assistance — To increase the likelihood of sustainable programming outcomes, the Agency is taking a collaborative and coordinated approach to programming by expanding the range and effectiveness of our technical services.

What We Are Doing

To support WASH programs at the country level, Agency staff provide technical assistance at the mission level as well as assistance to governments, institutions, service providers, and others. In addition, to supplement bilateral programming in priority WASH countries, several new central mechanisms have been put into place to support WASH finance; sustainability; communications and knowledge management; monitoring and evaluation; and water security.

Prioritizing Sanitation — Improved sanitation translates to greater dignity, security, health, and financial well-being. Investments in sanitation reduce health care costs and boost productivity, as time available for work and school increases. Every \$1 spent on improved sanitation is estimated to generate \$5 of economic gain. Because this change can be so transformational, the strategy specifically targets bring-

ing sustainable and improved sanitation services to 6 million people within five years.

What We Are Doing

In 2015, USAID, along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Government of India's Ministry of Urban Development to provide technical assistance. USAID's support has contributed to 4,041 cities ending open defecation and strengthening sustainable sanitation services.

Making Water Quality as Important as Access — Much progress has been made to increase access to water and sanitation services, but even with increased access many still struggle with poor service and poor drinking water quality. USAID learned from experience that the performance of utilities as well as the management of water resources must be a focus to ensure reliable service and improve water quality.

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What We Are Doing

In the West Bank, the USAID-funded Deir Sha'ar Main Pipeline now provides 18,000 cubic meters of water every day to communities in the southern West Bank. This infrastructure project has led to substantial improvements in the volume, quality, and reliability of water service for 260,000 Palestinians.

Building the Evidence Base — An important element of the strategy is a commitment to sustainability. In an effort to gain more information on how programs are performing in this regard, the Water Office made a commitment to do post-project evaluations of WASH programs that have been closed for several years.

What We Are Doing

The first in a series of post-project evaluations was completed in Madagascar this past fall and several are planned for 2017 in additional countries. In addition to these evaluations, USAID is funding an impact evaluation through the NOURISH project in Cambodia to better understand the possible combined benefits of improved water, sanitation, hygiene and nutrition on reducing childhood stunting. And the new Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Partnerships and Learning for Sustainability (WASHPaLS) project will support research activities that build a rigorous, policy-relevant evidence base for interventions and approaches to address priority problems related to sanitation access, behavior change, and the enabling environment for WASH.

The development and application of new knowledge is of course essential to increase the impact of our WASH and water programs. In this regard, a number of emerging lessons from studies and research from partners such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, WHO, and UNICEF merit close attention.

Increasing the Emphasis on Water Security — Through our implementation of the strategy, we've also increased our commitment to invest in the key issue of water resource management. The important role this plays in water security and the building and sustaining of human resilience is clear and increasing.

What We Are Doing

USAID has supported the construction of 3,300 infiltration ponds in North Sumatra, East Java, and Central Java in Indonesia, to replenish aquifers and help communities protect themselves from water shortages caused by many factors, including rapid urbanization.

Challenges

While much progress has been made toward achieving our goals, significant challenges remain — in both the sheer number of human needs and causes we must address. Governance, sustainability of infrastructure, urbanization, sustainable water supply, the prevention of childhood stunting, and conflict are just some of the ongoing challenges. To address some of these, the Agency is continuing its support of WASH infrastructure and WASH behavior change, and expanding its work in the areas of sustainable water supply, causes of childhood stunting, water resource management, sustainability, WASH finance, and governance, as reflected in some of the above-mentioned activities.

The implementation of the Water and Development Strategy has given water programming new insight into what works, what doesn't work, and what can be improved. I am extremely proud of what we have accomplished during my time here and I believe the future of the Agency's water programming is bright. The strategic focus we have put in place and the approaches that have come as a result of that focus will help USAID meet the water challenges of the 21st century.

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Additional Resources:

- [U.S. Government Global Water Strategy](#)
- [@USAIDWater on Twitter](#)

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