



A four-person panel moderated by USAID's John Pasch discussed active USAID projects featured in this year's Safeguarding report and took audience questions. Pictured from left to right are John Pasch, Allen Hollenbeck, Ian Moise, Ku McMahan, and John Gavin. Photo credit: USAID

What We Learned: Looking Back at a Decade of Water Programming

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A special event for the release of USAID's FY 2015 [Safeguarding the World's Water](#) report held January 12, 2017, in Washington, DC, brought together USAID staff and a wide range of water sector stakeholders to reflect on accomplishments and lessons learned from more than a decade of U.S. Government funding and support for water programming and the implementation of [USAID's Water and Development Strategy](#).

The event began with USAID water leadership looking back at accomplishments and challenges supporting programs to improve access to clean drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Then a panel of water and WASH implementing partners weighed in on integrating WASH into different types of programming, applying Water

Strategy approaches to challenges in the field, changing development paradigms, and injecting innovation into the sector.

Chris Kosnik, acting director of the Water Office of USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment (E3), opened with some key results to highlight this year's Safeguarding report data. In FY 2015, the Agency invested more than \$499 million toward water-related programming in 54 countries. More than 83 percent of these investments, \$416.6 million, went toward WASH programs to improve health and advance development. In addition, the Agency allocated more than \$83 million toward WASH in emergencies, water for food, water resources management, and disaster risk reduction.

Christian Holmes, the outgoing Global Water Coordinator, took the floor and reflected on the enormous challenge of meeting global water needs: "Increasingly water becomes the denominator in all this: it's the cause and the solution," he said. "Challenges are manifold," he noted, with more than half a billion people in need of water; 2 billion who need sanitation; millions of children stunted from diarrheal disease or who die; the abysmal state of hospitals; degraded watersheds; compression of people into urban areas with no chance to establish infrastructure; and the increasing intersection of water and conflict.

Mr. Holmes then provided a brief history of the development of the 2013 [USAID Water and Development Strategy](#), which is further elaborated on in a [Global Waters blog and podcast](#) and a newly published Water and Development timeline.

Highlighting key accomplishments since the implementation of the Water Strategy, he emphasized that water partnerships have significantly expanded the scope and impact of the Agency's water programming. Over the last decade, private sector partners have committed more than \$113 million to the Agency's water-focused public-private partnerships — the ongoing Water and Development Alliance with Coca Cola and a new partnership with the Gap are two examples. To reinforce the Agency's commitment to sustainability, a series of post-project evaluations, the first one completed last fall in Madagascar, was launched to build the evidence base. He went on to discuss his interest in prioritizing sanitation, emphasizing water security, and increasing the role of women in programming.

With the introduction of the speaker panel the meeting agenda switched from one of reflection to anticipation of the challenges ahead. John Pasch, engineering division chief, USAID E3 Office of Energy and Infrastructure, and former head of the Water Office, moderated the four-person panel, which began with a question for Save the Children's WASH Advisor Ian Moise about the challenges of linking WASH interventions to health outcomes and the growth of WASH in the health sector.

Mr. Moise identified two growth areas: WASH and nutrition and WASH and Health Care Facilities (HCF). The growth in WASH and nutrition integration has been generated by a better understanding of stunting and its deleterious effects on children's health, learning, productivity of a lifetime, and its negative impact on GDP. "USAID has shown great leadership over the last number of years in this space. It seems almost every country has integrated WASH and nutrition investments," he stated.

Citing WASH in HCFs as an underfunded area that lacks an institutional home, Mr. Moise elaborated on the need to address the issue of health care-associated infections, i.e., infections acquired during care that affect hundreds of millions of people each year. Acquired infections are hardly surprising when a World Health Organization survey of 66,000 health care facilities in 54 countries showed that 38 percent of facilities lack an improved water source; 19 percent lack improved sanitation facilities; and 35 percent do not have access to soap and water for handwashing.

The next panelist, Allen Hollenback, a project manager from DAI, spoke about USAID's IUWASH (Indonesia Urban Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) project and discussed the evolution and trends in WASH programming and shared lessons from IUWASH's experience with project integration.

One trend he identified was the increased acknowledgment of the importance of an integrated, systems-based approach. "I really think that the key driver of the project impact was that it worked at all levels of what we've come to call the urban WASH ecosystem, reinforcing linkages between actors and identifying components of local systems that really need to be strengthened." He explained how this approach contrasts to strategies in the past that prioritized infrastructure spending, "despite persistent underlying institutional weaknesses."

At the community level IUWASH focused on unlocking household demand for sanitation and overcoming the misconception that people are unwilling to invest in sanitation. The IUWASH experience suggests otherwise — sanitation microfinance has taken off in the last four years to accommodate household demand for compliant septic and toilet facilities.

Emphasizing better access to the poorest and most vulnerable communities is another trend he touched upon. IUWASH was able to decrease average water costs by 70 percent in many of its target communities. Mr. Hollenbeck explained how the follow-on IUWASH PLUS project is engaging the Indonesian government to bring even greater focus on improving WASH services for those living at the margins. An IUWASH activity called WASH wealth mapping will better target poor communities through spatial analysis.

The next question was directed to John Gavin, a project manager from CDM Smith, who was asked about significant achievements and advantages of working at a strategic or national level to design and implement solutions.

Drawing upon his more than 20 years of experience working on water projects in Jordan and elsewhere, Mr. Gavin explained the inherent advantages: "You have more resources and you have different perspectives." As for the challenges: "It takes time to work through systems with different groups of stakeholders, systems, mentalities, focus, and objectives. It's trying to align all those together for a common objective and that can really seemingly impede progress." However, he points out: "Collaboration is easier now than it used to be. Information exchange is facilitated by technology, and as long as there's an overall objective that the different parties can agree to, the operational differences can be resolved."

The final panel speaker, Dr. Ku McMahan of USAID's Global Development Lab,

leads Securing Water for Food: A Grand Challenge for Development. He was asked to address the importance of science, technology, and innovation in water sector programming, specifically what successes he can attribute to this approach and what challenges have to be overcome.

He explained the thinking behind the creation of the Securing Water for Food Grand Challenge in 2013 and how experimentation and competition will enable the development community to come up with the best suggestions and solutions for producing more food with less water and to make more water available in developing countries. "There's a hubris when we go into these countries and think we understand what the challenges are and aren't necessarily listening to the people on the ground in the local context. The success we've had has been where our innovators have gone and asked those questions, done consumer demand surveys, gone out and done the focus groups before we start, and then start the implementation with the technologies." He concluded by commenting on the challenge of incorporating innovations that show significant progress early on into existing programs.

A lively question and answer session concluded the event and some of the topics raised included water safety, how to begin integrating WASH into nutrition programming, how government partners adapt to the systems-based approach, water quality, the intersection of water demand and food security, how to address and meet the needs of women, knowledge sharing about behavior change models, adapting culture to technology (or vice versa), and upstream watershed management challenges.

By Wendy Putnam



Additional Resources:

- [U.S. Government Global Water Strategy](#)
- [USAID Water and Development Strategy](#)

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