



Newly recruited younger staff members work in a water laboratory in Nigeria. Reforms in the country's water sector are prioritizing youth engagement to improve service delivery. Photo credit: USAID E-WASH

Professionalizing Nigeria's Water Sector: Transforming Service Delivery One State at a Time

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"If you drink Zobo, we're going to drink Zobo with you," Dennis Mwanza, project director of USAID/Nigeria's Effective Water and Sanitation Hygiene Services (E-WASH) project explains, referring to a popular Nigerian drink made with Hibiscus flowers. "It's relationship building...if you are there [in the government water offices], you can see management styles, how teams work together, [and] adapt for the implementation of this program." Such is USAID's approach to implementing E-WASH: embedding technical experts and project team members in six Nigerian state government water board offices to work alongside decision-makers and affect change in the water sector.

Urban Migration and a Call to Action

An increase in domestic migration over the past few decades has resulted in nearly half of Nigeria's 183 million citizens residing in urban centers. This has put a significant strain on water and sanitation services, not only in cities, but throughout the country. "The proportion of urban to rural population used to be 30 percent [urban], 70 percent [rural], now it's 50–50. And the [urban water] system has not been upgraded or expanded," says Jean Jolicoeur, USAID/Nigeria project manager for E-WASH. "Government has not put enough money into the system, so it can't absorb the population growth, [and this has] put pressure on infrastructure."

According to a 2017 World Bank WASH Poverty Diagnostic study, fewer than one in three Nigerians (in both urban and rural settings) have access to sanitation or potable water service on their premises. Urban areas are even more of a cause for concern, as residential access to piped water dropped from 32 percent in 1990 to 7 percent in 2015. "Sanitation is even worse," Jolicoeur says. "[It is] completely neglected. There is no sewage system in the entire country, other than a section of Abuja; few treatment plants; [waste is] dumped in rivers, in lagoons, or open sites; [there is a] complete lack of regulation or mandate."

The World Bank diagnostic brought much of this reality to light, and in March 2018 the Government of Nigeria (GON) responded with a Water and Sanitation National Action Plan. It includes a five-year emergency response effort, as well as a longer term revitalization strategy for the water and sanitation sectors. The plan is part of a broader government strategy aimed at achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Soon after the government released the plan, the president declared a national state of emergency in the WASH sector, indicating support from the highest levels of government.

Building Relationships to Improve Services

In response to the GON's commitment to improving governance and WASH, USAID/Nigeria began implementation of E-WASH, a four-year project designed to improve urban water service delivery by strengthening the governance, financial, and technical capacities of six State Water Boards (SWBs). Modeled after a successful three-year predecessor project, Sustainable Water and Sanitation in Africa, E-WASH embedded seven project experts in each of the six state-level SWBs to work alongside local employees. They serve as advisors to help develop legislation, implement trainings, provide guidance, support civil society engagement, and monitor the state's progress toward improving management of the water and sanitation sector. "The USAID state teams [embedded staff] drive high-level strategy, synergy, and technical guidance continuously throughout the life of the project. This approach creates a flexible space for cross-collaboration and [allows the project] to quickly make any necessary changes. This approach is also tailored to the unique needs of each state and stakeholder through state specific Action Plans," Jolicoeur says.

A majority of states established SWBs as autonomous institutions in the late 1990s, with the aim of providing affordable and accessible public water services in each state. However, the water boards have never achieved full autonomy and are still heavily dependent on financial support from state and national budgets. As a result of poor governance, lack of regulatory mechanisms, and inefficient financial structures, water sector services under the SWBs have been extremely unreliable. Mwanza

explains, “Billing of consumers is done manually [in most states]; tariff of water is not tied to the cost of producing the water; there are no [bulk] or domestic water meters to measure use; and most water schemes are producing at less than 30 percent of their capacity.”

Musa Buba Siam, the general manager of Taraba State Water Supply Agency, describes ongoing challenges in his state, “[There is a] need for more staff training, an upgrade and expansion of computerization for our operations, [there is a] lack of standard storage facilities, lack of workshops for carrying out repairs, [and a] need for the extension of pipelines to many new areas that are not presently covered.” With limited or nonexistent public water sources, Nigerians have had to find their own way to access potable water, through private water providers or other means.

Transforming Service Delivery

To address these challenges within the SWBs, E-WASH is “helping to create a corporate culture in the water service sector,” Jolicoeur says. Corporatization means transitioning the current civil-service structure to one that is overseen by a board of directors, is more autonomous in managing services, and achieves commercial viability through improved cost-recovery techniques.

To be effective in this effort, the project promotes and advocates its approach among the public and with government officials. Siam explains that his state’s work with E-WASH has been, “Very, very fruitful within a short time...staff capacity has been strengthened through trainings, workshops, and seminars, [and through] awareness creation at stakeholder engagements.” After its first year, E-WASH has already seen some initial successes. For instance, in Taraba State, Siam describes the recent establishment of a WASH customer forum and an integrated WASH sector steering committee, as well as the successful launch of state WASH policies and a new law for regulation of the sector. In Delta State, the government passed a law that corporatizes water service delivery and establishes a board of directors. The legislation also includes a policy to introduce cost-recovery tariffs and establishes regulatory mechanisms to ensure value for money. Across the six states, governments have begun allocating state funds specifically for water services, and have been putting policies and laws in place to improve oversight of the sector. These actions indicate good will from political leadership and will undergird E-WASH’s efforts to introduce new methods for improved management of the sector.

Though elected officials are supportive of the project, managing expectations and changing people’s mindsets continue to be barriers to reform. For example, many employees of the SWBs believe they will lose their jobs, Jolicoeur explains. However, changing the management structure to a corporate format will lay the groundwork for increased efficiency and expanded services, which will actually add jobs in the sector. To mitigate concerns, E-WASH is implementing a variety of strategic communications efforts to strengthen understanding of the new corporate approach. These activities include: conducting extensive consultations with all stakeholders — from state leadership to the users, civil society organizations, and the media — to gain buy-in; providing trainings to build capacity; and exposing Nigerians to successes in other, similar countries. Additionally, the project is informing the public of the importance of their role in holding state agencies accountable — helping establish water consumer forums, hosting media roundtables, and conducting knowledge campaigns.

Strengthening Capacity, One State at a Time

Changing hearts and minds about the most effective way to manage water service delivery, and subsequently implementing those changes, will take time. That's why E-WASH has technical experts working in government offices across the country to build their capacity and to promote the method broadly. With the support of national- and state-level leadership, E-WASH is strengthening Nigeria's governance of the WASH sector and is helping to make project participants "pioneers [and] part of the change that's happening," Jolicoeur says. "[Participating SWBs] are the next pool of experts." The E-WASH-supported states are leading the way for change, so that Nigeria can continue on its journey to self-reliance and every Nigerian has easy access to safe and clean water and sanitation services.

By Melissa Burnes

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