



Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership

# Adapting Collaborative Approaches for Service Provision to Development Contexts: Expert Panel Results

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## Introduction

Collaborative approaches bring stakeholders together to overcome complex challenges that cannot be solved alone. Increasingly, the international development sector has been implementing collaborative approaches\* to strengthen service delivery systems. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Sustainable Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) Systems Learning Partnership (SWS) is working to understand and improve on these approaches. As part of this effort, SWS convened a panel of non-WASH experts to rate the importance of factors that contribute to the success of collaborative approaches, based on their experience implementing such approaches or studying them academically.

This study builds on collaborative approaches literature, based mainly on experiences in North America, Europe, and Australia – such as the literature on inter-organizational collaboration,<sup>[1–5]</sup> collaborative governance,<sup>[6–9]</sup> multi-stakeholder partnerships,<sup>[6,10–13]</sup> and collective impact.<sup>[14–20]</sup> Development contexts pose unique challenges that likely influence the design, implementation, and monitoring of collaborative approaches. Inadequate regulatory structures, unclear roles and responsibilities, a diversity of informal and non-governmental service providers, and conflicting development agendas and funding mechanisms greatly complicate service delivery, often leading to frequent and lengthy interruptions in services.

The panel of experts convened to answer two primary learning questions:

1. **What contextual conditions, design components, and intermediate results (also referred to as “factors”) contribute to the overall success of collaborative approaches for service provision in low-income country contexts?**
2. **What is their relative importance (i.e., which are essential, and which are only occasionally important)?**

\* For a more detailed description of what collaborative approaches entail, refer to SWS’s definition brief: <https://www.globalwaters.org/resources/assets/sws/defining-collective-action-approaches-wash>



**Figure 1.** Number of collaborative approaches the 17 panelists worked with, not including the 29 in the United States, with four global or trans-national.

## Methods

A list of 52 contextual conditions, design components, and intermediate results emerged from the review of a variety of relevant literature and interviews with SWS partners and advisory board members.

A panel of 17 experts reviewed this list, added six additional factors, and evaluated all 58 factors according to their importance in low-income country contexts on a scale of *Not Important* to *Essential*. Panelists provided ratings over three rounds using the Delphi methodology<sup>[21]</sup> which gave them a summary of the panel responses alongside their responses after each round and then gave them a chance to change or keep their rating and provide a rationale.

## About the panelists

The evaluation of more than 30 potential panelists resulted in the selection of 17 experts chosen based on their experience. Combined, these experts had experience in more than 20 countries with more than 70 collaborative approaches, with four focused on global or trans-national activities (see Figure 1).

## Results

The panel agreed on the importance of 49 factors – eight of which they rated as essential for success. Figure 2 provides the ratings of all items, separated into design components, contextual conditions, and intermediate results.

- *Contextual conditions* are existing factors that lie outside the control of project implementers and can only be influenced over long periods of time, such as if they are inherent to the geography, political administration, or culture; these can influence planning stages of the approach.
- *Design components* are the steps, elements, or processes that are included by design within a coalition's functioning and activities; the project implementers have control over which design components are put in place.
- *Intermediate results* are key indicators or behaviors the coalition exhibits over time; they are important milestones indicating progress toward success.

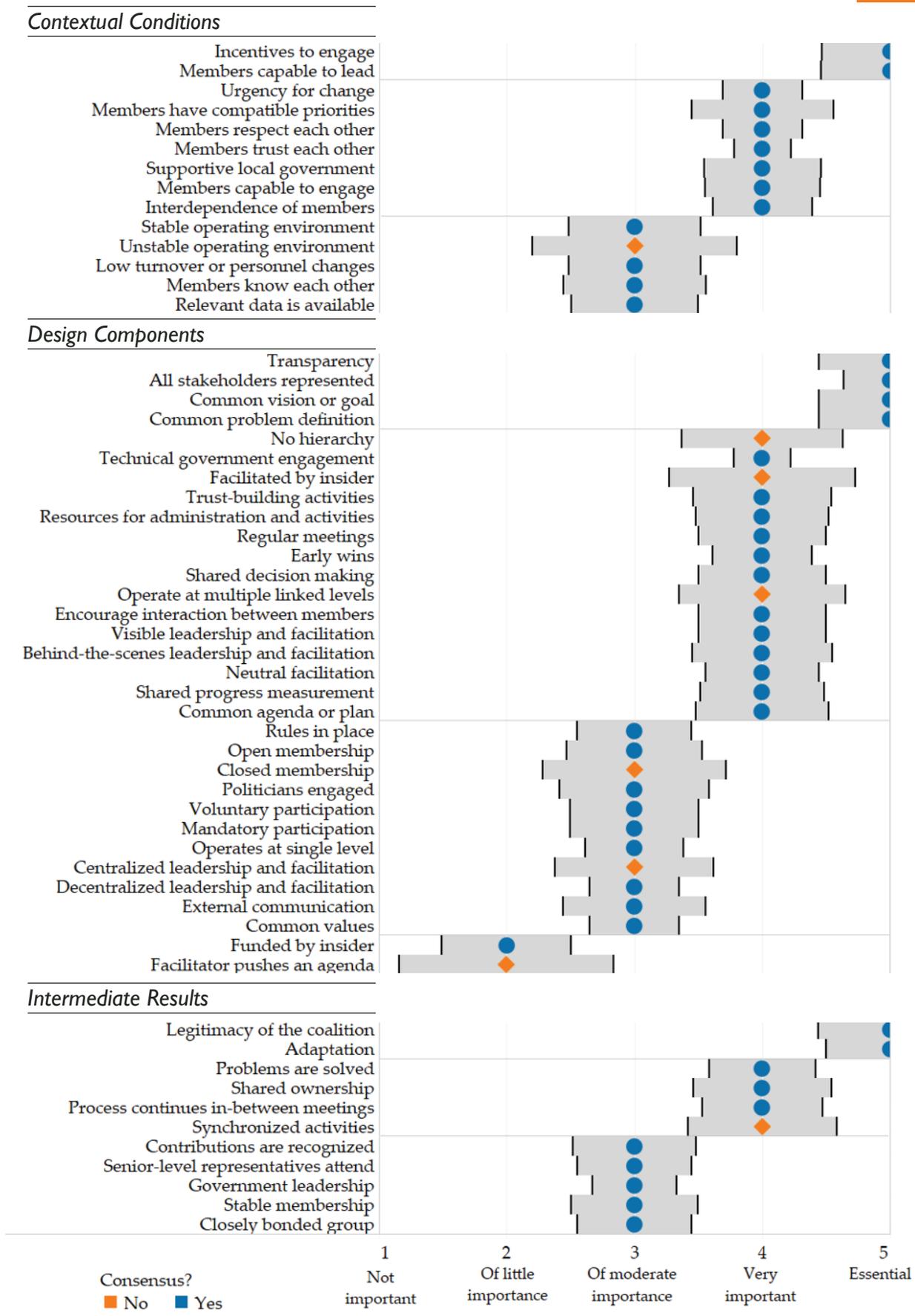


Figure 2. Final panel scores for all factors. Dots show the median score and gray bars show the mean absolute deviation.

### Highlighted result: Government engagement

Having the support of local governments was rated as a *Very Important* contextual condition and engaging with technical government offices was seen as *Very Important* to the design of these approaches. There was some disagreement within the panel as to how important it is to engage political officials and for government to take on leadership roles (see Figure 3). Thus, program design, implementation, and monitoring must carefully consider government engagement. Future and existing collaborative approaches in development should reflect on how they engage with government and share best practices. This engagement can help future programs seeking to strengthen the self-reliance of local governments.

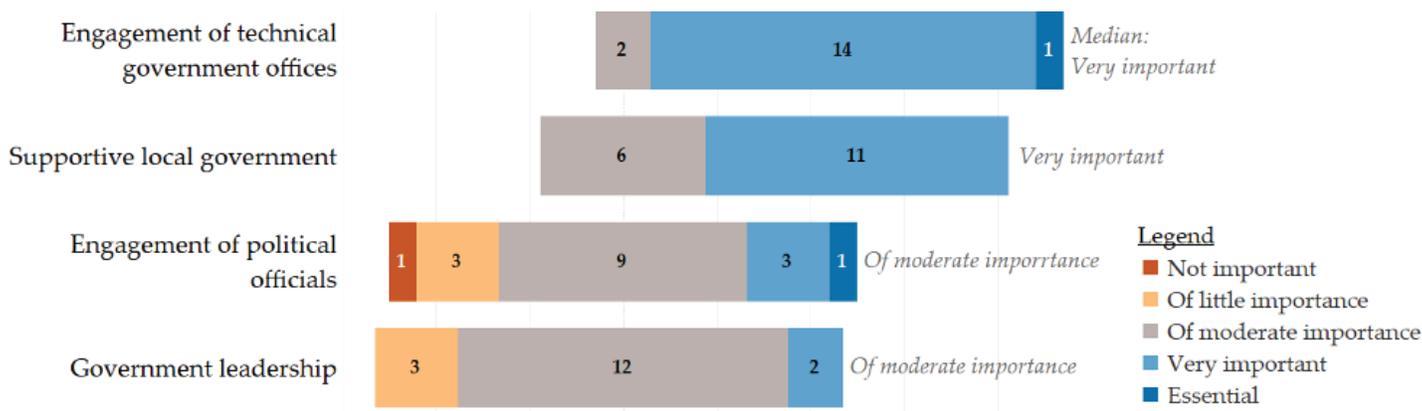


Figure 3. Four factors related to government engagement, with the distribution of panel responses.

### Factors unique to international development and service delivery

Many of the factors discussed by the panel were universal and important in all collaborative approaches in any context. Thus, we identified the factors that are particularly unique, those that differ substantially in development contexts, and those that are unique to service delivery contexts.

#### Factors unique to international development contexts include:

- The role and influence of donors
- Designing for stable versus unstable political and institutional environments
- Acknowledging and working with a lack of data
- Accommodating inevitable high turnover rates and inadequate knowledge transfer
- Building leadership skills of members so they can take on leadership roles

#### Factors that differ substantially in international development include:

- How to generate legitimacy
- How to structure leadership and facilitation
- How to deal with power imbalances
- How to best involve political and technical government officials

#### Factors unique to service delivery applications include:

- Government engagement and agreed-upon shared metrics

### What does this mean for the sector?

The results of this panel study show collaborative approaches for service delivery in development contexts are similar in many ways to those in non-development contexts but also unique in a few critical ways. Thus, there is an overwhelming need for documentation and evidence of how collaborative approaches work in international development contexts. The list of factors and their relative importance provided by the panel study can provide a working vocabulary for collaborative approaches in the development sector. This list is more encompassing than the more widely-known collective impact conditions, which, notably, were not all rated as essential by the panel. We encourage readers to refer to this list to reflect on design, or to monitor the success of their programs.

Read the full, open-access article here: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/7/2612>

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### About the Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership:

The Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership is a global United States Agency for International Development (USAID) cooperative agreement to identify locally-driven solutions to the challenge of developing robust local systems capable of sustaining water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) service delivery.

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For more information, visit [www.globalwaters.org/SWS](http://www.globalwaters.org/SWS), or contact Dan Hollander ([Daniel.Hollander@colorado.edu](mailto:Daniel.Hollander@colorado.edu)) or Elizabeth Jordan ([Ejordan@usaid.gov](mailto:Ejordan@usaid.gov)).

