

Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership

Factors Driving Success in Collective Action Approaches to WASH

November 2021

Kimberly Pugel, Shawn Peabody, Amy Javernick-Will

[Collective action](#) approaches are increasingly being used to create sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. However, these approaches are relatively understudied, and little evidence is available on what real-world factors influence their success. This brief summarizes a [flagship report](#) that systematically and robustly analyzed 11 cases from the United States Agency for International Development–funded Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership (SWS) from 2016 until 2021 that took place in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. It provides information on the factors that drive success of collective action approaches and informs future WASH programming.

Challenge

Complex WASH issues often prompt collaboration either because they exceed the abilities of any single entity or because current efforts are fragmented or stifled by perverse incentives. Fragmentation is no stranger to the WASH sector, where national and local governments, service providers, and development organizations have traditionally worked in an isolated fashion, or only loosely coordinated to reduce duplicated efforts. Local institutions responsible for WASH services are also often highly fragmented, creating both gaps and overlaps of service roles and responsibilities that waste resources and weaken WASH services, infrastructure, and overall development.

Recognizing the need for collaboration to overcome complex, systemic issues, the WASH sector has begun to adopt collective action approaches. Yet, these approaches remain understudied, especially regarding the factors most necessary for successful implementation in WASH. Over the past 5 years, SWS has worked to fill this gap in evidence.

Collective Action Approaches

SWS defines collective action as a process where a coalition, or a group of local, multi-sectoral stakeholders, regularly convenes to take joint action toward addressing a shared problem. The coalition iteratively explores, strategizes, and implements solutions, with each member bringing unique knowledge and skills to the table. By design, it often produces results that are greater than the sum of its parts, solving problems that no single entity could have solved on its own.

Methods

Drawing from SWS partners' expertise, the research team systematically compared 11 cases of collective action in WASH, including nine SWS cases and two non-SWS cases. The research team used fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis to synthesize more than 100 literature sources, 4,000 pages of documentation, and 40 interviews and uncover key combinations of factors that contributed to success. To determine the relative success of each case the research team evaluated the extent to which each coalition implemented activities, accounting for the difficulty of each activity in relation to others.

Findings

This analysis revealed several insights as to what real-world conditions most facilitate the use of different collective action approaches in WASH.

- 1. Local government support and action is critical.** Having government decision-makers (e.g., district water offices, local authorities, and leaders) value, prioritize, and put resources toward collective action efforts proved critical to success in all 11 experiences. This was most effectively accomplished when activities aligned within government mandates, the coalition demonstrated its legitimacy, and government decision-makers understood the value of the coalition.
- 2. There is no single pathway to success.** Three pathways or combinations of factors (Figure 1) contributed to a program's success, or ability to make progress on difficult outcomes. Key drivers of success in these coalitions included: a hub's convening power; local government uptake, and either external funding for coalition activities or member continuity and accountability. Other cases made progress on difficult activities when they combined collective problem identification with external funding and local government uptake.



Figure 1. Three unique pathways, or combinations of factors explain how cases made progress.

- 3. Collective action requires resources.** Collective action requires extensive staff time as well as investments in direct costs (i.e., logistics, travel, and other operational costs). SWS analyzed resources spent for collective action methods and tools used in all 11 experiences. More than half of the costs (53 percent of staff time and 52 percent of direct costs) can be attributed to recurring coalition meetings, including preparation, meeting costs, and follow up. Other major costs included monitoring progress and documenting activities. Smaller costs included conducting learning exchange visits (e.g., coalition members traveling to another district to learn about new approaches or programs) and multi-district meetings (e.g., representatives from multiple neighboring coalitions meeting to discuss and learn about regional WASH issues). Additionally, coalition activities incur costs. For example, coalitions that helped to create a district WASH master plan and demonstrate a service delivery model incurred costs between \$30,000 and \$130,000 over the course of the activity.

4. **Two main approaches work to define problems.** All cases in this study had an agreed-upon vision of universal access to water or sanitation services, but cases differed in how they identified the activities they would implement to reach that vision. Some relied on the member organization to identify the issue. In this case, the coalition identified the key WASH issues, broad solutions to address those issues, and planned detailed activities for each solution. The second approach is when a lead support organization, often in collaboration with a few government officials, identifies an existing WASH issue prior to the formation of the coalition. This organization then convenes a coalition of local stakeholders to collaboratively execute those established goals. Contrary to some collective action literature, SWS found that neither form of identifying problems was better than the other, but each carried unique risks and benefits.
5. **Hubs can secure convening power and capacity in different ways.** Hubs, or the entities that convene and facilitate the coalition, in many cases needed convening power in addition to strong capacity to effectively fulfill their role. The way that convening power and capacity are gained can vary. Government entities that meet these criteria are ideal hubs. If governance systems or institutions are less able to satisfy these criteria and an outside and independent organization can do so, e.g., an independent NGO or community-based organization that meets hub functions, then that entity should be the sole hub. When governance systems and institutions are reliable, consistent, and supportive, but capacity and resources for the coalition are scarce, then the government entity and independent organization should share the hub role.

Collective Action Recommendations

1. **Implementing Organizations.** Design hub structures, problem identification methods, and funding structures as necessary based on the context. Recognize that government uptake will be critical to your success and ensure that the activities of the coalition align clearly within government mandates, key local decision-makers are convinced of the value of coalition activities, and the coalition itself is seen as a legitimate and credible entity. Programs need to have flexibility to adapt and shift as needed, working with local stakeholders to develop a common understanding of the local system and aligning (and adapting) methods and tools with local experience and constraints.
2. **Government Agencies.** Collective action platforms can help local governments fulfil their mandates while also enhancing leadership, authority, and coordination. In the studied cases, local government officials regularly recognized the unique role of collective action approaches in solving complex WASH problems that could not be solved by any single entity, and, in a few instances, moved to institutionalize them as official government structures. Government agencies can also help ensure success of collective action by leveraging their own convening power to ensure that influential stakeholders participate in collective action processes, align group WASH priorities, and drive progress.
3. **Funders.** When reviewing proposals, ensure implementers have prior knowledge of the location and, ideally, existing networks and connections to local stakeholders. If implementers are new to an area, examine their plan for gaining convening power and local government commitment and uptake. Check to make sure they have adequate resources and skills for facilitation and training, event planning, consultation, leadership, and systems analyses. In addition, provide startup or seed funding for activities of the coalition. Recognizing that it can take several years for coalitions to build trust and strong relationships, funders should be realistic about resources and timelines.

Collective Action Experiences

1. **Kitui, Kenya.** The Kitui County WASH Forum has focused for years on improving rural water services. Kitui County's population is just over 1.22 million people, 86 percent of whom reside in rural areas where 82 percent of rural piped systems are managed by users and/or community-based water management committees. These water pipe systems only have a 60 percent functionality rate. Through SWS, Oxford University collaborated with UNICEF Kenya and Rural Focus Ltd. to strengthen the existing WASH forum, making it more collaborative and action-oriented, with the goal of standardizing and formally regulating the way that maintenance services are provided in the county. SWS partners developed an infrastructure monitoring system that generates rural water service data and statistics to provide evidence and inform efforts. The WASH forum gained support to develop a county water bill to standardize scheme management and also to institutionalize the Kitui forum within the government and its budget. The bill will formally recognize the private sector; mandate the county to establish and fund a water service monitoring database, and establish a trust fund to subsidize rural water operations and maintenance. Bill enactment is ongoing.

2. **South Ari, Ethiopia.** South Ari is a district (woreda) in the South Omo Zone of Ethiopia, home to 279,574 people, only 26 percent of whom have access to water services via a patchwork of 245 water schemes, 334 point sources, and 334 household connections. Where infrastructure exists, it is mainly managed by community-based Water User Associations (35 percent). SWS partnered with the South Ari government to establish a collective action coalition called a learning alliance, where local rural water stakeholders meet regularly to explore challenges and work together to develop solutions, such as a capacity building of Water User Associations to reinforce regular maintenance practices. The learning alliance improved the Water User Association capacity in the district to maintain and monitor rural water scheme functionality — a focus area the learning alliance identified after IRC conducted WASH systems assessments. A lack of district government capacity, including skills, equipment, and staffing levels, and high government turnover meant this coalition relied upon an independent hub with high capacity but low convening power.
3. **Nakaseke, Uganda.** Nakaseke District is located in rural Uganda and as of 2017, only 40 percent of the population had access to basic levels of water services. There, SWS partner Whave Solutions helped to develop a collective action coalition, the Nakaseke District Public Private Partnership (PPP), to focus on improving its water service sector. Quarterly PPP meetings averaged an 80 percent attendance rate. In Nakaseke, member accountability for action items proved challenging early in the project but improved over time, especially after a district councilor who kept in regular contact with members between meetings took over meeting facilitation. A key vision for the PPP included appointing and regulating Whave, the local professionalized maintenance service provider, as the sole Area Service Provider (ASP) for maintenance of rural water points. The PPP achieved this outcome through consistent engagement with district local government authorities who were shown Whave's track record of more than 7 years of effective water service provision within the district. Joel Mukanga from Whave said, "We were able to show proof of concept by collecting and presenting data on functionality, which clearly indicates that in areas where Whave is providing professional maintenance services, water point functionality is consistently near 100 percent. Nakaseke also heard from neighboring local officials that the initial efforts with Whave were working well. This, combined with the new national O&M [operations and maintenance] policy for rural water services, which adopted Whave's ASP approach, convinced them to work toward institutional change for sustainable rural water service delivery."

Through this work, SWS addressed an understudied but growing approach to water and sanitation sustainability by investigating factors driving success in collective action approaches. No single pathway ensured success; rather, a combination of five key factors drove progress on difficult outcomes in the studied coalitions, including gaining local government uptake, having a hub with convening power; having external funds available for coalition activities, having member continuity and accountability, and, in some cases, collectively identifying the problem to be addressed. These findings provide key recommendations to implementing organizations, government agencies, and funders.

More information on this research including the full report and links to associated journal articles can be found on Globalwaters.org.

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 with the University of Colorado Boulder (UCB) to identify locally driven solutions to the challenge of developing robust local systems capable of sustaining water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) service delivery. The consortium of partners — Environmental Incentives, IRC, LINC, Oxford University, Tetra Tech, WaterSHED, Whave, and UCB — are demonstrating, learning about, and sharing evidence on systems-based approaches for improving the sustainability of WASH services in four countries. This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through USAID under the terms of the Cooperative Agreement AID-OAA-A-16-00075. The contents are the responsibility of the Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government. For more information, visit www.globalwaters.org/SWS, or contact Amy JavernickWill (amy.javernick@colorado.edu) or Ryan Mahoney (rymahoney@usaid.gov).