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Lessons Learned Series

COMBATting COVID-19 IN AFRICA

USAID's [Water for Africa through Leadership and Institutional Support \(WALIS\)](#) project focuses on building the capacity of sub-Saharan Africa's national and regional leaders to capture and apply evidence in the development of policies, strategies, programs, and investments to improve the capacity of their water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sectors.

The [African Ministers' Council on Water \(AMCOW\)](#) is a specialized African Union technical committee mandated to accelerate the achievement of WASH goals and provide policy direction across their 55 member states. AMCOW strives for an Africa with equitable and sustainable water resource use and management for socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, and regional cooperation. AMCOW's leadership on water and sanitation issues places the organization at the forefront of WASH knowledge, and as a hub for timely, reliable WASH information and data.

AMCOW and WALIS have developed the Lessons Learned Series, which examines emerging experiences, knowledge, opportunities, and challenges of African-led WASH policy development and implementation. The Series also identifies individual country solutions that others can replicate, with a focus on COVID-19 response mechanisms.

BACKGROUND

From 2016 to 2020, WALIS implemented the [Improving WASH Evidence-Based Decision-Making \(IWED\)](#) program to encourage a shift toward sustainable services delivery, consistent with [Sustainable Development Goal 6](#), through smarter use of data, better monitoring, greater emphasis on analysis, and evidence-building. The program also focuses on strengthening WASH sector policies and strategies and encouraging sharing lessons learned and experience among African governments.

IWED supported demand-driven, country-led initiatives to improve data monitoring and analysis in six countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Mozambique, Senegal, and Tanzania. The initiatives strengthened the respective governments' abilities to develop informed policy and sectoral planning for sustainable WASH services and their capacity to improve the collection and use of sector data.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

WALIS: Alayne Potter, Deputy Chief of Party: alayne_potter@walis.org

AMCOW: Obinna Anah, Knowledge Management Officer: [oanah@amcow-online.org](mailto: oanah@amcow-online.org)

LESSON LEARNED #1: STRENGTHENED WASH DATA SYSTEMS HELP AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS RESPOND TO COVID-19

TANZANIA

With more than [two million confirmed COVID-19 cases](#) across the African continent, it has never been more important for governments to ensure the provision of improved water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services and facilities. Handwashing with soap is recognized by the World Health Organization as one of the most important measures in the prevention of the COVID-19 virus. In addition, while accurate, reliable, and timely data is needed to identify and prioritize WASH investments in the fight against COVID-19, many African countries lack sound sector data.

In [Tanzania](#), WALIS helped the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender Elderly and Children (MoHCDGEC) increase access to quality data by supporting the development of a national WASH web portal- a public facing data access system. The Tanzania [WASH Portal](#) is used by decision makers to identify and allocate resources to areas with low sanitation and hygiene coverage. “We have been using information on the Portal and National Sanitation and Management Information System (NSMIS) to track trends and identify where we need to increase sanitation and hygiene efforts. The availability of reliable and current data helped us identify hotspots of COVID-19 infections and allocate resources for the establishment of handwashing stations and training in public places,” says Anyitike Mwakitalima, Head of the Water Safety, Sanitation, and Hygiene Sub-Unit at MoHCDGEC.

“The availability of reliable and current data helped us identify hotspots of COVID-19 infections and allocate resources for establishment of handwashing stations in public places,” says Anyitike Mwakitalima, WASH expert at the Tanzania Ministry of Health.

Due to this increased engagement at the local level, Tanzania’s handwashing rate climbed from 21% in December 2019 to 38% by June 2020. Mwakitalima considers this a feat since it had previously taken years for Tanzania to improve its handwashing rates.

According to Mwakitalima, the Portal has made it easier for decision-makers to access the WASH data stored on the NSMIS. Before the Portal was developed, only Ministry staff could access the WASH data on the NSMIS. This meant that stakeholders, including regional and district-level officials, could not view data collected across the country, undermining NSMIS’s objective to be a transparent advocacy tool. “Since the web portal launched, decision and policymakers now have access to required data anytime, anywhere,” says Mwakitalima.

Additionally, information stored on the Portal and NSMIS informed the Tanzanian government’s efforts to curb future cholera outbreaks. “We used the data to assess the sanitation and hygiene profiles of the affected districts and realized that they had little to no sanitation coverage and very low rates of handwashing practice. So, it is in those areas that we focused our efforts and allocated more resources to improve sanitation and hygiene coverage,” says Mwakitalima. “Without access to such information, it would otherwise be impossible for decision-makers and other stakeholders to know where the problems are and what interventions are necessary to improve the situation,” he adds.