

USAID/E3 Water Communications and Knowledge Management (CKM) Project

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

[Christian Holmes on WASH Accomplishments and Lessons Learned](#)

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Global Waters Radio: You are tuned into Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the United States Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting edge research from around the world.

Today on the podcast, we're speaking with USAID Global Water Coordinator Christian Holmes. Chris has spent nearly his entire career engaged in different aspects of protecting human health and the environment, working at USAID, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency, as well as in the academic, private, and the NGO sectors. He has served as USAID's Global Water Coordinator since 2011, and since 2015, he has also served as Deputy Assistant Administrator for Water in the Agency's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment, where he has been responsible for overseeing USAID's global water portfolio. As he prepares to depart from the Agency, Chris is sharing with us reflections and lessons learned from his tenure.

Chris, to start things off, you have been the Agency's first-ever Global Water Coordinator. Can you describe for our listeners how your role and work has evolved over the past several years?

Christian Holmes: I'll be happy to do so. First of all, I was asked back in 2010 to begin working on USAID water programs, and as we reviewed the programs we concluded that the Agency really needed to have a global water strategy to be able to guide its expenditures and programs, and in particular, because the water programs increasingly were becoming more and more important to the success of other programs in addition to water supply, sanitation and hygiene—such as our education programs, and the very important role which WASH programs have in helping keep girls in school when you provide adequate water supply and sanitation and privacy.

So initially, we began in 2011 with the work on developing a strategy. We put together a great interagency team. We worked very closely with partners both in the public and private sector as we developed it. And by late 2013, we actually were able to launch the strategy and begin implementing it. It is focusing now on a target never yet set before by AID in water,

wherein we commit to reach over five years 16 million people with water and sanitation, and 2 million people with improved water management for food security.

So, when you put together any kind of strategy, you really have to have the best possible organizational support—staff support—because nothing happens without great people and great partners. So we created the Office of Water within USAID, and we hired a team of experts with the skills necessary to implement the water strategy, building upon and working with an already very impressive group of individuals in AID engaged in the water sector.

But subsequently, as we moved along with the strategy, we began implementing it through new approaches to programming and partnerships. But I think the most outstanding thing that occurred, shortly after the strategy, was really two things. One was the Agency coming together and putting together a very detailed guide, and sharing it with the public on just how we are going to do business in a new fashion at AID with water. And there are a couple things that really stood out in that guide. One of which was specifying the priority countries for the water strategy, and that was the first time we had done that, and that was very much in line with the emphasis the Congress has placed on priority countries when they passed the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act back in 2005.

The second thing that was really remarkable as we started to implement the strategy was the fact that the Congress passed the Paul Simon Water for the World Act of 2014, and that Act incorporated much of the water strategy and in fact even codified the Global Water Coordinator position in the law. And I feel that what was indicative about the Congress incorporating the strategy was that not only did it address congressional needs and concerns as related to specificity, but there was also an overall emphasis in the strategy to really have a certain focus and sensitivity to the needs of women as it relates to water—not just in the context of protecting women, which is highly important, but also in the context of engaging women in the development of water programs. And that most certainly seemed to have resonated with a tremendous number of people in the Congress. So, this again reflected I think very strong support for work in the water sector.

GWR: Well Chris, as you reflect upon your work as Global Water Coordinator, what are the key WASH programming accomplishments you're most proud of, and why?

CH: So you know when you ask me to reflect on my work, I really have to reflect on the work on the hundreds of people across AID that are engaged in working on these water programs. It has been an extraordinary team effort of linking people with different disciplines in such a way that we come together with the common objective of basically meeting enormous needs for water and sanitation.

So one of the achievements of course is meeting your targets. You know, we set this target of reaching 10 million people with water, and now we're a little bit more than halfway through the strategy, we reached 6.8 million. We set a target of reaching 6 million people with access to sanitation, and now we're at about 4.3 million reached, and finally we set this targeted of reaching 2 million people with improved water management for food production. We have exceeded that target already by reaching approximately 3.2 million people, and I think that's a tremendous accomplishment. It's reflective of not just the hard work of AID people, but the hard work of our implementing partners, the nongovernmental

organizations that we've partnered with since the creation of USAID, our developing country counterparts, and many others.

I think also in terms of programming accomplishments and achievements, we are all very proud of our increased focus and skill sets being developed around integrative approaches to meeting water, sanitation and hygiene, and other needs. We've launched a major \$50 million award in Kenya called the Kenya Integrated WASH program, which is a combination of funds from our water supply, sanitation, and hygiene budget, and our food security budget to develop an integrated approach to meet water and nutrition needs at the same time. And when you tackle those two needs, namely water and nutrition, it's also an important way to help reduce stunting. So, getting more leverage out of our water programs becomes absolutely essential.

GWR: Well, in terms of getting more leverage out of the Agency's water programs, let's talk partnerships, which represent an important means of achieving greater impact at scale. Can you talk to our listeners about why you think partnerships are strategically important to help advance USAID's WASH objectives?

CH: I think in terms of our partnerships, what has been important is that they've been a wonderful way in which to attract additional funds and technology and experience and expertise to our work, and also to really achieve great leverage when we're doing that. And our partnerships are arranged in many different approaches. So over the last year, we've been working in India with the Gates Foundation on a partnership wherein we're helping build up the staffing capacity of the Ministry of Urban Development there, to develop new approaches to end open defecation in some 4200 cities throughout India. At the same time in India, we've developed a partnership with Coca-Cola and Plan International, where we're going to be working in 60 schools throughout India, targeted on introducing water supply, sanitation and hygiene into these schools so as to reduce the dropout rate of young women and young boys who leave school because of inadequate water supply and sanitation.

And finally, I think one of the most impactful partnerships we have and clearly I think the most expansive in terms of global reach, has been the Securing Water for Food partnership, which is a partnership with the Government of Sweden, the Government of Netherlands, and South Africa where we've gone out on a global call seeking new approaches to increase food production or at least maintain food production in areas that have enormously scarce supplies of water and in areas where it has been extremely difficult to be able to produce food. And many of those approaches are already being put in place. So I think this is kind of indicative of some of the different approaches we've been taking.

GWR: Chris, what lessons have you learned over the years that you feel are most relevant for strengthening WASH programming?

CH: Well I think one overarching lesson is it's important to be humble. These challenges are absolutely enormous—both the needs and the causes of the problems that we have to address. I think within that context, there are really three lessons that have really stood out.

One is the power of the strategy, particularly if the strategy has great specificity, and particularly if the entity that has to implement the strategy, in this case USAID, is deeply

engaged both deeply and broadly within the Agency on both the development of the strategy and its implementation. If they have that kind of support, they become critical because they bring focus to one's work.

I think the second lesson that I've learned is that the challenges are really only going to increase, and I feel as we go into the future, these present challenges that we deal with—climate change, conflict, diminished water supply, and most recently, pandemics—are continuing challenges. And as we mature, and as we develop our water strategy, I think over time we are going to have to do more and more specific work strategically as it relates to these challenges.

The last lesson to me is that you know there's just no one fix. Problems are so enormous, you know we're talking about 2 billion people in need of sanitation, probably 800 million to a billion people in need of water. The global stunting levels are absolutely enormous. There is a figure now about 160 million children that are stunted and then finally on top of all that, you have the enormous loss of life due to the diarrheal disease, and diarrheal disease is in part attributable to inadequate clean water and sanitation.

So we're talking about enormity in terms of sheer numbers of humans in need, and I think that when you put together an approach to deal with these problems... what I've concluded is that rather than looking for a magic bullet, one has to really look at things from very systems-based perspective and a very human-based perspective. And I think the solutions and effective responses are really found, and are really grounded, in these areas.

I think one is exercising individual and collective leadership. I am very proud of people at AID that come together with a minimum amount of supervision, and in a very self-managed way, developed and implemented programs. I think secondly, it is highly important to exhibit compassion and empathy and remain never inured to the enormous suffering that one deals with on a day-in-day-out basis. Thirdly, to me, we're just engaged to meet these problems and the continuing development and application of new knowledge. And this most certainly entails learning about and applying interventions which have an enormous leverage.

I also feel that when you look at meeting these water and sanitation needs, that it's a systems-based approach. In other words, there is no one point that one should basically lock in on. I think what one has to do is lock in on numerous points in the system, and then approach it from that perspective. And that means building understanding, both needs and responses of the community at the local, regional, national, and international levels when you're dealing with the challenges of reaching billions of people.

I also feel that without governance capacity, without developing countries having their own capacity, sources of finance to be able to apply, it's very difficult to meet this challenge. And for that reason, another mechanism, which has also been developed by the Agency, the so-called WALIS mechanism, is also very much focused on capacity building and institution building.

So all of this is terrific. These concerns are all important, but one can never forget the importance of the people who are on the ground, the implementing partners, the NGOs, the developing country professionals who operate in enormously trying circumstances and

deliver service. The one element to all this, which one always needs to remember, is that it is ultimately the individual that receives the service that plays the greatest role in all of this, because it's the individual that understands what they need, and understands how to utilize service. So I think strategically, tactically, humanly, always really try to listen and relate to each individual on a human basis—that is pretty critical. So that's what I've learned.

GWR: Well Chris, thanks so much for taking the time today, and we want to thank you for all your efforts in helping drive the Agency's many water and sanitation achievements in recent years. For our listeners, as always, if you have any topics you'd like to see covered in a future edition of the podcast, you can easily contact us at waterteam@usaid.gov.

This is Global Waters Radio.