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APPLYING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT FOR RESULTS IN A FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT

A USAID Water and Sanitation Project Learning Note

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INTRODUCTION 1
CONTEXT 1
Water Sector 1
USAID Water and Sanitation Project in Haiti 3
The Operating Environment 3
APPLYING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT 4
Lesson 1: A Vision for Change 5
Lesson 2: People and Tools Before Infrastructure 6
Lesson 3: Building on small victories 9
How it worked 10
What we learned 11

INTRODUCTION

USAID and its implementing partners frequently work in countries undergoing rapid and complex change triggered by political turmoil, natural disasters, and economic downturns. Development activities are often designed well in advance of implementation and based on assumptions about the future operating environment. Yet conditions and contexts can rapidly change – as was the case in Haiti. Implementers must seek a path forward despite the chaotic operating environment.

This Learning Note presents evidence synthesized from interviews with project staff, government stakeholders and other partners to understand how USAID/Haiti, stakeholders, and DAI used adaptive management to successfully implement the $46.7 million, five-year USAID Water and Sanitation Project in Haiti to achieve successful results, even as Haiti struggled with its economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the assassination of the President, and a major earthquake. While this document focuses on the water activities, the lessons apply equally to the sanitation activities. The three main key adaptive management lessons are summarized in the graphic below and are detailed in the following narrative.

Key Takeaways

Establish, and work toward, a bold, aspirational vision for change. Manage capacity-building and activities toward aspirations rather than deficiencies.	Find and empower the champions that can bring about the change. Listen carefully to the beneficiaries to understand their issues.	Early successes are critical and build support for longer term change. They can be achieved even in uncertain environments.

CONTEXT

Haiti's Water Sector

While Haiti has long had the lowest access to potable water of any country in the Western Hemisphere, donors began large investments in the water sector prior to the 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), the World Bank and other donors began investing in the sector, committing nearly $600 million over 10 years--roughly $55 for each person in Haiti.

One of the initiatives supported by the donors was reform of the water sector. This culminated with the passage of a law in 2009 creating the National Water the Sanitation Authority (known by its French acronym of DINEPA) with responsibility for overall management and regulation of the water and sanitation sector. The law also created four regional authorities (known as OREPAs) with one for each of the four regions: West, East, North, and South; urban water utilities (known as CTEs) for managing the urban water networks, and rural water management committees (known as CAEPAs) for managing the small, rural networks (see the text box below). Whereas previously the water systems were managed centrally, in this new arrangement the CTEs were given the authority to sell water and retain the revenues to pay expenses and salaries of their staff.

On January 12, 2010, only a few months after the reform process started, the greater Port-au-Prince area was hit by a terrible earthquake. The government's and donors' attention switched to focusing on helping people to survive the earthquake and then to rebuild from the damage. Reform of the water sector stalled. In 2017, at the start of the USAID Water and Sanitation Project, only two out of the 27 CTEs in the entire

country generated enough revenue from water sales to cover their basic operating costs. The remaining CTEs were caught in a vicious cycle of poor service leading to lower customer revenues and ad hoc dependency on subsidies for fuel and chlorine. The World Bank noted in the *Haiti WASH Poverty Diagnostic* (World Bank, 2017) that the percentage of the population with access to piped water declined from 62% to 58% between 1990 and 2015.

How water systems in Haiti are managed

Each urban water network in Haiti is managed by a *Technical Operations Center* (CTE), owned by the Regional Water and Sanitation Authority (OREPA), and under the overall regulation of the National Water and Sanitation Authority (DINEPA). DINEPA sets the rules for operations and directs capital investments to each region, while the OREPAs manage capital investments. However, these water networks are quite small. While the CTE that serves the Port-au-Prince area has over 50,000 customers, the next largest CTE has only 6,000 customers and most serve less than 1,000. Each CTE has a director, and the larger ones have up to three additional professional level positions (operations, administrative, and commercial managers) and up to 30 support staff (plumbers, meter readers, invoice deliverers, and cleaners).

Nearly all the CTEs sell water based on a fixed monthly fee. In general, these tariffs were set with the establishment of the CTEs in 2009 and had not been adjusted. With Haiti's high inflation, the tariff is only worth a small fraction of its 2009 value. Between the low number of subscribers and the low tariffs, the vast majority of the CTEs bring in less than $10,000/month with some only generating around $1,000/month—enough to only cover the low salaries paid to the dozen people who work for these smaller utilities. These low revenues mean that the CTEs pay low salaries and have few funds left over for maintenance on the system, leaving them caught in a vicious circle of providing poor service that then leads to customers finding alternative sources of water which further lowers their revenues.

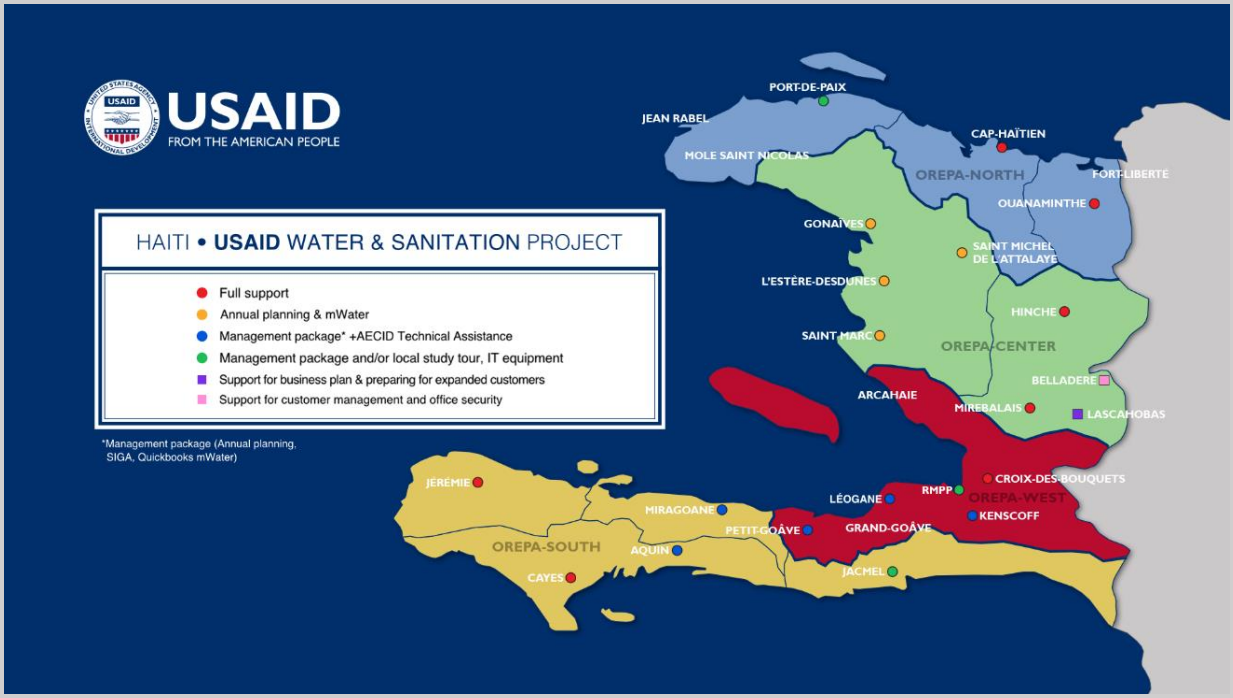

Figure 1. The USAID Water and Sanitation Project works with all 27 CTEs in Haiti. The CTEs are divided into four regions (blue for North, green for Center, red for West, and yellow for South).

USAID Water and Sanitation Project in Haiti

In 2016, USAID/Haiti designed a new intervention to improve water and sanitation services in Haiti; the contract was awarded to DAI and implementation began in December 2017. The USAID Water and Sanitation Project (The Project) is a $46.7-million, five-year activity implemented in collaboration with DINEPA. The Project initially targeted the communes of Cap-Haïtien, Mirebalais, Croix-des-Bouquets, Les Cayes and Jérémie - areas hard hit by the 2010 cholera outbreak and by Hurricane Mathew in 2015. The Project subsequently expanded to another seven locations including two that were hit by the 2021 earthquake in the South of Haiti. Ultimately it is impacting all the CTEs in Haiti through partnerships with other donor-funded projects and national-level events.

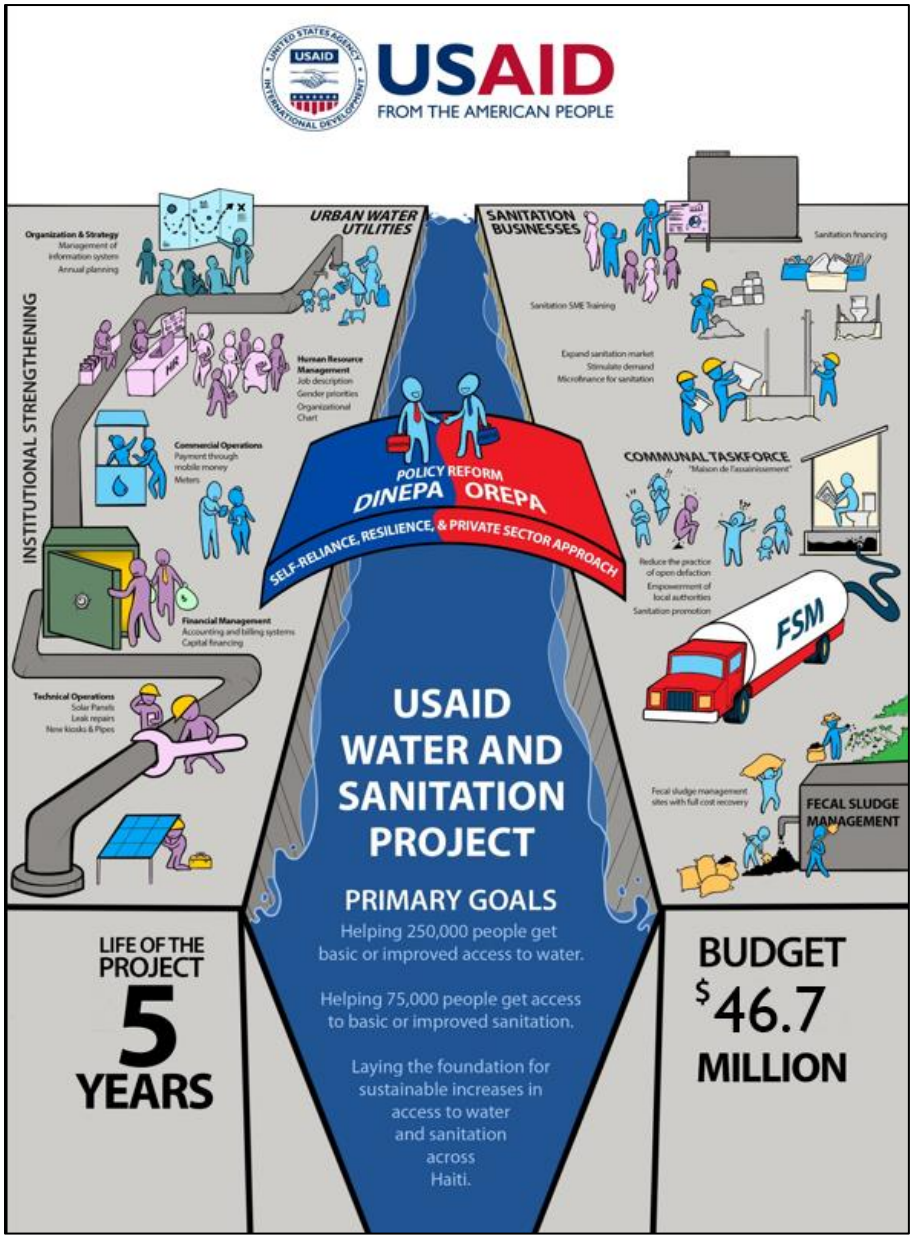

Figure 2. The Project used visuals such as this poster to easily explain the project approach.

The Project had a bottom-up approach—focusing on building the capacity of the CTEs based on the theory of change that by improving operations of the local water and sanitation utilities, these utilities will be able to offer better services which will lead to better health and economic development outcomes for Haiti. Furthermore, these local successes can then be replicated in other areas leading ultimately to changes at the national level.

The Operating Environment

USAID designed and sought an implementer for the Project in 2016-2017 when the Haitian government was relatively stable, and the economy was growing, due in part, to the robust international largesse in response to the earthquake. The Project's first year, 2018, during which time the WASH sector assessments were being undertaken, turned out to be the only stable year for the Project (see Figure 3

below). By early 2019, the situation in Haiti began to deteriorate. There were widespread protests in Haiti in March 2019 over the government's attempt to increase fuel prices. In fall 2019, the protests became more severe, leading to a two-month shutdown of the entire country—referred to in Haiti as *Pays Lock*. In early 2020, kidnapping became so common that the US State Department raised the travel warning for Haiti to Level 4—the highest possible rating. Then, in March 2020, the COVID pandemic hit. The Haitian government closed its borders, ports, and airports for three and a half months. In July 2021, the President of Haiti was assassinated in his home. The Prime Minister organized a transitional government with a mandate of quickly moving to electing a new government. In August 2021, Haiti was hit by a magnitude 7.2 earthquake, followed by a severe storm, Grace, about a week later. By October, the gangs in the neighborhoods around Port-au-Prince grew so strong that they were able to block all fuel deliveries in Haiti, bringing the country's economic activity to a halt. Within weeks, the government was able to restart fuel deliveries, but the gangs remained in control of the poor neighborhoods surrounding Port-au-Prince. As of early 2022, the Prime Minister and his transitional government are still in power and there is no clear timeline for elections.

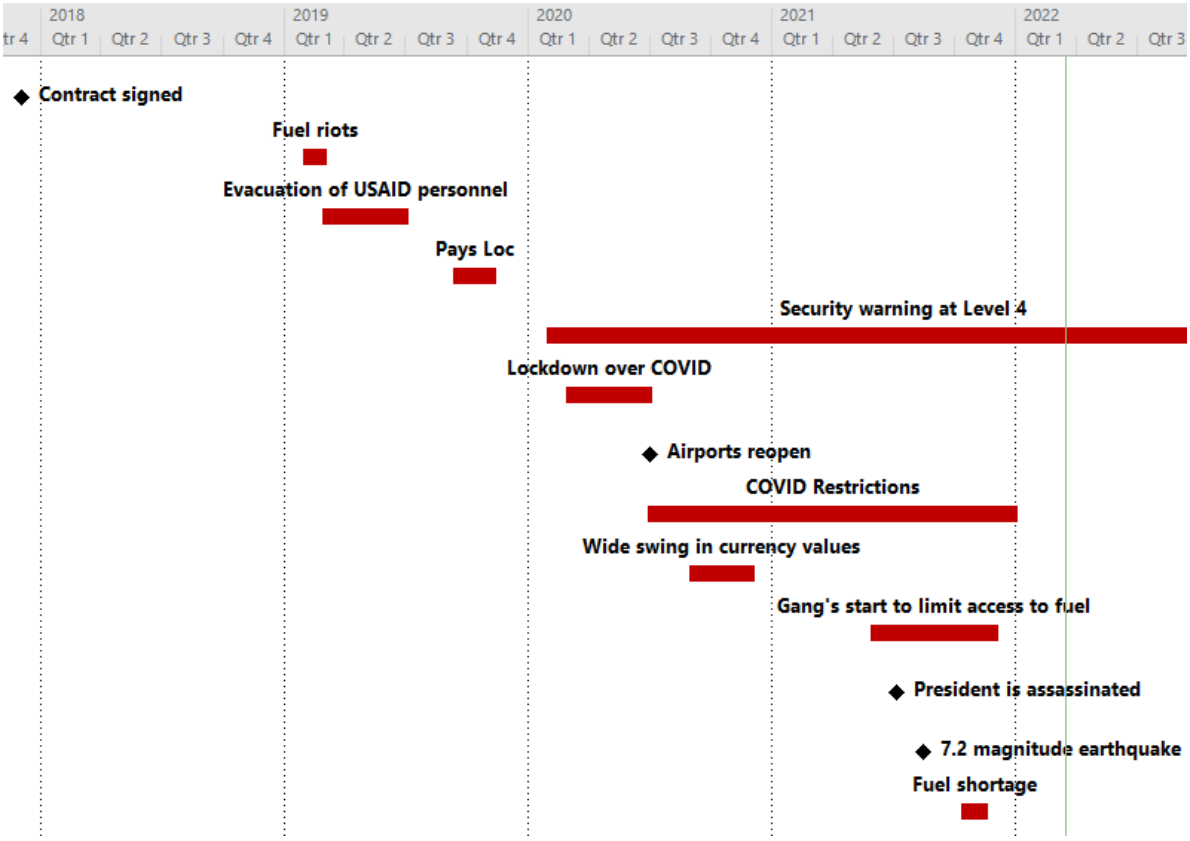

Figure 3. Except for its first year, the Project faced a constant series of crisis through implementation.

APPLYING ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Despite this constant turmoil, the Project has helped to transform the water sector – supporting the water utilities in Haiti's cities to escape the vicious cycle of deteriorating service and declining revenues, while expanding access to safe drinking water for the Haitian people. Not only have services improved in the targeted utilities, but the Project's interventions have led to improvements throughout the sector. As an example, between 2017 and 2020, the annual revenues from all the CTEs in Haiti had gone up by only

an estimated 6% from 405 million gourdes ($4.05 million) to 427 million gourdes ($4.27 million). In FY21, the revenues for the targeted CTEs increased by 40% and the overall revenues from all of the CTES had grown by 20% to 488 million gourdes ($4.88 million) (DINEPA, 2022). In FY22, the CTEs revenues will likely exceed 700 million gourdes ($7 million).

More importantly, DINEPA is developing a data-driven culture focused on rewarding performance. This is an important cultural shift that is critical for DINEPA to continue moving forward in its quest to provide safe water for all.

Adaptive management was key to the Project's ability to achieve these results in a fragile operating environment. The findings in this note are based on semi-structured interviews among 33 Haitian government stakeholders, development partners, Project staff and partners conducted by an outside consultant between July and September 2021. We synthesized those results, together with desk analysis of project documents, and identified three key lessons for applying adaptive management for results.

Lesson 1: Provide a bold, aspirational vision and find champions to support it

When the Project started, the CTEs in Haiti were struggling to collect enough revenues to meet payroll. With no funds for maintenance, they were managing a water system with declining distribution and declining revenues. Only one of the USAID-supported CTEs had been even keeping monthly financial records. The rest were struggling just to be minimally operational. There was a broad feeling both within DINEPA and the donor community that the CTEs could never generate enough money to cover their operating costs. The Project initially focused on cataloging the CTEs' deficiencies and developing plans to overcome them. This was a frustrating process for both the Project and the CTEs.

During the Project's second year, it switched its approach to an aspirational one and began pushing the vision that the CTEs ought to be able to generate the revenues that they needed to operate. Using the performance ladder from the World Bank's newly published Water Utility Turnaround Framework (UTF) (Soppe, Janson, & Piantini, 2018), the Project began to promote a vision for how the CTEs could grow. The UTF laid out five levels of performance from elementary (describing the situation for nearly all CTEs in Haiti at that time) up through world class (Figure 4). CTEs were then able to chart the goals and tasks that would take them from one performance level to the next – aligning everyone around a common vision of success and generating more ownership and gradually leading to self-sufficiency. The Project then designed and developed capacity-building programs to support the CTEs' own goals.

> *"More often than not when projects come, they come with things that are predesigned and they impose it on people. It's like I came with my own "thing" and, like it or not, you have no choice. When you do things like this, it's as if the results are for the implementer, it's not for the people you came to support or help. If you really wanted to help, if you wanted to have change, if you wanted to have an impact or sustainable change, the first thing you would need to do is work with the people to see what their needs are. You identify the needs together and see what you can offer and together we will move along. We will define things together so that everyone understands, and once we all understand we establish a plan together, and we get to work."* Nadine Rene, Liaison Agent in Hinche

With the Project pivot toward aspirational management, the Project made another pivot – away from more conventional training to coaching the CTE staff. Rather than holding a series of workshops, the Project placed locally-hired technicians (*Liaison Agents*) in each CTE and worked directly with the CTE staff to identify and overcome problems. By being in the CTEs every day, the Liaison Agents were able to

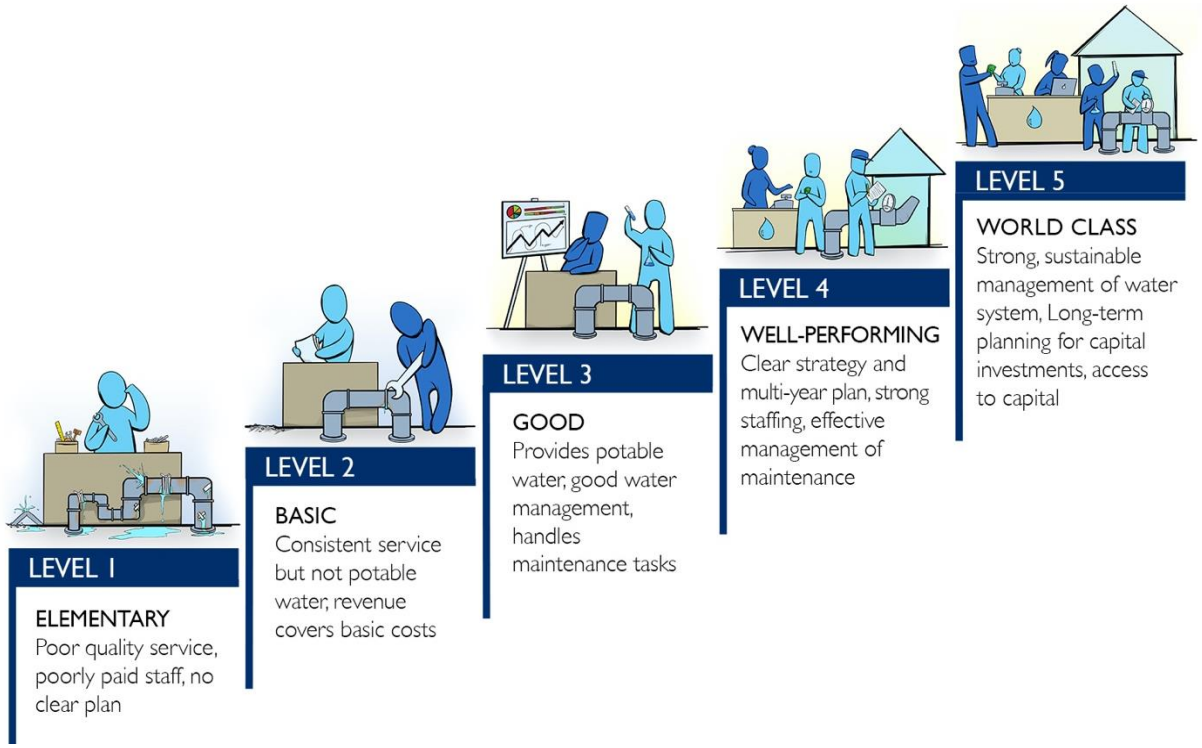

Figure 4. The Water Utility Turnaround Framework is based on a World Bank study of transforming a poorly performing water utilities in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia; it developed a clear roadmap of how to improve a utility's performance from an elementary level (level 1) up through four stages to reach World Class (Level 5).

build relationships with the CTE staff. They helped troubleshoot problems as they arose and encouraged the CTEs to keep moving forward. The Liaison Agents allowed project staff to get to know the CTE team better, understand how the management and staff experienced their jobs and to see their problems firsthand, allowing for adaptation as circumstances changed. Liaison Agents were themselves given the latitude to follow the lead of CTEs in designing and facilitating project support packages and to capitalize on opportunities. For instance, the Project supported CTEs to conduct progress review workshops, identify areas of potential improvement, and develop annual plans. The Liaison Agents were there to provide day-to-day support and on-going coaching to CTE staff. This strategy also allowed the Project to continue working when COVID-19 prevented gatherings and limited travel.

Lesson 2: Find champions and give them the tools they need to succeed

At the start of the Project, despite the large donor commitments to the water sector and the additional post-earthquake support, Haiti's water infrastructure was largely either inadequate or in poor condition. In the limited urban water distribution networks that did function, they leaked so badly that as little as 10% of the water was reaching customers. Except for the water system in Port-au-Prince, none of the systems had more than a few thousand paying customers and most had less than a thousand. Not surprisingly, the focus of most donors was to rebuild the infrastructure first and then to train the staff to manage and maintain it. However, infrastructure projects take a long time

> "More people are going towards infrastructure because it is more visible. They are looking for visibility. They are looking for things that have an inauguration ceremony. This makes an impact that is more rapid than the soft, that doesn't mean that it is sustainable, but it's more rapid." Théophil Ostinvil, Director for the OREPA-Center

I can say that we at the OREPA level were not happy when we first learned that the WatSan Project was focused on training instead of infrastructure. We were more accustomed to working with things in infrastructure because in Haiti we have many infrastructure problems. We need new reservoirs and spring caps. The project was not focused on this. The percentage of the budget was very low for infrastructure. I was skeptical and thought the project would never succeed.

We are more accustomed to a donor constructing a resource and helping us try to manage it, but USAID didn't see things like this. USAID saw that educating the staff, training people, and getting them to a performance level where they can actually perform and give results is more important than infrastructure. I think that this approach was very good and it has helped to give DINEPA a great boost with this project.

Pierre Poisson, Director, OREPA North

to identify, design, bid, and build leaving little or no time, budget, or inclination for capacity building.

At DINEPA's insistence, the Project had planned a similar approach, and assumed that early successes would be achieved through improvements to the infrastructure. Initial foundational studies focused on infrastructure needs rather than on the utility management.

During Year Two, as the Project began to spend more time with the CTEs and to better understand their problems, it became clear that the performance of the water systems depended more on the quality of the CTE management than it did on the infrastructure. As stated in the UTF:

> *Improving the performance of water utilities is difficult because the problems they face are complex and multidimensional. Problems caused by dysfunctional political environments, combined with an entrenched backlog of inefficient practices, cannot be solved by applying standard technical and managerial techniques. Achieving a sustained turnaround requires a framework that integrates practical steps to increase a utility's operational and managerial efficiency with measures to reverse the dysfunctional political equilibria in which it operates. (Water Utility Turnaround Framework, Introduction)*

As a result, the Project pivoted away from its initial emphasis on infrastructure and moved towards a greater focus on strengthening CTE management. USAID had recognized this in the design of the project, limiting infrastructure to no more than 40% of the Project budget.

The Project focused initially on the Les Cayes and Jérémie CTEs, but found that without a strong leader, it was hard to introduce new systems and change the culture. The Project started to push changes in other CTEs.

In Mirebalais, the Project found a dynamic leader who was very willing to do the work it took to fix things. It was amazing how quickly results could be achieved under a strong CTE Director. Jean-Denis Lordeus, the Director in Mirebalais, had a clear idea of how he wanted to improve water distribution and followed through on advice given by the Project to focus on improving service quality. With pipes and tools provided by the Project, the Mirebalais CTE repaired the main transmission line, significantly increasing water distribution. At the time, the CTE had the lowest tariff of any of the CTEs. As the water service improved, the CTE doubled the water tariff and used these additional funds to increase staff pay to a competitive level and make investments in continuing to grow their customer base. Strong leadership became the key criteria for expanding support to new utilities and the Project worked with the OREPAs to ensure that strong leaders were placed in each of the CTEs.

Figure 5. Jean-Denis Lourdes, the Director of the Mirebalais CTE, was the Project's first successful champion.

While leadership is essential for proper CTE management, it must be coupled with systems that support it. After some trial and error, the Project settled on supporting the CTEs' adoption of four software packages: **mWater**[1], a cloud-based platform for overall management of the water systems and monthly reporting; **SIGA**, a customized database program for customer management, **SISKLOR**, a customized data base program for water quality; and **QuickBooks** for accounting. All of these tools had been previously selected by DINEPA but were not widely used. The Project also worked with the CTEs to develop basic tools for human resources: organizational charts, job descriptions, salary grids, and an evaluation system.

[1] For more information on the remarkable role that data management played in the success of the USAID Water and Sanitation Project, see another Project Learning Note: *Using Data-Driven Management to Improve Water Service Provider Performance* (mWater, DAI, 2022).

Much of the coaching and support focused on the adoption of these programs. The CTEs were particularly eager to adopt SIGA because it allowed them to issue individualized invoices to its customers. By issuing regular, accurate invoices, they were able to substantially increase revenues. The reporting through mWater was critical for the CTEs to begin focusing on their performance indicators—basics such as revenues, number of subscribers, and volume of water produced. This allowed the CTEs to track their own performance. During the Project's third year, the Project's Liaison within DINEPA was promoted to be the head of DINEPA's monitoring division (known as ONEPA). Already a strong proponent of mWater, she used this new position to encourage the remaining CTEs in the country to begin reporting through mWater and showed the DINEPA staff the value of having this rich database of performance readily available.

This, combined with the strategic small investments to improve service quality, resulted in a significant jump in revenues for the CTEs. Once CTEs were collecting revenue, they needed an accounting system to manage their finances. Upon recommendations from the World Bank and IDB, DINEPA picked QuickBooks as a standard accounting system for the CTEs. The Project installed QuickBooks in each of the targeted CTEs and trained their staff on its use.

Because the Project had a bottom-up approach to improving the water sector, it could focus on helping CTEs to solve their specific problems and then share the successful approaches with other CTEs. As the Project identified best practices, it was then able to share them more broadly and eventually to encourage their adoption at the national level.

Shifting the focus from infrastructure solutions to improving systems was a cultural shift for DINEPA. It previously assumed that CTEs could not be self-supporting until they had better physical water systems. Initially, there was little support for the Project's approach of focusing on improving utility management. But the Project was able to adapt its approach to meet the immediate needs of utility staff and garner quick wins that demonstrated value. When Project-supported CTEs began to show significant improvement in revenue growth, DINEPA took interest and encouraged expansion of the Project approach, now urging others to follow the same model.

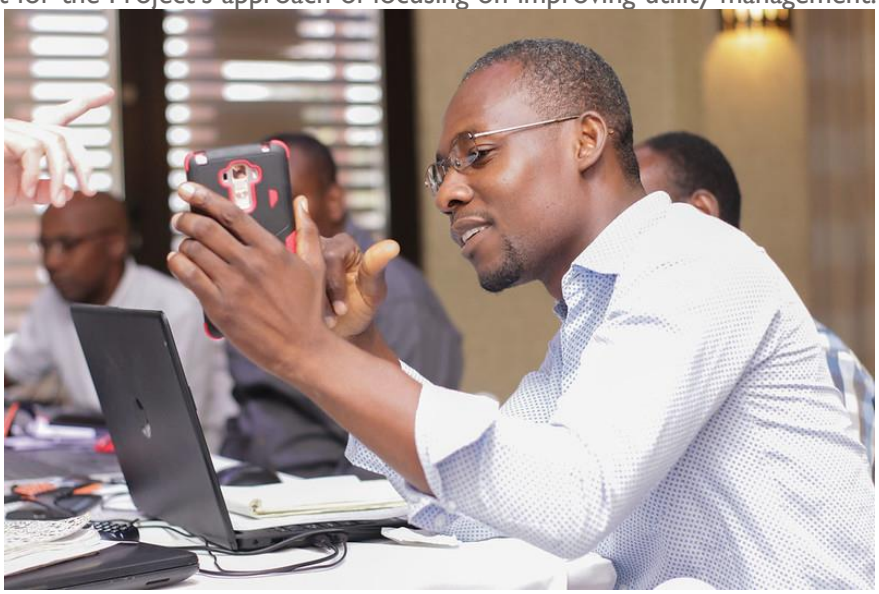

Figure 6. The adoption of online tools allowed for easy sharing of information.

Lesson 3: Building on small victories

Turning around a water utility is a difficult, time-consuming process. Infrastructure works can take years to bear fruit. Changing to a customer-focused, responsive mindset is difficult. Much of the hard work of adopting new systems is upfront with the benefits coming much later. Therefore, it was critical for the Project to help the CTEs achieve quick improvements.

To kickstart this process, the Project assigned two of its senior staff to work with the CTE staff and the Liaison Agents in Jérémie and Les Cayes to identify interventions to achieve quick impacts. In Jérémie, the Project decided to purchase pipes and tools so that the CTE staff could repair leaks in the distribution system themselves. In Les Cayes, the Project began paying for fuel for the generator at the pumping station so that they could increase water production. It also installed solar panels and improved the CTE office's security so that the staff could operate more effectively and have easy access to mWater, SIGA, SISKLOR, and QuickBooks. While these direct investments did not immediately improve the CTEs' performance, the willingness of the Project to step in and help the CTEs solve their immediate problems built confidence in the Project's approach.

This then became a key part of the Project's approach—providing concrete assistance to help the CTE to overcome day-to-day problems so that they could provide better service. In some CTEs, the Project provided paint so that they could improve the look of the office. This in turn made them feel and look more professional. The Project initially provided office supplies so that the CTEs could function properly as an office. When the CTE would hit key milestones, such as reaching a million gourdes in receipts in a single month, the Project would celebrate this victory with them.

The Project adopted a nimble approach to providing development assistance. Rather than focus on large infrastructure solutions, it would look for specific concrete and immediate problems to solve. It repaired a spring cap that was being polluted by stagnant water. It provided a storage shed for a CTE with no storage space. It provided additional pipes to allow another donor to expand an investment in rehabilitating a water system into targeted neighborhoods. Out of the $20 million spent on construction and in-kind assistance, not a single construction contract was over $1 million and only a handful were over $500,000.

This allowed the CTEs to quickly see a difference in their work. The staff would come to an office that looked more professional and functioned well. They had the tools that they needed to do their work. They heard of how the CTE's revenues were growing. This kept staff focused and motivated as the CTE went through the turnaround process.

How it all came together

During the first two years, the targeted CTEs' performance indicators remained flat. While the Project kept its focus on the long-term goal of improving the overall management, there was a lot of trial and error as the Project tried different techniques and watched to see which worked for the CTEs.

In Year Three the Project-supported CTEs with strong leadership began to show concrete results. Once the civil unrest ended and fuel was again available, the Les Cayes CTE was able to significantly increase production thanks to the Project providing them with enough fuel to pump consistently. The Mirebalais CTE was also effective at using pipes provided by the Project to improve water distribution. The Project's nimble approach and focus on problem solving also helped CTEs to leverage investments from other donors to achieve greater impacts. For example, it provided pipes to the Cap-Haïtien, Hinche and Jérémie CTEs to allow for

> "*If we look at the comportment of the Mirebalais and Hinche CTEs today, you will see that more or less the attitude of the people in the CTEs have completely changed. They are the same people before now but are different people in terms of their understanding of their roles. In terms of results. I have been in DINEPA since 2012. I used to think that the CTE didn't understand it was a public service. They didn't understand that the CTE had the principal role of a business where you are supposed to have a plan, a vision, etc. But with the integration of WatSan, with the same people, you see it's a different conception. It was truly a different conception.*" – Theophil Ostinvil
> Director, OREPA-Center

AECID-funded water supply infrastructure to reach a greater number of subscribers. Targeting these types of smaller interventions was effective at generating service improvements.

By the end of the third year (December 2020), the operating environment in Haiti had only gotten worse. Criminal gangs controlled large parts of the greater Port-au-Prince area and had effectively stopped overland travel to the southern part of the country. Since the assassination of the Haitian President the previous year, the interim government had not yet been able to put together a plan for a transition back to democracy. The Haitian economy had continued to deteriorate. Yet, DINEPA had solid momentum to improve the water sector.

The project-supported CTEs were doing dramatically better than those outside the program – growing their customer base and increasing revenues. The Project expanded from the initial five CTEs to working with 12. It began to sponsor regional planning workshops with the OREPAs to reach the remaining CTEs. In April 2021, it sponsored a national workshop on CTE management, bringing together for the first time all the CTEs and OREPAs. DINEPA began asking other donors to adopt a similar approach and to focus on CTE management rather than just infrastructure. At DINEPA's request, the Project organized a study tour for the Port-au-Prince CTE management team to visit the Project-supported CTEs to see how to better manage the capital city's water system.

Figure 7. The CTE Directors from Mirebalais and Croix des Bouquets won the award for overall leadership at the national workshop held in the Project's fourth year.

In December 2021, DINEPA held its first ever annual performance review of the CTEs. Thanks to the new systems, DINEPA could review and benchmark the performance of each CTE. The most striking part of the event was that it became clear that DINEPA and CTE staff now fully accept the idea that all water utilities should be able to cover their own operations and management costs and are willing to focus on effective management.

Conclusion: What we learned

The adaptive management approach adopted by the project enabled it to be flexible and pivot based on its early results and to demonstrate value and initial successes that developed buy-in and momentum. By working collaboratively with the CTEs in a bottom-up process of diagnosing, designing and implementing solutions – and by giving them the tools and data to be effective and to see where progress was happening – the Project created momentum that allowed change to continue even through distractions and challenges. By building local success and promoting those successes to the national level, the Project was

able to bring about, and scale, significant change despite the distractions. This locally-driven, bottom-up adaptive management approach helped CTEs to gain the skills and confidence necessary to "own" and sustain utility reform and to demonstrate that change was possible. Projects working in unstable environments should work to set a clear vision, focus on early adopter champions, and enable quick wins to make progress.

Every development project confronts unique challenges. The design of a project lays out the blueprint for what should be done, but these projects are frequently implemented in countries like Haiti where circumstances are always changing – sometimes rapidly – and projects must be ready to adapt. In reflecting on implementation over the past five years, it's clear that the following factors were critical to the Project's success:

1. Lay out a clear, bold vision for success and put in place clear, measurable metrics to measure progress: Once the Project had clarified that the primary goal of the project was to make the CTEs financially sustainable and had in place a strong system to measure change, it was much easier to convince local utility staff and government authorities to collaborate with the Project, and for the Project to prioritize the activities and metrics for success.
2. Focus on champions and the tools that they will need to succeed: Rather than putting infrastructure at the center of our approach, the Project focused on the people and their systems—identifying people ready to lead change and then working to give them the tools to bring about that change.
3. Creating small victories and building on them: As the Project helped the champions use their tools to strive towards the bold aspirational goal, staff and collaborating CTEs would work to achieve quick wins and build on those successes to create bigger ones.

In a chaotic implementing environment, the combination of a bold vision, strong champions, and an incremental growth strategy that adaptively builds on success allowed the Project to make continual progress, whereas a more deliberate long-term approach would have been stalled by the changing circumstances.

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