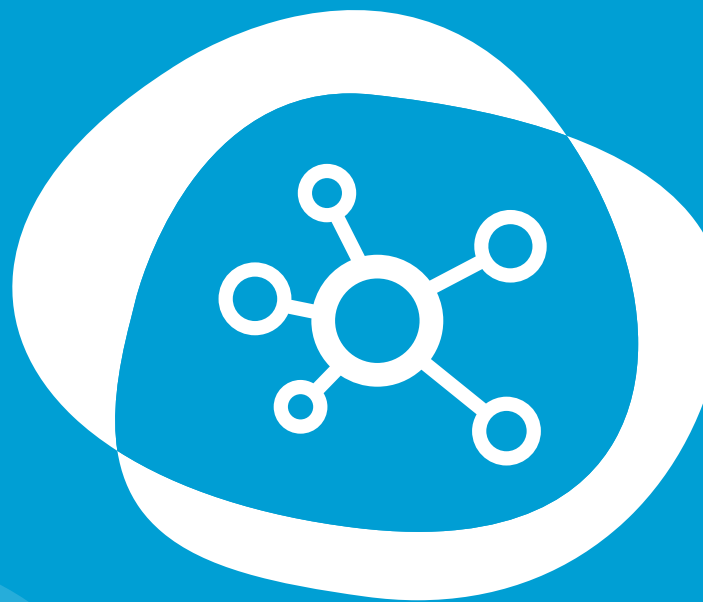


LEARNING NOTE ONE

Stronger systems for inclusive and sustainable WASH



Engaging with the people and actors within WASH systems

Summary

Water for Women aims to improve the health, gender equality and wellbeing of Asian and Pacific communities through strengthened national and subnational water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector systems with greater emphasis on gender and social inclusion, safely managed WASH and water security.

This learning note emerges from discussions under Water for Women's systems strengthening Learning Agenda initiative, which reiterates that WASH systems are made up of – and exist to benefit – people. We present lessons learnt from 20 Water for Women civil society organisation (CSO) led projects about what it means to strengthen WASH systems, viewed through the lens of systems as networks of people and actors.

Contents

Introduction	4
What are we learning about the drivers and barriers to change in WASH systems?	6
What are we learning about strengthening GEDSI in WASH systems?	16
Practical lessons for CSOs seeking to influence change in WASH systems	22
References	26

Through the experiences of Water for Women partners across the Asia-Pacific region, we have learnt that:

- WASH systems exist within broader political, economic, social and geographic contexts. *Who* is involved WASH systems, and their power, connections and capacity to influence others, is shaped by contextual factors, including geography, culture and institutional structures. As such, engagement with WASH systems needs to be context-based and context-specific.
- To understand how decisions are made in WASH systems we need to look beyond formal or visible power to consider who else has influence, and what social and cultural norms constrain or perpetuate power imbalances. Besides the 'traditional' WASH authorities, other political, social and economic actors, including CSOs, hold hidden power and influence to set the agenda in WASH decision-making. Working with, and through, these actors is one pathway to advocate for greater diversity and inclusion in WASH systems.
- The capacity of actors – as individuals and organisations – affects how well they can engage with others in the system and contribute to inclusive and sustainable WASH services. CSOs, such as Water for Women partners, have a key role to develop actor capacity and cultivate an enabling environment for skills and competence to be put into action.
- Relationships between actors are the conduit for sharing information and ideas. Building and sustaining collaborations, connections and coordination effectively are essential capacities of the WASH system. Connecting rights holder organisations (RHOs) into the WASH system can catalyse change in gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) within WASH by challenging prevailing attitudes and deepening understanding of GEDSI issues and how they influence WASH outcomes.
- Diverse systems are strong systems. Bringing GEDSI actors like RHOs into the WASH system results in a stronger network of actors. RHOs bring greater representation and the voices of service users who are at risk of being left behind, thus strengthening the likelihood of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (clean water and sanitation for all). They also bring their own capacities, networks of relationships and potential influencing pathways for achieving WASH and GEDSI goals. Encouraging and facilitating the involvement of RHOs in inclusive WASH systems, however, must be based on Do No Harm principles.
- A rights-based approach to systems strengthening can put accountability and two-way flow of information between rights holders (community) and duty-bearers (authorities and service providers) at the heart of how the system functions to improve WASH services.
- GEDSI issues need to be addressed at a system level in order to resolve and prevent inequality in WASH service provision and access. In the context of achieving SDG 6 and leaving no one behind, the sector must urgently prioritise GEDSI in efforts to strengthen systems for inclusive WASH.

Based on these lessons learnt, CSOs can contribute to strengthening the networks of actors that make up the WASH system as follows.

Influence actors' mindsets and attitudes by deepening their understanding of the system and their role within it

- Facilitate reflection about the silos and barriers that exist between actors, and repeatedly ask questions about who is missing from WASH discussions. Support reflective practice and inter-actor sharing to encourage mindset change from within.
- Facilitate first-hand experiences to challenge the invisible power of prejudice and underlying gender and social norms that support (implicitly or explicitly) gender and social inequalities.
- Partner with duty bearers to collaboratively explore their roles, responsibilities and duties with respect to WASH, thus strengthening accountability mechanisms. Duty bearers' understanding of their own roles and responsibilities forms a basis for capacity development and engagement of RHOs.

Influence the sector's direction by encouraging and supporting creation of shared vision and common goals

- Support creation of a shared vision and common WASH goals among actors. Building collaboration around a shared goal can be a mechanism for connecting diverse actors, shifting power, and developing individual, organisational and system capacity.
- Build ownership of common WASH goals among diverse actors. Encouraging meaningful involvement of RHOs when defining WASH sector goals ensures they participate enthusiastically in efforts to achieve them.
- Encourage common means of measurement to monitor progress towards WASH goals. Shared monitoring frameworks and indicators can facilitate regular information flow and accountability.

Influence how actors collaborate through strategic capacity development

- Support WASH and GEDSI actors to consider who holds mandates, responsibilities, and visible, hidden and invisible power. Encourage reflection about who is missing from WASH decision-making and how diverse actors can use their roles and connections to change that.
- Plan and facilitate capacity development aligned with individual and organisational roles, responsibilities and required competencies.
- Demonstrate good capacity development. Integrate applied learning, learning-by-doing, and peer-to-peer sharing to encourage actors to develop each other's capacity according to their strengths and needs.
- Alongside collaboration, encourage competency-based task allocation and working groups.

Advocate for, and facilitate, involvement of RHOs and influential actors at the WASH decision-making table

- Support and strengthen diversity in sector working groups by advocating for RHO involvement but ensure adoption of Do No Harm approaches. Develop capacity and awareness of both WASH actors and RHOs before bringing rights holders and service providers together, and plan to mitigate backlash.
- Determine who has power, and who is missing from discussions, and engage strategically. Use formative research and political economy analysis to identify who has power and influence and remember that they may not be people with formal authority, or traditionally part of the 'WASH system'.
- Engage with all actors in ways that help them to see benefit in their own work, role and objectives. Don't just engage with people through a WASH lens.
- Build relationships for the sake of relationships. As the fabric of the WASH system, strengthened relationships among diverse actors are not just pathways to influencing system change, they are themselves an indicator of a stronger system.
- Work with champions who can advocate for rights holder participation from within the WASH system. Champions can use their power, relationships or experience of overcoming challenges to inspire their peers and other actors.
- Plan for resilience and personnel change by building relationships with multiple people in each institution.

Influence how information is shared to encourage accountability and evidence-based decision-making

- Establish or strengthen feedback loops that can perpetuate two-way flows of information beyond the life of the project. Rights-based approaches, citizen voice mechanisms and working group commitments can reinforce accountability.
- Help system actors to consider who has access to what information, and who should have access.
- Generate and share evidence with allies and champions to strengthen their advocacy and influencing efforts. Often people in technical roles know how to resolve issues but need hard data and other evidence to influence decision-makers and politicians.

Introduction

The Australian Government's Water for Women Fund aims to improve the health, gender equality and wellbeing of Asian and Pacific communities. One of the four end-of-fund outcomes is 'strengthened national and subnational water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector systems with greater emphasis on gender, social inclusion, safely managed WASH and water security'.

Under Water for Women's Learning Agenda, partners are collaborating on a dedicated systems strengthening initiative that aims to deepen partners', and the broader WASH sector's, understanding of how strengthening WASH sector systems can lead to more gender and socially inclusive, sustainable WASH services through exploring two primary learning questions:

1. How do partners interpret, frame, understand and engage with WASH systems?
2. What changes is Water for Women contributing to within (local and national) WASH systems, and how does this change happen?

The lessons learnt from this initiative will be documented in an overarching summary report, complemented by a series of learning notes, of which this is the first. While seeking to contribute to the second learning question, this learning note is grounded heavily within the first question. To date, several common ideas have emerged from discussions among partners on the first learning question:

- Systems are made of, and exist to benefit, people.
- Interactions between individuals, institutions, components and administrative levels add to system complexity.
- There are many potential points at which CSOs can engage in strengthening inclusive and sustainable WASH systems.

This learning note presents lessons learnt from 20 Water for Women projects delivered by CSO partners (hereafter referred to as partners) about strengthening inclusive WASH systems, through the lens of systems as networks of people and actors.

Within the WASH sector, it is common for systems strengthening programs to refer to the 'building blocks' of the WASH system¹. Building blocks are useful for project design, monitoring and reporting but do not necessarily explain how people in the WASH system contribute to systems change.

Purpose and structure of the learning note

This learning note seeks to explain how Water for Women's CSO partners are effecting change in WASH systems through engaging with elements of social systems ([Box 1](#)) – context, power, relationships, and capacity – as drivers of or barriers to change in WASH systems.

The learning note starts with an overview of each of these elements, then explores the value of diversity and strengthening GEDSI within WASH systems. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for CSOs who are working, or plan to work, to strengthen inclusive WASH systems.

Strengthening GEDSI within WASH systems, and in WASH service delivery, is one of the primary objectives of Water for Women. If systems are made up of people, then good systems are made up of diverse people. Supporting the voice and agency of women and people who experience marginalisation is one of the most effective pathways to strengthen equity and inclusion in the WASH system, thus ensuring better WASH services for all. Valuing diversity, and diverse perspectives, strengthens prospects for a more socially cohesive future, and can be seen throughout the examples in this learning note.

¹ Water for Women uses the [Sanitation and Water for All Building Blocks](#) of sector policy and strategy, institutional arrangements, sector financing, and planning, monitoring and review, and capacity development to help consolidate reporting across the Fund. These are explored more fully in other learning documents from this learning initiative.

Box 1. The system as a network of actors

Engaging with WASH systems inevitably involves working with a variety of people and institutions, but what does it mean to strengthen the WASH system, as a social system?

Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1991) described social systems as a network of interactions (relationships) between actors. A social system is inseparable from the environmental and cultural context within which it exists, and from the personalities of the actors, though it is the interactions between the actors rather than the actors themselves that define it. The structure of these interactions varies according to differences in status between the actors (power), ability of the actors to become the authors of their own actions (capacity), and the point of reference each actor holds towards their place in the system (their mindset or paradigm). Parsons wrote that social systems generally act and react in ways that avoid major disruptions in their structure that would lead to their disintegration.

Truly championing diversity in WASH systems requires sustained efforts to identify and appropriately challenge the gender and social norms that work against diverse representation and decision-making – such as patriarchal structures that do not value women as leaders in their communities, or social stigma that plays into prejudices of seeing people with disabilities as ‘less able’.

This learning note synthesises learning and evidence from various sources, including partners’ annual reports, online webinars and workshops, case studies and partner documentation, interviews with partners and an online partner survey. Throughout this learning note, partners and their projects have been cited as examples. These examples are intended to be illustrative but are not exhaustive; there are many relevant examples from other Water for Women projects.

"People. . . ultimately form the overall system, through their roles, actions, behaviours, institutions, rules and engagement with one another."

Water for Women partner survey respondent



A member of the Vietnam Women's Union discusses building a hygienic latrine with a community member in Thanh Hoa province, Vietnam
Credit: Thrive Networks / East Meets West Foundation

What are we learning about the drivers and barriers to change in WASH systems?

WASH systems need to be understood within their local context

WASH systems exist within broader political, economic and geographic contexts. Who is involved in the systems for WASH and GEDSI, and their power, connections and capacity to influence others, are shaped by human and non-human factors in the context.

Some of these factors, such as the institutional structures, financing flows and policy environment, will be discussed in more detail in other learning notes developed as part of this Learning Agenda initiative. Below are some of the implications for systems that partners have observed from contextual factors.

- Geography and population distributions affect the size and connectedness of the network of actors. Densely populated areas of India or Bangladesh could be expected to have more people working on WASH or more RHOs than less densely populated areas such as rural Fiji or Papua New Guinea (PNG). Similarly, in geographically well-connected contexts, like rural Cambodia or Pakistan, interactions and sharing of ideas and information between WASH actors at local levels and between local and national levels could be expected to be more frequent than in a more geographically challenging context, such as Bhutan or Vanuatu.
- The geographical factors listed above, and economic factors like the costs of doing business and obtaining materials, have significant impacts on who is active in a system. Contexts like rural Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam and Pakistan can sustain active, viable and innovative WASH businesses and private sectors more easily than smaller, more fragmented and relatively 'expensive' contexts, such as Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste.
- Cultural and social norms often underpin and reinforce power dynamics, both harmful and otherwise. This is especially true of gender norms: almost every Water for Women project has reported that women are under-represented in WASH decision-making or leadership in the WASH system due to norms and attitudes. This underlines the need for systemic GEDSI change, which lies at the core of Water for Women.
- Political, governmental and non-governmental institutional arrangements, and corresponding finance flows, often formalise who holds power, connections and capacity and who is able to make decisions. The closeness of decision-makers and budget-holders to WASH service users in contexts where decentralisation reform is relatively advanced and both decision-making and financial authority are transferred to local levels, such as Nepal, means actors in those contexts will discuss and lobby for WASH and GEDSI considerations in a different way to more centralised contexts, such as Cambodia or PNG.
- The size, resourcing, minimum education standards, competitiveness and career desirability of the public service leads to different capacity levels of local government with respect to their ability to perform their functions and to continually grow individual and institutional knowledge.

These reflections highlight that engagement with WASH systems needs to be context-based and context-specific.

"To become a female district governor, human resource is required for a female deputy district governor, i.e. her capacity and knowledge. Another barrier is her family workload, which hinders her effort to become the district governor."

Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation, Cambodia

Power determines who has a seat at the WASH decision-making table

To understand how decisions are made in WASH systems we need to look beyond formal or visible power to consider who else has influence, and what social and cultural norms constrain or perpetuate power imbalances.

Social networks and social interactions such as those between actors in the WASH system are inherently political, involving negotiations about who has what kind of power (Box 2). Many partners have a strong understanding of power and relationships in the contexts where they work, which is often held intuitively or tacitly. The GEDSI transformative focus of Water for Women has also highlighted that power and decision-making in most contexts are highly gendered and reinforce inequalities.

Box 2. What is power?

'Power', as used in this document, is defined as 'the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exerted by different sections of society' (ASPBAE, 1993). In this framing, power is 'dynamic and relational rather than absolute'; individuals or groups may have more or less power in different networks and at different points in time. In thinking about power within the system of WASH and GEDSI actors, it can be useful to consider three different levels of power (Veneklasen & Miller, 2002):

Visible power – observable decision-making

Includes the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision-making.

Hidden power – setting the political agenda

Less obvious power and influence over who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda.

Invisible power – shaping meaning

The way individuals think about their place in the world, their beliefs, sense of self and their acceptance of their own superiority and inferiority shape attitudes and norms in a given society and affects how willing people are to challenge prevailing power (im)balances.

Within each of these levels, individuals and institutions can also present power in different forms (Rowlands, 1997):

Power over – controlling power

Power to – generative or productive power which creates new possibilities

Power with – collaborative power through which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts

Power from within – inner power and confidence that stems from self-acceptance and self-respect and extends to acceptance of others.

Visible power

The formalised aspects of the WASH system are often relatively identifiable because they are public and visible: who has power to set government budgets for WASH, who should 'own' WASH strategies and plans, who has the mandate, licence and duty to provide services to the community. Engaging with these actors is important to ensure ongoing ownership and sustainability of WASH system improvements but requires CSOs to navigate complex bureaucracies and individuals' incentives.

Several partners, such as the Centre for Advocacy and Research, India (CFAR), Plan International Australia (Plan), SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) and WaterAid, have undertaken analysis or mapping of power as part of their project design, context analysis, regular project reflections and as part of this learning initiative. This power mapping identifies those who hold visible power in the WASH system through their formal and decision-making responsibilities. These are often government actors who lead the WASH sector, parliamentarians who legislate and approve budgets, local authorities, and formally endorsed service providers such as utilities and municipal corporations.

All Water for Women projects engage in some way with formal WASH structures and holders of visible power for WASH in their contexts. Examples include project support to coordination, technical assistance and capacity development with local government (Habitat for Humanity, SNV, Plan, WaterAid, World Vision), facilitating accountability processes and feedback between duty bearers and rights holders (CFAR, World Vision), and linking private sector and political decision-makers to find sustainable financing solutions to WASH service provision (iDE, Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation). Actors who hold visible power are often the main advocacy targets for Water for Women projects seeking to influence policy, standards and strategies (International Rescue Committee [IRC], Plan), or those seeking to include GEDSI issues on the WASH agenda within formalised WASH sector working groups. In these ways, partners have been trying to ensure greater diversity among the actors who have 'power over' WASH decisions, strengthen collaborations and 'power with' and supporting working groups' 'power to' overcome problems related to WASH.

Partners reflected that, as a sector, CSOs need to engage more, and more strategically, with those actors with the highest levels of visible power, such as parliamentarians and political decision-makers.

Hidden power

Different political systems, historical legacies and gender and social norms in each context mean there are a diversity of actors who hold 'hidden power' – actors who can influence the sector agenda. Through their social, economic or political connections, these individuals and groups influence what decision-makers prioritise or what information reaches them. Water for Women projects have shown that identifying, collaborating with, and strengthening the understanding and capacity of actors with hidden power is one pathway to enable change in inclusive WASH systems.

"There are also people within the key partner organisations that do not have formal powers but through their networks we were able to gain entry into key government agencies at the national level."

WaterAid PNG

Hidden power can be associated with organisational size and political affiliation. In Vietnam, Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation works closely with the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU). At the community level the VWU is relatively grassroots, but because of their size and role as a wing of the political party they have hidden power at provincial and national levels. The VWU's primary focus is women's rights and dignity, and the alignment of Thrive Network's project with their objectives motivated them to engage with GEDSI within WASH. The VWU's leadership and political will has increased efforts to achieve WASH targets in the national government's New Rural Development program and to secure agreement for government WASH co-financing at provincial level.

Hidden power can be closely linked to who controls financial resources. Some partners have noted that within the WASH sector, bilateral and multilateral actors that channel funding through government via large loans or grants have more sway with government than CSOs that do not. Ministries of finance, which aren't always considered to have authority in the WASH system, are known to have a strong influence on how much finance is available and for what.

Partners acknowledge that CSOs themselves can often hold unique hidden power within the sector. Several partners who have a long-term presence in their project countries (such as iDE in Cambodia, IRC in Pakistan, SNV in Nepal, Bhutan and the Lao People's Democratic Republic [Lao PDR], Plan in Indonesia, PNG and Solomon Islands and WaterAid in Timor-Leste and PNG) report that they are invited by government to feed into policies and strategies as members of national or local working groups. This enables them to advocate for other organisations (e.g., RHOs) to be consulted or to consider particular topics in sector discussions. Several partners working at both national and subnational levels use demonstration projects implemented at community and local levels to inform development of national policies and systems. For example, iDE in Cambodia used its role as co-chair of a sector technical working group as well as evidence from programming to develop sector guidelines for faecal sludge management. In Indonesia, Plan used its collaboration with government at sub-district level to demonstrate inclusive monitoring approaches to sanitation in its project in Manggarai, and its role in the national WASH working group, to support the Ministry of Health to expand the national sanitation monitoring and evaluation system – changes now being rolled out nationally.

Invisible power

As mentioned above, WASH systems cannot exist separately from the cultural and social norms in the context. The invisible power of prevailing norms, attitudes, values and societal expectations can enable or prevent change by influencing how decision-makers view their role in the system, and their willingness to extend decision-making opportunities to others.

Partners working in the Pacific have often reflected how cultural and social structures, such as the wontok system in PNG and Solomon Islands, and kastom system in Vanuatu, are deeply connected with power and the control of resources and information.

Across Water for Women projects, patriarchal systems have been highlighted as a common reason for prevailing gender inequality in WASH systems, which many projects are working to shift. In Fiji, Habitat for Humanity have worked to shift attitudes and mindsets amongst Fiji's Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the ministry responsible for preservation of Fijian culture and economic and social development of indigenous Fijians. It has drawn on indigenous iTaukei culture and ideals of familial or kinship ties to provoke responses and inspire Ministry representatives to explore ways to overcome WASH inequalities. WaterAid Timor-Leste's integration of gender dialogues with community WASH projects has led to gender empowerment outcomes, with participants reporting deeper understanding of the gendered nature of WASH roles, men taking on more domestic WASH duties and more women taking community decision-making roles in WASH. World Vision Bangladesh used a 'Mencare' approach to discussion sessions with men to begin to shift patriarchal household and community norms, which has led to increased participation of women in leadership and decision-making. While such examples show that CSOs can contribute to shifting invisible power at local levels by helping to grow individuals' 'power from within' and 'power with' in local collaborations, partners agree that shifting gender and social norms at a broader societal and systems level is needed to enable broader gender equality in WASH.

Water for Women projects are also challenging invisible power dynamics in market aspects of WASH systems. iDE Cambodia's payment instalment plans and targeted partial subsidies have shifted private sector attitudes about the ability of poor households to invest in sanitation. Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation in Vietnam has reported that perceptions of the roles of service providers and customers, and the commitment of private water and sanitation enterprises to improve service quality, has changed as a result of project facilitation of customer satisfaction surveys and feedback.

"Social, religious, and cultural norms around the roles and responsibilities of women are deeply held in Vanuatu, with women often seen as serving home/domestic duties. Water collection [is considered] a woman's responsibility, but water governance as a man's responsibility. Examples of women in leadership are scarce, with the community kastom leadership system mostly upholding men as leaders, while there are no women representatives in Parliament."

World Vision Vanuatu

"The social norm that sees women and girls responsible for most WASH workloads and most adversely affected by poor WASH services is compounded by the general lack of agency of women and girls in decision-making at community level and upwards."

Plan International Australia

Capacity affects not just how well actors perform their roles, but how well they can engage with others in the system

The capacity of actors – as individuals and organisations (Box 3) – affects how well they can engage with others in the system as well as contribute to sustainable and inclusive WASH services through fulfilling their roles. CSOs have a key role in developing actor capacity.

Box 3. What is capacity?

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee defines capacity as 'the ability of people, organisations, and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully' (OECD, 2006, p. 8). Capacity development 'is understood as the process whereby people, organisations and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt and maintain capacity over time' (OECD, 2006, p. 9).

The OECD identifies three levels at which capacity could and should be developed:

Individual capacity

Individual capabilities and competence along with social awareness that influence the application of these skills.

Organisational capacity

Including organisational procedures and skills but also the organisational culture and governance that incentivise individuals' competence.

The enabling environment

The structures of power, influence and institutions – that influences the behaviour of individuals and organisations through incentives and governance.

Rather than 'building capacity', which assumes a pre-defined, and usually colonialist goal, 'developing capacity' is an endogenous process, led and owned from within the system, its organisations and individuals. Capacity development should maximise learning rather than being viewed as the simple transfer of knowledge or procedures.

Water for Women's theory of change for strengthening inclusive and sustainable WASH systems considers capacity development as an intermediate outcome, with improvements in capacity leading to better system performance. On this basis, all projects are expected to contribute to capacity development as part of their work to strengthen the WASH system.

Individual capacity

The knowledge and capacity of decision-makers shape WASH policies and practices, the capacity of service providers influences the quality of WASH services, the capacity of communities affects their confidence to advocate for themselves, and the capacity of civil society determines their ability to generate the evidence they need to hold others to account. Below are some highlighted examples of how partners are strengthening individuals' capacity to contribute to the WASH system.

- iDE has supported women sanitation business owners in Cambodia to participate in a female entrepreneur training and business incubation program, which helped to meaningfully build skills and business acumen, as well as improve their income and savings.
- SNV Bhutan's Leadership for Change initiative partners with a local women's organisation to encourage transformative leadership, including identifying and building confidence of male 'HeforShe' champions, preparing persons with disability to contribute meaningfully in national WASH workshops, and specific training on gender and inclusion for local decision-makers.
- WaterAid PNG and the Wewak District WASH Coordination Body used an annual WASH service delivery cycle as a framework to identify what competencies local government staff needed for planning, monitoring, community engagement and technical infrastructure design. They then ran practical training to assist with developing capacity in these areas.

- World Vision Vanuatu seconded a staff member from the Vanuatu National Statistics Office (VNSO) to the team undertaking their large Water, Women, Disability study so that they were immersed in the process of collecting and analysing disaggregated sex, age and disability (SAAD) data. Helping develop the capacity of this individual has contributed to SAAD data becoming the norm for VNSO, including in Vanuatu's census.

While Water for Women projects have demonstrated several successful initiatives to develop individual capacity, there is a continued need to institutionalise them so that they are sustained beyond the life of Water for Women and able to reach beyond their initial geographical scope.

Organisational capacity

Individuals need an enabling environment and encouraging work culture within their organisation to put their skills and knowledge to best use. The following examples highlight some of the ways that Water for Women projects are helping to develop organisational capacity through supporting the creation of new organisations and strengthening and incentivising organisational procedures.

- CFAR India has strengthened the organisational capacity of community structures – such as ward Single Window Forums² (SWFs) and community management committees – to gather and use data on sanitation service provision to inform improvements. The inclusion of community representatives in those mechanisms, including from the most marginalised groups, alongside individual training and capacity development means that these groups are better able to act as brokers between the community and the service provider.
- SNV's approach to systems strengthening, which is based on capacity development, considers what incentives can drive institutional capacity in different contexts. In Lao PDR, inter-district competition was a strong motivator for district governments to strive for open defecation free (ODF) status; SNV's Water for Women project helped it to develop institutional capacity for planning, budgeting and sanitation demand creation. Clarifying WASH roles and responsibilities, especially related to supporting the most marginalised groups to access WASH, was an important step in developing this capacity.
- WaterAid Myanmar and the Ministry of Health and Sports, during the period 2018–20, developed the TEACH CLEAN training package, which strengthens gender-sensitive and socially inclusive WASH and infection prevention practice in health care facilities. The package was designed to be delivered systematically to all health care facilities in the country through quality improvement tools and procedures such as the formation of committees to oversee cleanliness and accessible WASH.

Enabling environment

Developing the capacity of the system's enabling environment is synonymous with system strengthening; the inter-institutional structures, relationships and the prevailing norms that influence individual and organisational actions are the fabric of the system. Examples of partner work to strengthen this 'whole-of-system' capacity are discussed in this learning note, in the previous section on power, and the following section on relationships. A separate learning note under this Learning Agenda initiative will consider how Water for Women projects are strengthening WASH governance and institutional arrangements.

² Single Window Forums are a consultative mechanism used by CFAR to strengthen collaboration between community, civil society networks, local authorities, service providers and stakeholders to support the delivery of inclusive WASH services for the most vulnerable and marginalised communities in urban settlements of Bhubaneswar and Jaipur.



Government officials and development partners declare 41 villages Open Defecation Free (ODF) in Champone District, Lao PDR

Credit: SNV / Bart Verweij

Relationships must be valued as the fabric of the system

Relationships between actors are the conduit for sharing information and ideas. Building and sustaining collaborations and relationships, as well as effective coordination, are essential capacities of the WASH system.

Collaborations between actors can enable individual actors to pool resources and capacity to respond to complex WASH issues.

Brokering relationships

Connecting actors can allow information to be shared in different ways with diverse people. Several partners have highlighted the brokering of relationships, especially between RHOs and WASH sector actors, as one of the most significant contributions of their project to changing how the system functions and provides services by giving voice and agency to people who otherwise risk being left behind.

In Cambodia, iDE has facilitated the engagement of small and medium-sized sanitation businesses in provincial WASH working group meetings and connecting them with local government 'sanitation champions'. These relationships allow the business owners to reach more potential customers through the government's behaviour change promotion channels and supports the government to provide sanitation solutions to households and communities. In India, RTI International is facilitating connections between the Government of Rajasthan and the Asian Development Bank to explore blended finance models to provide secure water sources through access to secondary or tertiary treated effluent.

Some Water for Women projects have also been working to bring service users and service providers together and encourage new ways of working and sharing information and decisions. IRC-led training with WASH agencies in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province resulted in government and community members establishing joint working mechanisms in which community members become part of the government WASH structure. This enabled better two-way sharing of information and joint resolution of WASH service issues.

Many partners have been facilitating connections and collaborations between WASH and GEDSI actors who did not work together prior to the project. Inclusion of RHOs in WASH working groups can influence the sector's goals and embed GEDSI in WASH strategies and targets that ensure no one is left behind. SNV Nepal used the [Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene – Gender Equality Measure](#) (WASH-GEM), developed by the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures under Water for Women, to facilitate discussions among municipality authorities and WASH actors, asking questions such as

'who is missing from the list of actors when we have WASH sector discussions?' It took time and regularly asking questions about who is being left behind for WASH actors to see that achieving WASH access for all meant engaging, including and learning from women's rights groups and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). The meaningful inclusion of OPDs and women's representatives has led to changes in how WASH services are designed and provided. For example, Thantikandh Municipality in Nepal set up a help desk for the WASH requirements of persons with disabilities, while Sarlahi Municipality allocated specific budget for menstrual health and hygiene for women with disabilities and provided disability-friendly handwashing facilities during its COVID-19 response.

Bringing RHOs and WASH actors together can challenge norms and attitudes in ways that Do No Harm. WaterAid PNG notes that it was 'unprecedented' for rights groups to be openly accepted into government decision-making bodies such as the WASH Coordination Body, but these partnerships have led to new understanding on the need for equality in WASH. SNV Bhutan's Leadership for Change program helped prepare the national WASH sector to welcome a women's organisation as a participant for the first time, which in turn increased acceptance and support for gender equality. IRC Pakistan and CFAR India's work to create joint government-community action planning has shifted service providers' attitudes around rights groups from people who need to be served to co-collaborators in producing better WASH outcomes.

When WASH and GEDSI actors work together they grow in confidence to discuss shared topics and develop individual, organisational and inter-organisational capacity. OPD and women's group representatives who Plan in Indonesia has supported to take up roles on district WASH committees have been entrusted with budgeted tasks, which enables them to build confidence to contribute meaningfully to WASH activities in the district and formalises their involvement in the WASH system. Many Water for Women projects have also noted that through regular engagement with RHOs, traditional WASH actors are growing in their own confidence to discuss and prioritise gender and social inclusion.

Sustaining relationships

Sustaining and nurturing relationships is a key pathway for change. While it takes time, patience and investment to establish trust, strong relationships allow actors to influence power, capacity and connections within the WASH system.

As a sector, we also need to become better at valuing strong and sustained relationships as an end-goal in themselves and not just a stepping stone to changing the system. This is especially true in contexts such as remote or small island states, where informal and formal networks are very closely intertwined. For example, WaterAid and partner staff are part of the social fabric in Manufahi Municipality, Timor-Leste. Individuals who work on WASH during the day are members of youth groups, church councils and community football teams after hours. Being responsive and dependable in social situations, such as collaborating with the municipal administration to run a football tournament, shows commitment and builds the trust and communication channels that enable strong partnership with government on WASH matters. But they also reflect that the importance of relationships is hard to quantify. Trying to document or assign value to relationships can jeopardise trust or tokenise individuals' lived commitment to their community.

"Community members who are answerable to community forums are now part of the government's formal working mechanism. This direct interaction and relationship has improved communication between both stakeholders. Secondly, being part of the system, the community has direct influence over decision-making at local/micro level. Secondly, they are answerable to their communities also, therefore they ensure that work is done as per satisfaction of local communities. This has improved the power balance between government departments and local communities."

IRC Pakistan

"Our main role has been in forging the link between the city duty bearers and the collectives of those who experience marginalisation."

CFAR India

Multi-stakeholder forums

WASH committees and working groups that bring various actors together can be a useful entry point for brokering and sustaining relationships. These mechanisms can reduce the effort and input required to coordinate among various actors, support 'convergence' of efforts around a shared WASH vision and build shared ownership of initiatives to resolve complex issues.

Noting the limited financing for WASH in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, IRC in Pakistan used its role on the Provincial WASH Steering Committee to catalyse policy and financing change. IRC worked with the Provincial Health Engineering Department and Department for Local Government to develop sanitation definitions and budgeting guidelines, which were endorsed by the steering committee. IRC also worked through the Planning and Development Department's SDG unit to engage with 33 Provincial Assembly Parliamentarian members as part of an SDG WASH task force. Advocacy through this group to increase budget allocations for WASH, together with advocacy to provincial departments to prioritise WASH within their own funds, contributed to WASH budgets rising from 1.8% to 3.3% of the provincial annual development plan budget.

WaterAid PNG helped to establish the Wewak District WASH Coordination Body (WCB), which brought together local government managers, district administration, provincial health assembly representatives and rights groups, including the Wewak Disabled People's Association and the East Sepik Council of Women to focus on WASH for the first time. These actors share information, and a culture of mutual commitment and accountability is emerging. The WCB was instrumental in the creation of the Wewak District five-year plan and in coordinating the COVID-19 response, with the insights of the women's group and OPD contributing to a focus on leaving no one behind. The leadership of the district administrator in this body has been key to success, due to their role as a formal leader but also because they are well liked, well respected and their connections with political leaders give them hidden power to advocate for prioritisation of WASH.



Community engagement on the Wewak District WASH Plan at Walandoum, PNG

Credit: WaterAid Wewak team



Engage with the champions who stand at the crossroads of power, connections and capacity to influence the system

Champions can often be key to progressing change within the WASH system. These individuals may hold a particular position that gives them visible or hidden power to influence decisions and policies, have strategic connections and capacity to lead, or engage leaders.

Commitment and passion from leaders and advisors can shift the attitudes of others. In Bhutan, the chief of the health engineering department was willing to seek advice from and listen to gender advisors, and then to prioritise and allocate resources to GEDSI. This shifted the attention and focus for the WASH sector and led to greater inclusion of rights groups in WASH discussions.

Connecting with the right champions can influence change at scale. The Member of Parliament (MP) for Kavieng in New Ireland Province, PNG, is also the national Treasurer. Live and Learn Environmental Education, under its Water for Women project led by Plan, has regularly met with the MP to discuss financial flows for WASH and share evidence from ongoing financial modelling.

Champions can drive community-level change and become relationship brokers. In Cambodia, iDE's grassroots public-private partnership team identifies 'sanitation champions', who may be commune councillors, village chiefs, or other influential community members. The project provides coaching to these champions about how to use data to make decisions about sanitation promotion in order to achieve ODF status. The champions then link up with private sector sanitation businesses to build local momentum around sanitation.

"Even just one person committed to the cause can make a huge difference."

SNV Bhutan

Individuals who find a way to overcome the challenges or barriers that held many of their peers back can become role models for others, or can be supported to put ideas forward and use their experience to advocate for change. CSOs can support these individuals by providing evidence for them to effectively convince others, or giving them a platform to share. For example, World Vision Bangladesh supported the leader of Uria Union Parishad to share their example and inspire other district leaders to act on WASH ([Box 7](#)). WaterAid Timor-Leste's partner Grupu Feto Foinsa'e Timor-Leste (GFFTL) ([Box 5](#)) engaged the First Lady (the President's wife) in a national celebration of Menstrual Hygiene Day. Whereas in previous years this event generated backlash for using taboo words in public, the First Lady speaking on media and television was able to reshape the public discourse about menstrual health and hygiene and challenge taboos.

Partners have learnt that often people who have influence in the system, including champions and allies, do not know how to influence the system around them, how to explain to others something that might come intuitively to them, or may not even realise their own potential as a role model for others. Guided participatory exercises such as power mapping and political economy analysis can help to develop capacity for influencing and overcome inhibitions and constraints.

What are we learning about strengthening GEDSI in WASH systems?

Water for Women's design explicitly emphasises gender equality and social inclusion within efforts to strengthen inclusive WASH systems. Establishing relationships between WASH and GEDSI actors contributes to ensuring no one is left behind in their access to WASH services. It can also support groups that are at risk of being left behind to have voice and agency to influence decisions and policies within the WASH system.

Working for gender equality and social inclusion in WASH must start with doing no harm

Encouraging and facilitating the involvement of RHOs in WASH systems must be based on Do No Harm principles.

On one hand, this involves working with the leaders of the WASH sector, usually from WASH technical departments, to ensure that participants in discussions understand sensitivities around GEDSI and that forums provide a safe space. On the other hand, CSOs have a role in helping prepare RHOs to meaningfully engage and advocate for their communities confidently. It can take years of partnering, mentoring and coaching to achieve these safe and empowering relationships, as SNV Bhutan's example demonstrates ([Box 4](#)).

From a capacity perspective, many partners noted that they had to undertake a period of internal reflection and capacity development, especially around GEDSI issues and principles. Knowing what to look for, especially in terms of inclusion and empowerment, and identifying and mitigating harm must start from within the organisation and project before it can be applied in the organisation's work with the system.

In the application of Do No Harm, Fund partners have developed a strong understanding that 'doing nothing is doing harm'. If projects are not actively looking at ways to reduce inequalities and champion the voices of women and the marginalised, then they are doing harm, because they are implicitly reinforcing the social and gender inequalities already in place. For this reason, partners have developed their own nuanced and contextually appropriate Do No Harm strategies that ensure they are actively identifying and addressing risks of backlash and resistance when supporting the voices and agency of the less powerful to conduct dialogue with the more powerful.



Participants in the Do No Harm pilot in Fiji where Water for Women partners with Habitat for Humanity

Credit: Water for Women / First Fighter

Box 4. Bringing persons with disabilities to the decision-making table in Bhutan

Creating a safe and empowering environment for rights groups to meaningfully participate in WASH decision-making takes years of partnering, mentoring and coaching.

For far too long, governance, development and decision-making spaces for OPD engagement have been rare. In their Water for Women project, SNV in Bhutan's partnership with Ability Bhutan Society (ABS), the Disabled People's Organisation of Bhutan, and national and local governments is rewriting this long history of exclusion.

For SNV and its partners, disability inclusion in WASH is as much a process as it is an outcome. Pathways to realise inclusive WASH are a journey that multiple groups, representing different perspectives, must take together. OPD partners do not only advise on strategies but are active spokespersons in WASH decision-making forums. SNV in Bhutan works at multiple levels within the national WASH governance system to enable an environment of inclusive development. SNV invests in the capacity development of OPD partners to increase their voice and influence in WASH decision-making forums, enhance their research capacity, and make research recommendations actionable to influence policy change.

It is clear that collaboration with RHOs requires a lot of intentional work and commitment. Collaboration has many facets, and requires multi-level, consistent, and long-term approaches to redress the historical exclusion of many groups from decision-making, planning, and implementation. This example demonstrates that capacity-strengthening activities need to be complemented by advocacy to influence policy formulation and directions, and ongoing mentoring and coaching of RHOs and government to broadly embed inclusion practice.

According to ABS, the collaboration with SNV is 'increasing leaders' awareness about disability inclusion in WASH'. At national level, ABS has become a key player in the national WASH arena and is a member of the National WASH Technical Working Group led by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement. ABS staff have also been engaged in sanitation and hygiene promotion in districts, and Bhutan's WASH sector is benefiting greatly from ABS's comprehensive data on the prevalence of both visible and invisible disabilities and the contact details of the carers of persons with disabilities.



Leadership training for women with disabilities in Bhutan

Credit: SNV Bhutan

Diverse systems are strong systems

Bringing GEDSI actors like RHOs into the WASH system results in a stronger network of actors. RHOs bring greater representation of service users, as well as their own networks of relationships and potential influencing pathways for achieving WASH and GEDSI goals (Box 5). The previous section of this learning note demonstrated that new relationships between WASH actors and GEDSI actors can be mutually beneficial by beginning to shift attitudes and prejudices, by humanising and giving voice to those at risk of being left behind, and by developing the capacity of all actors involved as they seek to understand different actors' priorities and needs.

Box 5. New partners and new pathways for advocacy in Timor-Leste

Actors bring their existing networks of relationships with them to the WASH system. Introducing new actors can help the sector leverage these relationships as a conduit for information, evidence and advocacy.

In Timor-Leste, WaterAid's partner GFFTL has a long and proud history of gender equality activism since before independence. In 2019, when WaterAid identified a need to deepen collaboration with women's rights groups, GFFTL was an obvious choice.

Now a formal implementing partner in the Water for Women project, GFFTL staff are leading community awareness-raising sessions to bring about a more equal distribution of WASH-related domestic labour between men and women. GFFTL have been undertaking follow-up visits to 16 communities to explore how these sessions have changed the balance of household labour, and using the evidence to advocate for national uptake of gender-transformative WASH approaches.

The GFFTL team compiles feedback from the community conversations and develops it into advocacy materials and messages to share with national leaders. GFFTL leveraged its participation in existing gender forums to bring rural gender and WASH issues to the fore, engaging the Women's Parliamentary Group of Timor-Leste, the State Secretary for Equity and Inclusion and the National Women's Network, and bringing parliamentarians into direct dialogue with the community on WASH topics. GFFTL can push this agenda in spaces in which WaterAid, as a WASH-focused organisation, isn't present. Moreover, GFFTL's long history of activism in this space means that its members are not only heard, they are listened to and elicit action.



GFFTL facilitated gender dialogue session with a community WASH management committee in Dato village, Liquiçá, Timor-Leste
Credit: GFFTL / Nafriano dos Santos Lopes

Meaningful participation of RHOs and community representatives in district WASH committees and WASH working groups is one mechanism through which power can be more equitably shared with rights groups and service users ([Box 6](#)). This includes both visible power through RHOs having a seat at the decision-making table, and hidden power through their role as 'brokers' of relationships between the communities and members they represent and other working group actors (especially authorities). RHOs, as representatives of often under-represented and vulnerable groups, can add legitimacy to formal working mechanisms, provided their participation is empowering and not tokenistic. This is reflected in the abovementioned examples of Plan's support to women's groups in Indonesia and OPD representatives in district WASH committees, and the role of ABS in Bhutan's national WASH working group ([Box 4](#)).

Box 6. Putting rights groups at the centre of WASH services in Bhubaneswar, India

Many Water for Women projects have approached systems strengthening from the starting point of government systems. The following example provides an alternate, bottom-up approach to systems strengthening that begins with rights groups.

The residents of the slums of Bhubaneswar, India, have long been stigmatised as 'illegal' (non-notified) and suffered inadequate WASH services because their dwellings lie outside formal service provision structures. As well as their 'illegal' status, many slum residents have intersecting vulnerabilities as women, ethnic minorities, transgender, and persons with disabilities, which mean they face additional barriers and prejudices.

CFAR's aim in its Water for Women project was to establish empowering and participatory bottom-up WASH governance mechanisms, but bringing these community actors together proved slow and complicated. The first action was to raise awareness. Community members who had long been stigmatised were unaware of their rights to water and sanitation and about what 'safe' and 'equitable' WASH looked like. A second step involved a 'healing process' of public hearings to resolve deep-seated grievances and disputes, often many years old, which prevented individuals within the settlements working together constructively. Only once these grievances were addressed could CFAR begin to develop the technical capacity among community volunteers and rights group representatives.

Over the past four years, community volunteers have championed robust bottom-up governance through community-led operating structures such as the Community Management Committee (CMC) from each slum settlement and SWF at the ward level, represented by the highly marginalised and most vulnerable population groups. The CMC and SWF members are trained in different WASH sector processes including planning, implementation and monitoring, which further help in scaling up the process of social inclusion. They conduct household assessments of WASH in their communities, enable authorities and service providers to understand the reality of WASH in the settlements, and work with them to find solutions to complex WASH problems.

Community platforms, government, think tanks, private sector and CSO partners are beginning to develop a shared understanding of the issues and needs of the slum communities. These autonomous community platforms are now self-advocating and engaging to institutionalise participatory planning and joint execution of WASH improvement projects in a transparent manner.

Involving RHOs in WASH advocacy can create stronger pressure for change, due to the diversity of voices that the enlarged WASH system represents and the role of RHOs as representatives of the community. SNV Nepal reported that the lobbying of RHOs representing Dalit³, persons with disabilities and women was a key success factor in convincing district authorities to allocate funding for WASH rather than other infrastructure. In WaterAid Timor-Leste's project, besides the national advocacy pathways mentioned in [Box 5](#), the Secretary of State for Equality and Inclusion's staff are involved in Municipal WASH working groups, bringing additional avenues for advocacy and influence to the WASH sector, because they also hold positions on the Consultative Municipal Council that advises municipal political leaders.

³ Defined by the National Dalit Commission of Nepal as "Those communities who, by virtue of atrocities of caste-based discrimination and untouchability, are most backward in social, economic, educational, political and religious fields, and deprived of human dignity and social justice" or in India as marginalised low-caste (so called) Hindu groups and any person outside the caste system.



A community meeting in Bhubaneswar, India

Credit: CFAR / Samir Manik

Rights-based approaches can institutionalise new power structures in the WASH system

A rights-based approach to systems strengthening can put accountability and two-way flow of information between rights holders (community) and duty-bearers (authorities and service providers) at the heart of how the system functions to improve WASH services. Two examples from Water for Women projects, CFAR in India ([Box 6](#)) and World Vision in Bangladesh ([Box 7](#)), have shown that there are opportunities to support the involvement of RHOs in both the right-holder and the duty-bearer elements of rights-based accountability mechanisms, through duty-bearer WASH committees and also through participation in community dialogues.

Institutionalising a rights-based approach typically involves a sustained period of raising awareness about the right to water and sanitation and developing capacity in both the community and service providers. This is then used as the basis for regular feedback about service quality and issues, via methods such as World Vision Bangladesh's scorecards, driving action planning and even joint activities to respond to emerging issues such as those supported by CFAR.

These rights holder/duty bearer mechanisms, if institutionalised and transitioned to operate independently of CSO involvement, represent an attractive pathway for strengthening the WASH system. Regular feedback loops between service users and service providers offer opportunities for transparency, better flow of information and course correction, while institutionalising citizen accountability can shift power and decision-making closer to the service users.

"Mechanised desludging on scale is our end outcome; our interim outcome is to strengthen voice, agency and community involvement from planning to execution."

CFAR India

System approaches are necessary for inclusive and resilient WASH services at scale

The examples shared highlight that activities to strengthen WASH systems provide opportunities to improve gender equity and social inclusion. In addition, they demonstrate that many issues of marginalisation and inequity in WASH emerge from systemic barriers such as the consolidation of power among the privileged, underlying social norms and attitudes that prejudice certain groups, and relationship and capacity imbalances that see certain groups gain greater control over resources than others. Hence, when strengthening WASH systems, CSOs and the WASH sector more broadly need to continuously ask questions about equality to ensure that the systems and social structures being strengthened do not perpetuate harmful norms and practices.

GEDSI issues need to be addressed at a system level in order to resolve and prevent inequality in WASH service provision and access. In the context of achieving SDG 6 and leaving no one behind, the sector must urgently prioritise GEDSI in efforts to strengthen systems for inclusive WASH.

Box 7. Accountability at scale through inclusive WASH working groups and citizen voice in Bangladesh

Rights-based approaches can use accountability to strengthen systems for sustainable and inclusive WASH.

At the beginning of Water for Women, the union parishads (UPs, local government areas) where World Vision Bangladesh was working had no active consultative mechanism for coordinating WASH actors and no plan for achieving universal WASH. World Vision identified one potential champion – the Uria UP chairperson, who was enthusiastic about WASH. With the support and guidance of World Vision, the chairperson used existing government legislation to establish a new government-led WASH committee, including representation from women's rights groups, OPDs and community organisations. This WASH committee created an annual WASH action plan, including targets, and allocated budget for climate resilience, gender equality and social inclusion.

At an upazila-level (the level above UP) learning event, Uria Parishad shared its progress with all other UP chairpersons in the upazila. The obvious effectiveness of its approach led to the chief of the upazila encouraging and formally requesting all other UPs to follow Uria Parishad's example, referring to the Local Government Acts and laws for inclusion of persons with disabilities. Upward accountability to the upazila leaders and encouragement from their peers led to 12 UPs creating inclusive WASH committees and setting plans and targets for achieving ODF.

Meanwhile, World Vision's project built a movement for citizen-duty bearer accountability through the creation and training of Citizen Voice Action (CVA) working groups. CVA working groups, whose members include quotas of women and persons with disabilities, conduct scorecard sessions with women, men, girls, boys and persons with disabilities to compare the current WASH situation against the monitoring standards. CVA working groups then organise interface meetings with service providers and members of the WASH committees, at which they present the findings of the scorecard sessions. CVA working groups and service providers agree on actions for resolving issues, and CVA working groups monitor and provide regular feedback for continuous service improvement. These platforms give community members knowledge of their water and sanitation rights and have deepened service providers' understanding of GEDSI issues in WASH. Regular feedback and dialogue between citizens and duty bearers has not only improved accountability but led to tangible WASH service improvements benefiting thousands of households.

"Union Parishad is a friend of women, persons with disability, Dalit and others marginalised people. We listen to people before taking any initiative. We included the voice of excluded people in our structure, planning, implementation and monitoring. People have easy access to our council."

Chairman of Uria Union Parishad, Gaibandha

"We have acknowledged the effort of Union Parishad for providing the support to excluded group of peoples i.e. persons with disability, Dalit, Hijra⁴ etc. UP change their attitude and showing more accountability towards us for providing the services."

Member of Tia women's group

⁴ Hijra refers to the third gender of several South Asian nations.

Practical lessons for CSOs seeking to influence change in WASH systems

What can these experiences of Water for Women partners teach the sector about the role of CSOs in strengthening the social systems for more equitable and sustainable WASH?

The following section of the report draws on the lessons learnt and experience from partners to present recommendations for CSOs seeking to strengthen WASH systems. These recommendations were structured based on a framework from Donella Meadows (1999), who documented a list of leverage points for systems interventions: 'places within a complex system where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything' (see [Figure 1](#) below). Rather than entry points for intervening, these leverage points reflect influencing targets, which can catalyse change beyond a project's immediate entry point.⁵ Meadows ranks these leverage points in order of their effectiveness in influencing change within a system.

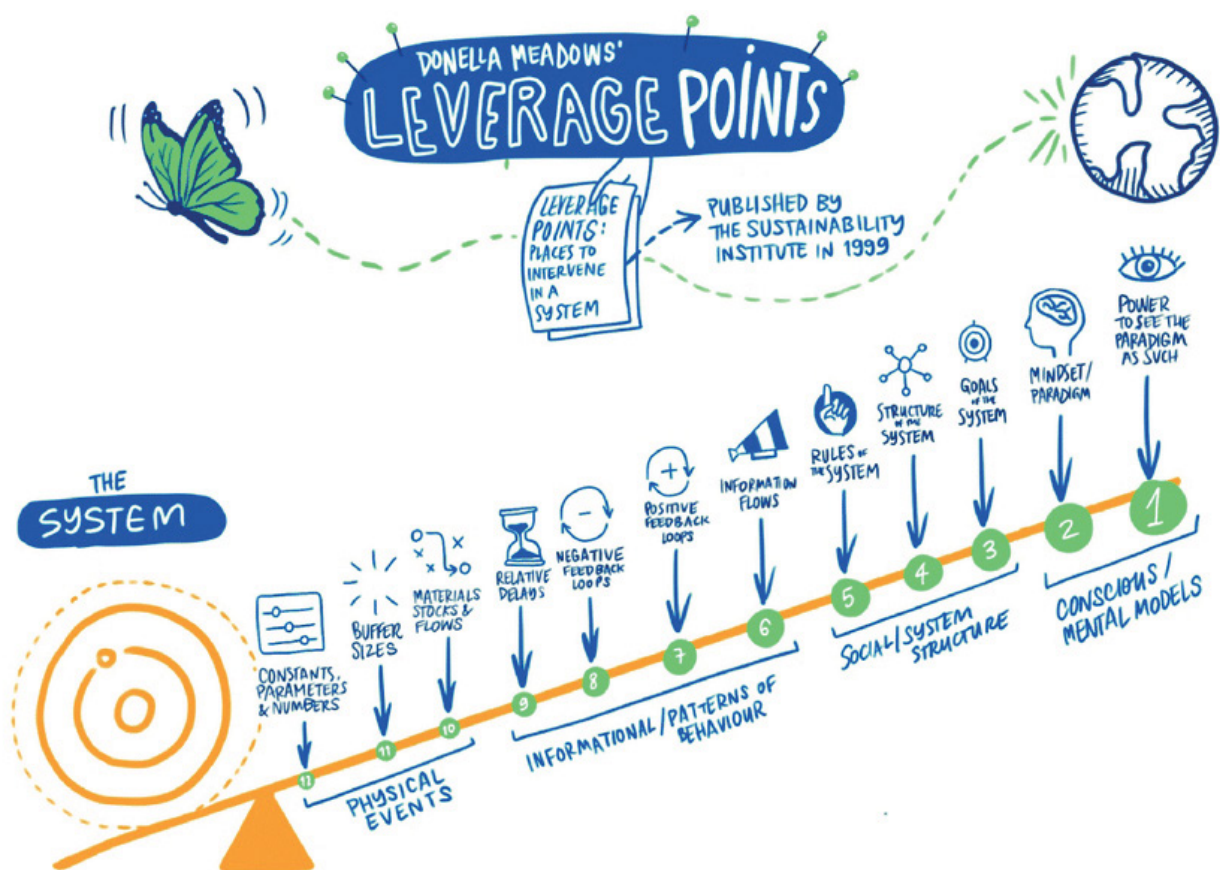


Figure 1: Donella Meadows' leverage points based on Meadows (1999)

Credit: UNDP/Carlotta Cataldi

⁵ For a more detailed list of examples of Meadows' leverage points that are relevant to the WASH sector, see Grant & Willetts (2019).

Influencing mindsets and attitudes – what do we believe is important?

According to Meadows, the biggest impact a systems change intervention can have on a system is reshaping the mindsets and paradigm of the actors within the system, their comprehension of the system, and their role within it. Partners have reflected similar lessons learnt. How to do this is very context and actor-specific, but the following may provide useful ideas.

Facilitate reflection about the silos and barriers that exist between actors, and repeatedly ask questions about who is missing from WASH discussions

- Mindset and attitude change is most effective and sustained when it comes from within individuals and institutions. Champions and people with informal power have a key role to play. Tools and frameworks to guide such discussions include political economy analysis, actor mapping, and the [WASH-GEM](#).
- Involving RHOs in such reflections can be a useful entry point for empowering them to share their experiences and opening a discussion about GEDSI among WASH actors.

Facilitate first-hand experiences to challenge the invisible power of prejudice

First-hand experiences can be a powerful way of changing decision-makers' and authorities' mindsets around both WASH and GEDSI.

Partner with duty bearers to explore their roles, responsibilities and duties with respect to WASH

- Working with actors in positions of authority and power to understand WASH rights and responsibilities can be a useful starting point for building understanding and developing capacity. This understanding is important to prepare the WASH sector for engaging and including RHOs in the WASH system.
- People in positions of authority often underestimate the knowledge and wisdom of community members and informal actor networks. Creating opportunities for duty bearers to understand and learn from the knowledge of others in their constituencies can help to open minds and build respect for existing knowledge.

Influencing the goals of the system – where is the sector going?

Support creation of a shared vision and common WASH goal

The process of defining a goal and a roadmap towards it can be a mechanism for building relationships and connections, shifting power, and developing individual, organisational and system capacity.

- Use the flexibility and hidden power that many CSOs have to connect and bridge actors who might not otherwise engage with each other. Strengthen voice, agency and community engagement in the development of the goal of the system and any decision-making structures that will guide and monitor progress towards it.
- While the goal might be to develop common messaging among diverse actors, consciously engage with actors in ways that are relevant to them and appeal to their organisation/individual priorities. Don't just engage through a WASH lens, and don't assume that all actors' priorities will be WASH-related.
- Multi-stakeholder forums in which rights holder representatives are prepared to share and raise issues, and leaders are prepared to listen, can be a useful starting point for defining the sector's vision.

Build ownership of common WASH goals among diverse actors

- Support champions and sector leaders who have formal mandates in WASH to drive definition of the goals and end points.
- Encourage and facilitate safe and meaningful involvement of RHOs and groups that might otherwise be neglected. Their involvement early in the development of strategies and policies can help secure ongoing attention to GEDSI.
- Use CSO engagement to keep priority issues on the agenda.

Encourage common means of measurement to monitor progress towards WASH goals

Monitoring progress towards common goals should be based on shared indicators of success, which can also facilitate a regular flow of information and accountability.

- Seek ways to include GEDSI indicators in frameworks that measure progress towards a goal.

Influencing the rules of the system – capacity to do, and to not do

Rather than just building capacity through providing training, CSOs should influence how actors in the WASH system understand their roles and responsibilities and develop their capacity to fulfil them.

Support WASH and GEDSI actors to consider who holds mandates, responsibilities and visible, hidden and invisible power

Encourage reflection about who is missing from WASH decision-making and how diverse actors can use their roles and connections to change that.

Plan and facilitate capacity development aligned with individual and organisational roles, responsibilities and required competencies

- Model the type of power and capacity within an organisation that we hope to see more of in the sector.
- All actors will have different capability needs. Start with mapping internal capacity and capacity needs.
- Develop or co-develop assessment tools to help actors reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and needs. This can build ownership of capacity development.

Demonstrate good capacity development

Integrate applied learning and learning-by-doing into the way the CSO engages with actors in the system.

- Encouraging diverse actors to work together on shared initiatives, and towards their shared goals (see above), provides opportunities for sharing and mutual learning. The capacity that one actor needs to develop may exist in other actors, and the process of learning from each other can strengthen relationships and trust.
- Support peer-to-peer sharing and mutual capacity development according to actors' strengths and needs. Often people do not consciously think about how their relationships and collaborations can help to develop their own capacity, share their influence or exchange information. CSO-facilitated processes can develop shared understanding and approaches to capacity development such as system assessments, competency mapping and political economy analysis.
- Involve RHOs in capacity development to promote GEDSI principles and encourage actors to identify and prevent harmful practice.

Alongside collaboration, encourage competency-based task allocation and working groups

While collaboration can have benefits for mutual sharing, learning and shifting power and attitudes, it may not always be the most efficient pathway to progress certain tasks. Focused working groups or allocation of tasks to skilled and component actors, with regular sharing back to other relevant actors, is another important means of 'getting things done'.



Influencing the structure of the system – who has a seat at the table?

Support and strengthen diversity in sector working groups by advocating for RHO involvement, but ensure adoption of Do No Harm approaches

Make sure to develop capacity and awareness before bringing rights holders and service providers together.

- Prepare RHOs to join WASH multi-stakeholder platforms/forums. Help them prepare and be clear on what they want to express, and to frame it in ways that resonate. Supporting them to gather data and present evidence can help with this.
- Prepare WASH actors to receive RHOs in their forums. Support WASH champions to understand and advocate for the complementarity and shared vision of these actors, whose causes may at first seem unrelated. Help create safe spaces by supporting RHOs to run training and reflections about power, marginalisation and equality.
- Engage with actors in positions of authority (formal power) so that they do not feel alienated by discussions about bringing new actors like RHOs into the system. Backlash from people with formal power can derail years of effort.

Determine who has power, and who is missing from discussions, and engage strategically

Remember that not everyone who has power and influence holds formal authority or is obviously a part of the 'WASH system'.

- Conduct formative research and establish baselines to understand who has power and who is missing (many CSO teams understand this tacitly or intuitively). Actor mapping, political economy analysis and power mapping are ways of conducting this work.
- Repeat actor mapping, political economy analysis and power mapping exercises in a participatory way with members of the formalised WASH system, such as a multi-stakeholder forum or working group. Actors have different understandings of where power sits in the system, and how it is or could be used. CSOs facilitating these kinds of reflections can help to make actors more aware of their own power and influence, or raise understanding of the need to involve community or rights groups.

Engage with all actors in ways that help them to see benefit in their own work, role and objectives

- Use power analysis or political economy analysis to identify where WASH and GEDSI goals sit relative to the agenda of other actors. Finding alignment and complementarity between actors can incentivise greater collaboration.

Build relationships for the sake of relationships

As the fabric of the WASH system, strengthened relationships among diverse actors are not just pathways to influencing system change, they are themselves an indicator of a strong system.

Work with champions who can advocate for rights holder participation from within the WASH system

- Identify and support 'positive deviants' who have already found ways to overcome barriers or constraining norms, and create platforms for them to share their wisdom.
- Encourage champions to seek out gender and inclusion advisors and resources to provide them with the insights and evidence they need.

Plan for resilience and redundancy by building relationships with multiple people in each institution

By ensuring multiple individuals from important institutions are involved in WASH and GEDSI efforts, structures, information and priorities are more likely to be sustained even when key personnel change.

Influencing the flow of information – who has access to what information?

Establish or strengthen feedback loops that can perpetuate two-way flow of information beyond the life of the project

- Rights-based approaches and citizen voice mechanisms that help create demand–supply feedback loops can embed rights at the centre of the service provider–service user relationship.
- Determine whether existing reporting and coordination structures between levels of government or actors, such as district WASH committees, could include mechanisms to reinforce accountability.

Help system actors to consider who has access to what information, and who should have access

- Sometimes the barriers are in communicating information. Provide information in a range of formats (such as through images, large print, audio or Braille) to help overcome communication barriers that prevent people's meaningful participation.

Generate and share evidence with allies and champions to strengthen their advocacy and influencing efforts

Often people in technical roles know how to resolve issues, but need hard data and other evidence to influence decision-makers and politicians.

References

Asia Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE). (1993). Study undertaken with FAO's Freedom from Hunger campaign, as quoted in Batliwala, S., 1993. *Women's empowerment in South Asia – concepts and practices*, ASPBAE/FAO (Draft).

Grant, M., Willetts, J. (2019). Learning for adaptive management: using systems thinking tools to inform knowledge and learning approaches, In: Neely, K. *Systems thinking and WASH tools and case studies for a sustainable water supply*. Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, pp. 107-132. <https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/handle/10453/140129>

Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage points: places to intervene in a system*, The Sustainability Institute, Hartland VT. <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2006). *The challenge of capacity development: working towards good practice*, DAC Network on Governance. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/part-4-the-challenge-of-capacity-development_journal_dev-v8-art40-en

Parsons, T. (1991). *The social system*, Routledge, London.

Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: working with women in Honduras*. Oxfam Publishing, Oxford, UK. <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/121185/5/bk-questioning-empowerment-honduras-010197-en.pdf>

VeneKlasen, L., Miller, V. (2002). *A new weave of people, power and politics: the action guide for advocacy and citizen participation*, World Neighbors, Oklahoma. https://justassociates.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/new_weave_en_ch3.pdf

Acknowledgements

Water for Women acknowledges Fraser Goff of WaterAid Australia for his leadership of this collaborative Learning Agenda initiative and the authorship of this report.

All Water for Women partners contributed extensively to this initiative in terms of scoping, sharing learnings and the synthesis of findings. We also recognise their leadership and support for progress towards strengthening inclusive, sustainable and resilient WASH systems across Asia and the Pacific.

This work was supported by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Special thanks to the members of the advisory group for this Learning Agenda initiative, who guided the initiative's development, coordinated and led learning events and helped to synthesise the lessons learnt: Anwar Zeb and Junaid Khan of IRC Pakistan, Gabrielle Halcrow of SNV, Juliet Willetts of the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures, Lien Pham of Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation; and Tom Rankin from Plan International Australia. Thanks to WaterAid Australia colleagues who have supported the Learning Agenda initiative: Chelsea Huggett, Clare Hanley, David Shaw and Edmund Weking. Thanks also to the members of the Water for Women Fund Coordinator team, who played a substantial role in the development and delivery of the initiative and this learning note: Kate Orr, Matthew Bond, Alison Baker, Joanna Mott, Mia Cusack and Bianca Nelson Vatnsdal.

Citation: Water for Women. (2022). *Stronger systems for inclusive and sustainable WASH. Learning Note One: Engaging with the people and actors within WASH systems.*

First published in August 2022

This publication was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the contributing authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.



About Water for Women

Water for Women supports improved health, gender equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive, sustainable and resilient WASH projects and research. It is the Australian Government's flagship WASH program, delivered as part of Australia's aid program, investing AUD 118.9 million over five years. Water for Women is partnering with CSOs and research organisations to deliver 33 projects in 15 countries. Knowledge and learning are central to Water for Women and its partners, positioning the Fund as an important contributor to global knowledge development and sharing in inclusive WASH. Water for Women's Learning Agenda promotes collaboration and learning between all partners, and beyond the Fund, to support long-term changes to inclusive and resilient WASH policy and practice.

Find out more at
waterforwomen@ghd.com
waterforwomenfund.org

