SERVICES THAT LAST

Recommendations for building institutionally sustainable WASH projects in Malawi

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Overview

This learning document has been developed to share insights from work facilitating the transition strategy of a WaterAid Malawi project from the district of Salima between 2014 and 2017. One of the most important challenges facing the WASH sector is ensuring services gained through project investment last forever. By placing a more strategic focus on institutional sustainability, referring to the ability of permanent institutions to sustain the gains of development projects in the absence of project funding, projects can prepare for their inevitable exit and leave the system able to ensure that services last. The content herein aims to provide practical and actionable ideas that will improve the institutional sustainability of WASH projects.

Background

WaterAid Malawi (WAMA) had been implementing WASH projects in Salima District since 2002, focusing on the development of water supply and sanitation infrastructure, complemented by hygiene promotion activities. After more than a decade of implementation, WAMA made a decision to evaluate their impact and strategize their exit from Salima. Despite WAMA's successes, it was clear that there were significant threats to the sustainability of infrastructure gains as well as behaviour changes they promoted in their projects. Both were at risk of regressing after projects ended due to challenges associated with the capacity of permanent institutions to effectively manage and maintain these services and behaviours within their low-resource, post-project context. To ensure effective facilitation of the transition phase, WAMA sought out a new partnership with EWB. As part of this transitional period, WAMA would contribute strategic oversight, advice and resources, and EWB would develop the strategy for and facilitate the transition process itself, working with the Salima District Council, extension workers, community development committees, as well as the implementing NGO under the project, Evangelical Lutheran Development Services (ELDS).

NOTE ON EXIT STRATEGY AND TRANSITION

An exit strategy can be considered as a sustainability plan – it describes how a project will ensure that the impacts achieved will be sustained once the project ends. Strong exit strategies often incorporate a transition phase, where the transition between project and post-project environments is a facilitated process with permanent stakeholders, ensuring that permanent institutions like local government and community-based management systems are able to preserve the service levels achieved through project investment.

The Transition Process in Salima District

Project Phases

Each phase of a project, from design, through implementation, and finally transition, offer unique opportunities to ensure institutional sustainability. The specific opportunities for each phase are highlighted below, followed by the recommendations themselves:

Design Phase: The design phase is an ideal place to start strategizing effective ways to build the planning, management, and communications capacity of permanent institutions gradually throughout a project rather than addressing them at the end of the project. By considering these aspects early on, it provides the opportunity to secure a budget and other resources required to carry out capacity building throughout the project. It is also a time to examine and understand the practical challenges that permanent institutions will face after the project closes and to consider these as constraints in every aspect of the project that will continue or need to be managed after exit.

Implementation Phase: In addition to implementing core WASH activities of the project, the implementation phase allows organizations to fill cross-cutting and management capacity gaps they have identified within districts by assigning responsibility (beyond supervision) for the execution of project activities through mentorship. District coordination can be improved by ensuring that project activities actively link key managers of WASH across multiple levels of the district system – from the community up to the council level. This will lessen the workload of fixing essential communication channels during final transition.

Transition Phase: A transition phase gives the opportunity to re-assess management capacities and ensure that district government and local actors are prepared to fill roles that extend beyond the life of the project. It is critical at this stage to clearly demarcate the time when the project is no longer operational and permanent stakeholders are independently responsible for their roles. Although communication of exit is important at the beginning of a project, the manner in which it is done when the project closes sets the tone for the lasting perception of the project, and influences motivation for permanent stakeholders to continue supporting WASH activities. The latter part of the phase can be used for the implementing organization to gradually step away from an active role and provide arms-length support to overcome major hurdles.

The Transition Process in Salima District

Permanent Stakeholders

The purpose of the two-year transition phase at the end of the project in Salima District was to set up permanent district and community level managers of WASH services to both understand their necessary post-project role, and to be able to execute this role. Three groups of WASH managers in Salima were identified as the focus of transition strategy efforts:

District Coordinating Team (DCT): District Council level committee of government officers from WASH-related sectors (water development, environmental health, and community development play key roles). The DCT meets to plan, direct, coordinate, harmonize, and organize supervision of WASH-related work by various NGOs.

Extension Workers: Junior government staff from the water development, community development, and environmental health offices responsible for field level activities of those respective office. Extension workers interact heavily with communities and Area Development Committees.

Area Development Committees (ADCs): Elected committee of community members responsible for liaising with NGOs, CSOs, and government on all development initiatives. ADCs check-in and provide accountability and motivation to community level groups, and offer support on community-mobilized projects and activities.

Recommendation 1

At project conception, define the enabling environment required to independently sustain the intended project outcomes after project exit. Design interventions to match the financial and human resources that will be available post-project.

Problem: Project impacts can often only be sustained in high-resource and high capacity environments, which rarely considers the financial and human resource constraints of permanent institutions such as government. For instance, the impact of a water point repair system that relies on financial literacy and multiple documents to be signed between mechanics and communities will likely regress in a very low resource, low capacity, post-project context. This is also true of high-tech technologies requiring expensive and difficult-to-source spare parts, or handwashing practices that will only continue if health extension workers can follow-up and keep communities accountable.

In Practice: For each intended project outcome, the necessary responsibilities and relationships required to fully sustain those outcomes after project close should be defined. Because permanent institutions like district government will hold these responsibilities and relationships, this defining process should be done considering the existing finances, capacity, policies, and coordination capacity of those same permanent institutions. A particular focus should be placed on consistent and cost effective communication between community groups and the district council to facilitate support for WASH services. It is important that roles are not developed and handed over to groups, but that they participate in the process to ensure feasibility and buy-in.

Community Development Assistants from Traditional Authorities Maganga and Mwanza work through a template on identifying strengths with Mascot Bvumbwe from ELDS, during the Salima Transition All-Stakeholders Workshop held in March 2016.

For more ideas on facilitation: See WASH Catalysts' Recommendation 1 – Design Phase Facilitation Guide.

Recommendation 2

Throughout project implementation, support permanent stakeholders to gain soft skills and connections necessary for sustaining project impacts.

Problem: Project-controlled management and a singular focus on building WASH-specific technical knowledge leaves a management skills (soft skills) gap amongst government and community partners. This results in a situation where permanent stakeholders are unable to effectively manage processes, procedures and communication channels in the long-run.

In Practice: Project staff should encourage permanent stakeholders to take on as much of their necessary post-project role as possible during project implementation. This means that permanent stakeholders like extension staff can strengthen crucial management skills, like coordinating community meetings or analyzing data collected, with just a bit of assistance from project staff. This mentorship or apprenticeship, eases the transition into any new roles that permanent stakeholders may be expected to take on in a post-project context, especially given that many of these skills require behaviour change and therefore practice. Project staff should not wait until the end of the project to do this.

Area Development Committee members and Community Development Assistant Nathan Ntema from Traditional Authroity Mwanza discuss their relationship and working styles, with Nathan Chiwoko from ELDS listening, as a step in the Salima Transition work, in August 2016

Recommendation 3

Dedicate time and financial resources for a transition phase at **the end of a project,** during which project activities should cease, in order to focus on system strengthening.

Problem: Projects often leave immediately after the implementation phase, committing to "hand-overs" but not committing to troubleshooting how the system left behind will continue to manage without the project's support.

In Practice: From the beginning of the project, plan for a transition phase within the timeframe and budget of the project. Projects should aim to design transition phases with a reasonable period, recommended to be no less than 20% of the project implementation phase, depending on the nature of the project. This phase allows the system, communication lines, planning, roles and activities, to be observed without being artificially propped up by project resources. However, it still allows project staff to help people fulfill their roles through mentorship. It is crucial to avoid new infrastructure implementation, technical trainings, and other project activities during this period. Costs for this phase are minimal compared to the costs during the implementation phase since there are no major infrastructure investments. In Salima, 2 years were set aside where no other project activities were being implemented in order to facilitate this transition phase. The length of the transition phase may also vary depending on the level to which role definition, capacity building, and mentorship occurred throughout the project– if the more this was done throughout, the shorter the transition period may be.

An Area Development Committee executive member from Traditional Authority Mwanza shares notes from a root cause analysis, one session from the capacity building workshop facilitated during the Salima Transition, in December 2015

For more ideas on facilitation: See WASH Catalysts' Recommendation 3 – Transition Phase Facilitation Guide.

Best Practices for Implementing Organizations

The following practices can be integrated into implementation strategies at district level, and will further build the institutional sustainability of intended WASH outcomes:

① **Hold a series of targeted conversations with permanent institution groups about the long-term sustainability of project impacts, and how they will prevent the loss of services after the project ends.** The process of discussing simple sustainability theory, specifically about the common decrease of service levels once projects exit, has been demonstrated to improve the perception of responsibility and ownership over services brought through the project in Salima. This gives permanent institution groups a clear pathway to achieve their goals in sustaining services. It is the duty of the implementing organization, and therefore project staff, to facilitate these discussions repeatedly over the course of implementation. In practice, these conversations can be added as brief agenda items in district coordination meetings or ADC meetings, they can be discussed informally while conducting another activity, and they can be built into the facilitation plan for other capacity building exercises. Additionally, these conversations on expected post-project roles should be held at least once with all relevant permanent institution groups in the same space together (e.g. district officers in the same meeting as extension workers and ADC members) in order to clarify each others expectations and commitments. The necessary roles of permanent institutions should be reiterated as a final activity before complete exit, and clear and realistic expectations should be set about any future involvement of the implementing NGO.

2 **Throughout implementation, project staff should mentor extension workers to implement activities directly rather than simply involving them in monitoring and supervision roles.** In doing so, project staff can transfer real skills and real practices to permanent government staff. This can be as simple as supporting extension workers to develop a work plan for follow-ups, instead of project staff independently developing this work plan. For example, in Salima, the water development office became responsible for all aspects of Area Mechanic (AM) monthly follow-up meetings in the months prior to InterAide's exit from the district. The WMAs were responsible for arranging and facilitating AM meetings and filing the contracts and data that had been collected from these meetings in the past. InterAide was still available to assist when a problem arose (like assessing the data that had been collected), and the water development office extension workers were able to practice their skills in a fail-safe environment. By the time InterAide's project wrapped up, water development extension staff were fully able to conduct the AM monthly meetings independently.

3 **Technologies, approaches and materials used should be those that are most common in the district.** For example, Afridev pumps were used in Salima because the spare parts supply chain is well-managed district-wide, they require few spares as a relatively simple technology, and they are financially accessible to communities.

Maintenance services for non-standard pumps can be hard to contract due to poor or non-existent spare supply chains as well as lack of local knowledge to maintain them. In another example, extension staff had already been trained in CLTS facilitation, and therefore the project reinforced those existing facilitation skills. Instead of fragmenting the knowledge of effective WASH management, the project worked within existing procedures to reinforce the mechanisms that ensure service delivery.

4 **Avoid project funding for any activity or behaviour that is expected to continue after project exit.** Doing so will set the expectation that this activity or behaviour can only occur with additional injection of resources. Even district level coordination meetings, if required to continue indefinitely to ensure that services can be sustained, should never be funded by the project. This prevents other, more reliable resources from being allocated to that activity and sets a damaging precedent. The same is true for providing fuel for district council members to conduct longterm monitoring of water points, or funding other things as seemingly harmless as printing data collection forms or providing refreshments for regular field visits. The culture of incentives is problematic and challenging to navigate, but needs to be considered for its significant risk to sustainability.

5 **Monitor the state of the enabling environment throughout the duration of the project, as it pertains to sustaining project impacts.** It is important to assess how the project will work to build the necessary environment for project sustainability throughout the project's implementation while skill and capacity building activities can still be conducted. Continuous assessments of the enabling environment in Salima highlighted the need for additional work on the relationship between CDAs and ADCs. As a result, an activity to improve their communication was conducted late in the transition phase. The fact that this relationship was posing a risk to the project's sustainability would never have come to light without consistent questioning and capacity assessments.

It is inadequate to rely solely on formal mechanisms of consultation like DCT or DEC meetings to receive such input. For example, in Salima, our transition facilitation team met with the water development office on a monthly basis, even if it was just to update their office on work plans. This held us accountable to the water development office, helped to build a trusting relationship, and was crucial in guiding our work. Moreover, this consistent interaction simultaneously built the water development office's knowledge of our work, which increased their ability to easily follow-up on what was accomplished.

6 **Seek consistent consultation and guidance from all permanent institution partners, especially district government offices.** They have a deep understanding of the district and of beneficiary communities, are aware of the work of other NGOs and CSOs, and have technical WASH expertise, all of which can be used to improve the strategies and approaches being taken to achieve project goals.

Best Practices for Country Programs Supporting Sub-Grantee Implementing Organizations

The recommendations below originate from insights during facilitation of the Salima transition as well as recent consultations with Participatory Development Initiatives (PDI), an implementer of the Deliver Life Project in the district of Machinga. They highlight specifically how country programs can support sub-grantee organizations to implement more institutionally sustainable projects.

1 **Offer strategy development support to project staff in the development of the project plans, strategies, and activities they are implementing**, and secure resources for this process. When there is a lack of guidance, project staff often put an emphasis on the most resource intensive activities (e.g. prioritizing infrastructure components over capacity building) and this compromises the effectiveness of the more soft-skill related activities. Too often, project staff are only using budgets to guide their activities, and minimal thought is given to the approach or tactics used. Because not all project staff have a wealth of experience in a given sector or problem area, some type of consultative resource with seasoned professionals should be made available to them. In addition, M&E resources and frameworks should be available for sub-grantees to guide them in assessing the long-term sustainability of project outcomes.

2 **Confirm flexibility in the budget for necessary follow-up activities, ensuring project staff have the opportunity to intervene post-project if there is a clear need or gap in capacity identified**. When there is no budget for follow-up activities, it compromises the sustainability of the project. For example, the Deliver Life project has restrictive budget lines that do not include resources for follow-up activities. As a result, project staff do not have the opportunity to ensure that project impacts are able to be sustained once activities have been completed within a specific timeline. This is particularly problematic for activities that are trying to promote behaviour change, since they require more time to ensure sustainability.

③ Set realistic timelines for project activities promoting behaviour change. Sufficient time needs to be devoted to activities that require behaviour change. Often these activities are left to be implemented later on in the project, while the activities involving infrastructure development are prioritized. This gives project staff less time to build the capacity of community members and permanent institutions in a way that will be sustained. For instance, PDI Machinga noticed that time constraints might affect the outcome of the CLTS triggering and sensitization component of the Deliver Life project. The team fears the training and capacity building of community members will not stick because of the compressed timeline as they approach the end of one of their projects. In this way, the timing (within the project cycle) is a risk to its effectiveness. Sub-grantee organisations such as PDI should be guided on the appropriate timelines of project activities.

④ Ensure there are opportunities throughout project implementation for sub-grantees to ask questions, get clarification and raise concerns about project activities. Review meetings should not be confined to before and after project implementation. Project staff would benefit from the opportunity to raise some of their concerns while project activities are still being implemented so that they can be addressed before the project ends.

For example, since the Deliver Life Project is being implemented in other districts, it would be beneficial if project teams could come together to discuss tangible approaches, timelines, challenges, and risks they are facing in their work and ways to improve them.

Note from the Authors

This document was developed for WaterAid Malawi's Country Programme. Recommendations draw on lessons learnt through WASH Catalysts' facilitation of WaterAid Malawi's transition out of Salima district. Although these recommendations were produced specifically as a result of this project, the underlying principles remain relevant for the sustainability of WASH projects worldwide. The content is meant to be adaptable to a variety of WASH projects and programs. WASH Catalysts is consulting for several WASH organizations, improving their pathways to setting up permanent institutions to maintain project gains after project exit. As we continue to grapple with this challenging subject, we will continue to learn and share insights. To develop the most relevant content moving forward, we would love to receive suggestions on what might be useful to your organization.