



Solving complex problems through systems strengthening The Sustainable Services Initiative of Welthungerhilfe in the WASH sector

Sustainability: the core problem of water and sanitation

Sustainability has numerous aspects. In the WASH sector, for rural consumers, sustainability principally comes down to the functioning of the water supply and sanitation infrastructure, for example, by the consumer asking the straightforward question: “Does the pump provide a reliable source of water or not?”

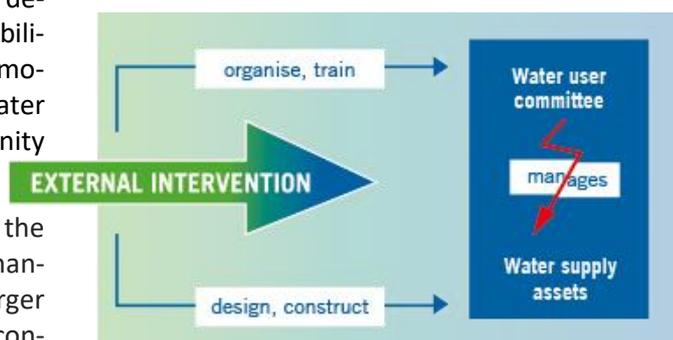
For far too many people in rural areas, water and sanitation services are still unreliable and substandard. An estimated 30% of installed hand-pumps are non-functional and another 40% are only partially working, on average, after three to five years of installation. Despite the best intentions, the fact is that the development cooperation has contributed towards the problem in numerous ways.



What is going wrong?

Normally, WASH development projects are designed by default in a variation of 4 steps: the construction or rehabilitation of water and sanitation infrastructure, the promotion of “life-saving” hygiene practices, the training of water user committees and finally the handover to community management.

These projects have a relatively high risk of failure in the long term because the pump, user committee and the management functions have not been seen to be part of a larger WASH system. A system that has many parts which are connected, have relationships to each other and are affected by context.



Systems strengthening

Systems thinking has been around for a long time - we are used to thinking in terms of health, education and ecological systems. In the water and sanitation sector, the thinking in terms of a WASH system and how to strengthen it to ensure sustainability is still relatively new. It was only introduced in 2015 by a global WASH initiative, the Agenda for Change (A4C). A4C is an association of WASH implementing organizations, research institutions and donors. In 2017, Welthungerhilfe joined this association with its Sustainable Services Initiative (SSI).

Applying system thinking, the WASH system is divided into eight building blocks (see below). An essential prerequisite for improving sustainability is a comprehensive analysis of these functional areas carried out in close cooperation with the local government i.e. the service authorities. This analysis is followed by joint planning to determine which building blocks are appropriate entry points for external support agencies to strengthen the WASH system at a district level.

In practice, the systems approach leads to a shift in the focus from WASH projects only building infrastructure (pumps and latrines) to also supporting service authorities in the planning process. The approach also focuses on strengthening and using national systems instead of creating parallel ones, using only one monitoring and mutual accountability platform and thinking about sustainable financing strategies. Since no one organization can do it all, the systems approach also increases the potential for collaboration between external support agencies.



Guiding principles for the implementation of the system approach are human rights principles and the 2030 Agenda, as is now also enshrined in many national water strategies (e.g. BMZ Water Strategy 2017): Everyone, Everywhere, Forever.

The Sustainable Services Initiative of Welthungerhilfe

Through the Sustainable Services Initiative (SSI) sponsored by Viva Con Agua, Welthungerhilfe is currently implementing the system strengthening approach in Uganda, Ethiopia and Nepal in partnership with the German Toilet Organization and Aguaconsult, a founder member of A4C. The country project teams are supported on-site by experts in the planning and implementation phase. At regular meetings, experiences are exchanged and further processed. More than 300,000 people will benefit permanently from improved water and sanitation through the SSI.

Welthungerhilfe is one of the first organizations worldwide which, without an exclusive focus on WASH, is working to improve long term WASH sustainability. Given the linkage between WASH and nutrition, Welthungerhilfe is supporting A4C to extend the systems strengthening approach beyond water supply to include sanitation and hygiene.

Our goal is to implement the SSI approach in other WASH priority countries from 2019 onwards and make an effective contribution to achieving the Water Sustainability Goal (SDG6).

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