Strengthening Systems for more Equitable, Sustainable and Climate-resilient WASH:

Lessons from Water for Women

Water For Women

Systems Strengthening

WaterAid

Australian Aid

In brief

This brief shares the lessons learnt about strengthening systems for inclusive and sustainable WASH from 20 Water for Women civil society organisation (CSO) projects across the Asia-Pacific region. It is the culmination of a two-year-long participatory learning process under Water for Women's Learning Agenda. The lessons presented synthesise insights documented in three accompanying learning notes:

1. Engaging with the people and actors within WASH systems
2. Leveraging finance for more equitable and sustainable WASH
3. Shifting WASH systems towards greater equity and sustainability through sector planning, monitoring and review.

This brief summarises and ties the lessons outlined in the learning notes together into a narrative about WASH systems and the CSO contributions that strengthen them.

About Water for Women

Water for Women supports improved health, gender equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects and research. It is the Australian Government's flagship WASH program, investing AUD 154.9 million over seven years. Water for Women is partnering with civil society organisations, research organisations and local partners to deliver 40 projects in 16 countries from 2018 to 2024. Knowledge and learning are central to Water for Women, positioning the Fund as an important contributor to global knowledge development and sharing in inclusive and climate-resilient WASH. Water for Women's Learning Agenda promotes collaborative learning, knowledge development and sharing to support long-term transformative change to WASH policy and practice globally.

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Front cover: In Praek Kamphleung village, the village chief, sanitation champion, commune council and iDE representatives celebrate the village's open defecation free (ODF) claim submission - a milestone towards achieving Cambodia's nationwide goal of ODF by 2025. Credit: Miguel Jerónimo Photography

Summary

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

This learning brief, the result of a participatory Learning Agenda initiative, documents the lessons learnt from 20 Water for Women civil society organisation (CSO) projects about strengthening systems for inclusive and sustainable WASH.[1] Through work undertaken under the Water for Women Fund, we have gained the following insights.

Systems are made of, and exist to benefit, people — relationships between people and institutions form the foundation

To strengthen WASH systems, CSOs must invest in building strategic relationships with, and between, diverse actors from government, private sector, rights holder organisations (RHOs) and civil society. Actors' capacity, mindset and the political, economic, social and geographic contexts around them influence who is able to engage with the WASH system, who is excluded, and how actors relate to one another.

CSOs must consider system elements of power, agency, capacity, relationships, attitudes and norms

Building blocks of a strong WASH sector[2] — such as policy, institutional arrangements, financing, planning, monitoring and review — are useful categorisations of the functions the system should be able to perform. Considering such building blocks can help to identify obstacles to inclusion and sustainability, but they should be complemented by consideration of the political, relational and attitudinal aspects of the system. This figure illustrates the intersecting relationships between system actors, elements and factors that make up the WASH system.

CSOs should strive to change norms in the WASH system and wider society for more inclusive and diverse WASH systems

Unless WASH strategies, plans, and collaborations prioritise gender equity, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), people remain at risk of being left behind. Ensuring diversity, equality and inclusion in WASH decision-making leads to greater emphasis on GEDSI in the way services are provided. Many GEDSI issues related to voice, agency, participation, accountability and Doing No Harm must be addressed through changing norms at a societal and system level in order to create lasting and equitable WASH.

CSOs have important roles to play as convenors, technical specialists, advocates and innovators

By strategically selecting different roles at different times — as convenors, advocates, innovators, and technical WASH, gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) specialists — CSOs can contribute to transforming the WASH system, and connecting WASH to other sector systems.

CSOs' WASH systems strengthening interventions should seek structural, relational and normative systems change

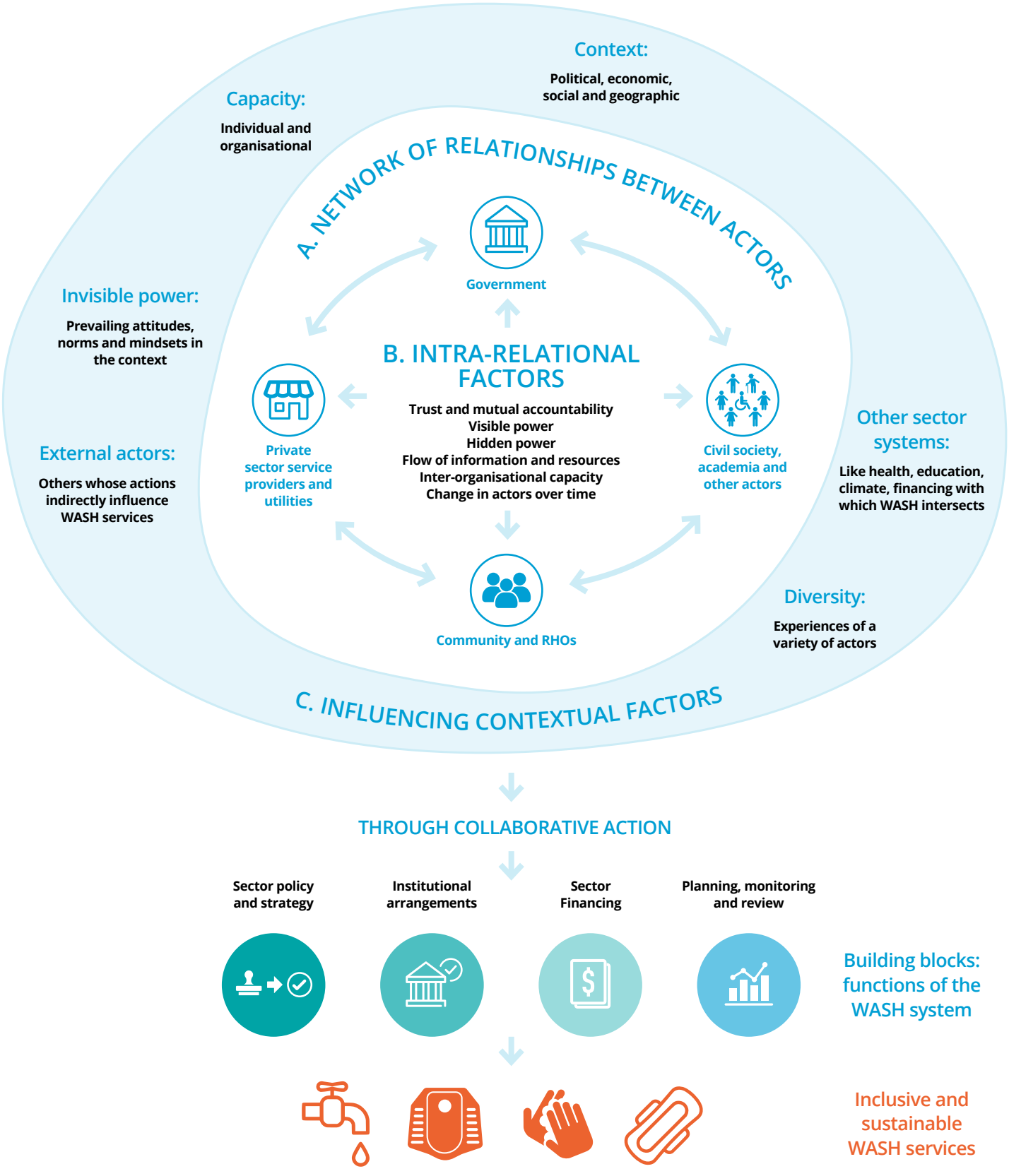
CSOs must go beyond influencing change at the structural level of policies, practices and the flow of resources to effect sustained change. CSOs' systems strengthening interventions should promote relational and political change that builds collaborations and challenges power imbalances, and mental change that transforms the prevailing norms and attitudes that influence how people in the system engage with each other and WASH service provision. This figure provides insights on CSOs' roles in fostering structural and practical changes, relational and political changes, and mental and attitudinal changes in the system.

Systems strengthening is as much about *how* CSOs work as *what* CSOs focus their efforts on

CSOs can demonstrate the principles of strong systems by employing collaborative, participatory and empowering project approaches that are grounded in local efforts and contexts. In addition, CSOs can help to develop sectoral capacity for continuous learning and self-improvement by encouraging cycles of reflection, learning and adaptation.

[1] Water for Women has also partnered with research organisations to conduct research on WASH systems. Read more about the role and impact of research in WASH systems in this learning note.

[2] Water for Women uses the Sanitation and Water for All Building Blocks of sector policy and strategy, institutional arrangements, sector financing, planning, monitoring and review, and capacity development to help consolidate reporting across the Fund.



The WASH system is (A) a network of people and institutions, influenced by (B) intra-relational factors of power and access to resources, and (C) contextual factors, drawing on lessons from this Learning Agenda initiative

Structural and practical changes

Policies, practices and the flow of information and resources

- CSOs are traditionally most comfortable influencing structural change, by supporting WASH policy development, promoting good practice, and advocating for change, for example.
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities in WASH policy and practice is especially important as it establishes how actors work together.
- By helping individuals and organisations develop capacity to fulfill their roles in each of the building blocks, CSOs can also build confidence and trust, which leads to stronger relationships.
- By generating evidence of good practice and policy gaps, CSOs can help improve accountability, influence resource prioritisation and build confidence to invest in WASH and GEDSI.

Relational and political changes

Connections and power dynamics

- CSOs need to understand the political economy and (non-WASH) incentives of different actors, and be conscious of the priorities of actors with social or economic influence beyond formal WASH mandates (and the system), to broker effective and lasting collaborations.
- CSOs can foster relationships and challenge harmful power dynamics by advocating for and demonstrating participatory approaches that meaningfully involve women and people with disabilities in WASH coordination, and policy, strategy and plan development.
- CSOs can shift the balance of decision-making power by establishing rights-based mechanisms for joint planning and regular review between service users and providers.

Mental and attitudinal changes

Norms, beliefs and assumptions

- Helping other actors to see and understand the system they are part of can change the way they think about their role in WASH service provision.
- Creating platforms for community and rights groups to share WASH experience and knowledge can help decision-makers to understand issues from service users' perspectives.
- Brokering RHO and GEDSI actors' involvement in the WASH sector can shift the norms and discourses around GEDSI needed to 'do no harm'.
- Highlighting progress in non-WASH local systems, such as health or education, can motivate and inspire WASH actors - growing commitments to climate-resilience provide opportunities to shift attitudes and projects around the WASH-climate nexus.
- Through peer-to-peer sharing, role model WASH and GEDSI champions can inspire peers to shift from inertia to action.

Insights about how change happens in WASH systems

Recommendations

To design effective systems strengthening interventions WASH CSOs should:

- Understand the context
- Strive to influence systems change at practical, relational and normative levels
- Design flexible projects that adapt to changes in the system over time
- Be realistic and clearly articulate what and how your project expects to contribute to systems change
- Select project locations and partners intentionally and strategically
- Focus on the people and institutions that make up the system
- Use project design and implementation to prompt a reimagining of the WASH system
- Be ready to change and be changed

To implement effective systems strengthening interventions WASH CSOs should:

- Demonstrate inclusive and participatory development practice
- Build ownership of shared WASH goals among diverse actors
- Build diverse collaborations
- Do No Harm
- Generate and share evidence
- Establish and strengthen feedback loops for accountability

To contribute to lasting impact on WASH systems — and thereby the sustainability and inclusiveness of WASH services — funders of WASH CSOs should:

- Consider systems approaches in all WASH projects they fund
- Understand the context of the intervention, and insist that implementers do too
- Provide sufficient project time horizons and realistic expectations
- Allow project flexibility and adaptation
- Expect and request outcomes that go beyond traditional WASH outcomes
- Employ non-traditional approaches to financing that create lasting impact on WASH systems

Abbreviations

CFAR	Centre for Advocacy and Research, India
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CVA	Citizen Voice and Action
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion
IRC	International Rescue Committee
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
PNG	Papua New Guinea
RHO	Rights Holder Organisation
RTI	Research Triangle Institute International, India
SNV	SNV Netherlands Development Organisation
STBM	Community-based Total Sanitation (Indonesia)
SWA	Sanitation and Water for All
ToC	Theory of Change
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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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 equality, social inclusion, safely managed WASH and water security.'

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

- How do partners interpret, frame, understand and engage with WASH systems?
- What changes are Water for Women contributing to within (local and national) WASH systems, and how do these changes happen?

Purpose and structure of the brief

This learning brief summarises lessons learnt from 20 Water for Women projects delivered by CSO partners (hereafter referred to as partners) about strengthening WASH systems for inclusion and sustainability. It is the culmination of a two-year-long learning process. The lessons presented in this learning brief synthesise insights documented in three accompanying learning notes:

1. Engaging with the people and actors within WASH systems
2. Leveraging finance for more equitable and sustainable WASH
3. Shifting WASH systems towards greater equity and sustainability through sector planning, monitoring and review.

This learning brief summarises and ties the lessons outlined in the learning notes together into a narrative about WASH systems and the CSO contributions that strengthen them. It is divided into four sections:

1. The first presents some of the diverse ways in which CSOs think about and understand WASH systems, and the implications of considering WASH systems as social systems.
2. The second explores CSOs' approaches to systems strengthening project design, implementation and monitoring, and details the common roles through which CSOs engage with different functions across the building blocks of the WASH system.
3. The third draws on a framework for categorising systems changes (systems change conditions) to share lessons learnt about how CSOs can contribute to systems change.[3]
4. The fourth presents a conclusion in the form of key messages and recommendations for future programming to strengthen systems for inclusive and sustainable WASH.

Some examples of CSO projects' contributions to change in WASH systems are provided in Annex A.

[3] Throughout this brief, the term 'systems change' refers to change in the way WASH systems function, with the intended results of this change being greater inclusion and sustainability of the WASH services that the systems produce.

The systems strengthening initiative: A participatory approach to learning

The initiative was designed around the learning questions and sub-questions presented in Table 1. While the initiative explored all of these sub-questions, this brief is structured according to the emerging findings considered most pertinent to the global WASH sector.

Table 1. Learning Agenda initiative questions and sub-questions

How do CSOs interpret, frame, understand and engage with WASH systems?	What changes is Water for Women contributing to within (local and national) WASH systems, and how does this change happen?
How do CSOs define and document the WASH system? Do they account for formal and informal systems? If system boundaries are drawn (explicitly or implicitly), where are they and why?	What aspects of each SWA building block have changed during the Fund period, and what actors or factors have contributed to this?
How do CSOs decide how to engage with strengthening the WASH system? What is their vision and direction for change within the system, and what guiding principles influence how they work towards that change?	What changes have we identified in each SWA building block with regard to gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) during the Fund period?
How do CSOs understand, represent and engage with GEDSI issues within the WASH system? What GEDSI issues are being addressed by partners through WASH systems?	What approaches and activities from CSOs have contributed to systemic WASH and GEDSI changes, and how?
How do CSOs measure change within the WASH system? How do CSOs measure GEDSI change within the WASH system?	What changes have occurred in WASH systems during/due to the COVID-19 pandenic?
How have the above changed during the Fund period, and why?	Which building blocks are driving change or presenting barriers to system progress?
How do CSOs adapt their programming in response to changes in the system and context?	Which actors and factors have created challenges and opportunities for CSOs in trying to influence change?
	Which actors and factors have created challenges and opportunities in improving GEDSI through WASH system strengthening? In particular, what role have GEDSI actors (RHOs) played in strengthening WASH systems?

The systems strengthening Learning Agenda initiative applied a participatory learning approach. Its primary objectives were to:

- identify and document systems strengthening lessons from the Fund (through this brief and the accompanying three learning notes)
- develop a community of practice for WASH systems strengthening among CSOs in the Asia-Pacific region
- strengthen the programming and reporting of CSO partners regarding systems strengthening efforts.

Box 1 highlights some of the ways in which the Learning Agenda initiative has contributed to these other objectives. Figure 1 and Figure 2 outline the overall process of the Learning Agenda initiative and the sources of input for this learning brief.

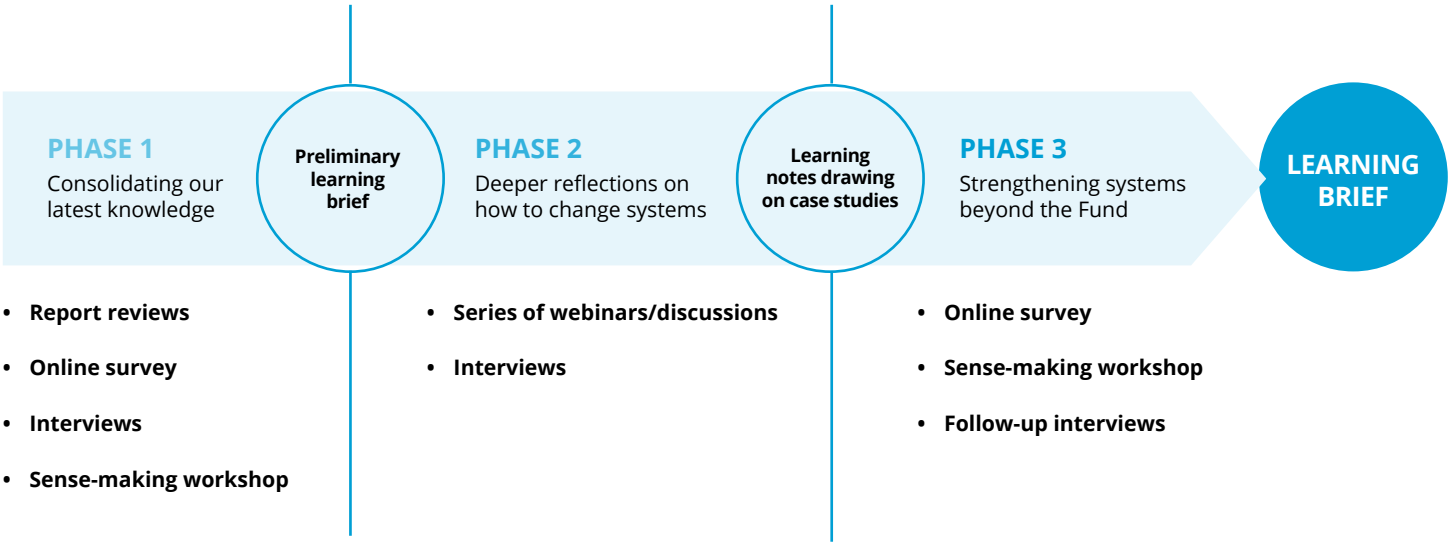

Figure 1. The participatory and iterative nature of the systems strengthening Learning Agenda initiative encouraged responsiveness to emergent learnings

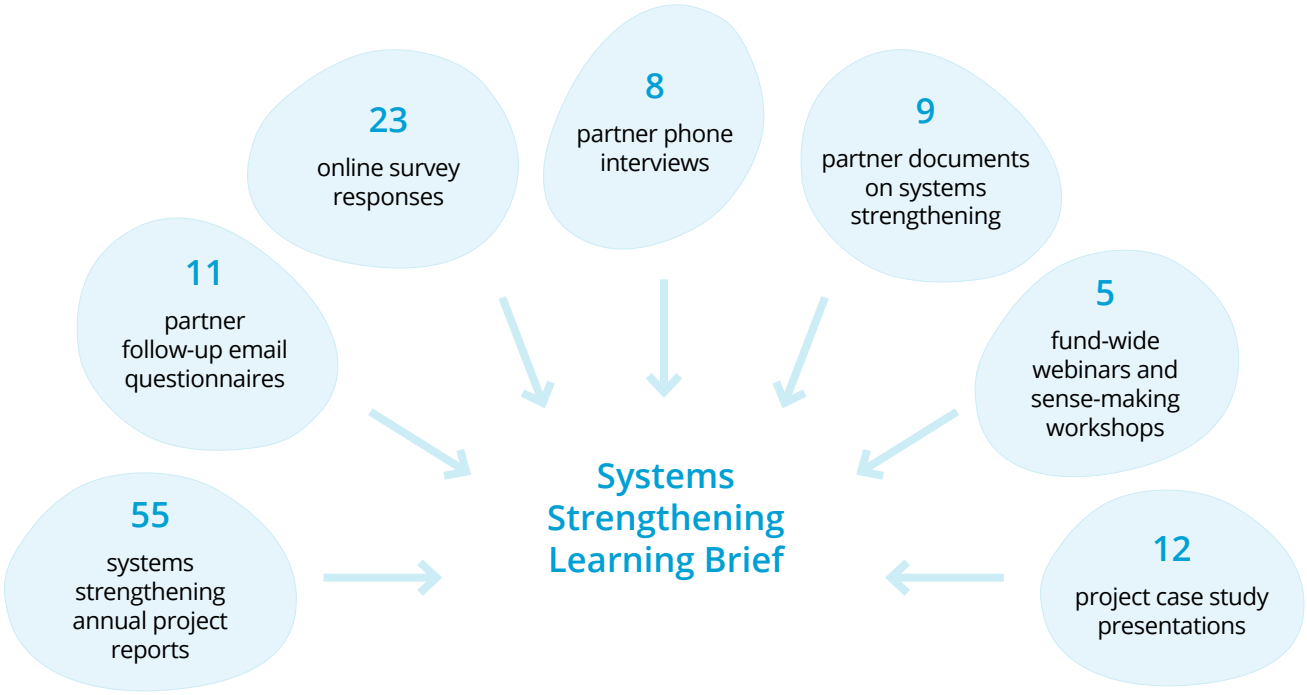

Figure 2. Inputs for the lessons in this brief came from rich and varied sources

The Learning Agenda initiative sought evidence and practical experience from CSOs, but also drew on concepts from systems and WASH systems literature. The Sanitation and Water for All (SWA[4]) (2022) building blocks provided a framework to guide discussions and findings despite partners' different programming approaches. The framing of the system as a network of actors (see Box 2) draws on the work of sociologist Talcott Parsons (1991). Analysis and synthesis of how CSOs contribute to systems change built on The Water of Systems Change (Kania et al. 2018), which was informed by the systems thinking work of Meadows (1999) and Foster-Fishman et al. (2007). Rights-based approaches (Box 3) drew on work by UNICEF (2018) and other Water for Women Learning Agenda initiatives (2022a). Finally, the concept of complex adaptive systems (see Box 4), built on work by Ramalingam et al. (2008) and Neely (2019), influenced much of what is presented in this learning brief.

Box 1. The Learning Agenda initiative as a learning process

The Learning Agenda initiative has had a range of benefits for participants, beyond the simple documentation of learning. The initiative enabled CSO partners to reflect on, document and share examples of their work with other CSOs across the region, and helped to deepen individual and organisational understanding of WASH systems strengthening design and implementation. This is illustrated in the following quotes from participants in the online surveys:

> **"Personally… I went from having a theoretical understanding of systems to putting it into practice and understanding the complexity and all the challenges it came with."**

> **"I have really been able to distinguish between the two levels of activity … systems strengthening and the service delivery/direct implementation … They both have distinct goals and outcomes but are crucial to each other for both WASH and GEDSI."**

The initiative has helped at least three CSO partners document their systems strengthening approaches through detailed case studies, or to apply new systems thinking tools in their projects. See the Water for Women website for further details.

Interpreting and understanding WASH systems

The idea of a 'system' — a group of items that interact to form a unified whole (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) — is abstract, and there are many ways to understand and interpret the 'WASH system'. Therefore, a starting point for the system strengthening learning initiative was to determine how CSOs define and perceive the WASH system.

Respondents to an online survey were invited to consider a series of images that could possibly represent a WASH system, select the image that best visualised the WASH system in their project area, and explain their selection. The responses (Figure 3) highlight that there is no one 'correct' way to conceptualise a system, but some themes exist:

- Systems are made of, and exist to benefit, people.
- The system is defined by its purpose: the provision of WASH services.
- WASH systems comprise many different moving parts. Interactions between individuals, institutions and subsystems such as monitoring and financing, and between interconnected systems at community, district and national levels, add to system complexity.

There are many potential points at which CSOs can be involved in the system. These are explored further in Learning Note 2, and later in this brief.

[4] Sanitation and Water for All is a partnership of governments and their development partners, including civil society and the private sector. Partners work to stimulate political dialogue and coordinate and monitor progress towards WASH-related Sustainable Development Goals, and to jointly assess and overcome obstacles to universal access.

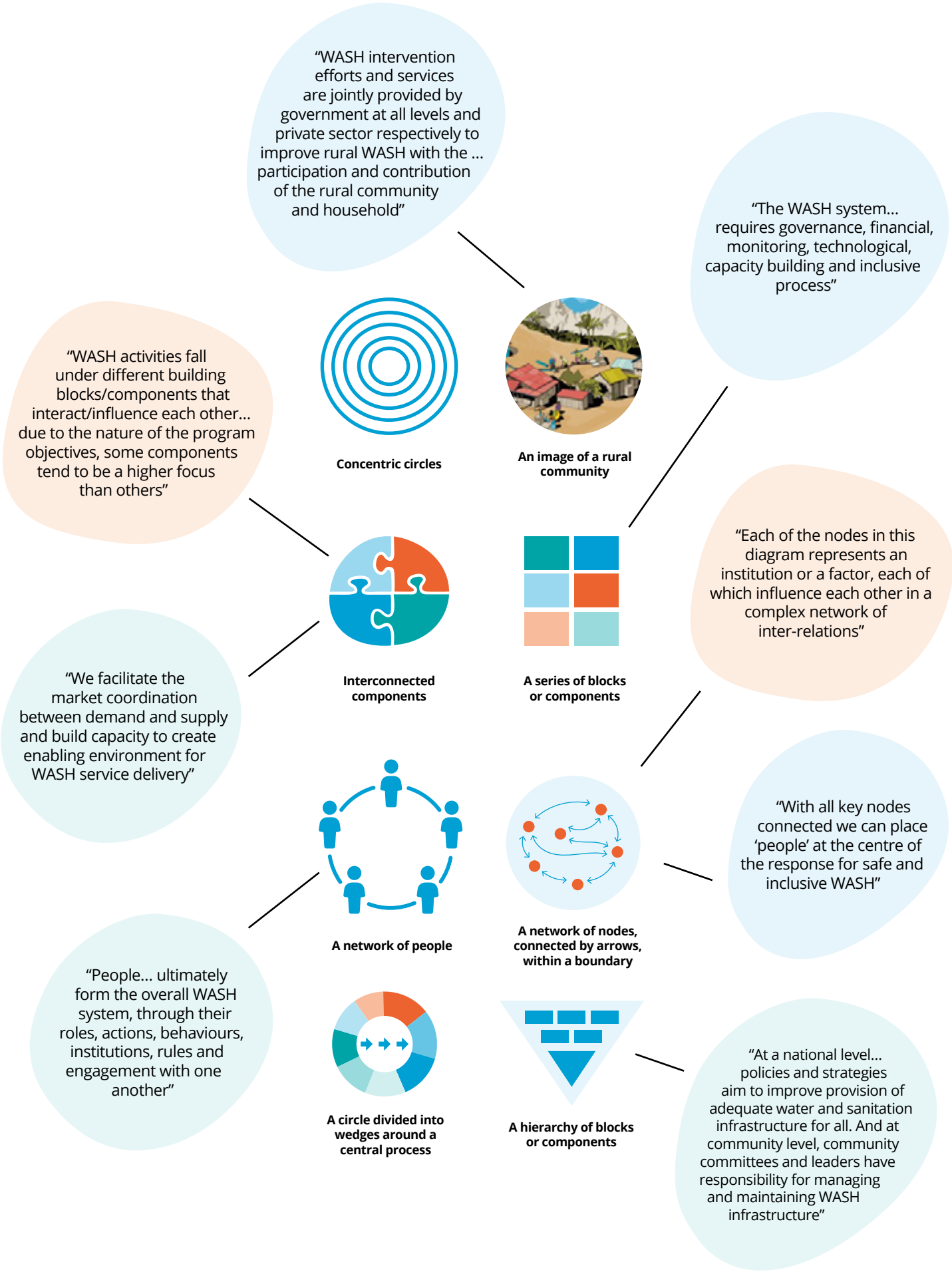

Figure 3. There are many valid ways to understand and conceptualise the WASH system

Learning Note 1 explores in greater depth some of the implications of considering the WASH system as a social system — a network of actors (Box 2).

Box 2. The system as a network of actors

Engaging with WASH systems inevitably involves working with a variety of people and institutions, but how does considering the WASH system as a social system help us to understand the connection between actors, collaborations and system strength?

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), the ability of the actors to become the authors of their own actions (capacity), and each actor's concept of 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.

Key insights from Learning Note 1 include:

- The political, economic and geographic context influence who is involved in WASH systems. 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, who does not have influence but should have, and what social and cultural norms constrain or perpetuate power imbalances.
- The capacity of actors — individuals and organisations — and prevailing norms and paradigms affect 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, can develop actor capacity and cultivate an enabling environment for skills and competence to be put into action.
- Relationships between actors are conduits for sharing information and ideas. Building and sustaining collaboration, connections and coordination effectively are essential capacities of the WASH system.
- Diverse systems are strong systems. Bringing GEDSI actors like rights holder organisations (RHOs) into the WASH system results in a stronger network of actors, and more opportunities to solve complex problems that affect everyone.
- A rights-based approach to systems strengthening puts 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 and ensure no one is left behind.
- GEDSI issues need to be addressed at a system level in order to resolve and prevent inequalities in WASH service provision and access.

Drawing on these insights, Figure 4 represents the WASH system as a network of actors. It depicts how stronger systems and collaboration between diverse actors can improve the function of WASH building blocks such as policy, planning, monitoring and review, and ultimately, WASH service provision. The actors involved in function/building blocks and aspects of service delivery may differ (for example, ministries of finance in WASH financing, and wastewater and faecal sludge workers in sewage disposal). Therefore, effective WASH systems should exhibit good coordination, role clarity, availability of information and holistic strategies that enable diverse actors to contribute to inclusive and sustainable WASH services.

Civil society organisations assume a variety of roles in their engagement with WASH systems (explored further in the next section). CSOs' roles and the way in which they shape engagement with other actors influence their framing and understanding of the system. This in turn influences how CSOs design systems strengthening interventions and the change to which they intend to contribute.

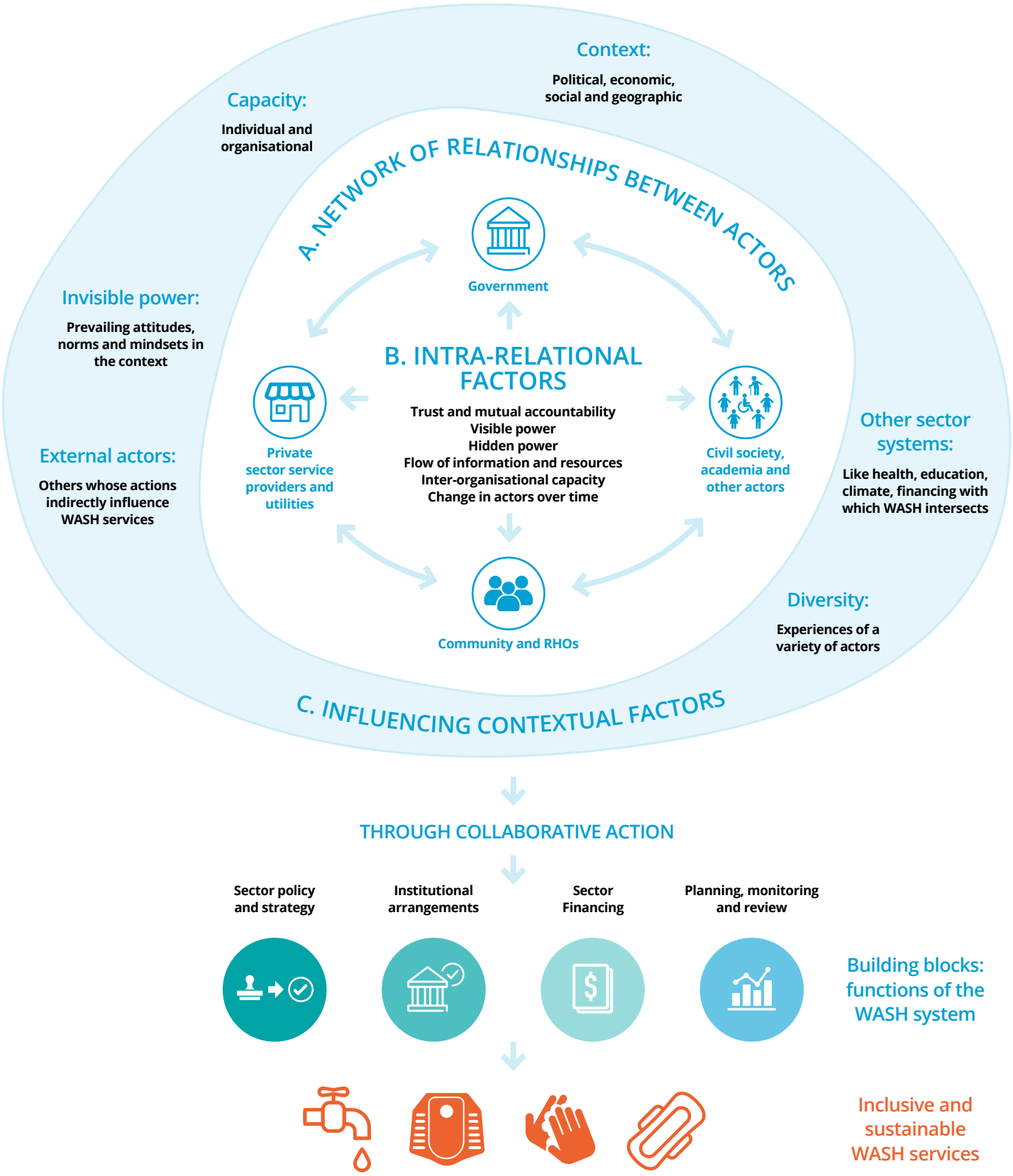

Figure 4. The WASH system is (A) a network of people and institutions, influenced by (B) intra-relational factors of power and access to resources, and (C) contextual factors, drawing on lessons from this Learning Agenda initiative

Engaging with WASH systems

As well as their own understanding of the WASH system, each CSO brings unique organisational strategies, principles and approaches to designing their systems strengthening interventions. A strength of the Water for Women Fund has been the opportunity for CSO partners to learn from each other's diverse approaches. These include the market-based systems strengthening of iDE and Research Triangle Institute International, India (RTI), the capacity-centred framing of the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), the community co-design and joint planning approaches of the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR), India, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), right-based accountability-centred projects led by World Vision Bangladesh and district-wide approaches by Plan International, SNV and WaterAid.

Designing systems strengthening projects

Water for Women's CSO partners used a mix of structured project design activities such as gender power analysis, capacity assessments, political economy analysis, building block assessments, and power mapping to design their projects. Partners were also required to draw on their own knowledge of the context and consultations with government, community, other CSOs and RHOs. This led to rich understandings of each context, from which partners selected their starting points and vision for change within the system. The broad steps taken by CSOs to design their systems strengthening projects, along with some useful questions to consider at each step, are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Example steps taken by Water for Women CSOs to design their systems strengthening interventions

Project design steps	Structured design activities	Other design activities	Example questions for CSOs to ask
1. Understanding the local WASH system and imagining a stronger, more inclusive system	Capacity assessment Building block assessment Market system assessment Stakeholder mapping Marginalisation, gender and power analyses	Stakeholder consultation Organisation knowledge of context Review of evidence gaps from literature	Who should be involved in making decisions about the WASH system and how can we involve them in the design process? What are the barriers to more sustainable and inclusive WASH services? What are the opportunities? What are the gaps in the WASH market, service delivery chain, and enabling environment? Who should be involved in WASH decision-making and service delivery but is missing?
2. Identifying how CSOs can contribute to systems change	Marginalisation, gender and power analyses Political economy analysis Formative research	Stakeholder consultation Organisation knowledge of context	What is our CSO's role/unique contribution in the WASH system? Who are the potential allies or opponents to systems change? What are their motives and incentives? How can we engage them in collaborative efforts? What evidence and data might help to catalyse change? What norms and attitudes need to change to enable greater inclusion and sustainability?
3. Defining project outcomes	Documenting Theory of Change	Stakeholder validation Establish formal and informal partnerships Formation of project reference group	What element of the system are we seeking to influence? Why is it important? How will the change contribute to sustainability and inclusion for service users? How will we know that we are making progress towards the intended change? What else do we need to know/learn in order to engage effectively with the system?

Sanitation and Water for All building blocks of a strong WASH sector

Water for Women used the SWA framework of building blocks of a strong WASH sector (Figure 5) to bring consistency to the Fund's systems strengthening outcomes and help consolidate reporting. Building block frameworks can be useful for CSOs to assess what systems elements or functions are already present and which functions require focus in order to improve WASH services. Water for Women's reporting template focuses on the four building blocks of sector policy and strategy, institutional arrangements, sector financing, and planning, monitoring and review. It considers capacity development as an intermediate outcome that cuts across the other four building blocks.

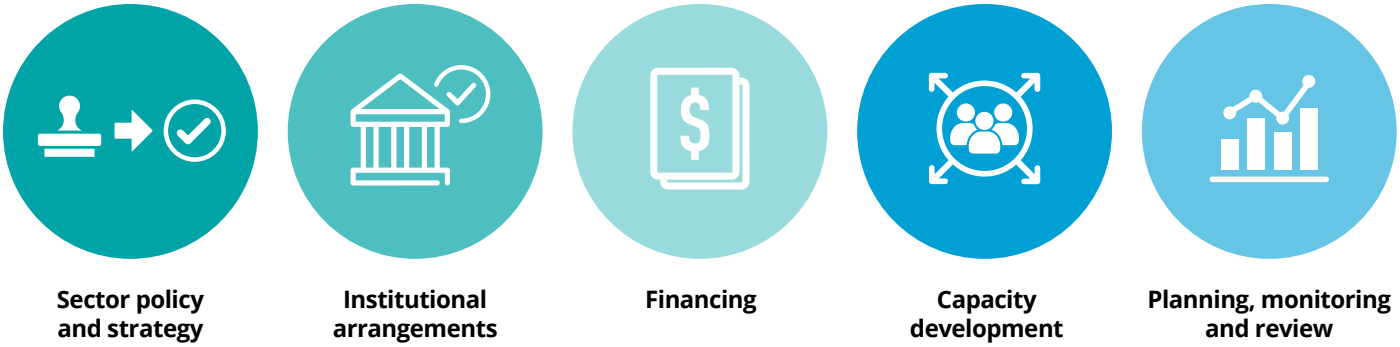

Figure 5. Building blocks of a well-functioning WASH sector

Source: Adapted from SWA (2022)

Like all frameworks, building blocks have strengths and limitations. Some partners reported that the building block framing helped provide structure to their reporting, and encouraged them to reflect on areas of the WASH enabling environment that they had not considered. Other CSO partners found it challenging to align their projects' impacts with the SWA building blocks' emphasis on government-owned aspects of the WASH system. This was especially the case for partners that focused on strengthening or creating private sector service models for WASH, or supporting rights-holder empowerment and changes to GEDSI norms. Learning agenda discussions also highlighted that the building blocks can obscure or distract from a focus on the relational and political aspects of WASH systems as discussed in the previous section of this brief.

Despite its limitations, the SWA building block framework proved useful in discussions during this Learning Agenda initiative. Focusing discussions on particular building blocks enabled comparisons between projects to better understand the roles that CSOs can play to promote systems change. An analysis of CSO partner annual reports (Table 3) informed discussions about common areas of focus, and areas receiving less attention across the Fund. Almost all projects have supported effective and inclusive planning, monitoring and review of sector goals, and participatory coordination mechanisms. Other common focus areas included the development of strategies for WASH implementation and clarifying institutional roles and responsibilities. The areas with less focus reported across the Fund included legal and regulatory frameworks, accountability mechanisms and mid- and long-term reviews of sector performance.

> *"We don't report on relationships because it's not one of the building blocks."*
>
> WaterAid PNG

This analysis also indicated that most projects expected to be working across a wide range of activities and influencing many parts of the WASH system and WASH governance. This reflects the interconnected nature of the building blocks, as well as the broad range of areas identified as requiring strengthening. Examples of CSO partner contributions to systems change within and beyond the building blocks are provided in more detail in Annex A.

Table 3. Number of Fund projects reporting efforts to create change in aspects of each building block

		2019	2020	2021
		n = 17	*n* =19	*n* =19
Sector policy and strategy	Sector goals and pathways	9	7	4
	Implementation strategies	14	15	11
	Policies that cover subsectors and both national and sub-national contexts	11	11	10
Institutional arrangements	Roles, responsibilities and decentralisation	10	15	10
	Participatory, country-led coordination mechanisms	14	17	13
	Legal and regulatory frameworks	5	3	3
Financing	Mid-term expenditure framework matching government priorities	10	7	4
	Realistic and transparent budget with funding streams	10	11	10
	Use of data on financing streams (Taxes, Transfers and Tariffs)	10	9	9
Planning, monitoring and review	Systematic planning and performance monitoring of goals	16	18	14
	Mid- and long-term reviews	5	7	2
	Accountability mechanisms	4	7	4
	Data transparency and public access	8	5	2

Least Most

Roles of CSOs in strengthening the WASH system

Learning Note 2 presented analysis of CSO partner efforts within the WASH financing building block and showed how CSOs can encourage more equitable and sustainable financing for WASH. The lessons learnt from the case studies presented in Learning Note 2 explain how CSOs can strengthen systems as convenors, technical WASH, GEDSI and MEL specialists, advocates and innovators (Figure 6).

Children use a new tap installed in their village on Kairiru Island, East Sepik Province, PNG as part of WaterAid's Water for Women project
Credit: WaterAid / Dion Kombeng

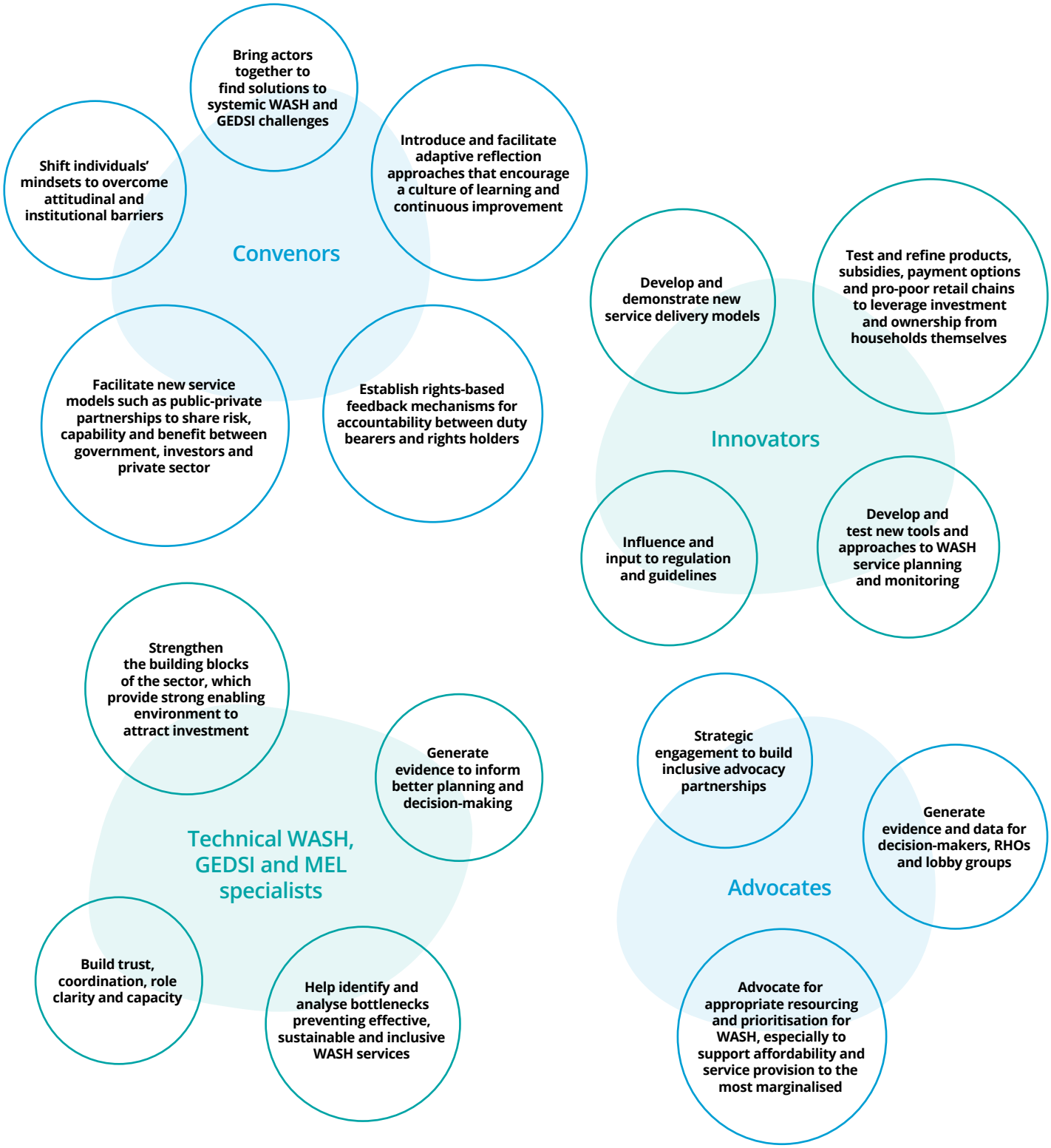

Figure 6. Roles CSOs can play when engaging with WASH systems

As **convenors**, CSO partners have brought together diverse actors from across WASH and GEDSI fields, such as RHOs, as well as other actors working in policy-making, regulation, financing and water resource management. In India, RTI convened local government, major water users from the private sector, development partners like UNICEF, and investors including the Asian Development Bank to create new service delivery and financing models using public–private partnerships. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), WaterAid facilitated the establishment of the Wewak WASH Coordination Body, a novel forum for government, RHOs and civil society to discuss WASH and create a shared vision. CFAR in India and World Vision in Bangladesh used rights-based approaches to facilitate review of WASH services between duty bearers and rights holders (Box 3), which led to joint action plans to improve services.

As **technical WASH and GEDSI specialists**, CSOs have helped their local sectors to identify, analyse and overcome the bottlenecks that are preventing the effective provision of WASH services. In Nepal, SNV supported individuals and institutions who had received mandates for WASH following a major government restructure to build their understanding of WASH and help them develop the capacity to fulfil their responsibilities. In Myanmar, over 2018–20, WaterAid and the Ministry of Health and Sports developed the TEACH CLEAN training package to systematically improve gender-sensitive and socially inclusive WASH and infection prevention practice in health care facilities.

As **advocates**, CSO partners have leveraged their status and engagement at various levels and with diverse actors to support and maximise different actors' priorities to influence change. SNV Bhutan partnered with organisations of persons with a disability (OPDs) to generate evidence and stories of lived WASH experiences of people with disabilities, which OPDs used in national WASH forums to advocate for greater government priority for GEDSI-related WASH services. Effective advocacy depends on trust and strength of relationships. For example, Plan International's long engagement with national working groups in the Solomon Islands means the government invites it to input to policy and strategy development.

As **innovators**, CSOs can identify and demonstrate new service delivery models and tweaks to existing service delivery to make them more equitable and sustainable. In Cambodia, iDE developed and tested innovative products and financing mechanisms such as low-cost latrines, targeted sanitation subsidies and payment instalment plans to enable the private sector to extend sanitation markets to poorer households. In India, CFAR developed and demonstrated the Saniwall, a community dashboard that helps people understand and review the status of water and sanitation services for individual households, settlements and wards. Also in India, RTI's innovative service delivery models that link public toilets to revenue-producing shops fill a funding gap for sanitation operation and maintenance and provide livelihoods for women and transgender entrepreneurs.

Civil Society Organisations' roles within the WASH system and their understanding of the system are inter-related and mutually informing. A CSO's organisational experience and expertise, and its niche within the local WASH system, informs their understanding of what is working well or needs to improve within the WASH system. In turn, this understanding influences how CSOs engage with the system, what aspects of the system they seek to influence, and the way they measure change. While there are common approaches and principles that can improve systems strengthening approaches, context is key; there is no 'one-size-fits-all' way to strengthen WASH systems.

A woman accesses a disability-inclusive latrine with interlock shelter, installed by an iDE-connected sanitation business, in Prey Veng, Cambodia
Credit: Miguel Jerónimo Photography

Box 3. Rights-based approaches

Rights based approaches involve consciously and systematically paying attention to human rights in all aspects of program development. Rights-based approaches in WASH seek to realise rights to water and sanitation by empowering people (rights holders) and strengthening the State (duty-bearers) by embedding principles of equality, non-discrimination, transparency, participation, accountability, and sustainability into the ways rights are realised (de Albuquerque, 2014).

Rights holders: Individuals or social groups that have particular entitlements in relation to specific duty bearers, in this case the right to WASH. In general terms, all human beings are rights holders, but the rights of some social groups may not be fully realised in particular contexts. A rights-based approach considers rights holders as active agents in the realisation of human rights and development — both directly and through organisations representing their interests.

Duty bearers: Those actors who have a particular obligation or responsibility to respect, promote and realise human rights and to abstain from human rights violations. The term is most commonly used to refer to State actors, but depending on the context, individuals (e.g., parents), private companies, aid donors and international institutions may also be duty bearers.

Rights holder organisations: Those organisations that are made up of, advocate for, and raise the voices of marginalised parts of a community, and include women's organisations, OPDs, sexual and gender minority organisations, ethnic minority organisations, and organisations that represent people who are economically disadvantaged.

Adapted from UNICEF (2018) and Water for Women (2022a)

Measuring and communicating CSO contributions to WASH systems change

WASH systems are complex, so measuring change is complicated (Box 4). At the beginning of Water for Women, CSO partners developed Theories of Change (ToC) outlining the outcomes and systems changes to which they expected their project to contribute (see Annex A). They also created monitoring frameworks with indicators and processes to assess whether these changes were occurring.

Several CSOs mentioned that reflecting on their ToC regularly helped their project team to not only track progress but adapt to changes in their context. For projects to remain relevant and strategic within dynamic and unpredictable WASH systems, programming approaches that encourage reflection, learning-by-doing and adaptation are essential (see Box 4).

As well as monitoring progress towards intended project outcomes, it is useful for CSOs and other actors (such as governments) to measure the overall strength of the system in order to track change in the system over time and identify gaps. Service access and quality are often used as proxy measures for system strength. However, some WASH projects might construct infrastructure without strengthening the supporting systems, so improvements in service levels do not always reflect stronger systems.

A WASH committee in Jamalpur district, Bangladesh, reviews WASH progress
Credit: World Vision Bangladesh / Jobayer Hosain

Water for Women CSO partners have used different approaches to help their local WASH sector measure system strength to inform sector planning and priorities.

- iDE and SNV have used the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene — Gender Equality Measure (WASH-GEM), developed through Water for Women, to track gender outcomes associated with WASH using qualitative measures. Changes are measured in the domains of resource access, agency, critical consciousness, norms and structures, and wellbeing.
- SNV's monitoring framework measures capacities of individuals, organisations and the system to provide sustainable and inclusive WASH services using ladders and scorecards. SNV uses participatory workshops to prompt reflection, review and goal setting among WASH and GEDSI actors.
- WaterAid uses building block frameworks with descriptive criteria to assess the status of the functions of the WASH system. These frameworks have been used in participatory workshops with WASH and GEDSI actors to identify priority actions for collaboration and track progress towards those goals.
- World Vision Bangladesh draws on the Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) approaches they established to align monitoring standards with the scorecard indicators used in the community monitoring of WASH services. They supported the scores generated by the community and duty bearers' discussions with evidence from working group minutes, regulations and budget allocations.

> *"Our organisation monitors change at three levels:*
>
> - *sex/social group disaggregated WASH service access data*
> - *triangulate with data on community participation, leadership and representation*
> - *qualitative studies (structured group discussions, key informant feedback, public consultations) to assess the shift/change in power structures at the level of norms, procedures and processes in WASH management/ governance."*
>
> Partner survey respondent

These examples represent some of many approaches through which CSOs can create shared understanding of WASH systems. An important contribution from CSOs in their roles as convenors, technical specialists, and advocates is to help system actors become more aware of how their system works, and mainstream cycles of review, reflection and learning to drive continuous system improvement.[5] Sector strategy development and planning, monitoring and review processes provide excellent opportunities for CSOs to encourage knowledge exchange and reflection.

How CSOs measure and communicate their contributions to systems change remains a topic for further exploration. However, as one survey respondent highlighted, CSOs' designs must identify the elements of the system they are seeking to influence and why those elements are important, report the change they think they have made, and show how that change will contribute to greater sustainability and inclusion for service users. CSOs need to balance the intended influence with flexibility and openness needed to adapt projects to changing contexts, relationships and momentum, and encouraging reflection, learning and adaptation in the system as a whole.

[5] Grant and Willetts (2019) explained that when CSOs use systems thinking tools to facilitate sector reflection and learning, they can not only influence strategic decision-making that improves WASH services but transform the paradigm of the system. Actors learning and sharing together can facilitate more equitable relationships and create a sector culture that values learning and adaptation.

Box 4. Complex adaptive WASH systems

WASH systems are examples of what academics call 'complex adaptive systems.' Briefly considering the complexity of WASH systems can help explain the challenges partners face in measuring and communicating their contribution to systems change.

Building on the earlier description of systems as networks of actors, 'complex' can refer to the level of predictability in the actors' behaviour, which sits somewhere between chaos and ordered. There are patterns to how people and institutions interact, but these patterns are not immediately obvious or always predictable when considered at the scale of the system. 'Adaptive' refers to the agency the actors in the system have: individuals are free to react and respond to each other, which leads to dynamic and changing relationships within the system (Neely 2019).

Some of the features of complex adaptive systems that affect measurement of systems strengthening interventions include (Ramalingam et al. 2008):

- **Emergence** — the whole is different to the sum of its parts, which can make change unpredictable. For example, the way the WASH system organises differently at community, district or national level means scaling a successful intervention from one district to a whole nation will result in different and unpredictable challenges.
- **Non-linearity** — relationships between inputs and outputs/outcomes are not proportionate. For example, a small change in a new policy or a new relationship between two influential actors can cause large changes to how WASH services are provided, and conversely intense advocacy efforts might have minimal long-term impact.
- **Sensitivity to initial conditions** — small changes in the initial state of the system can create large changes in the future. For example, many partners observed that one engaged and charismatic leader can help a district accelerate WASH progress well beyond that in neighbouring districts with similar geographic, institutional and cultural contexts.

These features reinforce the need for flexibility and adaptability in the design and monitoring of systems strengthening interventions. Some useful starting points for CSOs considering programming approaches to engage with complex adaptive systems are outlined below.

- **Center for International Development** — the Building State Capability program at Harvard University developed a useful Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation toolkit (Samji et al. 2018). The toolkit emphasises the need to involve multiple and diverse actors to solve systemic problems. Bringing together each actor's unique perspectives creates more complete understanding of the issues and potential pathways to change.
- **Better Evaluation** — Rogers and MacFarlan (2020) produced a series of working papers about how monitoring and evaluation approaches can support adaptive management in international development programs.
- **Global Learning for Adaptive Management** — led by the Overseas Development Institute, this initiative consolidates learning about adaptive management from various organisations, including approaches to measuring program contributions to outcomes in complex systems.

Lessons learnt about how change happens in WASH systems

As discussed in the previous section, the building blocks provide a structure that can help CSOs to report and reflect on what elements or functions of the WASH system look like in a given context. As shown in Annex A, they are also useful for categorising and consolidating reporting of project contributions to system functionality. However, building blocks do not explain how system actors and contextual factors interact[6] or how systems change can be effected and sustained to overcome systemic challenges. Exploring how systems change happens requires a different framing.

Introducing the six conditions of systems change

The Water of Systems Change (Kania et al. 2018) provides a useful and actionable framework (Figure 7 and Table 4) for considering the factors that create and perpetuate systemic challenges. It identifies the conditions that may be shifted to enable the WASH system to move from inertia towards continuous improvement, positive reinforcement and progressive realisation of equitable and sustainable services.

> ***"Systems change is about shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place."***
>
> Kania et al. (2018)

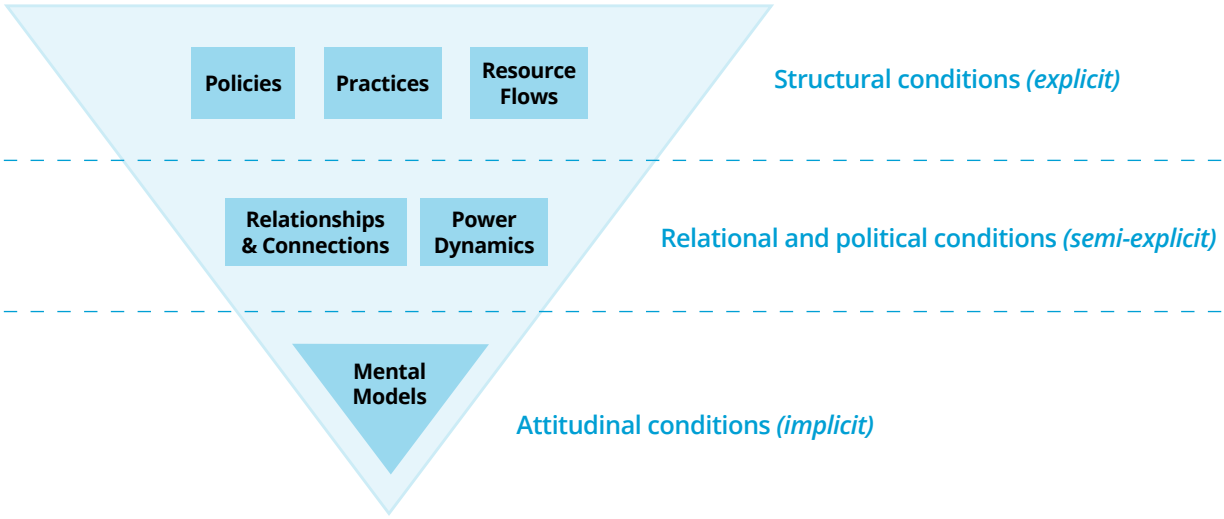

Figure 7. Conditions of systems change

Source: Adapted from Kania et al. (2018)[7]

[6] For example, Learning Note 2 documented that improving financing for inclusive and sustainable WASH often required change in other building blocks such as clear mandates and responsibilities (institutional arrangements). In turn, changes to WASH financing were a prerequisite for changes in other building blocks, such as local government receiving decentralised authority for WASH to perform its role effectively (institutional arrangements).

[7] The six conditions are presented in three levels based on how visible and readily assessable they are. All six conditions are interconnected and mutually influencing. For example, changes in flows of resources to WASH might occur as a result of changes in the beliefs/assumptions of budget-makers. Conversely, the effective use of allocated resources might catalyse a shift in decision-makers' assumptions about how to allocate budget. The framework does not necessarily imply that the less visible and more transformative changes in mental models are more 'causative' for change in systems; sustainable and sustained change requires changes in conditions at all three levels.

Table 4. Conditions of systems change definitions

Condition	Definition
Policies	Government, institutional and organisational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the institution's own and others' actions
Practices	Activities of institutions, coalitions, networks and other entities. Also, within the institution, the procedures, guidelines or informal shared habits that comprise their work
Resource flows	How money, people, knowledge, information and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed
Relationships and connections	Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints
Power dynamics	The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organisations
Mental modes	Habits of thought — deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk

The conditions of systems change in Figure 7 can be categorised into three levels:

1. the structural and practical level at which the system delivers WASH services
2. the relational and political level at which the system is organised
3. the attitudinal level at which actors perceive their engagement with the WASH system.

At first glance, the structural level of systems change in this framework seems to align with the SWA building blocks. However, while the building blocks describe the WASH system functions in which change might be observed, the conditions of systems change represent how change can be brought about to influence the system. For example, within the building block of planning, monitoring and review, it would be possible for CSOs to support a government department to develop and implement a sector WASH strategy or plan without changing the relationships, power dynamics or attitudes that would enable the system to translate the plan into more sustainable and inclusive WASH services. By influencing leaders' understanding of their role in planning (attitudinal transformation), and using participatory planning approaches that challenge harmful power imbalances (relational change), CSOs can leverage the planning process to influence the system more broadly.

Insights about how systems change happens in WASH systems

By applying the conditions of systems change framework to CSO experiences in WASH planning, monitoring and review, Learning Note 3 captured insights about how changes happen in WASH systems and how CSOs can contribute to systems change. These insights can be generalised to reflect how CSO partners are influencing change in WASH systems more broadly (Figure 8).

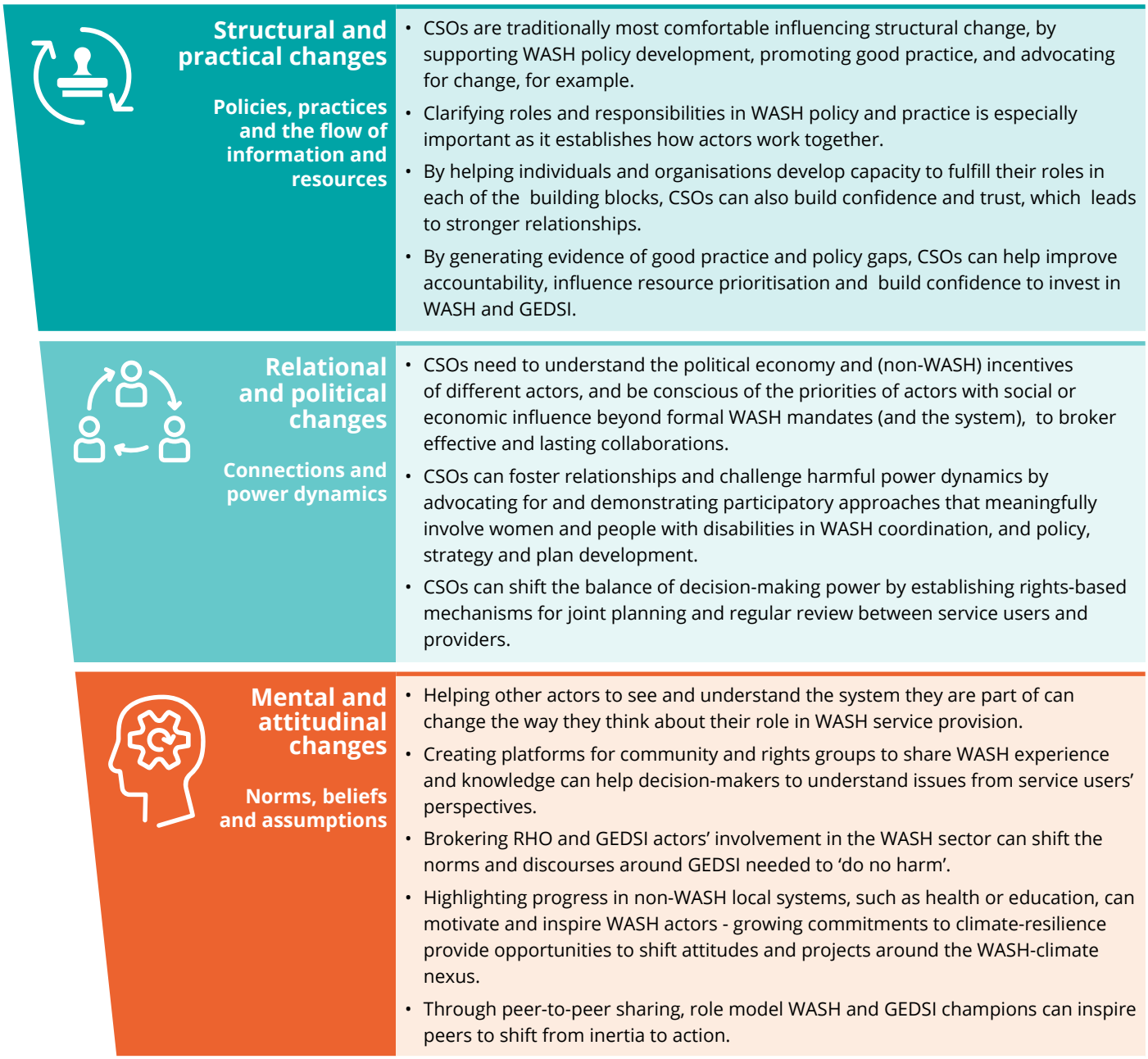

Figure 8. Insights about how change happens in WASH systems

Applying these insights for more effective systems strengthening projects

These insights highlight that, to create lasting impact on WASH systems, CSOs need to take approaches to systems strengthening that promote structural, relational, political and attitudinal change. It also means that for shifting systems towards greater inclusion and sustainability, **how** CSOs work to strengthen aspects of the system is at least as important as **what** change CSOs are trying to influence. CSOs can promote inclusive and sustainable systems by:

- tailoring projects to the local system that delivers WASH services, and engaging strategically as convenors, innovators, technical WASH, GEDSI and MEL specialists and/or advocates
- modelling and facilitating participatory approaches that bring diverse actors together to analyse and solve problems in WASH policy, institutional arrangements, financing, planning, monitoring and review
- facilitating reflection about the silos and barriers that exist between actors
- asking questions strategically and repeatedly about who is missing from WASH discussions
- embedding reflection and learning-centred review mechanisms in all building blocks (functions) of the system to encourage continuous learning and capacity development for individuals, organisations and the system as a whole
- supporting creation of shared and collaborative visions for inclusive WASH services
- establishing or strengthening two-way flows of information that integrate rights-based approaches and feedback loops into how service providers, duty bearers and rights holders engage with each other
- encouraging and facilitating safe and meaningful involvement of diverse actors within all WASH discussions to encourage diversity in representation, voice and agency
- promoting and adopting common means of measurement to monitor progress towards WASH goals
- generating and sharing evidence to build the case for equitable and inclusive WASH and support collaborative advocacy efforts led and owned by RHOs and duty bearers.

By intentionally prioritising ways of working that challenge power imbalances, build collaborations and relationships, and open people's minds to issues of equality, sustainability and accountability, CSOs can have lasting impact on the shape and direction of WASH systems.

Bhutan declares 100% improved sanitation nationally after realising the 14-year long goal of an improved toilet for every member of the population on World Toilet Day, 19 November 2022
Credit: SNV / Upasana Dahal

Conclusion

Systems are made of, and exist to benefit, people

Relationships between people and institutions form the foundation of the system. To strengthen WASH systems, CSOs must invest in building strategic relationships with, and between, diverse actors from government, private sector, RHOs and civil society. Actors' capacity, mindset and the political, economic, social and geographic contexts around them influence who is able to engage with the WASH system, who is excluded and how actors relate to one another.

CSOs must consider system elements of power, agency, capacity, relationships, attitudes and norms

Building blocks of a strong WASH sector — such as policy, institutional arrangements, financing, planning, monitoring and review — are useful categorisations of the functions the system should be able to perform. Considering such building blocks, and the political, relational and attitudinal aspects of the system, can help to identify obstacles to inclusion and sustainability.

CSOs should strive to change norms in the WASH system and wider society for more inclusive and diverse WASH systems

Unless WASH strategies, plans and collaborations prioritise GEDSI, people remain at risk of being left behind. Ensuring diversity and inclusion in WASH decision-making leads to greater emphasis on GEDSI in the way services are provided. Many GEDSI issues related to agency, participation, accountability and Doing No Harm must be addressed through changing norms at a societal and system level in order to create lasting and equitable WASH.

CSOs have important roles to play as convenors, technical specialists, advocates and innovators

By strategically selecting different roles at different times — as convenors, advocates, innovators and technical WASH, GEDSI and MEL specialists — CSOs can transform the WASH system and connect WASH to other multisectoral systems like health, education and finance.

CSOs' WASH systems strengthening interventions should seek structural, relational and normative systems change

CSOs must go beyond influencing change at the structural level of policies, practices and the flow of resources to effect sustained change. CSOs' systems strengthening interventions should promote relational and political change that builds collaborations and challenges power imbalances, and transform the prevailing norms and attitudes that influence how people in the system engage with each other and WASH service provision.

Systems strengthening is as much about *how* CSOs work as *what* CSOs focus their efforts on

CSOs can demonstrate the principles of strong systems by employing collaborative, participatory and empowering project approaches that are grounded in local efforts and contexts. In addition, CSOs can help to develop sectoral capacity for continuous learning and self-improvement by encouraging cycles of reflection, learning and adaptation.

Recommendations for WASH CSOs

To design effective systems strengthening interventions:

Understand the context

Engage widely and openly to identify (and document) the sub-systems that contribute to local complexity in the system. Involve local actors and non-traditional WASH actors like RHOs in the design process to build a richer understanding of the WASH system.

Strive to influence systems change at practical, relational and normative levels

Sustainable and sustained systems change requires changes in relationships and power dynamics between system actors, and prevailing norms and attitudes, as well as changes in conditions at practical and structural levels (policies, practices, resource flows).

Design flexible projects that adapt to changes in the system over time

Plan projects that target the root causes of problems, take an adaptive programming approach, and promote sector reflection on successes and failures to help your organisation and other WASH actors keep their priorities relevant and responsive.

Be realistic and clearly articulate what and how your project expects to contribute to systems change

Explain how you understand the system, what role(s) your organisation plays within it, what element you are seeking to influence, why that element is important and how it will contribute to greater sustainability and inclusion for WASH service users. Systems change can be unpredictable; despite planning to adapt projects over time, CSOs can only expect to influence particular elements of the system.

Select project locations and partners intentionally and strategically

Analyse the political economy and select areas with willing and committed leaders and rights groups. Depending on the change you intend to influence, this may require finding a balance between selective strategic engagement with influential actors and intentional inclusive engagement with groups who experience marginalisation.

Focus on the people and institutions that make up the system

Be guided by sector building blocks that provide evidence of how effectively the system is functioning, while emphasising the human dimensions of WASH systems. Develop plans to help people and institutions develop capacity and secure resources required to contribute effectively to WASH service provision.

Use project design and implementation to prompt a reimagining of the WASH system

Ask questions like 'what would sustainable and inclusive business models for WASH services look like in this context, what can we do to realise those models, and who do we need to ask?' to help shift the sector's vision beyond current challenges to the horizon.

Be ready to change and be changed

Transforming the system will require CSOs to change direction as the context changes, and might require transforming the CSO itself! This might involve new internal capacity, new ways of working, or changes to partnerships.

To implement effective systems strengthening interventions:

Demonstrate inclusive and participatory development practice

Use WASH processes like coordination, policy setting, budgeting, planning, monitoring and review as entry points for demonstrating inclusive and participatory practices in the WASH system and developing individual, organisational and inter-organisational capacity.

Build ownership of shared WASH goals among diverse actors

Work to build ownership and leadership of WASH processes (such as coordination, budgeting, planning, monitoring, and review) by duty bearers and rights groups by supporting the creation of shared and collaborative visions for WASH services.

Build diverse collaborations

Partner with duty bearers like governments and private sector service providers, as well as RHOs, such as women's rights organisations, OPDs, and organisations representing minority rights and interests, to shift power imbalances and change attitudes and norms.

Do No Harm

Consider how existing and proposed WASH service models may be causing harm and how doing nothing can mean existing harmful practices are perpetuated. Ensure your own projects are not adding to or perpetuating harm. Implement a robust 'do no harm' approach to minimise any potential backlash when supporting diverse voices and agency in engagement with the WASH system.

Generate and share evidence

Data and evidence help build sector knowledge and capacity, support advocacy and influencing, and inform CSOs' own project monitoring and adaptation.

Establish and strengthen feedback loops for accountability

Rights-based approaches and citizen voice mechanisms that help create demand–supply feedback loops can embed rights within the service provider–service user relationship. Regular dialogue between duty bearers and rights holders and sharing of plans, data and feedback can deepen awareness of different actors' responsibilities and contributions to WASH, and shift power dynamics by enabling rights holders to input to decisions.

Advice shared by CSO partners may include further useful wisdom for WASH CSOs (Box 5).

Village representatives participate in a water cycle training and water hazard identification activity in Solomon Islands
Credit: Plan International Solomon Islands

Box 5. Advice for WASH CSOs, from WASH CSOs

The following quotes from respondents to the Learning Agenda initiative online survey and sense-making workshop include useful wisdom for WASH CSOs.

"Study the current system; identify gaps and ways forward from other similar projects."

"Check every activity in your work and assess it from a systems perspective, asking whether and how it contributes to the system."

"Have a good Theory of Change and monitoring and evaluation framework with clear indicators."

"Select the districts where the leaders would really like to contribute to inclusive and sustainable WASH."

"Building blocks drive us to think about institutions, perhaps we need to focus more on the people aspect of the system."

"We need to better understand and articulate the sub-systems within the building blocks — to capture the complex realities."

"Be mindful that most CSOs don't become permanent actors in the system themselves."

"Take time to establish the system at local level for sustainability."

"Think about top-down and bottom-up influencing — both are important!"

"Focus on inclusive WASH governance."

"Don't be put off by complexity or aim for perfection."

"Working with system strengthening requires time."

Recommendations for funders of WASH CSOs

To contribute to lasting impact on WASH systems and thereby the sustainability and inclusiveness of WASH services:

Understand the context of the intervention, and insist that implementers do too

Social, political, geographic and economic factors can have a large influence on who engages (or does not engage) with the WASH system and how. If funders understand the influence of contextual factors on the system, and require initiative implementers to articulate their own understandings, they can encourage more strategic and effective projects.

Provide sufficient project time horizons

Strengthening WASH systems takes time. Initiatives can become progressively more effective as implementers develop and strengthen new relationships, develop capacity and confidence between actors, and capitalise on previous efforts to resolve bottlenecks in systems.

Allow project flexibility and adaptation

Implementers of systems strengthening initiatives should adapt to unexpected changes in the context and build on emerging areas of momentum and actor engagement. Funders can encourage or require implementers to reflect and adapt regularly, and allow flexibility in the activities undertaken in pursuit of systems change.

Expect and request outcomes that go beyond traditional WASH outcomes

Funding that prioritises reporting of beneficiary numbers and deprioritises reporting of systems change leads CSOs to prioritise direct service delivery over systems strengthening. Sustainable and inclusive WASH services require stronger and more inclusive systems. Systems change must be evident in policy, practice and the flow of resources, as well as in power, agency, capacity, relationships, attitudes and norms.

Employ non-traditional approaches to financing that encourage lasting impact on WASH systems

Funders can encourage systems approaches through coordinated or pooled funding between donors, co-financing between donors, government, the private sector or investors, and multi-sectoral funding that promotes collective and collaborative approaches between actors in WASH and other sectors.

Villagers fill water containers from one of three collection points where a solar-powered pump and system connected to a bore now serve more than 140 households in Yakhdara rural village, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan
Credit: International Rescue Committee / Anil Kumar

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Annex A. Examples of CSO project contributions to systems change

The Fund's contribution to change in WASH systems across the Asia-Pacific is detailed in resources and case studies available on the Water for Women website. This annex provides high-level and practical examples of the Fund's contributions to change in each of the SWA building blocks (see Table 1). This list is not exhaustive; many more examples of project contributions could be included.

WASH sector policy and strategy

Relatively few CSO projects reported working to help develop new national policies or new national strategies for WASH. This is probably because many of the countries where projects have been implemented have existing policies and strategies. CSO contributions to sector policy and strategy focused on strengthening GEDSI aspects of policies and contextualising policies and strategies for subnational areas or sub-sectors like WASH in health or WASH in schools.

"Both OPD and PKK (women's representatives) have been entrusted by Pokja (working group) with budgeted tasks — a sign that their role and function in these groups is recognised as legitimate and important."

Yayasan Plan International Indonesia

- In Indonesia, Yayasan Plan International Indonesia produced a GEDSI policy brief. It formed the basis for Ministry of Health revisions to community-based total sanitation (STBM in Indonesian) regulations to emphasise meaningful involvement of marginalised people in community sanitation triggering, and women's participation in progressing STBM.
- Bhutan's new national strategy for WASH in healthcare facilities includes cross-cutting themes of gender, needs of people with diverse disabilities, and needs emerging from climate change. Through its partnerships with OPDs, SNV has helped to make the development of this policy an inclusive process.
- WaterAid supported the Myanmar Ministry of Health (2018–20) to develop the TEACH CLEAN training package, to operationalise the national WASH in health strategy and integrate gender and social inclusion principles into WASH and infection prevention roll-out. Along with healthcare manuals and guidelines, this involved embedding Joint Monitoring Programme indicators for WASH in healthcare facilities into minimum standards.
- In Fiji, Habitat for Humanity and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services co-developed GEDSI-sensitive water safety planning templates to improve WASH service provision in communities and schools. This led to inclusion of GEDSI modules in training provided by the Water Authority of Fiji to water committees.

Institutional arrangements

Water for Women's CSO partners identified unclear and overlapping roles and responsibilities as a common challenge to effective WASH decision-making and service delivery, exacerbated by incomplete decentralisation. CSOs' contributions to strengthened institutional arrangements focus on coordination, role clarity and capacity.

"Community members who are answerable to community forum[s] are now part of [the] government['s] formal working mechanism. This direct interaction and relationship has improved communication between both stakeholders."

IRC Pakistan

- Support to WASH coordination resulted in stronger leadership and role clarity and often enhanced RHOs' and OPDs' formal WASH decision-making roles. RHOs have taken on key roles in WASH coordination groups in Manggarai, Indonesia (supported by Plan), at the national level in Bhutan (supported by SNV) and in Wewak, PNG (supported by WaterAid). Greater involvement in coordination groups helps to increase RHOs' agency and voice in WASH decision-making.

- In Nepal, a government restructure at the beginning of the project meant many district government staff were taking on WASH responsibilities for the first time, while in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) overlapping mandates between various government departments left responsibilities unclear. In both of these settings, SNV used competency-based frameworks to help sub-national government map and clarify their roles, and ensure a focus on supporting the most marginalised groups to access WASH services.
- Two projects reported efforts to influence regulatory and legal frameworks with respect to sanitation financing regulations. In Indonesia, Yayasan Plan International Indonesia's budget and regulation mapping work made it easier for villages to allocate funding (totalling AUD 800,000) for GEDSI-sensitive sanitation approaches. In Pakistan, new guidelines (that IRC helped prepare) oblige government to budget for sanitation in development planning. These examples demonstrate that by engaging strategically with legal and regulatory frameworks, CSOs can have a broad and lasting impact.

Sector financing

Most CSO efforts to influence sector financing have focused on increasing public budget allocation to WASH.

- Districts in Nepal are using their new decentralised authority to allocate budget for WASH for the first time. SNV's support to eight rural municipalities to develop and roll out climate-resilient, inclusive water supply strategies has contributed to increases in annual WASH budget allocations by rural municipalities of up to 1700%. Within these allocated budgets, OPDs used evidence from their research to advocate for specific budgets for GEDSI-sensitive WASH.
- WaterAid has supported the Wewak district government to apply for funding through Provincial Investment Program mechanisms to meet its WASH plan targets, and district and provincial government are committed to co-financing the plan.
- IRC's support to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial WASH steering committee to develop guidelines for departmental sanitation budget utilisation, combined with strategic advocacy with receptive parliamentarians, has contributed to sustained increases in budget allocations for WASH in provincial annual development plans from 1.8% in 2018 to 3.3% in 2021.

> ***"Earlier [the] Union Parishad did not consider the budget for WASH activities. Budget allocation for WASH increased this year [compared to] previous. However, there is community demand to allocate more budget for implementing WASH activities."***
>
> Member of CVA working group, Bangladesh

- World Vision's support for RHOs to be involved in Union Parishad WASH planning in Bangladesh led to GEDSI-focused WASH action plans. These plans have facilitated increased budget allocation to upgrade accessibility of WASH facilities in schools.

Partners note that budget allocation does not always mean budget expenditure. Many partners continue to strive for effective public finance use to solve problems such as delayed transfers, complex budgeting frameworks, complicated acquittal processes and lack of budget transparency.

Other projects have focused on private sector financing models.

- By helping latrine businesses provide interest-free instalment plans, and by introducing targeted sanitation subsidies, iDE contributed to sales of 39,000 discounted latrines in Cambodia, enabling cash-constrained rural households to invest in their own sanitation.
- Focusing on identified gaps in the WASH market in India, RTI has developed and tested service models that leverage finance from both the public and private sectors. New retail chains that RTI has facilitated have enabled almost 14,000 women to access affordable WASH products and provided livelihoods for 69 women. RTI has also designed and brokered public–private partnerships using tariff structures that attract private investment to WASH at scale, while improving water security in arid Rajasthan.

- Thrive Networks/East Meets West has been using output-based aid to leverage government co-financing of targeted subsidies for poor households in Cambodia and Vietnam. The resulting government–private sector partnerships have incentivised pro-poor sanitation business models and expanded sanitation markets.

Sector planning, monitoring and review

Many partners have found WASH planning to be useful entry points for building collaborations between governments, private sector actors and RHOs. Supporting subnational (especially district-wide and city-wide) planning and monitoring for WASH has been the most commonly reported intervention of Water for Women projects.

"You are more likely to take the word of mouth from someone who is your neighbour, and purchase products that someone has tried and tested, someone you know. It also empowers the [community actors] to become WASH ambassadors of their community."

RTI India

- With CSO partners' support, subnational areas in Lao PDR and Bhutan (SNV), PNG and Timor-Leste (WaterAid), and Bangladesh (World Vision) have created area-wide WASH plans for the first time. These plans provide roadmaps for ongoing coordination between sector actors and regular reviews of progress towards universal and inclusive WASH.
- Joint community–service provider micro-planning processes supported by CFAR in Bhubaneswar, India, have improved the urban authorities' understanding of WASH status and needs in informal urban settlements. Faecal sludge management is now included in city planning. The integration of WASH into government development planning is one way of ensuring that WASH continues to be prioritised beyond project timeframes.

Partners have highlighted that quality plans need to be evidence-based in order to be appropriately targeted, measured and monitored. Several projects have been strengthening government WASH monitoring sub-systems to improve the availability of data, and GEDSI data, for WASH planning and review.

- Partners have facilitated participatory district-wide baselines of WASH access in which local government, OPDs and civil society collaborate to collect data and translate it into decision-making and planning. This has led to the first comprehensive records of WASH service status in project target districts in Lao PDR (SNV), PNG (Plan, WaterAid, World Vision), and Vanuatu (World Vision). As the quote from World Vision PNG (below) shows, reliable data can be a powerful catalyst to prompt action from decision-makers.
- In Indonesia, Yayasan Plan International Indonesia has worked to expand the national STBM monitoring system from one to five pillars and integrate GEDSI indicators. At district level, the project demonstrated how the expanded system could be applied in a way that promotes OPD participation, and used this experience to develop tutorial videos, which will be shared nationally as the expanded system is rolled out.
- Through technical guidance to the Vanuatu National Statistics Office to undertake a major Water, Women and Disability Study, World Vision helped develop capacity to collect and analyse disaggregated sex, age and disability data. These data collection approaches have since become standard in Vanuatu's census and the Vanuatu Ministry of Health and Ministry of Justice and Community Services have worked together to create a disability database to build evidence about needs and responses.

"The Western Province Development Plan (2018–2022) indicates WASH as a priority sector and [allocates] budgets ... [however] less than 10% of these funds have been released and spent. Dissemination of the findings of the WASH baseline survey triggered immediate action from the South Fly District Administration and Daru Mayor to release 300,000 kina from the COVID trust fund for refurbishment of Water PNG installations and drill new boreholes to improve urban water supply. This work began with immediate effect. "

World Vision PNG

As well as driving evidence-based planning, WASH monitoring is a key contributor to regular review processes that hold decision-makers accountable. Some projects have contributed to more systematic review processes that establish accountability mechanisms and encourage incremental service provision improvements:

- The public display of sanitation monitoring data through CFAR's Saniwall innovation made WASH progress measurable and visible in Bhubaneswar, India. In monthly meetings, high-level officials and community review the Saniwall data, share progress and discuss plans to improve sanitation services, and community members can hold authorities to account. The government of Odissa has committed to replicating this process across all 13 districts in the state.
- In Timor-Leste, WaterAid has supported community-level social audit mechanisms through which water service users, community water management committees, and government WASH agencies review both the status of their services and the committees' functionality to create action plans for ongoing improvement.

Beyond building blocks: influencing stronger relationships and shifting power in WASH systems

As mentioned above, the SWA building blocks have provided a useful framework for project reporting against the Fund's systems strengthening outcome. However, many of the significant systems changes reported by partners do not fit easily into the building blocks. The following two sections present relational and attitudinal changes reported by partners, many of which relate to creating inclusive WASH systems and cut across the building blocks.

Through participatory approaches and brokering relationships, CSOs have contributed to changes in power over WASH decision-making and who has a seat at the WASH table.

- Rights group representatives who Yayasan Plan International Indonesia supported to take up roles on district WASH committees have been entrusted with budgeted tasks. This enabled them to build confidence to contribute meaningfully to WASH activities in the district and formalised their leadership role in the WASH system.
- CFAR observed that limited community member involvement in the planning and monitoring of sanitation led to poorer service quality in slums in Bhubaneswar. Through participation in microplanning, community-led monitoring and monthly review meetings, community groups became essential members of the WASH sector, were able to take ownership of WASH service data and exercise voice and agency in demanding better services.

> ***"After we surveyed households and connected with the authorities, our process became simpler. After the installation of the Saniwall, when we carried out waste segregation and cleaning, sanitary inspectors also started cooperating with us because they see improvement. Now we all talk to each other and the work gets done."***
>
> Community Management Committee member, Bhubaneswar, India

- In Pakistan, IRC piloted a public–private partnership model in which government contracted community members to take on roles in community WASH. This model gives community members direct influence over decision-making and changes the power balance between government and community. Community representatives engaged in these mechanisms are answerable to their communities, which ensures work is completed to community satisfaction. The provincial government has since replicated the model in other areas beyond the project.
- After five years of partnership with SNV in Bhutan, OPDs have become critical members of the National WASH Working Group and actively champion inclusion within WASH standards, policies and planning.
- Establishing the Wewak WASH Coordination Body created a mechanism for political and social leaders and RHOs to work together on WASH. The active involvement of the East Sepik Council of Women and the East Sepik Disabled People's Association gives representatives of women and people with disabilities a seat at the decision-making table and keeps issues of inclusion on the agenda. As the chair, the District Administrator adds legitimacy and political influence to the group's decisions.

- Women, people with disabilities and other people who experience marginalisation in Bangladesh often feel unable to engage directly with service providers. The rights-based citizen voice and action mechanisms (Box 3) established by World Vision enable safe and empowering spaces for these groups to engage and communicate their needs to decision-makers.

Beyond building blocks: shifting actors' ways of thinking

As explored in Learning Note 1, norms, attitudes values and perceptions form part of the invisible power that influences the way individuals think about their place in the world and the WASH system. The Water for Women Fund's focus on gender equality means many CSO partners have been tackling invisible power in WASH systems, and how norms and attitudes can perpetuate harmful power imbalances.[8] Examples of how projects have contributed to changing GEDSI attitudes and norms within WASH systems include the following.

- Facilitating regular participation of rights groups and GEDSI actors in WASH coordination groups, policy discussions and planning, monitoring and review processes has helped to normalise GEDSI actor involvement in WASH systems. Examples include Yayasan Plan International Indonesia's observation of OPDs managing budgeted WASH committee activities and WaterAid Timor-Leste's GEDSI partner Grupo Feto Foinsa'e Timor-Leste being elected the leader of the national WASH platform. The acceptance of GEDSI actors as an essential part of WASH systems takes time but leads to stronger, more inclusive systems.
- In Nepal, SNV's support for inclusion of GEDSI actors in WASH forums led government departments responsible for WASH to invite GEDSI actors to participate in all events as a default. In addition, they began to change event venues to accommodate accessibility needs. These developments point to changed norms and commitment to GEDSI principles.

> ***"Public monitoring, besides identifying gaps, can create mutual respect for each other's intelligence and evidence. It is usually assumed that the community knows nothing, particularly when it comes to women and the poor."***
>
> CFAR India

- To strengthen the representation and voice of women in WASH in Bhutan, SNV's Leadership for Change initiative partners with a local women's organisation to encourage transformative leadership. The initiative promotes women and men who are championing gender equality in their WASH work as role models, and has started to shift the norms around meaningful women's participation in WASH.

Changes to attitudes and invisible power extend beyond GEDSI aspects to how actors perceive their role in the system:

- CFAR observed that many staff within urban authorities held an underlying assumption that community members knew nothing about WASH or the appropriate solutions to problems they face. Deeper collaboration through micro-planning and regular two-way sharing helped decision-makers to realise and appreciate service users' rich WASH knowledge and experience. Authorities now actively seek insights from community when considering how to solve WASH problems.
- Thrive Networks/East Meets West's work with private sector in Cambodia and Vietnam convinced WASH business operators that community members are not just passive end users, but can be co-creators of new markets, and paying customers.

> ***"GEDSI advocates and rights groups like DPOs being vocal have started to change things — men see the importance of women's roles and showing respect."***
>
> WaterAid PNG

[8] More information on Water for Women's learning about transforming norms at household, community, institutional and system level can be found in the Water for Women Learning Note (2022c) and Guidance (2022b) on Shifting Social Norms for Transformative WASH.

- Leaders can be inspired by positive role models among their peers to take on new roles and responsibilities. World Vision Bangladesh provided a platform for leaders from Uria Union Parishad, who had produced a WASH plan together with RHOs and community in their district, to share their experience with other Union Parishad governments. After seeing how they could use their role to champion WASH, other Union Parishads followed Uria's lead.
- In PNG, WaterAid observed that including and talking about WASH has become more normal in Wewak district since the WASH Coordination Body created the district WASH plan. Media, government and community are more aware of the importance of WASH services and the government's responsibility to ensure WASH access.

"Economic empowerment is a step to challenge social norms. When women are empowered they will understand about their rights and how they can make change within their family and their community and make impact."

Thrive Networks/East Meets West Vietnam

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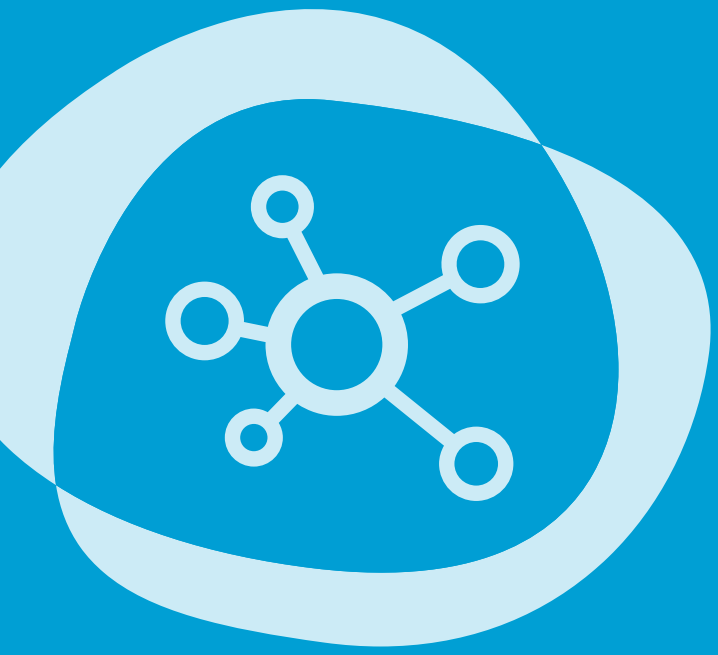

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