

Achieving Sustainability: changing the ways in which we define success

Implementing agencies like WSUP, Water For People and IRC are of course accountable to their funders, including major bilaterals and foundations. And naturally, these funders must track the effectiveness of their spending. But short budget cycles and the need to demonstrate “value for money” can often encourage over-simplistic measurement of success in terms of short-term outputs, rather than genuinely sustainable services. This note proposes some ways forward!

When “access” improves, but services don’t

In 2010, the UN Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) reported promising figures on water access, and less spectacular but still encouraging data on sanitation. But these figures have been undermined by studies from the UNC Water Institute, which looked at water *quality*, the true nature of “access”, and the extent to which the whole sanitation chain is being improved. Other studies have indicated that hundreds of thousands of handpumps, installed in well-meaning interventions by external agencies, are now inoperative. These are examples of access without service: a direct result of measuring success in simple terms of units of infrastructure (“taps and toilets”), without assessing whether that infrastructure is *sustainably providing acceptable levels of service*.

Simple indicators, complex problems

Concerns around sustainability have prompted intense discussion about how to measure success. Commonly, it comes down to a simple number: “people reached”. These are easily communicated numbers, and they certainly reflect our ultimate goal. “*If we’re not reaching people, we’re not doing our job*,” says WSUP CEO Sam Parker: “*but on its own, that indicator of ‘a person reached’ is insufficient*.” In other words, these simple indicators fail to reflect the complexity of WASH improvements in the real world. In interventions focused on capacity development, for example, there may not be a directly measurable impact on “people reached” within the funded project time-scale. And “cost-per-person-reached” criteria can often work against universal services: for example, it may often be cheaper to improve services for middle-income people than for the very poor.

WASH specialists within funding agencies are of course aware of these issues. But the need to communicate that WASH improvements are cost-effective often leads to over-simplification. A significant problem, says Ned Breslin of Water For People, is that “*sector actors know that current approaches aren’t working, but many are sadly refusing to change direction for fear of losing funding, at the expense of the people we theoretically serve*”. In this note three implementing agencies –IRC, Water For People and WSUP– come together to argue for funding models that are genuinely conducive to sustainability.



water for people

So what can we do?

We can develop sustainability clauses and compacts...

There is certainly already strong awareness among funders of the importance of sustainability, under partnerships like Sanitation and Water for All (SWA). The Dutch Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS) includes a sustainability clause in its funding agreements, requiring recipients to explicitly commit to service delivery over 10 years. And USAID has developed a “sustainability compact”, which lays out the responsibilities of project stakeholders in ensuring sustainability. Other funders are moving in the same direction. But most funding is still managed on very short 2- or 3-year cycles, with a focus on “numbers reached” at the end of each defined project.

We can monitor for sustainability, not just for numbers...

Critical reporting by implementing agencies is key. Sustainability can be tracked by *predictive* indicators of how sustainable a service will be (for example, are users saving enough money for maintenance?), and by *look-back* assessment of whether a service is still functioning, say 5 years later. Water For People’s Re-Imagine Reporting (RIR) system collates metrics that go beyond beneficiary numbers to track both predictive and look-back indicators of sustainability. It’s warts-and-all reporting, unafraid to highlight deficiencies in ongoing maintenance. Other organisations are moving in similar directions... WSUP tracks diverse predictive indicators, with a strong focus on the level of financial provision for ongoing services delivery; WaterAid’s PIMS system is an ambitious commitment to detailed look-back surveys.

We need to move towards integrated monitoring...

It’s critical to move away from project monitoring towards integrated programme monitoring. Water For People carries out annual surveys that do not just track the performance of waterpoints built with project support, but of all waterpoints within the intervention district. And increasingly, we need to move from monitoring led by WSUP or Water For People or IRC, towards monitoring led by partner governments (local, regional, national). Uganda is a good example of a country that is beginning to move in this direction.

We need to put more emphasis on robust financial planning...

Central to this debate is an uncomfortable fact: providing sustainable services costs more than just building taps and toilets. So robust financial planning, built on life-cycle costing as championed by IRC, is critical. WSUP places strong emphasis on supporting service providers to plan for financial sustainability, on the basis of both dynamic market-led models and equitable tax-based public finance (neither of which can be sufficient alone). One approach is for funders to make funding agreements conditional on partner government commitments to provide services for at least 10 years: “conditionality” shouldn’t be a dirty word, we should be using funding agreements to leverage government commitments to equitable WASH financing.

So now what?

This is clearly a complex topic, and we can’t do detail in just two pages. But the basic message is there, and we (WSUP, Water For People and IRC) are going to continue working together towards the Everyone Forever vision. In reality, we’re asking funders to make our jobs more difficult... it’s easy to build 100 toilets, much harder to ensure that a given district has improved WASH services that are both community-wide and sustainable. So make our jobs more difficult: bring it on!



Credits: This Perspective was researched and written by Ruby Cowling and Guy Norman, with inputs from Sam Parker, Ned Breslin, John Sauer, Katja Neubauer, Sherina Munyana, Patrick Moriarty, Nicolas Dickinson, Stef Smits, and Rachel Cardone. Editing Coordinator: Sam Drabble. Production Coordinator: Gemma Bastin. Design: AlexMusson.com.

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