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Strengthening local government leadership for area-wide sanitation and hygiene: experiences from East Africa

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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**Strengthening local government leadership for area-wide
sanitation and hygiene: Experiences from East Africa**

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Introduction

Following widespread decentralisation reforms, including across Africa (Cabral, 2011), responsibility for sanitation and hygiene (S&H) often sits with sub-national governments. Supporting government leadership is recognised as an important component of systems strengthening (Casey and Crichton-Smith, 2020). However, many development partners are grappling with how best to operationalise systems strengthening and much of the literature to date is based on experience in the water sector (Gensch and Tillett, 2019). Recognising this gap, the Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH) has been working with partners to explore practical experiences strengthening government leadership for S&H at sub-national levels.

Approach

In late 2020-early 2021, SLH collaborated with local government actors and development partners in East Africa to explore how sub-national government leadership can be increased to drive progress towards area-wide S&H. Case studies were developed to capture local government and development partners' experiences increasing sub-national government leadership and prioritisation of S&H in Siaya County (Kenya, with UNICEF), Nyamagabe District (Rwanda, with WaterAid) and Moyo District (Uganda, with WSSCC), all of which have seen increasing sub-national government prioritisation of S&H in recent years. The cases were explored further through three online participatory workshops facilitated with staff from the same local governments and development partners to review experiences and identify levers and blockages to change. Findings and practical examples were identified across four themes in the workshops.

Findings

1. Increasing political will and supporting leadership

A strong enabling environment with clear national policies and strategies for S&H emerged as key to increasing S&H prioritisation locally. For example, in Uganda, advocacy by a range of elected officials and technical staff with the national WASH parliamentary forum helped increase political prioritisation of S&H at the national level. In Kenya, encouraging leaders to document commitments improved continuity across political transitions. Presenting concise and compelling S&H data that speaks to different motivations – for example, using UNICEF's short, easily accessible county sanitation profiles – was found to be effective for engaging busy leaders. Strong partnerships between sub-national governments and development partners over long periods (at least ten years) were found to be key to supporting government leadership and ensuring their efforts strengthen local capacities for sustainability. Partnership support included: financing, leveraging county resources, and providing technical support for sub-national S&H plans and monitoring mechanisms.

2. Local government resource allocation (financial and human)

The process for allocating S&H resources varied and needs to be understood to influence allocations. Existing structures were often used to implement S&H programmes and resource allocation may need to fit with these. In both Kenya and Rwanda there also tended to be multiple priorities competing for sub-national funds. Even if funds were committed, these were not always released in full or were late or redirected. Political will may therefore be a prerequisite for resource allocation.

3. Government-led monitoring, reporting and data use

Data was identified as essential to achieving political buy in and S&H leadership. Data is used for multiple purposes and monitoring systems need to be agile, easy to use and produce data in real-time. How and when data is presented is key to its use. Visual presentation of select information was identified as important for encouraging decision makers to engage with data. In Kenya, the national real-time monitoring system is a key advocacy tool that captures the S&H situation at county level to help mobilise resources. Learning activities such as exchange visits were also recognised as important and can support programme quality, advocacy and motivation.

4. Leaving no one behind

The importance of understanding who may be vulnerable and why in a sub-national area and of developing context specific approaches was recognised, including plans for households who cannot afford S&H services. Within the three cases, there was an emphasis on communities' responsibility to look after the most vulnerable although it was accepted that this has limits and governments (sub-national or national) were increasingly allocating budget to support the most vulnerable.

Emerging lessons

- Conduct formative research to inform influencing and engagement processes
- Identify champions who can advocate for and hold leaders to account in the long-term, including across political transitions and beyond the achievement of initial targets (such as Open Defecation Free status)
- Use concise, tailored and clearly presented data to engage decision makers and support S&H arguments
- Advocate for investment in timely, easy-to-use monitoring systems at local and national levels
- Document plans and commitments to support continuity
- Use healthy competition to motivate sub-national governments to prioritise S&H
- Hold regular review meetings to resolve issues, share and document lessons, and support coordination

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