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**Monitoring sustainability within a regional WASH project:
emerging lessons from West and Central Africa**

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This paper describes the implementation of a sustainability monitoring framework within an ongoing regional WASH project in nine countries in West and Central Africa. The paper describes and draws lessons in relation to implementation processes such as development of a common monitoring framework and the procurement of independent parties to conduct sustainability checks of project outputs and outcomes. The paper goes on to describe how based on these lessons and the wider discussion about the role of project monitoring systems in developing countries, project stakeholders have decided to move towards an approach that seeks to strengthen and use country monitoring systems, forge stronger links to other regional and global monitoring processes and develop an advocacy strategy aimed at leveraging increased financial contributions by government.

Introduction

Following up on a commitment made at the 2012 High Level meeting of the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership, the Netherlands Minister of Foreign Trade and for Development Cooperation (through its development agency, DGIS) and UNICEF established an agreement in December 2012 for a 5-year partnership program for Accelerating Sanitation and Water for All in West and Central Africa to contribute to progress towards the MDG targets in Water and Sanitation. The nine participating countries are Benin, Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania and Sierra Leone. The project is implemented through UNICEF with coordination by its West and Central Africa Regional office (WCARO).

The project implementation period is from January 2013 to December 2017. It is aiming to enable over 5 million currently unserved people to gain access to sustainable drinking water and sanitation, reach over 7 million people with hygiene promotion activities, and promote improved household water treatment and storage. Additionally it is helping 1,700 institutions (1450 schools and 250 Health Centres) to improve their water supply, sanitation and hygiene, benefiting some 400,000 children and 25,000 patients.

Both UNICEF and the Netherlands government have an overriding commitment to promoting greater sustainability within the WASH sector. Additionally, donors are increasingly called upon by their respective constituencies to demonstrate that aid funds are being spent responsibly and that the outputs of the projects that they fund are sustainable.

The sustainability approach for this programme, in addition to the actual service delivery and behaviour change elements, includes:

1. The development and signing of "Sustainability Compacts" between UNICEF and the individual Governments, identifying key bottlenecks to sustainability, setting out Government commitments to ensure that services will function for a minimum of 10 years (five years beyond project closure) and UNICEF's role in monitoring and supporting this effort.
2. Annual Sustainability Checks carried out by third parties to monitor implementation of the Sustainability Compacts and the sustainability of services, water safety and behaviours and practices. These are to be financed initially by the project but with the financing responsibility gradually transferred to the Government by the end of the project (Year 5).

3. A joint Management response by the Government and UNICEF (signed at the Ministerial and Representative levels respectively) providing feedback on the necessary course corrections and improvements in programming arising out of the sustainability checks.

This paper focuses on the strategic implications of implementation aspects of the sustainability arrangements rather than on the technical details of the methodology or the outputs of the sustainability checks. The paper draws mainly on experiences in Benin, Mali and Mauritania, where the first cycle of sustainability checks and management responses have been completed and also Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana where the sustainability checks have been completed and the management responses are expected shortly¹.

Implementation of the sustainability monitoring framework

Common framework for sustainability checks

Following consultations with UNICEF's country offices in the five concerned countries it was agreed that WCARO would develop a common framework for carrying out the sustainability checks. This was developed by August 2014. The collection of data and subsequent analysis is based on an analytical framework that assumes that sustainability of outputs and outcomes for WASH are directly related to the following determinants at the service provision level:

1. Supply: Availability of essential materials and inputs and the existence of effective support arrangements (staff, facilities, information) for service delivery.
2. Demand (by users): Affordability of services, acceptance of services and the extent to which services are used on a continuous basis
3. Quality: Quality of services and interventions relative to minimum acceptable norms and standards.

Data collection and analysis would focus primarily on the service provision level. However, it was also recognised that this lies within an overarching enabling environment (e.g. national policy, legislative and institutional framework). Elements relating to the enabling environment would therefore be used, where necessary, to inform the analysis of data and help to explain reasons for (or lack of) sustainability as well as contribute to the analysis of the implementation of the sustainability compacts.

In order to enable data triangulation, the Consultant's methodology was expected to include a comprehensive combination of data collection strategies (e.g. audits of infrastructure, water quality testing, key informant interviews, household interviews and observation).

Procurement of services of third parties

It was initially agreed that WCARO would launch a single tender to procure the services of a third party (or parties) to undertake the sustainability checks in five countries. The thinking at this stage was that for this first round of checks, the centralised approach would result in:

- A common implementation approach enabling easy inter-country comparisons
- Economies of scale

There was a low response to the tender and this resulted in the award of a contract for the sustainability check in Benin only. Following a further round of consultations with the concerned UNICEF country offices it was decided that fresh tenders would be launched (this time by the respective country offices) for the sustainability checks in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Mauritania.

Implementation results

Implementation time and costs

The one year inception phase of the project, taken together with the low response to the WCARO tender, and the additional time taken for second round of tendering in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Mauritania meant that the first three sustainability checks and management responses only became available in the last quarter of Year 3.

The cost of third party services to perform the sustainability checks averaged \$61,000 for the five countries and ranged from \$25,000 to \$96,000. These are broadly in line with the costs reported for similar sustainability assessments (Boulenouar et al., 2013). There were significant variations in the scope of the work required in each country and it is therefore difficult to directly compare the costs by country. However government partners are indicating that it will be difficult to transfer these levels of cost to government

budgets, particularly where the sustainability checks are restricted to the project areas and the services of the third parties are procured outside their respective country systems.

Recommendations and management responses

The sustainability checks carried out in the five countries show a considerable degree of adaptation and customisation of the original framework and consequently used different frameworks for the analysis of data. A further observation is that in each country the checks went into great detail and generated a large number of recommendations. Many of the recommendations are quite generic (e.g. develop a new long term WASH programme, provide more training, ensure that there are more funds for WASH) and often speak to the symptoms of lack of sustainability rather than the underlying causes. This reflects the latitude given by the terms of reference.

Emerging lessons and way forward

Lessons

The following are some emerging lessons concerning the monitoring of sustainability within a regional project implemented in several countries:

1. A regional project of this type with a strong focus on sustainability can succeed in securing the formal commitment of implementers and recipient governments to take major steps to promote WASH sustainability.
2. Regionally managed processes for the implementation of the sustainability checks potentially offers some advantages in terms of uniformity of approach and possible economies of scale. However, these must be balanced against advantages of country level process which offer the best chance of government buy-in (including governments taking financial responsibility for the checks). From a practical standpoint, country level procurement processes will benefit from the country teams' detailed grasp of local conditions and also provide for greater clarity on accountability for results.
3. Broad project sustainability assessment frameworks developed by donors or regional bodies such as WCARO will generally undergo customisation and adaptation at country level. Furthermore, eventual uptake by the government is not guaranteed particularly if the costs of implementation are perceived to be high.

Way forward

The mid-term project review which took place in during the third quarter of 2015 provided an opportunity for reflection on the implementation of the sustainability monitoring framework in the light of lessons learned as well as the more fundamental issue of the appropriate role of project monitoring frameworks within the wider national context. Lockwood (2013) provides a good treatment of the issue. The review resulted in a number of decisions that will align the project monitoring effort more towards strengthening and using the national monitoring systems. The review also recognised the need for other development partners to become involved as well as finding ways to leverage greater financial contributions from government towards sector monitoring. The decisions taken by stakeholders on future implementation of the sustainability monitoring framework are outlined below.

Sustainability compacts

Country teams were encouraged to review the sustainability compacts in order to ensure that they are “living documents” that remain relevant not only to the DGIS-UNICEF-Government partnership but also to the wider sector. In particular, the compact commitments are to be better aligned with existing sector monitoring and review processes and linked with existing commitments at regional / continental level (e.g. African Union / African Ministers' Council on Water) and the global level (e.g. SWA).

Sustainability checks

Country teams were encouraged to re-focus the remaining sustainability checks on the verification of the programme results and forge stronger links with country systems. It was recommended that learning from the first round of sustainability checks should be used to develop simplified monitoring tools that could be used to cost-effectively to conduct the checks during the remaining project period.

Country teams were also encouraged to build capacity for monitoring sustainability at country level both in terms of human resources development (public and private sector) and in terms of strengthening national monitoring systems at decentralised levels.

It was also recommended that this type of independent monitoring should be institutionalised and internalised in order to promote a performance monitoring culture and improve the long-term cost-effectiveness.

Government contributions

Country teams were encouraged to develop advocacy strategies aimed at securing governments' counterpart funding of the project and to address the broader issue of sector funding through leveraging of domestic resources and innovative financing mechanisms.

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Note/s

¹ The sustainability checks were not carried out in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone due to the Ebola Virus disease outbreak in these countries. They were also not carried out in the Central African Republic due to the humanitarian crisis at the time.

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