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Kick-starting WASH systems in newly established local authorities – an experience from Nepal

Paper for the WASH systems symposium

W. Tillet, P. Bastola, S. Gautam (UK)



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In 2015 Nepal adopted a Federal Constitution, which effectively dissolved former local government structures, establishing new administrative boundaries and over 750 local authorities. These local authorities have considerable decentralised mandates including for WASH services, however as they are new, there are considerable gaps in their human resources, experience and internal processes to deliver on these mandates. The International NGO Welthungerhilfe (WHH), in partnership with Aguaconsult, the German Toilet Organisation and Viva con Agua, has a project aiming to strengthen WASH systems in one of the local authorities, through the process of developing a Sustainable WASH Plan, and is using learning and experiences from this initiative to share with the wider sector in Nepal. This paper summarises the project process to date, and its broad lessons learned. In particular, it highlights efforts in using the one-off surveys undertaken to inform the WASH plan to help to kick-start recurrent monitoring and management processes in the local authority.

Introduction and context

Nepal has made strong progress in increasing access to water supply and sanitation services, with rural access figures standing at 78% for water, and 82% for sanitation¹ (JMP 2018). However, service sustainability and quality remain challenges, with 39% of piped water supply systems in the country requiring major repair, rehabilitation or construction (DWSS 2016), and a nationwide survey finding that 71% of households are using drinking water sources that contained detectable levels of E-coli (>=1 CFU/100ml, MICS 2014).

Nepal has recently undergone a major shift in its administrative system to a new federal structure. Prior to the adoption of the Federal Constitution, the country was divided into 75 districts, with the District Development Committees and district-level Water Supply & Sanitation Offices tasked to plan for and oversee local services, including WASH.

Progress towards fiscal decentralisation had been slow: (World Bank 2014) the district and sub-district government structures often faced considerable capacity challenges

and lacked democratically elected representatives for a sustained period (Sahardiman 2015). Due in part to the capacity shortfalls at the district and sub-district levels, many NGOs and even funding institutions became used to direct programme implementation through NGOs, sometimes creating parallel NGO-led structures for WASH services (FCG & TMS 2013).

The Government of Nepal adopted the Federal Constitution in 2015, with implementation of changes effectively starting with local authority elections in 2017. This shift towards federalism has led to the re-defining of local administrative boundaries, with the creation of 753 local authorities termed municipalities or rural municipalities, and sub-metropolitans /metropolitans and decreased focus on the role of the districts relative to these smaller administrative units. The municipalities and rural municipalities have considerable devolved mandates for planning, enabling and overseeing services including in WASH – fiscal and functional decentralisation has also increased significantly. However, as these local authorities are relatively new, they currently suffer staffing shortfalls, and have gaps in experience, processes and systems in which to fully fulfil their decentralised mandate. In such a context of institutional reform and the establishment of new institutions, local government systems strengthening initiatives are highly relevant, and there is space for civil society organisations (CSOs) to define new ways of working collaboratively with these new local authorities.

The German International NGO Welthungerhilfe (WHH) has an initiative called the Sustainable Services Initiative (SSI), which aims to increase the sustainability of its WASH programmes. The SSI is financed by Viva con Agua, and receives technical support from Aguaconsult and the German Toilet Organisation. As part of the SSI, WHH is undertaking in-country initiatives in a number of countries in Africa, and also in Nepal. In Nepal it is undertaking a WASH project in the hilly areas of Chitwan District.

The SSI Nepal project started in 2015, with the systems strengthening component commencing from February 2018. It runs until 2020. The project, which covers one rural municipality in its entirety, in addition to selected wards from two neighbouring municipalities, has three main components:

- 'Downstream' activities in the communities, focusing on rehabilitation of water supply schemes, training Water and Sanitation User Committees (WSUCs), promotion of

¹ Statistics include basic and limited service.

hygiene, and Community Led Total Sanitation;

- ‘Upstream’ (ward and municipal level) activities focusing on strengthening institutional capacity and systems for enabling, planning, budgeting, and monitoring WASH services;
- ‘Sector-level sharing’ activities, aiming to share approaches, tools and learning with provincial and national level stakeholders; to contribute to sector learning; and help to provide examples of local level WASH planning and systems strengthening, which could be scaled-up in the wider sector.

This paper focuses predominantly on the process and learning arising from the ‘upstream’ component of the project: that is the strengthening of capacities and systems at the ward and rural municipality level, for sustainable WASH services.

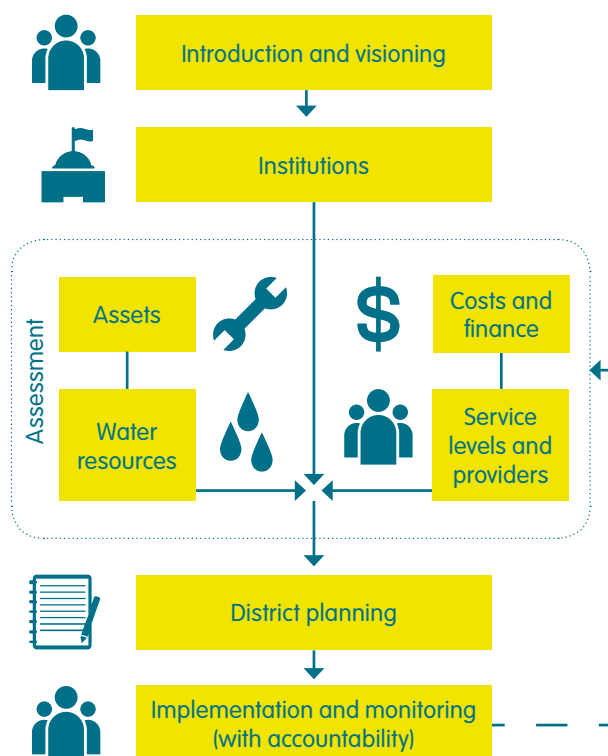
Project approach

The process which the SSI Nepal project is going through broadly follows the Roadmap to achieving and sustaining the WASH SDGs at the local level, as developed by Agenda for Change. In this, WHH and its implementing partner NGO Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN), are working with the rural municipality and wards to develop an evidence based, lifecycle costed WASH Plan to achieve universal and sustained access to WASH services within the municipality. While the launching of the WASH Plan is a key output of the project, it is the process of developing the plan which the project aims to use to strengthen the systems in the local authority. This is discussed later in this paper.

Nepal has a draft WASH Sector Development Plan (SDP), which provides the national level vision and targets for WASH services up to 2030, aligned to the SDGs. There is an expectation from the National Department of Water Supply and Sewerage (DWSS) that local authorities should now produce WASH Plans for their municipalities, which are coherent with and can be aggregated to the targets of the overarching SDP. This WHH project seeks to develop experiences and tools on developing local WASH Plans, which can feed into the national sector guidance and which will be provided to local authorities in future for WASH planning.

The development of WASH Plans for local authorities is nothing new, in Nepal or elsewhere. The table below highlights some common shortfalls of initiatives seeking to develop WASH Plans at the local level, and the approach which WHH is taking in Nepal which seeks to avoid some of these pitfalls. Note, the shortfalls listed are mainly from the authors’ observations and experiences in various countries², and not all of the listed issues are directly attributable to the context of Nepal.

Figure 1: Generic Roadmap Process. Source Tillett / Agenda for Change 2018



² Examples in the table have been drawn from the author’s experience in various contexts, for example: urban sanitation planning in Sierra Leone; district sector investment planning in Malawi, pilots with real-time monitoring with UNICEF (various countries), utility investment plans in Ethiopia.

Table 1. Common limitations on WASH planning initiatives (from the authors' experience), and how the project seeks to avoid these

Issues in some initiatives seeking to develop WASH Plans at the local level (not specific to Nepal)	The approach / considerations taken in the WHH SSI project in Nepal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) A strong focus on capital investment, with limited consideration to recurrent costs (e.g. the plan focuses on achieving 'everyone', but not 'forever') b) A relatively externally driven and undertaken initiative, using consultants or NGO staff, who 'handover' the plan once drafted (with issues of ownership of the local government) c) The process fails to strengthen the systems of local government, meaning there is a plan but a lack of capacity to implement it, or to update data collected d) The use of high-tech survey or mapping methodologies, which are beyond the capacities of the local authorities to update or use in future e) The development of a plan is seen as an initiative by an individual organisation (e.g. NGO or UN agency), rather than as a government-led initiative, meaning other NGOs may be reluctant to align to the plan, perceiving it as a plan guiding just the engagement of that organisation f) Plans are not always launched and made widely available, and not always periodically reviewed, updated and used as an ongoing tool for planning, budgeting and coordination of investments. The plan can become a document that is 'gathering dust on a shelf' g) Sometimes developing plans and undertaking assessments are low government priority rather than spending resources on 'tangible' infrastructure initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Analysing and considering all life cycle cost components in the WASH plan, and considering sources of finance for each cost component b) Leadership of the process by the local authorities from the outset, using a foundation of shared understanding and vision around universal and sustainable services c) Involving local authority staff throughout process to undertake activities, and using the process of the assessment phase to build systems, helping to build the implementation capacity of the local authority d) Maintaining a pragmatic balance between data quality and collection efficiency, and lower-tech methods that can be updated in future. Any high-tech methods used (e.g. Akvo) for the initial survey, is exported to simple excel database and paper forms developed for updating it e) Strengthening local government-led coordination platforms, and aiming to 'on-board' other NGOs in the area to align to the plan

Process

The process of implementing the Roadmap (see Figure 1) started in February 2018 with an initial orientation and visioning workshop. At the time of writing this paper, most of the assessment phase activities had been undertaken, and the data analysis and development of the plan was about to commence. The following sub-sections document the process followed, with an emphasis on how systems are being strengthened in the local authorities through the process of implementing the Roadmap.

Visioning, relationship building, and systems diagnosis

The process was initiated in February 2018 with a three-day workshop, bringing together representatives from the administrative and politically elected sides of the municipality and its wards, together with representatives of WHH and its implementing local partner RRN. The workshop sought to raise the minimal level of understanding on WASH issues, for example on challenges of poor sustainability

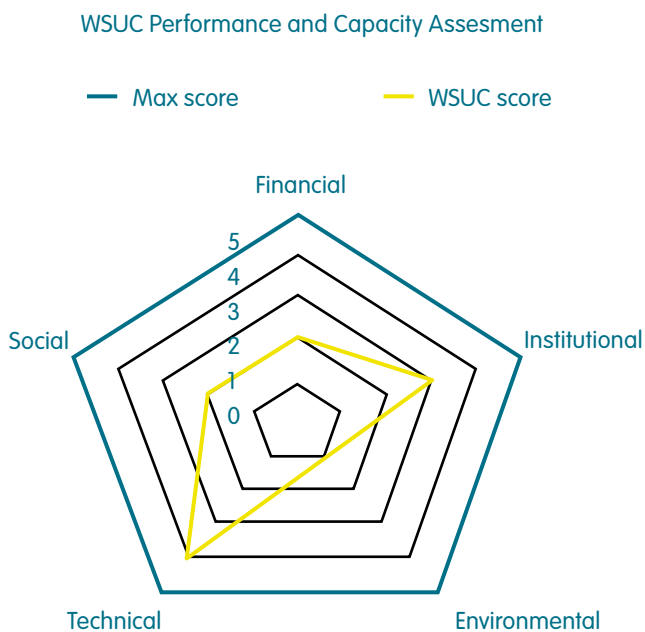
(and causes of this), and the importance of not only water supply but also prioritising hygiene and sanitation.

As part of the orientation, the concept of a WASH 'system' and its 'building blocks'³ was introduced, and participants undertook a participatory exercise to score the status of the WASH system in their municipality. This was done using a checklist developed by the SSI (an evolution of work done before by IRC and Aguaconsult), which requires a score to be given for individual components of the system, highlighting what is or is not in place to enable and sustain WASH services. The scoring was done in mixed groups of NGO and local authority staff, and helped not only to highlight the challenges which undermines progress and sustainability of WASH services in their municipality, but also built consensus between the NGO and local authorities in a constructive way around where the challenges lay. The checklist tool provides a summary of scores in a 'traffic light' coded scoring (shown in Figure 4), and whilst many building blocks were coloured

³ In Agenda for Change, partners have agreed on a common conceptual framework for the 'factors' in a WASH system, which includes eight 'building blocks'. These include: Institutional arrangements and coordination; Planning; Financing; Regulation and accountability; Learning and adaptation; Service delivery infrastructure; Monitoring; and Water resources.

red, it provided enthusiasm in the local authority to re-score in future to see how they have improved. The spokesperson of the municipality in her wrap-up statement mentioned “let us re-score this next year, and see how we will change our red scores to green!”.

Figure 2: Example scoring and category ranking of Water & Sanitation User Committees



WSUC Category ranking	WSUC Score (out of 100%)	Comment
A	>80%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model WSUCs • Limited targeted technical support
B	40-79%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical support on gaps
C	<39%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant technical support • (or possibly replacement of existing WSUC)

The workshop participants then developed a vision statement and set of principles which they would like to apply for WASH services for their wards and municipalities, and an initial Roadmap of how WHH/RRN and the local authorities would go through the process of developing an evidence-based life-cycle costed WASH Plan for the municipality. As a result of the workshop, the municipality: established a WASH Focal Person; committed to establish

a WASH coordination platform; started to allocate budgets for monitoring of WASH services; and began to take a more evidence-based approach to their investments in WASH infrastructure. The workshop also provided the opportunity for relationship building between the local authority and the NGO staff, which was key to enable progress for subsequent ‘upstream’ project activities.

Undertaking assessment activities for the WASH Plan

As per Figure 1, the assessment phase activities comprised of a series of surveys, which help to build the evidence base for the WASH Plan. These have included an asset inventory and water resources survey, a basic engineering assessment for new water supply schemes, a household survey⁴, and will also include (in the coming months) a survey of all Water and Sanitation User Committees (WSUCs), assessments of Direct Support Costs of supporting service delivery at the municipal level, and an analysis of gaps between tariffs and recurrent costs of sustaining water supply services.

The various surveys and assessments aim to collect data not only on needs and current status, but also on potential costs of achieving and sustaining universal WASH services, looking across the life-cycle cost components⁵. The WSUC performance and capacity assessment tool will seek to establish performance ranking across the WSUCs in the municipality, using a checklist to be scored with each WSUC, which indicates capacity and performance across the FIETS criteria (Financial, Institutional, Environmental, Technical and Social). Scores are summarised by criteria and a total score is provided. WSUCs are then ‘ranked’ in terms of their scoring (ranked in categories A to C), which not only helps to inform local government where more intensive support and training is required, but also helps to create competition and aspirational targets for the WSUCs themselves. Such performance ranking is relatively uncommon in community-based management, and experiences with this checklist will be shared with the wider sector in due course.

Through the course of designing and implementing the assessment phase activities, the project team tried to consider factors such as:

- How to build the capacity in the local authorities through the process of the surveys and analysis;
- How to avoid re-inventing the wheel at the local authority level, and ensuring coherence with national M&E frameworks (which are not yet fully in place);

⁴ Looking at aspects such as service levels received, household satisfaction and willingness to pay for services.

⁵ This includes cost categories including: capital investments (software and hardware), operation and maintenance; capital maintenance; and direct support costs.

- What data collection and analysis technologies/tools should be used, and are these realistic for the local authorities to update and use in future?

Turning one-off surveys into recurrent monitoring and management processes

The shift to federalism places the responsibilities for planning, overseeing and monitoring of WASH services within the municipalities. However, as these local authorities are relatively new, some have not yet fully established and equipped their monitoring systems and protocols for WASH services.

There was therefore an opportunity of using the one-off surveys undertaken as part of the development of the WASH Plan, to help ‘kick start’ recurrent government-led monitoring processes within the municipality. A second stakeholder workshop was held in October 2018, where initial results of the surveys were reviewed, and participants deliberated on the issue of what data should be updated in the future, and how. Working groups were assigned specific monitoring components (e.g. WSUC monitoring, water resources and asset functionality monitoring, ODF/hygiene monitoring), and asked to discuss the following: What information needs to be updated? How often? Who would collect / report the data? What are the costs, and who would bear them? Who would collate and analyse the data? How would the data be used, and shared? What broader actions would be required for the system to work (e.g. processes for registering WSUCs and water resources rights, etc)? Following this workshop session and the draft recommendations from the working groups, it was agreed to form a committee to develop the requisite draft monitoring protocols and templates, for subsequent endorsement and operationalisation by the municipality. Figure 3 summarises an example process of turning the one-off surveys in the Roadmap process into recurrent monitoring processes.

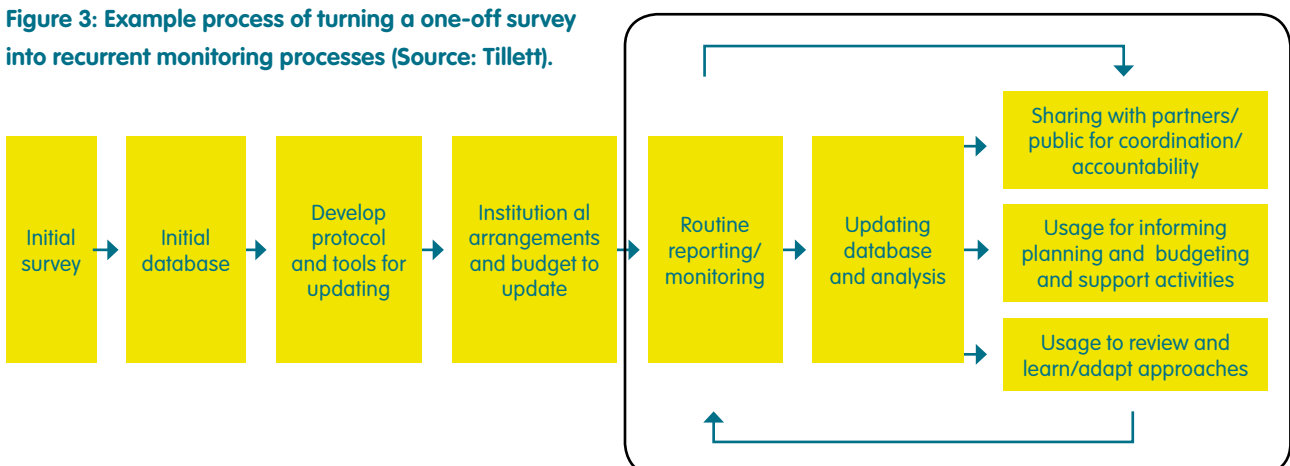
Ideally, national sector monitoring frameworks would inform the types of surveys, softwares, and protocols for collecting and updating such data at the local level. However, in Nepal the WASH sector M&E framework is still work-in-progress, and with the shift to federalism, there is currently some uncertainty around roles and responsibilities between former devolved line ministry and district functions, and the newly established provinces and municipalities. To avoid ‘re-inventing the wheel’, the approach is to consult with national stakeholders to ensure surveys and proposed monitoring protocols designed for the target municipalities are coherent with sector tools and frameworks (where they exist), and to liaise with key sector stakeholders (such as large WASH sector NGOs and the Federation of Water Users Committees – FEDWASUN) to share tools and protocols used elsewhere in Nepal. Once the sector M&E framework is fully in place, there may be a need to adapt what is being done in the project areas. In the meantime, the project seeks to share the tools and processes developed in the project areas, aiming to inform the development of wider sector frameworks.

Initial improvements in WASH systems

At the time of writing this paper, the SSI ‘upstream’ component of the project in Nepal had only been running for 10 months, with a strong focus to date on assessment phase activities. However, there are several areas of progress since the February 2018 workshop. These are summarised in the text box.

In the second stakeholder workshop in October, participants from the municipality, WHH and RRN were tasked to re-score the building block checklist which they had scored in the February workshop. This helped to identify areas where progress had been made, and highlighted areas that continued to require focus. These scores are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 3: Example process of turning a one-off survey into recurrent monitoring processes (Source: Tillet).



Examples of improvements in the municipality-level WASH system observed over the last 10 months of the project:

- Stronger political prioritisation of WASH, including sanitation and hygiene, and WASH Focal Person established in the municipality
- Greater orientation of the administrative and political wings of the municipality on WASH issues, and understanding of the importance of (and risks of) sustainability
- Declarations have been made in some wards around tariff setting and modifications to increase funds for maintenance
- The municipality is now allocating budget for Direct Support Costs for monitoring and support of WASH services
- Initial databases established for all assets and water resources in the municipality
- Greater clarity between local authorities and communities regarding responsibilities for maintenance and management of WASH services.

Figure 4 shows that progress has been made in certain areas, with a marked improvement in total scores. Improvements were observed in areas such as improved evidence-based planning (on water resources), and greater consideration of life-cycle costs in planning, budgeting and tariff setting. However, it is expected that in coming months, as there will be a focus on establishing recurrent monitoring and follow-up activities, that there will be considerable increases in the scores. Re-scoring of the checklist is planned for the end of Quarter 1 in 2019.

Challenges and lessons learned

Whilst the project is still ongoing, there have already been a number of challenges faced, and a number of lessons learned, as summarised below:

- To proceed along the roadmap and undertake systems strengthening activities as an NGO, it is crucial to build up the trust and relationships with the local authority from the outset. However, this takes time.
- Undertaking systems strengthening at a time of major institutional reforms is, in one way, a great opportunity in terms of starting from a relatively ‘blank canvas’ – helping to form capacities, systems and processes from the outset, and demonstrating approaches to systems strengthening that can be replicated in other municipalities. On the other hand, it is not easy to strengthen systems (such as monitoring) at the local level in the absence of clear institutional mandates and a sector-adopted M&E framework.
- Moving from local systems strengthening initiatives to sector influencing and upscaling can be challenging, and requires collaboration between organisations (such as between NGOs, to have a greater ‘voice’ at the sector level), however this is not always easy, especially in a relatively fragmented WASH sector.
- The use of the building block checklist has been effective at setting a baseline on which progress can be compared, and helped to motivate and guide the local authorities to improve their systems. It was also effective in building consensus between the NGO and local authority on capacity challenges in a non-confrontational way.
- Undertaking the Roadmap in its entirety, with in-depth surveys etc, takes time and costs money. In contexts such as Nepal where there are 753 local authorities, municipal level planning processes need to be low cost to be realistic to upscale.

Figure 4: A summary of scores from the building block checklist scored initially in February, and again in October 2018 in the project target municipality

max.	Summary of scoring on the building blocks								
possible	18	10	12	10	12	10	8	6	86
score	Institutions	Finance	SDM infrastructure	Regulation & Accountability	Monitoring	Water Resources Management	Planning	Learning & Adaptation	Total Score (max score 86)
score (feb 2018)	4	2	4	2	1	3	2	1	19
Score (oct 2018)	5	2	6	4	1	5	3	1	27

In conclusion, in terms of local systems strengthening, the Nepal example shows that the process of developing a WASH Plan, is as valuable as the plan itself – therefore efforts seeking to develop WASH Plans, and to follow the Roadmap should constantly consider how systems can be strengthened throughout the process.

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Contact details

Will Tillett

Aguaconsult, UK

Email: w.tillett@aguaconsult.co.uk

www: www.aguaconsult.co.uk

Surendra Gautam / Pravin Bastola

Welthungerhilfe, Nepal

Email: Surendra.Gautam@welthungerhilfe.de

Pravin.Bastola@welthungerhilfe.de



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