## WASH Talk Episode 17 – Achieving ‘Systems as Usual’ in the WASH Sector

## Show Notes – June 2018

**Introduction**

Why is the WASH sector so lagging behind other sectors when it comes to taking a systems approach to public services? The health and education sectors have adopted a whole systems approach, whereby achieving progress involves a mix of players and processes that work together in a synchronised way. For example, health systems include doctors, hospitals, adequate training, necessary financing and the supply and distribution of medicines and equipment. Ask any health professional within governments and they understand that health is about this list of ingredients, not simply about hospitals. Compare this to the WASH sector in the same country and they seem to be stuck in the building infrastructure mindset. The WASH sector is geared towards building infrastructure without sufficient attention to the essential parts of the systems, like adequate staff to plan, manage and monitor services, sufficient training, financing, and supply and distribution of spare parts. When planning at the systems level is introduced, many times it is resisted by government who are content with business as usual. Yet, meeting the sustainable development goals requires urgent action. So how can this urgency be spread across the WASH sector at all levels of government, civil society and the private sector?

We have two guests on the show to help unpack these issues. Juste Hermann Nansi tells us about how this situation is playing out in Burkina Faso. And Patrick Moriarty shares his experience of addressing this resistance in other countries.

Juste Hermann Nansi is Country Director for IRC in Burkina Faso, with over 10 years professional experience in rural development in West Africa, mostly in WASH. And Patrick Moriarty is the CEO of IRC and has over 20 years in the sector, of which 18 are with IRC as Country Director in Ghana.

**Show Notes**

* What do we mean by WASH systems? We do not refer to a tap, toilet or a pump. This is infrastructure, which is only one part of what is required to deliver a service. When we talk of WASH systems, we talk of all the components that are required for sustainable services, such as the people, money, the management, the institutions, and the policies. A WASH systems approach means focusing on all the elements needed for the service to work indefinitely, as opposed to just the presence of hardware.
* Other sectors follow systems approach when it's business as usual, such as the health and education sectors. But not the WASH sector. The WASH sector is crippled with “system blindness”. This problem was illustrated in a recent speech given by the Prime Minister in Burkina Faso, when the Minister highlighted the progress that had been made in the WASH sector by sharing the number of WASH facilities that had been built. But in the same speech, he would refer to the health system or the education system, and talk about the number of teachers or doctors that had been recruited and trained and the amount invested to sustain the services.
* WASH systems are better understood in urban service provision, with utilities mandated to manage the system, but is particularly poorly understood in rural WASH service provision. This is partly because health and education delivery has always been housed under one Ministry, but with WASH, it has always fallen under several ministries, and so responsibility has been fragmented. What's more, responsibility is often devolved to regional and district levels where capacity is weak.
* In more developed countries, as systems have grown up, they have been taken on by municipalities, which grew into sort of rural utilities. So a process of "utilitisation" could be needed.
* This has happened in Uganda where umbrella organisations responsible for community water systems have been turned into a series of rural water utilities, and have taken on ownership and management of the systems.
* Many practitioners are seeing immense resistance among government authorities who prefer business as usual. To meet the 2030 targets, the systems foundations need to be established now. One of the reasons for this resistance is that the sector has been led by people who are only familiar with infrastructure provision and know little about managing the infrastructure. Again, this is "systems blindness".
* What IRC has been trying to do is remove this “systems blindness” from the sector, to get service providers working in this space to realise they're players in the system and they rely on other aspects of the system to be successful.
* Practitioners can show examples from other sectors who understand systems, such as health and education, and the difference a system makes to end result.
* There should be more opportunities to spread the message of WASH systems, and for people to learn and get familiar with the new paradigm.
* Also, practitioners should not pretend to be able do it all themselves, acting in isolation. This means donors need to be educated that WASH improvements are part of a system, that projects have boundaries that touch the system, and need to be firmly integrated with the rest of the system before they exit.