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LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES

How to unlock the incentives to turn political will on sanitation into action

N. Mason, A. Hueso & M. Matoso (UK)

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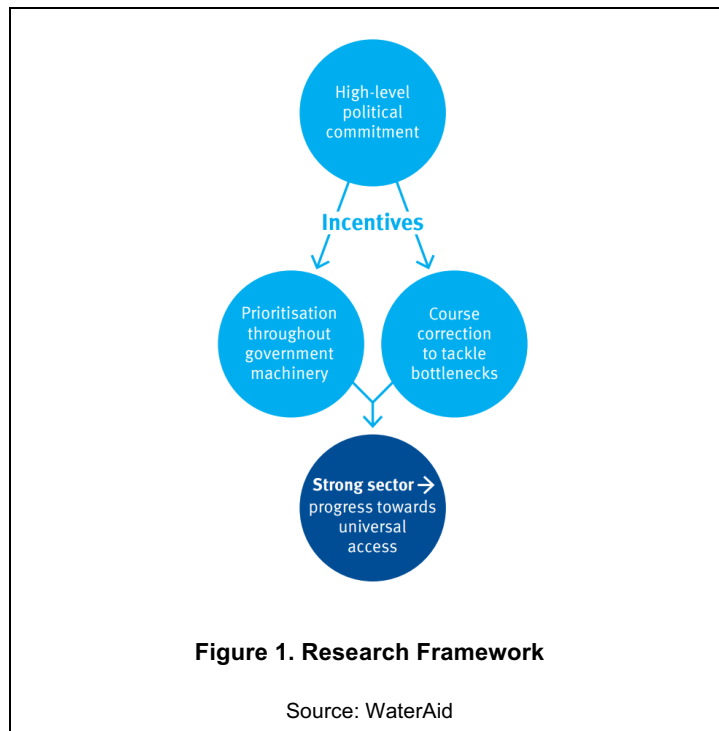
More and more governments are committing to achieving universal access to sanitation, but rhetoric alone will not be enough. High-level expressions of political will need to be turned into prioritisation of sanitation, across different levels and departments in government, and into course correction systems that can identify and adapt to implementation challenges. Research, carried out by the Overseas Development Institute and commissioned by WaterAid, investigates the underlying incentives that encourage these processes, drawing on case studies in India (Chhattisgarh State), Ethiopia and Indonesia. We find that organisations championing sanitation can tap into personal values as well as career aspirations and ambitions, to get different levels of government to prioritise sanitation. To enable timely course correction, it is important to build a culture of learning and trust, which means investing in reliable verification, enabling informal information sharing, and securing participation of people with power to make and follow up on decisions.

Introduction

Building ‘political will’ has been a key priority for the sanitation sector for at least a decade (UNDP 2006). High-level statements of support for sanitation, for example its acknowledgement as a human right, have been gradually on the increase (Mara et al. 2010). The clearest and most recent example is the ambitious target under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 – to ‘achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation’ by 2030.

A growing number of countries are showing commitment to sanitation progress at the highest levels of government, to match the global ambition. But commitments on paper or in speeches will not be enough to secure universal and equitable sanitation and hygiene. Previous research on the experience of South-East Asian countries shows that two steps are crucial for that commitment to translate into outcomes: prioritisation of sanitation, at all levels through the machinery of government; and establishment of ‘course correction’ processes to identify implementation challenges and adapt policy in response (Figure 1; Northover et al. 2015). Prioritisation can be seen as the engine for progress in sanitation, while course correction is the rudder enabling rapid responsive adaptations through policy, legal, and institutional reforms. Both are needed to navigate through sanitation’s inherent complexity and advance towards a strong sector that can deliver universal access.

To date, research and policy advice on what is required to enable a strong sanitation sector has focused on specific policy ingredients or building blocks, such as dedicated targets, clear institutional roles, budgets, and monitoring systems (WSP 2015, UN Water and WHO 2014). Less attention has been paid to the incentives that would lead to those elements being instated and made to work in practice. WaterAid therefore commissioned the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) to conduct research in three countries to bridge this knowledge gap.



Findings

The research draws on case studies of urban sanitation in Indonesia and of rural sanitation in Ethiopia and India (the last focussing on the Indian state of Chhattisgarh). The research involved desk review and consultation with 85 people in total, conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The synthesis report for this research gives further detail on methodology and findings (WaterAid 2016).¹

The three case studies show evidence of high-level political commitment. For instance, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made sanitation a top priority of his tenure, and senior civil servants within Indonesia’s Ministry of National Development Planning and elsewhere have succeeded in getting urban sanitation on the national agenda. In Ethiopia, commitment to sanitation is more diffuse, shown by the involvement of several ministers and senior civil servants. As a result, the three countries have achieved substantial progress in delivering sanitation, even though more is needed to ensure universal sanitation services (Table 1).

	Ethiopia (rural)			India (rural)			Indonesia (Urban)		
	2005	2015	Ranking*	2005	2015	Ranking*	2005	2015	Ranking*
Open defecation	68%	34%	4th	73%	61%	21st	15%	13%	39th
Improved sanitation	14%	28%	15th	20%	29%	41st	68%	72%	40th

Source: Based on data from WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme - www.wssinfo.org

* Relative performance of the country in rates of reduction in open defecation and increase in improved sanitation.

Incentives for prioritisation of sanitation through different levels of government

Our research looked for both incentives and disincentives for prioritising sanitation. The latter make up a lot of the ‘operating environment’, or wider context, in which elected or appointed government officials decide whether or not to prioritise sanitation. We illustrate two of these first, as issues that need to be thought about or worked around, before turning to the incentives that can be used to positively encourage prioritisation of sanitation.

A first important element linked to the operating environment that might act as a (dis)incentive is decentralisation. Officials at different levels of government need to be empowered by receiving resources and designated responsibility to do a particular job. In the many countries where sanitation (and water) service delivery responsibilities are increasingly decentralised, local officials need the authority and budget to act. But their choices about what to prioritise, when, can also be affected by how far they feel they have autonomy. In turn, this is often shaped by legal and political aspects of decentralisation. Examples from Indonesia and Ethiopia suggest that understanding how decentralisation is working in a given country, in practice not just in theory, and across fiscal, administrative and political dimensions, is crucial.

Examples	
In Indonesia , the Ministry of Public Works and Housing often constructs infrastructure for sanitation and water using national budgets, and notionally hands it over to district government. However, district officials can be reluctant to take on responsibilities for operation and maintenance, because the legal status of the assets is not always clear, and strict public expenditure rules determine that they cannot spend money operating infrastructure that they don't legally own.	In Ethiopia , where local elections are held, the political dimension of autonomy is important. In a context of single-party dominance, commands from higher level party representatives were seen as more important for local officials than policy and instruction from specific ministries, including those involved in sanitation. Health extension workers, who provide an important resource for sanitation and hygiene promotion in Ethiopia, can be co-opted into party-orchestrated campaigns for other health issues such as deworming or immunisation.

A second important piece of context shaping the (dis)incentives to prioritise sanitation is linked to the relative power of the departments and ministries charged with leading on the sector. If decentralisation relates mainly to prioritisation through different levels of government, there are also important questions about how to ensure prioritisation *across* government bodies at the same level – for example between national ministries and departments. Although sanitation is a multi-sectoral issue, there is always the risk of it becoming no-one's priority, or being isolated if prioritisation happens within a single ministry. Here, perceptions about relative power and status of institutions and programmes can affect how far key bodies are willing to collaborate and implement policy together.

Example
In Ethiopia , the Ministry of Health is designated as lead for rural sanitation at federal level. Within the Ministry hierarchy, a Hygiene and Environmental Health Case Team, sitting below directorate level, oversees sanitation. This relatively low status of the institutional sanitation lead can reportedly affect the responsible team's ability to drive prioritisation of sanitation across ministries and among wider WASH stakeholder groups.

Turning to the **positive incentives**, the **first key finding is that appealing to peoples' values and world views can be effective for encouraging prioritisation of sanitation** (and it is therefore not just about offering personal rewards). Examples include using ideas around modernity and economic competitiveness. In India and Indonesia, interviewees mentioned the Economics of Sanitation Initiative, which quantified the economic costs of inadequate sanitation, as a driver of the high-level commitment on sanitation (WSP 2016). However, broader ideas of modernity and economic competitiveness were used for prioritisation through lower tiers of government. To a lesser extent, political and campaigning messaging, using symbols of historical and cultural heritage, was also being harnessed to create wider support.

Examples	
In the words of an interviewee in Indonesia : "at the local level it is not the economic cost (...) that drives the agenda forward; instead, it is linked to the image of the smart/modern city that [Mayors] want to portray."	The deadline of India's rural sanitation programme Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G) is scheduled to match the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, and the logo features his distinctive spectacles.

Secondly, personal rewards still matter. A second finding around the positive incentives for prioritising sanitation is that it's still important to answer the question 'What is in it for me?', as much as 'Do I believe in this cause?' These can tap into government officials' desire for political gains, career advancement, and personal renown. In India, some interviewees regarded prioritising the programme as a potential route for politicians to win votes. Within the bureaucracy, officials perceive sanitation as a route for career

progression, given its political importance. In the words of one of the officials we interviewed: “by doing something new you will get your fame and promotion”.

Example

In **Indonesia**, inter-city competition encouraged leaders to prioritise sanitation. Since 2014, awards have been granted to recognise initiatives of mayors, such as increasing budget allocations or developing service delivery innovations. The incentive reportedly operated more through the prestige in the eyes of peers than the value of the award itself.

Incentives for course correction

Turning to the incentives underpinning course correction, for this research we take the term to entail **both day-to-day adaptation** (which may occur at more local levels) **and** more significant **review and reform of policies, strategies, and guidelines**. While these can occur at different levels, they both require timely and adequate information. However, the trust and relationships that incentivise people to collect and use information in the first place are just as important.

For more **local, day-to-day adaptation**, our case studies suggest that **a two-way dialogue between higher and lower ranking officials is important to prevent incentives for prioritisation from restricting course correction**. This is because incentives linked to tracking and rewarding performance (or punishing poor performance) – for example targets for sanitation coverage – can undermine the flexibility and information flows needed for successful adaptation. Fostering a two-way dialogue, in which local level officials can contribute ideas as well as report progress, can help to reduce the negative effects of a top-down, target driven culture.

Example

In **India**, top-down pressure to deliver was the key incentive driving prioritisation in the past. Coupled with weak verification, this resulted in high over-reporting of toilets constructed, hindering review and adaptation. In Chhattisgarh under SBM-G, supporting sanitation as a priority issue is seen a route to win prestige and career advancement from seniors. However, this time similar underlying incentives appear to be encouraging lower ranking officials to proactively share data and new ideas with higher-ranking ones, in a more open, two-way manner. One of the things making a difference is the WhatsApp groups that provide direct, personal exposure to political superiors, and motivate juniors to participate actively in day to day information sharing, outside the formal reporting lines that tend to be very hierarchical.

At the same time, using the prospect of career advancement to incentivise junior representatives to share information with their superiors can also make it more likely that negative stories or data are suppressed.

Example

In **Ethiopia**, several interviewees expressed doubt about the veracity of sanitation data, for example due to Health Extension Workers completing the quarterly reports on existence and use of latrines in response to ambitious targets, without independent observation. At its most extreme, a lack of verification means no one is willing to trust, or make decisions based on, available data. Another interviewee in Ethiopia recounted a meeting in Oromia Region in which stakeholders at the three main decentralised levels of government (regional, zonal and woreda) successively admitted they couldn't trust the data they were presenting. In this case, the perverse incentives reportedly operated in both directions, with some officials exploiting the system by over-reporting, to accrue prestige or career advancement, and others under-reporting to attract resources.

An open learning culture therefore needs to be matched with verification to incentivise the sharing of accurate information for effective course correction. Efforts are underway in all case study countries to improve routine monitoring systems and ensure systems for verification, though these remain a work in progress.

Example

In **India**, SBM-G places a strong emphasis on multi-tier verification mechanisms, incorporating peer review – village to village, block to block, and district to district. Although it was not possible to independently verify how well this was working in practice, in Chhattisgarh this appears to be reliant on the continuous engagement from committed individuals – a central element in a context where resources (financial, skills, staffing, etc.) can be constrained.

In terms of major course correction in the sanitation sector, the case study countries feature various **sector learning and review mechanisms**. However, interviewees in our case study countries suggested that many such formal mechanisms are not as effective as intended. Part of the challenge is around the sheer number of learning events and crowded agendas, as well as to drive follow up on review decisions, when the mechanisms or the participants lack sufficient power or status to ensure agreed actions are realised.

Examples	
<p>Since 2006, Ethiopia has attempted to hold biannual technical reviews of WASH sector progress, conducted jointly by Government and partners, and accompanied by a multi-stakeholder forum. At least one of the two has occurred in most years. Major advances that these processes supported include the One WASH National Program launched in 2013. Uptake by decision makers in the development and analysis of sector learning activities has been greater because national and regional government representatives played active roles in a process review of the national Community Led Total Sanitation and Hygiene approach.</p>	<p>One interviewee in Indonesia argued that the sheer number of sanitation sector learning events was “dispersing attention and focus, with most stakeholders limiting their level of participation due to time limitations and a sense of effort duplication.” Discussion of similar challenges in Ethiopia suggests that giving decision makers a direct stake in learning activities can encourage them to participate in research and evaluation, and act on the findings.</p>

Conclusions and recommendations

In Ethiopia, Indonesia, and India there has been relatively strong high-level political commitment to sanitation. We have attempted to go beyond an emphasis on high-level commitment, however, to shed light on the incentives underpinning processes of prioritisation and course correction for sanitation. These two processes are crucial in translating high-level political commitment into sector outcomes, and appear to be a ‘work in progress’ in the three case study countries.

We found **prioritisation of sanitation across the three case studies to be driven by a mix of incentives**. In some cases, framing sanitation as integral to **values around modernity and cultural heritage** helped government representatives to get behind the sector. In others, strong and sustained commitment from the top levels of government fostered a perception that sanitation was sufficiently high priority to be a means for **career progression or attracting politically useful resources**, e.g. funds or votes. We also found that competing incentives, to do with **people’s autonomy and perceptions about authority, power and status**, shape how these positive incentives to prioritise sanitation play out. For example, from the case study evidence, it seems that legal frameworks (or their absence) and political structures are important ‘rules of the game’, conditioning the freedom that subsidiary tiers of government have to prioritise any issue.

Turning to **course correction**, we considered incentives for sharing, evaluating and using information, on which evidence-informed policy review and reform is necessarily based. The case study evidence points to **the importance of giving stakeholders a direct role in the process of generating and interpreting evidence**. For government representatives at lower levels, we found that proactive participation in learning platforms offered a positive incentive to contribute, where it enabled them to interact with superiors. Technologies that can accelerate the flow of information and expand audiences may be useful in this regard, as use of WhatsApp has enabled in Chhattisgarh. However, increasing the political priority and prestige attached to sanitation performance could also create perverse incentives to ‘game’ data. **Verification systems, whether external or relying on peer review**, can therefore **provide an important complementary set of incentives for sharing accurate information**. For more major course correction efforts, a large number of sector review events and platforms can dilute attention and discourage key decision makers from attending the right ones. Involving them in research and learning activities may play a role in incentivising them to get around the table and subsequently be held to account for their commitments.

What can those working for universal access to sanitation do in response to these patterns of incentive, to turn political will into action? **For sanitation champions in national governments, as well as for external stakeholders trying to foster ‘political will’ and translate it into action, we argue for two areas of work.**

First, to cascade political prioritisation to lower government levels and across critical ministries by:

- Fostering buy-in by aligning with the world views of those involved, linking sanitation with notions of nation-building and modernity or other context-specific values.

- Tapping into personal aspirations, ensuring sanitation efforts receive public recognition and are a factor considered in professional progression.
- Enlisting authoritative senior figures in promoting prioritisation of sanitation in ministries and departments that are critical but don't have a designated lead role.
- Examining and working with the financial, legal, and political 'rules of the game' (e.g. on decentralisation) to ensure decision makers at the local levels have the adequate autonomy to engage in and champion the sanitation agenda.

Second, investing in timely course correction to address bottlenecks by:

- Building reliable third party verification or peer review systems in order to reduce perverse incentives to mis-report and build trust in monitoring data so that they can be used for decision making.
- Nurturing a culture of learning, where the challenges of sanitation are recognised and those leading the efforts on the ground have the space and flexibility for trial, error, learning and adaptation.
- Using informal sharing and reporting mechanisms such, as WhatsApp groups, that cut across hierarchies and enable rapid and regular flow of information.
- Strengthening review mechanisms, but ensuring quality over quantity. This includes involving those with decision-making power, improving follow up, and ensuring it all leads to progress-chasing policy implementation.

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Notes

- ¹ The synthesis report, case studies and a policy brief are available at: <http://www.wateraid.org/what-we-do/our-approach/research-and-publications/view-publication?id=21136127-4c4e-4e1b-88f2-ebe0f141522a>

Contact details

Nathaniel Mason is a Senior Research Fellow in the Water Policy Programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Dr Andrés Hueso is Senior Policy Analyst – Sanitation at WaterAid. Dr Mariana Matoso is formerly Senior Research Officer in the Water Policy Programme at ODI.

Nathaniel Mason/ Mariana Matoso

Address: 203 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8NJ

Tel: +44(0)20 7922 0300

Email: n.mason@odi.org.uk;

www: www.odi.org/programmes/water-policy

Andrés Hueso

Address: 47-49 Durham St, London SE11 5JD

Tel: +44(0)20 7793 4500

Email: AndresHueso@wateraid.org

www: www.wateraid.org
