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

**Towards effective implementation of community based
water safety plans: stakeholders engagement
process in Afghanistan**

S. K. Ngilambi (Afghanistan) & C. N. McCubbin (UK)

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The Rural Water Supply, Sanitation & Irrigation Programme (Ru-WatSIP) intends to implement a simplified community-based Water Safety Plan (WSP) approach in the rural water supply programme in Afghanistan. Such an approach is new to Afghanistan and faces some unique challenges. Although the main challenges reside in obtaining a common understanding on a simplified community-based WSP concept and agree on a minimum package of activities under the rural water supply program, there are other underlying factors such as the structure of community leadership and stakeholder participation which has hampered the process since its inception.

Introduction

The Water Safety Plan (WSP) approach, coined by the World Health Organization in the Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality (WHO, 2004) and supported in the Bonn Charter For Safe Drinking Water (IWA, 2004), is promoted as the most effective means of ensuring drinking water safety. By ensuring that water quality is maintained, WSPs have the potential to ensure a sustainable water supply. Recognizing this, the WSP has been endorsed by governments, larger water utilities and regulators and promoted at community level for rural areas. This has not only leveraged cooperation among all stakeholders but also improved assimilation of best practices and provided room for a more standard and rational approach to managing drinking water quality. Stakeholders and community engagement processes hold specific importance in water because this is a highly decentralized and fragmented sector with multiple, interdependent players at different levels.

The majority (78% to 80%) of Afghans live in rural environments where conditions are the most basic and don't have access to water piped into their premises or treated before distribution let alone the capacity to regularly monitor water quality. Community water supply is so far established as the principle service delivery model in rural areas in Afghanistan voluntary Water Supply and Sanitation User Groups (WSSUG) or Community Development Councils (CDC)/Water Supply User Committee (WSUC) as executive committees are tasked with operation and maintenance of the system.

To date, however, the majority of documented cases studies and anecdotal evidence have shed more light on the critical success factors and bottlenecks to WSP implementation. The experience of WSP implementation in rural communities with respect to small systems hasn't been fully documented (Greaves and Simons, 2011). For countries with experience in WSPs in small, community-managed water supplies, the focus was merely on the development of guided plans or model WSPs rather than in documenting the whole process (Davison et al. 2005). Cataloguing some of these experiences may seem to be a perfunctory task but if done in a methodological way this will shed more light on the inputs, process, outcomes and impact of the WSP implementation.

This paper seeks to provide insight to some of the experiences of implementing WSPs in Afghanistan. The analysis of the process is offered purposefully to recognize the institutional challenges and lessons as the stakeholder's engagement experience gathers.

Context of implementation of water safety plans in Afghanistan

Water safety plan: definition

A WSP is a preventive management approach used to identify and prioritize potential threats to water quality at each step in a specific system's water supply chain and implement best practices to mitigate those threats (NCHE, 2012).

It helps to ensure safe drinking water through good water supply practices, which include:

- Management of activities in the watershed to control contamination of source water.
- Removal or inactivation of contaminants during treatment.
- Prevention of recontamination during distribution, storage, and handling.

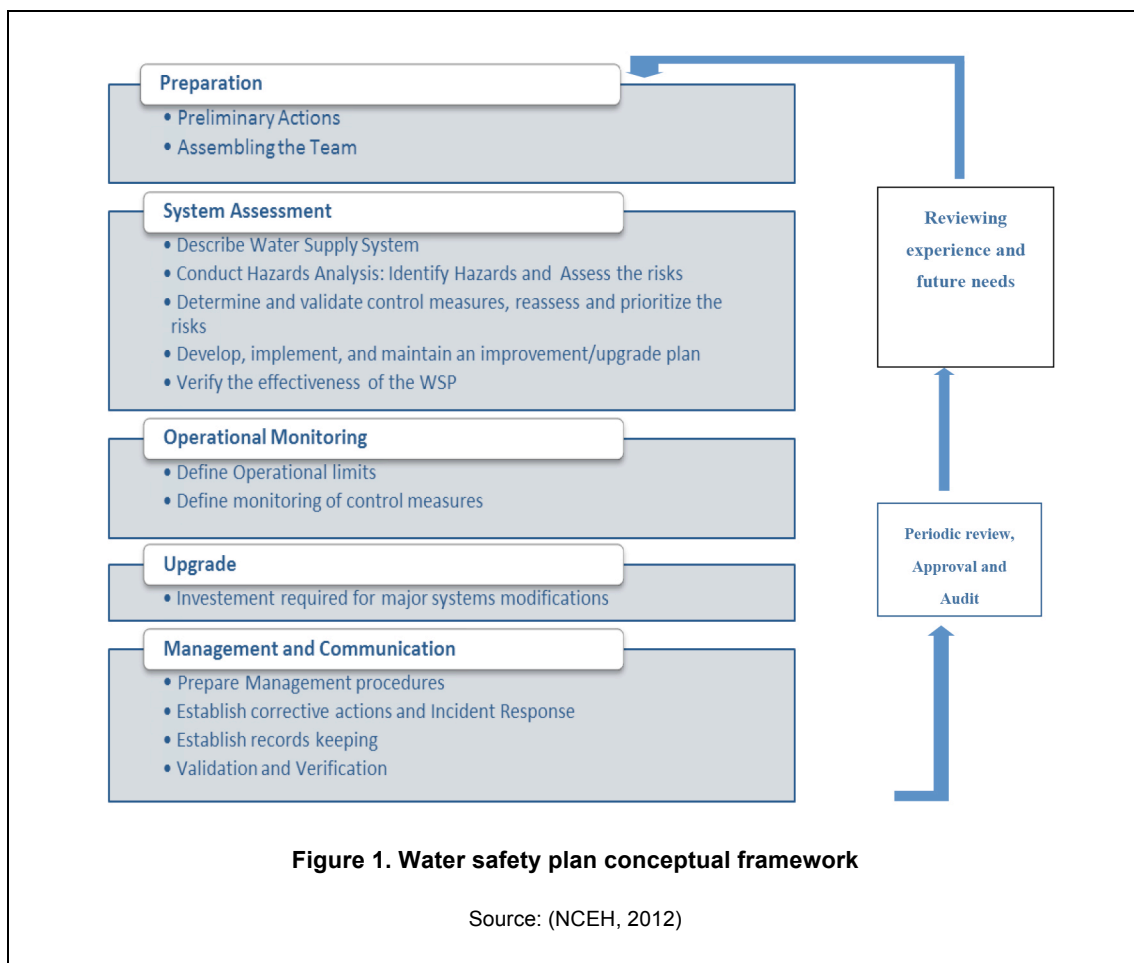


Figure 1. Water safety plan conceptual framework

Source: (NCEH, 2012)

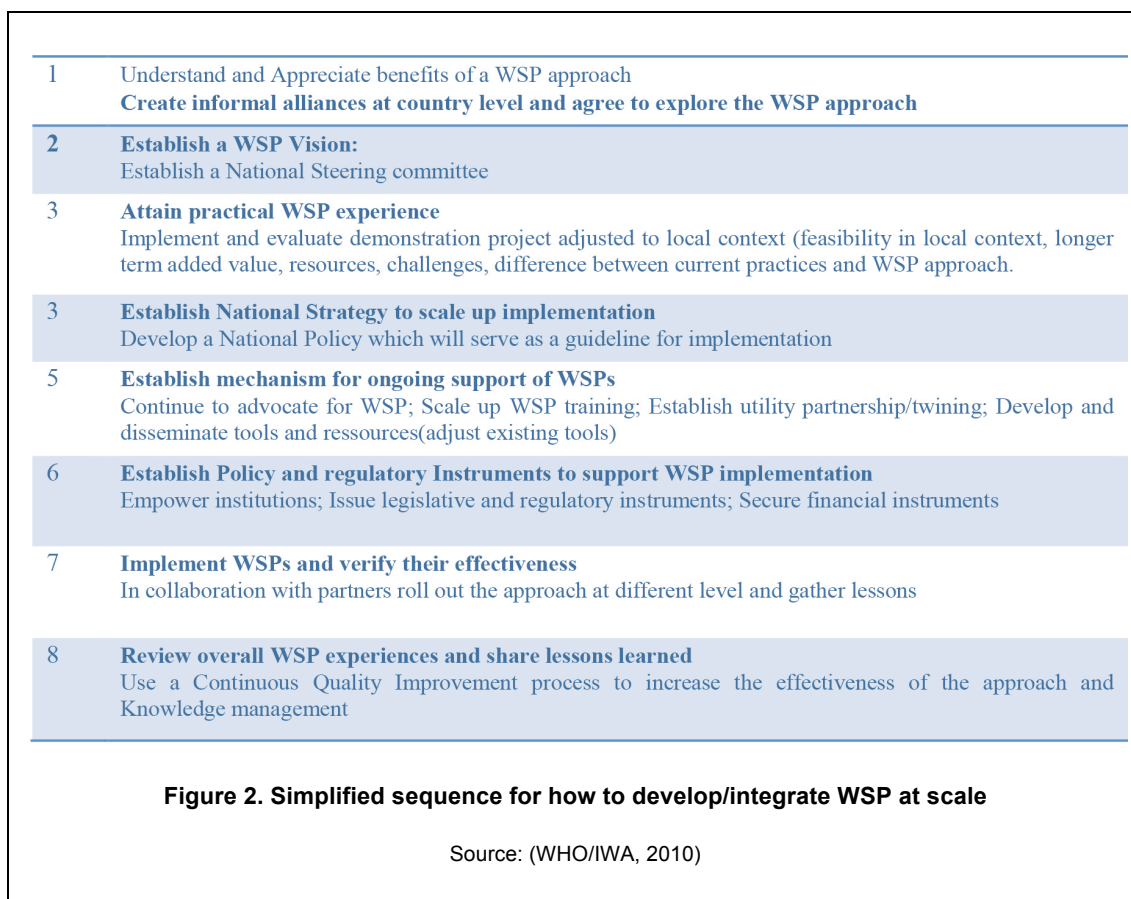
Roadmap for the implementation of water safety plans

The Rural Water Supply, Sanitation & Irrigation Programme (Ru-WatSIP) is one of the six directorates of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation & Development in Afghanistan (MRRD) in charge of providing rural communities with sustainable access to potable water sources and sanitation facilities. Rural water supply in Afghanistan consists to a large extent of point supplies such as dug wells and hand pumps connected to boreholes, some gravity fed piped supplies of different sizes with public taps/stand posts or yard/house connections, natural springs and the traditional Kareez system which is an indigenous method of irrigation in which groundwater is tapped by a tunnel. With the current service delivery mode, each and every NGO with a large community presence spent time building WSUCs, the Ru-WatSIP who have limited presence and capacity at province/district level is facing challenges to follow up on these arrangements and make sure they are standardized.

WSP implementation involves leadership commitment to keep the water safety agenda alive among stakeholders (Omar et al., 2017) therefore various aspects need to be considered in and before the implementation of the WSP:

- Coordination with relevant ministry in charge of water supply and establish at which stage of the implementation the WSP is on a national level,
- Decide and agree with the community of practice (this maybe through technical working group) on an implementation road map if not already existing,
- If the road map already exists, figure out at which stage of the roadmap does the initiative fit and adapt accordingly.

There is no one size fits all approach to implement and scale up WSP implementation. However, based on the experience of networks supporting WSPs a roadmap for implementation has been identified to describe the process. The ministries in charge together with implementing agencies have the choice to decide on an approach that fits the local context and needs, or decide that certain steps are less important than others in the process. The figure below (Figure 2) is an example of a roadmap to support country-level implementation of Water Safety Plan proposed by WHO/IWA.



Afghanistan has recently adopted the Water Safety Plan as the approach to be implemented country wide as the next step for the Water sector. The status of the initiative as documented in the Water Technical Working Group (WTWG) chaired by the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) and Water and Sanitation Group (WSG) hosted by the Ru-WatSiP is still somewhere between step 1 and 2 of the ladder in Figure 2 representing the roadmap for the implementation.

In early 2016, UNICEF commissioned a preliminary study setting the ground for the introduction of Water Safety Planning for rural water supply in Afghanistan, under the leadership of MRRD. However the preliminary process seems to be taking a long time between partners’ consultations via the WTWG or WSG. Water Sector partners are feeling the pressure to deliver on agreed activities. Most of them appear to have been implementing WSP projects using experience from other countries without getting to know where

Afghanistan stands on the road map of implementation. Getting stakeholders to agree on a simple package of activities /implementation plan or selecting a guidance document for WSPs in rural areas has been a daunting challenge.

Impact of the organizational structure on the stakeholder engagement process

Recent researchers have argued that organizational buy-in is as important as public health advocacy to ensure the success of WSP approach (Bartram et al., 2009 cited in Summerill et al., 2010). Alvesson's (2002) researches in the field of organizational culture and its importance to organizations, have identified existing linkages between organizational culture, knowledge management and stakeholder engagement, the two latter are considered as main aspects of WSP implementation.

The current organizational/institutional structure as presented in Figure3 is based on the Afghan National Solidarity Program (NSP). NSP is one of the earliest World Bank-funded initiatives that have used a community-driven development approach to reach some 35,000 communities over the past 14 years. NSP has helped establish Community Development Councils (CDCs) across all provinces of Afghanistan. Introduced as the lowest administration units, half of all council seats were supposedly allocated to women, giving them the opportunity to participate in decision-making at the village level and a forum to voice their opinions. Described by other line ministries as NSP /MRRD project units, the CDC concept has not gone unchallenged. The MMRD worked closely with CDCsⁱ in introducing the Afghan Contextualized Community Led Total Sanitation. CDCs act as the primary focal point for community development projects and facilitate the contact between government actors /NGOs and the most relevant group of community members (e.g. school shuras, community health committees etc.). The dynamics of these different groups and community structures varies from one province/region to another and has in some cases undermined the authority of CDC's. The implementation of the WSP requires a considerable time input and the team needs to have the authority to enable implementation of the recommendations stemming from the WSP.

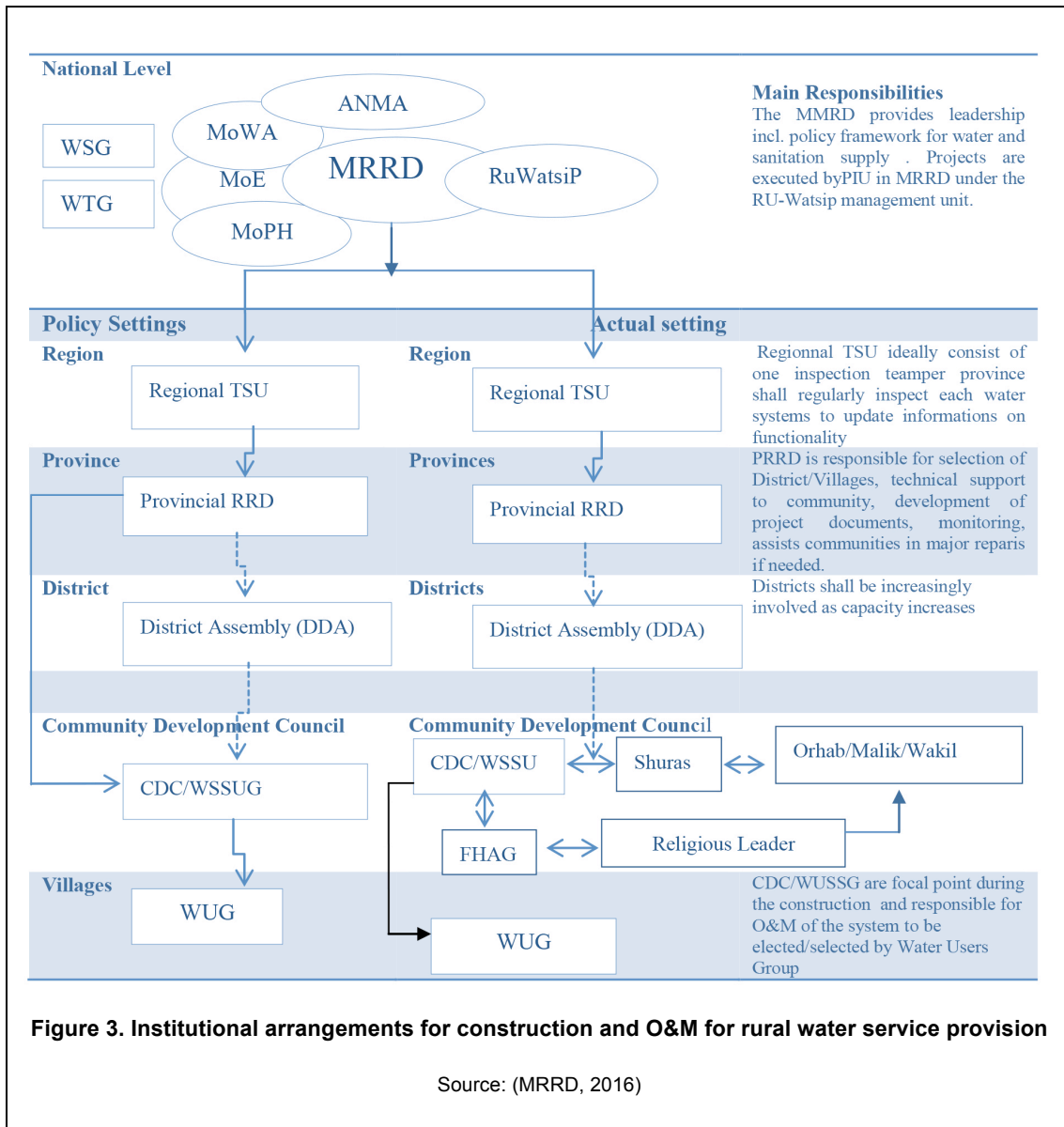
The legal status of Community Development Councils constitutes in itself a hindrance to the role that CDCs are supposed to play in the operationalization of WSPs. The WSP implementation process has been delayed partially because of the replacement of the NSP by the Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Program (CCAP) which is supposed to be implemented in 2017. Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Program (CCAP) is one slice of the larger, ten-year Citizens' Charter National Priority Program that will be supported through the government budget, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the World Bank/IDA. Although the new Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project suggest a new role for the CDC which is going to bring more responsibility for the delivery of activities at village level, the government may need to think of other measures, to provide more recognition for the role of the CDCs in the implementation of the Citizens' Charter. Moving forward the CCAP will increase emphasis on linking CDCs with local government institutions and ministries following a systems-based rather than project-based approach.

Assessment of implementation: lessons learned

The valuable lessons contained in this paper bear witness to the tremendous effort that MEDAIR has put into different technical groups in order to materialise the water safety plan approach in Afghanistan.

- Early introduction and mobilization: Introducing the WSP and mobilizing the WSP experts early in the process is of utmost importance. This encompasses discussions, plans and agreement on priority actions and exit strategies for the WSP implementation, including synergy with other initiatives and programmes such as the CCAP.
- The importance of a contextualized roadmap : A clear agreed roadmap with stakeholders early in the process will help in providing guidance on the implementation process and regulatory expectations.
- Recognize that, generally, the smaller the water supplier the more likely it is that they will struggle with preparing and implementing a water safety plan (Parker and Summerill, 2013).
- Stronger policies, institutional frameworks and buy-in should be considered as preconditions for sustainable water safety plans, without them WSP will just be like any other donor funded project.
- Considering the multidisciplinary nature of the national partners involved in the WSP implementations, working in silos cannot and will not work towards effectiveness of the process.
- Puzzling power relationship between different community groups/personalities eg: shuras, Orbab and CDC leaders can significantly contribute to an ineffective team dynamic and hinder the process.

- In a race to implement WSP projects, the effort to put together a single approach for the country seems to be widespread. WSP implementation will only be possible with strong collaborative relationships, enough time for implementation to occur and consistent guidance.
- There is a wide range of guidance documents available including several different versions from WHO and those from different agencies (e.g., Australian AID, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)). This only emphasizes the need of a single approach at a country level.



Conclusion

In order to move towards efficiency of Water Safety Planning it is important to know all the non-technical issues that play a huge role in the materialization of the concept. This disconnect persists, despite long-standing identification. Implementation challenges with WSPs are faced in many countries and these should not be ignored nor is any criticism of the institutions' governance arrangements implied, but there is a need to shed more light on the WSP process as a factor to trial the effectiveness of the WSPs, and acceptability of the tools developed for use. There will be a need to make bolder moves to grow core competencies, seek more leverage strategies in order to implement an integrated WSP approach that fits the country context. This will only be possible by harnessing the full power of stakeholders participations, community based approach and their social network.

Notes

A Conceptual Framework to Evaluate Water Safety Plans, CDC (March, 2012).

Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey 2013-2014.

Where the CDC does not exist, the community will form a WSSUG/C to plan, which later could be merged or administered under the CDC.

Gently sloping underground channel with a series of vertical access shafts, used to transport water from an Aquifer under a hill (UNICEF, 2016).

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Contact details

Sandy Kasambe Ngilambi was the WASH Advisor for Medair in Afghanistan and the Gender Focal Point for the WASH Cluster; she has been involved in the materialisation of the Water Safety plan approach in Afghanistan. Colin McCubbin is the Senior WASH Advisor, Medair HQ, he provided intellectual inputs and is the person who is contacted in regards to the submission

Sandy Kasambe Ngilambi,
Medair, Afghanistan.
Tel: +243972445510
Email: sngilambi@gmail.com
www.relief.medair.org

Colin N McCubbin PhD FRSPH,
Medair International HQ.
Tel: +447816682627
Email: colin.mccubbin@medair.org
www.relief.medair.org
