

WASH System Strengthening Approach Guidance Note

In line with the Concern [WASH Strategy 2016 - 2020](#), this paper provides key insights on how to achieve better sustainability of the WASH services we help to establish. This paper is targeted at Programme Directors and Programme Managers involved in the design and implementation of WASH programmes in Concern.

Why adopt the WASH system strengthening approach?

Over the past two decades, the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector has been evolving from an emphasis on infrastructure to a focus on service delivery. Past interventions focused on WASH infrastructure delivery and a quick setting up of a community-based committee to manage it, which is insufficient to secure the functioning of the service in the long term. To achieve better sustainability, INGOs such as Concern need to include market systems, the private sector (eg water utilities in urban settings) and governance systems (eg local authorities) in their work.

Concern is one of the few agencies to have piloted new ways of supporting WASH systems to work towards more sustainability, even in fragile contexts.



Figure 1: A hand pump is to a safe water system what a propeller is to an airline: essential but not enough. Source: IRC (WASH).

Which type of interventions does this approach cover?

The system strengthening approach is not just for programmes working in development contexts; it is just as applicable in emergencies, rehabilitation phases and protracted crises. Links established with different stakeholders – typically market systems and local authorities – can be useful in an emergency response, for instance when working on cholera preparedness and contingency plans. In an urban context, there is a particular need to engage in governance related activities. Even in relatively short-term humanitarian interventions, an awareness of WASH governance dynamics will assist in making decisions about how, where, and if to intervene.

What does it mean practically?

A service delivery approach goes beyond infrastructure to focus on what is provided to the end user, and what processes, resources, and life-cycle planning are needed to ensure it will continue after the end of Concern's support.

In many of our countries of intervention, basic elements of the WASH system are simply missing: the national policies to put in place a new WASH service are not clear or accepted and individuals and institutions lack resources to perform their functions. Typically, the District Water Offices do not have enough resources to go visiting the water points for which they are in charge. Going beyond WASH infrastructure implies undertaking whatever action is necessary to contribute towards securing the functioning of the WASH service in the long term. This can include work on the spare parts supply chain, support to the repair and maintenance services (for example, Hand Pump Mechanics Associations), the regulation body (for example, District Water Office), or the service providers (public, private or community-based organisations). A WASH system strengthening approach means working to improve the local and national governance of the sector.

What is the Theory of Change for the WASH system strengthening approach?



Figure 2: The Theory of Change for the WASH system strengthening approach. Source: IRC (WASH).

What is Concern's "niche" with regards to this approach?

Concern aims to apply the following principles of the system strengthening approach to the fragile states where we are working:

System strengthening at micro/meso level: Our role in developing WASH service provision is only one piece of a broader puzzle. Our action should be linked with wider sector strengthening activities. While UN agencies and WASH-specialised organisations (eg WaterAid) support central government systems to develop a robust national framework, Concern should support subnational (eg district and municipal) authorities and service providers to fulfil their decentralised mandates regarding planning, financing, managing and service delivery.

Please note this very important point:

The first step of any WASH system strengthening approach is to undertake a mapping of the WASH system.

Typically, Concern will gather around the table – or support the national entities who can facilitate this process – all the different WASH stakeholders at district level to support the design and implementation of WASH services that answer the needs and preferences of the users.

In emergency settings, WASH clusters are an obvious extra key stakeholder to involve in the process, as they are the entity in charge of coordinating the humanitarian sector intervening in the WASH sector.

Economic analysis: One Concern specificity is that for any type of WASH service we plan to support, we will conduct a robust economic analysis (life cycle cost analysis) to document whether or not this service can reach a financial balance.

The following table presents the different type of costs to take into account for the analysis:

Life Cycle Cost Component	Cost Description (simplified)	Tool used in A4C
Capital expenditure (CapEx)	Initial investments in construction and one-off software activities	Costed Asset Register / (https://www.ircwash.org/tools/irc-costing-and-budgeting-tools) / engineering survey/ Historical Investment Tool (https://www.ircwash.org/tools/tools-costing-everyone-forever-bolivia)
Capital Maintenance (CapManEx)	Expenditure on more major maintenance, repair or replacement which is not routine	Costed Asset Register / engineering survey / Historical Investment Tool
Operation and minor maintenance expenditure (OpEx)	Recurrent cost of operating the system, such as fuel, staff, chemicals, and regular maintenance costs – normally borne by the service providers (or households, in the case of domestic facilities)	At What Cost or Cash Flow Analysis tools - https://www.ircwash.org/tools/irc-costing-and-budgeting-tools
Expenditure on Direct Support (ExpDS)	The costs incurred by the service authority (e.g. district) in planning, coordinating, monitoring and providing mobilisation and technical support to service providers.	District Capacity Assessment or Direct Support Cost Tools (https://www.ircwash.org/tools/irc-costing-and-budgeting-tools)
Cost of Capital (CoC)	The cost of accessing finance for system construction – e.g. interest rates on loans, particularly looking at the public (rather than household) investments	Costing and Budgeting tool (https://www.ircwash.org/tools/irc-costing-and-budgeting-tools)
Expenditure on Indirect Support (ExpIDS)	Generally national-level costs of the sector, such as policy, sector planning and coordination and capacity building costs	Not captured in the direct-wide approach

Figure 3: Extract from 'district roadmap for universal access to sustainable WASH services'. Agenda for Change, 2018, p18.

Focus on the poorest/most vulnerable: Due to our particular mandate and, more globally, the humanitarian principles of action, Concern pays particular attention to the needs and preferences of the most vulnerable. For example, we will conduct systematic capacity and willingness to pay studies to ensure the poorest will not suffer from financial exclusion.

Public information and advocacy campaigns: Obtaining WASH systems changes requires adoption of new behaviours. Concern is using innovative behaviour change methodologies to design striking advocacy campaigns aimed at influencing key WASH decision makers.

What are the first steps to undertake for implementing WASH system strengthening approaches?

Many countries already have water sector reform processes underway. Where this is the case, Concern's first step should be to identify and document the process, the actors involved, the goals, and the timeframe. We should analyse the process to assess the extent to which the voices of the poor are represented, and find ways to participate in the process where Concern's voice would add value.

Where no sector reform process is underway, the first step is to conduct an assessment of the WASH system at local level, using the eight sustainability blocks framework described below. If possible, the assessment should be conducted jointly with the government representatives in charge of regulating the WASH service in the concerned administrative entity. The assessment should start with a WASH stakeholder mapping and will help identify the “missing pieces” of the WASH system, therefore it will help define the priorities of support for Concern.

What is the global framework to refer to when working on WASH system strengthening?

A WASH system can be assessed through the lens of the following eight critical "building blocks":

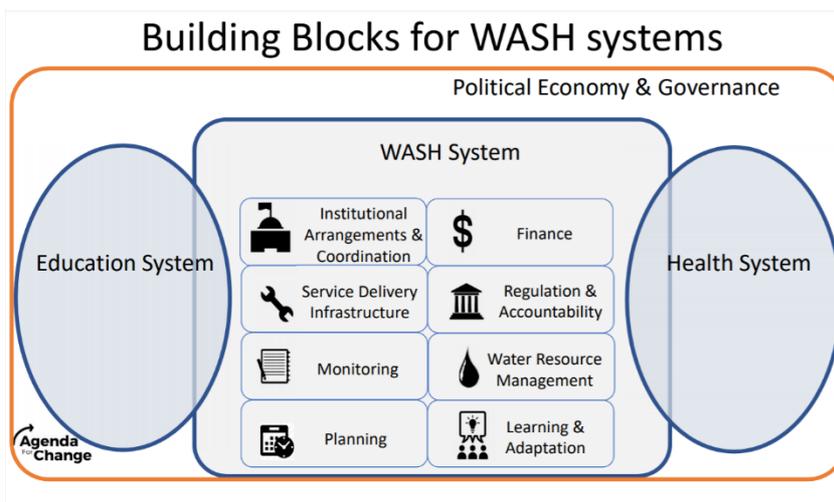
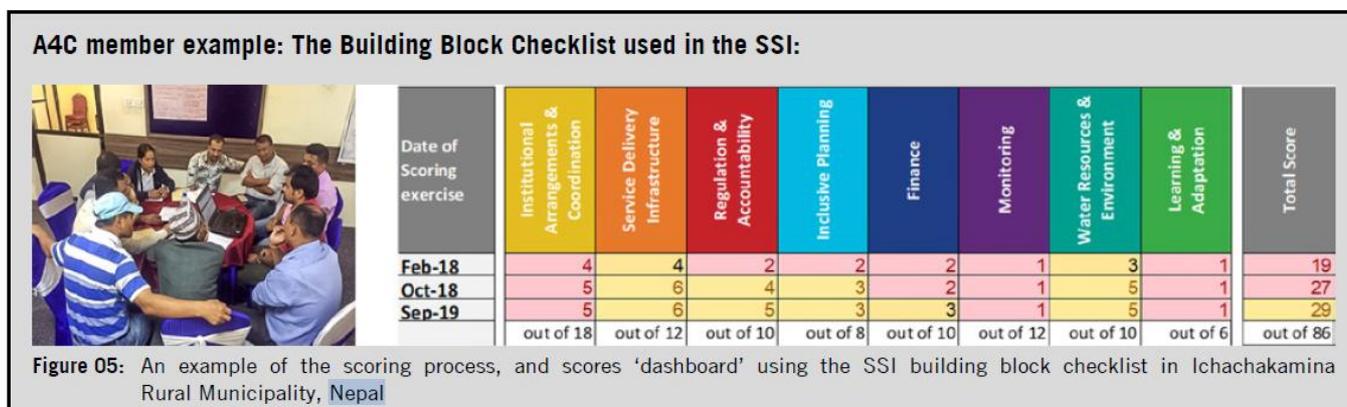


Figure 4: Building blocks for WASH systems, Agenda for Change, 2018.

A context analysis checklist tool can be used to assess these different building blocks in one particular context of intervention (see “resource” section). The Excel sheet and guidance notes below show how to use this sustainability blocks framework. The checklist has one tab per building block, with 4-6 questions per building block. The questions are scored 0-18 depending on the extent to which certain issues are in place or not, and provide a traffic light overview. A narrative justification is added for each score. The tool aggregates the individual scores to present on a dashboard overview.

Example of the findings from a building block checklist analysis done in a Nepal rural municipality:



What is Concern’s experience with the system strengthening approach?

At a global level, Concern is part of the [WASH Agenda for Change network](#). This initiative aims to influence donors and the INGO community for applying the principles aforementioned.

Case study: The DRC WASH Consortium (July 2013 - March 2019)

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) WASH Consortium was a £29.8 million GBP project, with Concern Worldwide as Consortium lead agency, working with ACF, ACTED, CRS, Solidarités International, and funded by UK Aid. The programme supported over 650,000 people in rural areas of seven provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Main highlights with regards to WASH system strengthening: The WASH consortium developed an innovative ‘Economic Approach’ based on the life cycle cost analysis tool. This tool was used to support the WASH Management Committees to take very high ownership of their WASH services, by preparing them to take on the ongoing costs of maintaining their water point. The consortium partners worked with them to develop so-called “Business Plans” which showed the anticipated costs of their water point – both technical and management – over the short, medium, and long-term, and to set-up revenue streams to be prepared to cover these costs.

Three levels of financial self-sufficiency were defined:



Main results:

- About two-thirds (2/3) of communities reached a level of financial self-sufficiency: Level 1: 47%; Level 2: 18%; Level 3: 3%.
- After two years of implementation, there were signs of sustainability: 89% of the water points were still in use, 99% of them were managed by a water management committee and 81% of them felt competent at this management.

Website: <http://consortiumwashrdc.net/> (mostly in French)

English-language publications: <https://consortiumwashrdc.net/ressources/>

Case study: Northern Uganda (2005 - 2017)

Concern worked in the water and sanitation sector in Uganda for more than 10 years, from the first emergency to the rehabilitation and development phase. We supported the District Water Offices (DWOs) to structure and regulate the WASH services providers in the area.

Main highlights with regards to WASH system strengthening:

- The team conducted a WASH system analysis that led them to identify a “missing piece”: the District Water Offices were in charge of the maintenance and repairing the water points without the sufficient resource allocated to it. For instance, they were not able to go in the field without Concern’s financial support. Discussions at different levels triggered a change of role for the DWO, passing from a direct service provider to a regulation body, and the setting up of a Hand Pump Mechanics Association to perform regular maintenance and repairs services in the relevant districts.
- Rather than setting up their own WASH database – as INGOs usually do - Concern assisted the District Water Offices in recruiting two Data Clerks, based in the DWO office and tasked with managing the water data. This allowed the DWOs to plan corrective actions as soon as water points stopped functioning. The positions were financed by Concern for two years and advocacy work was undertaken to ensure that the posts would be secured in the long term.
- The team established a database to clarify the extent and reliability of existing water services in the two districts of intervention. Counterpart support and training was provided to enhance data collection, resulting in up-to-date service mapping that better informs the identification of priority needs and water management decisions.

Case study: South Sudan (2014 – to present)

Since the beginning of the conflict in December 2013, Concern is one of the main WASH service providers in Unity state, northern region of South Sudan. Concern have developed and maintained a whole range of WASH services in the refugee camps as well as reopening the existing water treatment plants in Rubkona and Bentiu Town. Since the situation is now a bit more stable, a series of activities have been planned and are now being undertaken in order to secure the functioning of these water services in the longer term, even though we are still very much only at the beginning of the post-emergency phase.

Main highlights with regards to WASH system strengthening:

- Concern has defined the operating cost of the water services, using the Life Cycle Cost Analysis (LCCA) tool.
- A ‘willingness and capacity to pay’ study has been commissioned in order to identify whether user fees could be introduced – at least for the main business in town such as hotels and restaurants.
- Concern is in discussion with the local District Water Office in order to set up/ revive a water utility to manage the two main Water Treatment plants. The first option considered is a mixed public-private status for this new entity.

Which Concern countries have been already trained on this?

During our WASH global workshop held in Nairobi in July 2018, 25 Concern staff from 11 countries (Somalia, South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Niger, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Syria) attended a two-day training led by an external consultant (Aguaconsult) on the WASH systems strengthening approach.

What are the main resources to refer to for applying this approach?

To learn how to conduct the initial assessment and use the different tools/methodology proposed:

- [Guidance notes on how to use the sustainability blocks framework](#)
- [Checklist for the sustainability blocks](#) (Excel sheet)
- [Example of a district roadmap for universal access to sustainable WASH services](#)
- [Free online course 'WASH systems strengthening: the basics'](#)

On Concern's experience in WASH system strengthening:

- [Concern's WASH system strengthening approach in DRC](#)
- [Promoting Sustainable Water Services in Northern Uganda: Concern's experience applying the Service Delivery Approach](#)
- [Adapting the life-cycle costs approach for rural water supply in DRC through the DRC WASH Consortium](#)
- [Analysing and supporting spare parts and maintenance supply chains for hand pumps in rural DRC](#)

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IT TAKES

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