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# Why you should care about 'systems' in WASH

By *Catherine Cheney* (</news/authors/1115812>) // 22 March 2018



*A child reaches for the tap in Azerbaijan. Photo by: Allison Kwesell / World Bank (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/worldbank/8205651439/>) / CC BY-NC-ND (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>)*

SAN FRANCISCO — The story has become all too familiar. Volunteers or organizations enter a village, build new infrastructure, and when it fails, they are nowhere to be seen.

While the idea behind the PlayPump — a merry-go-round for children that simultaneously drives a water pump — was to tap into the power of play to provide clean water, the machines were hard to fix when they broke, and there were not enough hours in the day for children to pump enough water. In many villages, they were removed and replaced with hand pumps.

The case has become an infamous example ([https://www-tc.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/southernafrica904/flash/pdf/unicef\\_pp\\_report.pdf](https://www-tc.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/southernafrica904/flash/pdf/unicef_pp_report.pdf)) of why aid interventions sometimes fail, but it is just one of a number of examples of good intentions with poor outcomes in the water, sanitation and hygiene, or WASH, sector. It is also an example of the need to shift the focus from gadgets to systems.

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**What's the problem with WASH innovation?** (<https://www.devex.com/news/what-s-the-problem-with-wash-innovation-92187>)

There are a few, according to experts. But a hyperfocus on shiny new gadgets tops the list.



Recently, Devex ran a story on the problem with (<https://www.devex.com/news/what-s-the-problem-with-wash-innovation-92187>) WASH innovation, which emphasized the importance of taking a service delivery approach. Today on World Water Day (<http://worldwaterday.org>), experts are highlighting Agenda for Change (<https://www.washagendaforchange.net/>), an effort to move the sector toward systems approaches in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensuring that everyone has access to safe water by 2030.

“Historically, the water and sanitation sector has focused a lot on hardware because it’s easy to count the number of people impacted by new water or sanitation infrastructure: This many people got toilets. This many people got access to water,” said Kim Lemme, senior manager for sustainability at Water for People (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/water-for-people-39160>), an international nonprofit organization based in Colorado that focuses on providing access to clean water in rural parts of developing countries.

But those numbers do not reflect whether those people will use the toilets, she said, recounting examples where people have used toilets to store their goats as one of many failed efforts across the sector.

“We can have a big party and cut a ribbon and take a lot of pictures and then move on, but unless that ecosystem is in place to actually support that water infrastructure we’re not really guaranteeing that the water system will last over time,” she added.

## Systems not gadgets

Agenda for Change is a coalition of organizations that seek to demonstrate how to deliver scalable and sustainable WASH services through collective action. Launched in May 2015, it stems from the approaches of its founding partners, including Water for People. The organizations continue to run their individual programs, but say they accomplish more by working together (<http://skoll.org/2017/08/27/toward-fierce-collaboration-no-one-can-solve-global-water-sanitation-crisis-alone/>), including by coordinating efforts between staff on the ground, sharing data, and recruiting others to join the movement.



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“When you go to the toilet in the morning, you probably don’t think that is a system,” said Patrick Moriarty, chief executive officer of IRC (<https://www.ircwash.org/home>), a WASH organization based in the Netherlands that is also an Agenda for Change founding partner, during a TED talk (<https://www.ircwash.org/news/its-about-systems-stupid>). “When you turn on the tap, water comes out. When you flush the toilet, everything goes away and is made safe. And that’s because there is a system.”

He talks about how people are largely blind to the complex systems that deliver services like health, education, and WASH. They see what they deliver, but not what it takes to deliver them, and the fact that it all depends on systems. He sees this as the reason for failed investments and poor services, explaining that it is only by building systems that we can end extreme poverty.

“When I talk to people and I tell them I work in development, I travel all around the world, I do water and sanitation, people are sort of excited, and they think, ‘What a fulfilling job. That must be amazing!’ And of course it is,” he continued. “But when I tell them that ‘no, I don’t actually spend my life digging wells in villages or making latrines, that I work on building systems, that I work with governments and help them to get systems working,’ they often lose interest.”



Last week, at the launch of the Value of Water (<http://thevalueofwater.org>) campaign at South by Southwest (<https://www.sxsw.com/>) in Austin, Texas, leaders from organizations including the Caterpillar Foundation (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/caterpillar-foundation-31814>), Water.org (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/water-org>), and Opportunity International (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/opportunity-international-44589>) agreed that the clean water challenge is not a technology challenge. But while technology in and of itself is never a solution, and none of the so-called innovations in the WASH sector have been the silver bullets they are sometimes portrayed to be, technology can help to enable the shift from gadgets to systems, said Evan Thomas, director of the Sustainable Water, Energy and Environmental Technologies Laboratory at Portland State University (<https://www.pdx.edu/>).

Thomas is in Silicon Valley this week to discuss how (<https://www.meetup.com/IoTSiliconValley/events/248254313/>) the Internet of Things (<https://www.devex.com/news/devexplains-the-internet-of-things-89765>), or IoT, can help to address the gap between the intentions of service providers and the long-term impact of their interventions.

“We’re using high tech stuff like IoT and machine learning and even integrating blockchain, but what we’re targeting is improved service delivery,” he said.

Agenda for Change outlines in its principles ([https://www.washagendaforchange.net/sites/default/files/a4c\\_joint\\_principles\\_en.pdf](https://www.washagendaforchange.net/sites/default/files/a4c_joint_principles_en.pdf)) a commitment to new partnerships, better use of existing finances together with new sources of funding, and a commitment to monitoring for improvement, which is one area where technology comes in.

“What is missing in this sector is a set of agreed-upon metrics and measurements that put everybody on the same path,” Thomas said.

“You can promote tech solutions that are aligned with your skill sets and donor interests and community needs if everyone is held to the same standard of: Is this providing reliable, accountable, and responsive access to water and sanitation?”

*Via Facebook*

**Time for change**



In order to move away from this dynamic of NGOs building the infrastructure then walking away, a problem that is persistent in WASH but shared across many sectors, both NGOs and donors need to make changes, Lemme of Water for People said. She explained that donors need to recognize the importance of funding the “less sexy stuff” that is harder to count. And NGOs have to get better at tracking those less tangible metrics while also communicating the importance of funding more flexibly than the cost per beneficiary, she added.

“Supporting systems change is necessary to achieve sustainable development outcomes, but it requires more patience and tolerance for ambiguity

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and risk than conventional philanthropy,” said Louis Boorstin, managing director of the Osprey Foundation (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/osprey-foundation-69006>), which funds IRC, WaterAid, and Water for People as part of its Systems Change portfolio for WASH, and is also part of the Agenda for Change. “In short, it’s about teaching someone to fish instead of giving them a fish ... while also recognizing that the fishing line could snap, the lake could dry up, or the local government could interfere in the fish market. But it’s still better than handing out fish.”

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The Osprey Foundation’s WASH strategy could serve as a model for other donors looking to move from one-time investments in infrastructure to systems change for the WASH sector. The organization supports organizations like Water for People that strengthen systems through capacity building and local service delivery; participates in sector-wide initiatives like the Agenda for Change that promote systems change approaches; and encourages other funders and implementers to take a systems change approach. The strategy goes beyond a focus on the installation and maintenance of hardware like taps and toilets and emphasizes the need for expanded demand, sustained local funding, supportive policies, and performance monitoring, in order to deliver sustainable WASH services that reach those with the greatest need.

Cross-sector collaboration is always hard, but experts told Devex it can be especially difficult with the WASH sector, where donors and implementers quickly shift the focus from making a contribution to getting the attribution in terms of water points built or lives saved.

Lemme of Water for People told Devex about meetings in Rwanda where all stakeholders involved in service delivery come together around the table for what they call “reflection sessions” to discuss the data, look at the successes and failures, and determine what that means for planning moving forward.

While still in its early days, the kind of collaboration Agenda for Change is testing could hold important lessons for other sectors, given the idea that if the WASH sector can do it, anyone can. It aims to tackle several problems at once, including the lack of collaboration among stakeholders, the need for government-led action to achieve SDG 6, and the projectized focus of WASH, said Susan Davis



(<http://www.improveinternational.org/changetheway/who-we-are/>), founder and executive director of Improve International (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/improve-international-inc-105654>), a research and consulting firm focused on improving water and sanitation efforts.

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“The Agenda for Change, if its principles were followed by all involved, could go a long way towards changing the way things are done,” Davis told Devex via email. “But, as with anything complex, the players involved have various priorities, motivations, knowledge, willingness to comply, and accountability.”

Agenda for Change is at a relatively small scale, she added. While the group is working to align its programming in Honduras, Rwanda, and Uganda, where they work in partnerships with local governments with the goal of delivering universal access to water and sanitation, the evidence of how this initiative works might take a decade or two, she said.

Then there is the ongoing challenge of NGOs doing parallel work, and the risk that this might be repeated in taking a systems-based approach, even though that would go against the underlying principles of coordination and cooperation.

“NGOs work under an awful lot of external pressure, they have incentives, they have pressure to deliver certain targets, they have branding and profile issues, and the need for fundraising, which are very powerful,” said Harold Lockwood, director of the United Kingdom consulting firm Aguaconsult (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/aguaconsult-51603>), also a partner of Agenda for Change, in a recent podcast (<https://www.ircwash.org/news/wash-talk-podcast-adopting-systems-approach>) on adopting a systems-based approach to WASH in order to achieve SDG 6. “A lot of these NGOs really survive on being able to showcase what they have done, them specifically, so to sort of given up your identity and to work in a common framework and cause runs counter to a lot of things that make NGOs keep going.”


Participants are adamant, however, about the need to move the focus in WASH from gadgets to systems if they are to have real and long-term impact.

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Catherine Cheney is a Senior Reporter for Devex. She covers the West Coast of the U.S., focusing on the role of technology and innovation in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. And she frequently represents Devex as a speaker and moderator. Prior to joining Devex, Catherine earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Yale University, worked as a

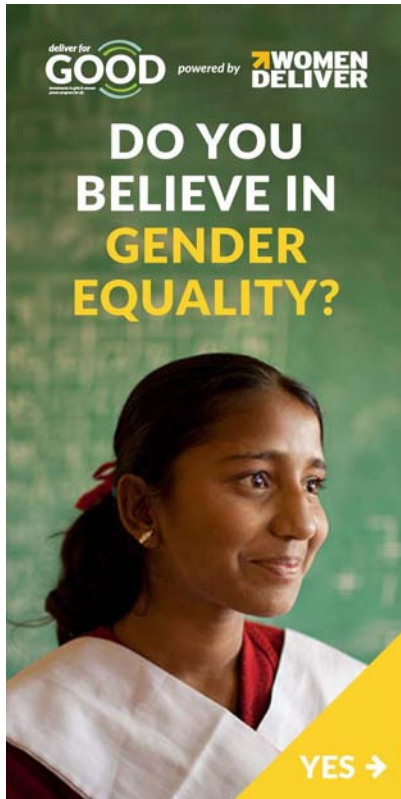




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