



Strengthening water, sanitation and hygiene systems in Rwanda

Lessons from the Isoko y'Ubuzima Project, Rwanda

Learning Paper

A consortium learning paper from the Isoko y'Ubuzima Project (2021–2026). Author: B.M Ishimwe. Version: June 2026



water for people



Acknowledgements:

This paper was developed as part of the Isoko y'Ubuzima project, which has supported efforts to strengthen WASH systems in Rwanda through collaboration across national, district, and community levels. It reflects the contribution of many institutions and individuals who have shaped, implemented, reviewed, and learned from this work over the past five years.

The author sincerely thanks the Ministry of Infrastructure (MININFRA), the Water and Sanitation Corporation (WASAC), the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA), the Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA), district authorities in the ten focus districts, and the wider WASH sector actors who contributed their time, experience, and leadership to the processes reflected in this paper.

Deep appreciation is extended to the Isoko y'Ubuzima consortium partners, Water For People, IRC, CARE International, and Vitens Evides International (VEI), whose collaboration made this system strengthening work possible. Special thanks go to Sara Bori for her close review and valuable feedback, and to reviewers Kurt Henne, Anna Libey, and Louis Pacal Habimpamo for their support in reviewing the product. Their comments, questions, and suggestions helped strengthen both the analysis and the final quality of this learning product.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	7
1.1 The context of water, sanitation and hygiene in Rwanda.....	7
Systems strengthening as a strategic choice	8
About this paper	9
2. Improving WASH governance so all can thrive	10
About Isoko y'Ubuzima	10
Strategic objective 1: Improving decentralized WASH governance	10
Systems strengthening framework, methodology, and tools.....	11
3. Strengthening systems at national and district levels	12
National level.....	12
District level.....	15
4. Key results: systems change and sustainable services ...	18
WASH systems change	18
Sustainable services.....	18
5. Key challenges and adaptive responses	22
Institutional turnover and competing priorities.....	22
Capacity constraints at national and district levels	22
Adaptive management responses	23
6. What we've learned	24
7. Recommendations and calls to action.....	26
For government institutions	26
For development partners.....	27
For scaling and replication.....	27
8. Conclusion.....	28
References.....	29

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

CSC – Community Score Card
DWASHB – District WASH Board
FLCC – Full Life-Cycle Costing
LODA – Local Administrative Entities Development Agency
MININFRA – Ministry of Infrastructure
NST1 – National Strategy for Transformation 1
NST2 – National Strategy for Transformation 2
PO – Private Operator
QIS – Qualitative Information System
RBC – Rwanda Biomedical Centre
RURA – Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority
RWF – Rwandan Franc
SDG – Sustainable Development Goal
SPRP – Strategic Preparedness and Response Project
TWG – Technical Working Group
VEI – Vitens Evides International
WASH – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WASAC – Water and Sanitation Corporation
WATSAN – Water and Sanitation

Executive Summary

Rwanda has expanded access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services in the past decade. Access to improved drinking water sources increased from 87% in 2016/17 to 90% in 2023/24, while improved sanitation rose from 86% to 94%. However, service sustainability remains affected by gaps in planning, financing, coordination, monitoring, and accountability. The 2022 Rwanda WASH Finance ¹ estimated that about RWF 400 billion per year is needed to meet SDG 6 targets, far above current spending.

Implemented from 2021 to 2026, Isoko y'Ubuzima addressed these constraints by strengthening the systems that support service delivery, rather than focusing solely on infrastructure. Under Strategic Objective 1, the project worked with national institutions, including the Ministry of Infrastructure (MININFRA), Water and Sanitation Corporation (WASAC), Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Agency (RURA), Local Administrative Entities Development Agency (LODA), and ten districts, to improve how WASH services are planned, financed, coordinated, monitored, and held accountable.

At the national level, the project supported Building Blocks assessments, sector performance reviews, revision of the 2022–2024 WATSAN multi-year action plan, and development of the 2024–2029 plan, helping translate sector analysis into actions such as district full life-cycle costing investment planning, review of delegated management arrangements, tariff study prioritization, climate-resilient project preparation, and WASH MIS upgrading priorities. It also strengthened professional learning through the WASH Systems Academy, which adapted three Rwanda-specific courses and supported learning processes that reached 555 stakeholders between January 2022 and September 2025. About 20 WASAC staff members received targeted support in climate-resilient WASH and project preparation.

At the district level, the project supported capacity assessments and development of District WASH Boards and district WASH teams, annual and semi-annual reflection meetings, full life-cycle costing (FLCC), district WASH investment plans, Sustainable Service Checklists, and Community Score Card processes. These interventions helped strengthen coordination, planning, follow-up, and joint problem-solving among district authorities, WASAC branches, private operators, CSOs, and communities. Investment plans and related engineering designs were also used as tools for resource mobilization in some districts. However, progress was partial. Some Technical Working Groups did not function as intended after relaunch, and the WASH MIS remained non-functional for routine governance use, limiting its value for regular monitoring, coordination, and evidence-based decision-making. These gaps show that system strengthening requires more than tools and platforms; it requires institutional ownership and follow-through.

Continued progress in Rwanda will depend not only on infrastructure investment, but on sustained investment in system strengthening and political will.

Key achievements at a glance:

Between 2021 and 2026, Isoko y'Ubuzima contributed to measurable improvements in Rwanda's WASH governance and service sustainability:

- **Strengthened national systems:** Rwanda's average WASH Systems Building Blocks score increased from **3.4 (2022) to 4.0 (2024)**, with notable improvements in planning, institutions and coordination, regulation and accountability, and finance.

- **Improved district governance:** Across the ten focus districts, District WASH Office performance improved substantially over the project period. Average QIS scores rose from **60% to 97.5%** in human resources, from **72.5% to full scores** in planning and budgeting, and from **62.5% to 92.5%** in accountability and regulation. Progress in monitoring and information systems was more modest, increasing from **52.5% to 67.5%**, indicating that data systems remained a weaker area despite broader governance gains.
- **Capacity built at scale:** Three Rwanda-specific WASH Systems Academy **courses** were developed and delivered through blended learning, reaching **555 sector stakeholders** between 2022 and 2025, with a **43% completion rate**, above the global average.
- **More sustainable planning and investment preparation:** All **ten focus districts** developed District WASH Investment Plans using full life-cycle costing, strengthening links between planning, budgeting, and resource mobilization.

The central lesson of Isoko y'Ubuzima is that strengthening water, sanitation, and hygiene systems depends less on the quality of the tools introduced than on whether institutions own them, use them routinely, and act on what they reveal.

1. Introduction

1.1 The context of water, sanitation and hygiene in Rwanda

Rwanda has made significant progress in expanding access to water, sanitation, and hygiene services over the past decade, supported by investments in infrastructure, institutional reform, and sector coordination. Access to improved drinking water increased from 87% in 2016/17 to 90% in 2023/24, with higher coverage in urban areas (97%) than in rural areas (87%). Access to improved sanitation rose from 86% to 94% over the same period. Despite these gains, challenges remain in sustaining service quality and ensuring equitable and resilient services, as persistent systemic bottlenecks continue to affect long-term functionality.

Rwanda's WASH governance reflects the country's decentralized framework. National institutions, particularly the Ministry of Infrastructure (MININFRA), provide policy direction and oversight, while implementation responsibilities are shared across utilities, regulators, and district governments. Districts play a central role in infrastructure planning, supervision of service providers, and coordination of local actors. This structure aims to balance national policy coherence with responsiveness to local needs.

Rwanda's rural water management arrangements have evolved from community-based and district-managed models toward delegated management with private operators. Earlier approaches struggled to ensure maintenance, financial management, and continuity of service, which contributed to the low functionality of many schemes. The 2023 National Water and Sanitation Policy retained delegated management but shifted overall responsibility for rural water supply management to WASAC, while districts continued to play planning, coordination, and oversight roles within decentralized governance structures.

At the same time, the sector still faces several systemic constraints that affect service delivery and long-term sustainability:

- **Planning and asset management gaps:** Infrastructure development has often been project-driven rather than grounded in long-term service delivery models, limiting the integration of life-cycle costing, asset management, and maintenance planning, and contributing to infrastructure deterioration over time.
- **Financing constraints:** Meeting SDG 6 targets requires an estimated RWF 400 billion annually, leaving a financing gap of around RWF 170 billion per year under national targets, highlighting the need for additional resources through private-sector participation, blended finance, and improved cost recovery.
- **Weak coordination and uneven capacity:** Coordination among government institutions, development partners, utilities, private operators, and communities remains inconsistent, as platforms are not always fully institutionalized; district-level technical and financial capacity gaps further affect service delivery.

- **Private sector challenges in rural water services:** The delegated management model was intended to professionalize operations, but its performance still depends on tariff adequacy, infrastructure condition, contract arrangements, operator capacity, and clarity of role. Private operators responsible for managing water systems continue to face constraints related to access to finance, tariff adequacy, and managerial capacity, despite clearer roles between WASAC (the national utility), which is responsible for contracting and managing private operators, and district authorities. These issues are explored further in related project learning on private operator performance and non-revenue water (NRW) reduction.
- **Policy ambition versus systemic constraints:** National frameworks such as the National Water and Sanitation Policy and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1 and NST2) prioritize sustainable service delivery and institutional strengthening, but achieving these goals requires addressing persistent systemic constraints affecting service sustainability.

The private sector has become increasingly important in rural water service delivery. Under the delegated management model, private operators manage some rural water systems and are responsible for day-to-day operations. While districts initially contracted these operators, the model has evolved: WASAC now contracts and manages them, while districts retain planning, coordination, and oversight roles. This shift reflects a broader effort to professionalize rural water service delivery and clarify institutional responsibilities within the sector.

At the policy level, Rwanda's WASH sector is guided by frameworks such as the National Water and Sanitation Policy and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1 and NST2), which emphasize sustainable service delivery, institutional strengthening, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 6. Achieving these objectives requires addressing the underlying systemic constraints that affect service sustainability.

Systems strengthening as a strategic choice

Across many countries, WASH interventions have historically prioritized capital investments. While these approaches have often produced rapid gains in access, they have struggled to ensure services last where operation and maintenance systems are weak, financing is insufficient, or institutional responsibilities are unclear. Experience from Africa and Asia shows that investments in rural water and sanitation infrastructure have frequently resulted in sustainability challenges when maintenance, regulation, local management, and service delivery models were underdeveloped. As a result, global experience has demonstrated that sustainable WASH services depend not only on physical assets but also on the wider systems that shape how services are planned, financed, delivered, regulated, and monitored.

The system strengthening perspective looks beyond projects to institutions, capacities, incentives, and relationships, including governance arrangements, service provider performance, financial viability, regulatory oversight, and accountability to users. These lessons have driven governments and development partners to move away from projectized interventions toward strengthening service delivery systems, a shift reflected in recent global and continental agendas: the UN System-wide Strategy for Water and Sanitation emphasizes governance, financing, data, and capacity development as key enablers of transformation, while the Africa Water Vision 2063 and policy position resilient water and safe sanitation systems as central to long-term development on the continent.

The Isoko y’Ubuzima project, launched in 2021, was designed with this understanding of WASH sector development in mind.

About this paper

This paper examines how the Isoko y’Ubuzima project has contributed to the sustainability of water, sanitation and hygiene services in Rwanda. Its purpose is to document how system strengthening approaches can contribute to the sustainability of water and sanitation and to policy dialogue. The paper highlights key systemic challenges affecting sustainable service delivery and discusses strategies used to address them through coordinated institutional strengthening. This is particularly relevant to Rwanda’s ambition to achieve universal access to safe and sustainable water and sanitation services.

The paper is structured around the main dimensions of system strengthening addressed through the project. It examines national- and district-level governance and planning, private-sector engagement, financing, and accountability mechanisms. Then it reflects on key results, lessons learned, and implications for future sector strategies in Rwanda and similar contexts.

2. Improving WASH governance so all can thrive

About Isoko y'Ubuzima

Implemented from 2021 to 2026, Isoko y'Ubuzima was a multi-year initiative designed to strengthen the sustainability of Rwanda's water, sanitation and hygiene services by addressing systemic constraints in sector governance, service delivery, and financing. The project was implemented by Water For People, IRC, CARE International, and Vitens Evides International (VEI), each contributing complementary expertise in system strengthening, service delivery, community engagement, and utility management. At the district level, the project focused on Kayanza, Kirehe, Nyagatare, Rwamagana, and Ngoma in the Eastern Province of Rwanda; Nyabihu and Ngororero in the Western Province; and Nyanza, Nyamagabe, and Ruhango in the Southern Province.

Water For People led overall implementation and coordination. IRC provided technical leadership on system strengthening methodologies and sector learning processes. CARE International contributed expertise in inclusive governance and community engagement, while VEI supported capacity strengthening of water service providers through its experience as a partnership of Dutch water utilities. Partners worked together with public institutions, private operators, civil society, and communities at national, district, and community levels.

By working across community, district, and national levels, the project sought to strengthen the linkages between policies and local implementation (infrastructure planning and service delivery).

Isoko y'Ubuzima aligned with Rwanda's national development priorities and contributed to global commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda for Change partnership. These frameworks emphasize sustainable service delivery, institutional strengthening, and long-term sector transformation.

Strategic objective 1: Improving decentralized WASH governance

A core component of the project – Strategic Objective 1- focused on improving decentralized WASH governance by strengthening the institutional capacities and coordination mechanisms required for sustainable service delivery at both national and district levels.

The first intermediate result focused on strengthening institutions in the national WASH sector. MININFRA, WASAC, RURA, and LODA play a central role in setting policy direction, coordinating sector stakeholders - district authorities, development partners, NGOs, private operators, and other service providers- and providing technical guidance to local authorities. Strengthening these institutions supports coherent sector planning and improved coordination.

The second intermediate result focused on strengthening district capacity to implement WASH policies and plans in the ten project focus districts. Districts remained central to local WASH planning, coordination, and oversight, even as the delegated management framework evolved during the project period. These responsibilities required technical and managerial capacities that varied across districts. The project therefore supported districts in strengthening planning processes, improving service delivery follow-up, and translating national policies into more effective local action.

Systems strengthening framework, methodology, and tools

Key tools and methods used include:

- **WASH Systems Building Blocks assessments:** The project used the IRC-developed framework to understand and strengthen the WASH sector (Huston & Moriarty, 2018). It examines nine key components: institutions, policy and legislation, planning, finance, regulation and accountability, monitoring, infrastructure, water resources management, and learning and adaptation. It captures system strengthening by measuring progress across the building blocks, rated from 1 (worst) to 5 (best). The tool was used to review sector performance and identify priority areas for strengthening. The assessments also created space for structured dialogue among sector actors—ministries, regulators, service providers, district governments, development partners, NGOs, and communities—aligning interventions with system challenges.
- **Qualitative Information Systems (QIS),** developed by IRC, is a qualitative monitoring tool for tracking institutional change and supporting adaptive management. In Isoko y'Ubuzima, it was used annually to evaluate district WASH offices and Boards through facilitated scoring by district planners, WATSAN officers, WASAC engineers, one-stop center directors, and facilitators. The tool assesses five governance areas: human resources, monitoring and information, planning and budgeting, accountability, and regulation. Each benchmark is scored as True (10), Partially true (5), or False (0). Category scores are converted to percentages to show progress, enabling monitoring of institutional functionality and fostering reflection and joint analysis.
- **WASH full life-cycle costing tools:** Used to strengthen planning and financial sustainability by helping districts and service providers understand the full costs of delivering and sustaining WASH services.
- **Sustainable Services Checklist:** Supported routine assessments of water system functionality and service quality.
- **Community Score Card:** Strengthened governance and accountability by facilitating dialogue among communities, service providers, and local authorities regarding service performance and agreed-upon improvement actions.
- **Capacity assessments and benchmarking tools:** Used to assess the performance of private water operators and identify technical and managerial gaps requiring support.
- **WASH Systems Academy:** Supported professional capacity development through blended learning, combining online courses and in-person training for government officials, service providers, and other sector actors.
- **Learning exchanges and study visits:** Used to expose national and district actors to alternative approaches in utility management, district planning, and service sustainability, including inter-district learning and the international learning visit to the Odisha Water Corporation in India.
- **Continuous monitoring, reflection, and dialogue** enabled sector institutions to assess progress, identify emerging challenges, and adjust strategies over time.

3. Strengthening systems at national and district levels

National level

Strengthening national planning and coordination

At the national level, the project focused on strengthening existing MININFRA-led coordination structures. Their effectiveness depended on regular evidence sharing, follow-up, and alignment among planning, monitoring, and sector dialogue. Partners, therefore, concentrated on reinforcing national processes that support collective planning, performance review, and coordination among government institutions, development partners, regulators, utilities, and other sector actors.

One key activity involved supporting national WASH sector performance reviews and Building Blocks assessments, led with MININFRA, and engaging institutions such as WASAC, RURA, LODA, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN), district representatives, development partners, and NGOs. These processes were used during sector reflection and performance review moments, including the 2022 and 2024 sector performance reviews, to examine the WASH system. The assessments helped structure dialogue around specific sector bottlenecks, including weak coordination across levels, limited financing for sustainable services, uneven district capacities, and persistent gaps in monitoring and accountability. Importantly, the assessments were not used solely for diagnosis; the Sector Working Group validated them. They provided a shared evidence base for identifying priority actions to be taken forward by the government and partners.

Partners also supported the revision of the WATSAN multi-year action plan 2022–2024 and the development of the subsequent 2024–2029 plan under MININFRA's leadership. These planning processes were directly informed by the Building Blocks assessments and translated broad policy ambitions into more operational priorities, responsibilities, and sequencing. In practice, this was reflected in actions such as the review of the delegated rural water management model, the development of district full life-cycle cost WASH investment plans, support for a national billing and customer management system for rural water supply, and the facilitation of WASH Systems Academy uptake by higher learning institutions. The 2024–2029 plan also helped prioritize actions that remain important for sector strengthening, including the revision of District WASH Board Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), a water and sanitation tariff study, the development of climate-resilient WASH project proposals, and the upgrading of the WASH MIS to harmonize sector data better. Through this process, the Building Blocks approach helped connect sector assessment with action planning. It provided a clearer framework for aligning the support of government institutions and WASH partners around shared priorities.

Another important dimension of national coordination involved strengthening sector dialogue platforms such as the regularly convened Sector Working Group and periodic Technical Working Groups organized under MININFRA and the WATSAN Secretariat. These platforms bring together government institutions, including MININFRA, WASAC, RURA, LODA, MINECOFIN, and other relevant ministries, as well as development partners, NGOs, and technical actors. The project supported these platforms by feeding in evidence from Building Blocks assessments, finance strategy work, district reflection processes, and implementation experience from the ten focus districts. This helped make dialogue more evidence-based and strengthened feedback loops between district-level experience and national decision-making, rather than leaving national coordination discussions disconnected from local service delivery realities. However, not all of the relaunched technical coordination platforms became consistently functional, and some met less regularly than intended. Where convening ownership was clear, and evidence was fed regularly into discussion, platforms were more useful; where convening was inconsistent, functionality remained limited. This is discussed further in Section 5: Key challenges and adaptive responses.

Institutional capacity development, learning, and adaptive leadership

Strengthening the technical and institutional capacity of national institutions responsible for WASH governance - MININFRA, WASAC, RURA, and LODA - was another core element of the project's system strengthening strategy.

IRC, working with consortium partners and national counterparts, [delivered targeted learning and capacity development](#) for national government staff, district officials, private operators, young water professionals, and lecturers through Rwanda-specific courses, workshops, webinars, blended learning sessions, on-the-job coaching, and exchanges. Between January 2022 and September 2025, these efforts reached 555 stakeholders across government, the private sector, academia, and civil society. The content focused on system strengthening, Building Blocks analysis, district planning, life-cycle costing, finance, climate-resilient WASH, and market-based sanitation, to strengthen practical competencies in governance, planning, financial sustainability, and service monitoring.

A central vehicle for this work was the WASH Systems Academy, a global online learning platform that offers courses on system strengthening in the WASH sector. Through Isoko y'Ubuzima, IRC adapted three courses to the Rwandan context: *WASH Systems Strengthening for Rwanda* (March 2022), *District Planning for Sustainable WASH Services in Rwanda* (March 2023), and *Costing for District WASH Planning in Rwanda* (July 2023). Delivered through blended learning, these courses achieved a 43% completion rate in Rwanda, above the global average of 31%, while 98% of respondents found them interesting and 99% reported learning something new.

By the end of April 2026, 607 course participants from Rwanda had enrolled in the Academy, with 545 certificates awarded. Participants also reported applying the learning in practice. For example, Moise Irankunda of WASAC noted that the costing and climate resilience courses helped improve project planning, including requiring consultants to integrate climate resilience into proposals. At the same time, Emmanuel Hategekimana of MININFRA highlighted the value of life-cycle costing for budgeting and resource mobilization. Charlotte Uwimpuhwe from the University of Rwanda used Academy materials to strengthen her teaching on water demand, water losses, and costing. Discussions also began with WASAC about using the induction courses for new staff, aligned with its ambition to establish a training center.

Beyond formal training, learning was reinforced through regional, international, and national exchange processes. These included a 2024 international learning visit for Government of Rwanda representatives to the Odisha Water Corporation in India, as well as continuous inter-district learning exchanges throughout the project period within Rwanda. The Odisha visit exposed WASAC leaders to smart water management technologies and customer engagement models. It contributed to WASAC's July 2024 commitment to pilot a Smart Water Management System in Gasabo District, including tools such as SCADA and IoT-based monitoring. Isoko y'Ubuzima also fed evidence and lessons from implementation into existing national reflection and coordination processes, helping connect district experience to national review and planning discussions. These combined learning processes reinforced attention to life-cycle costing, district coordination, delegated management, climate resilience, accountability, and service sustainability. This meant that learning and exchange were not treated as separate activities but were integral to how sector institutions strengthened policy, planning, and implementation over time.

WASH financing and project preparation

Addressing financing constraints is a critical component of strengthening WASH systems. As discussed in earlier sections, Rwanda faces a substantial investment gap in achieving universal and sustainable WASH services. Strengthening the capacity of national institutions to plan, finance, and prepare investment projects is therefore essential to mobilize additional resources for the sector.

Within this workstream, IRC and consortium partners worked with national and district teams to strengthen financial planning and investment preparation. A major focus was the use of full life-cycle costing in district WASH planning and sector financing processes, helping actors move beyond construction costs alone and pay greater attention to operation, maintenance, rehabilitation, and long-term service sustainability. This was complemented by more targeted support to WASAC Development on project preparation, following earlier scoping that had identified bottlenecks around feasibility studies, bankability, sanitation project preparation, and the integration of climate resilience into water supply investments. Through this support, around 20 WASAC and government staff received training in climate-resilient WASH, project identification and feasibility studies, and financial, economic, social, and environmental appraisal, alongside on-the-job coaching and standardized tools such as model terms of reference and checklists for sanitation and climate-resilient feasibility studies. In practice, this helped government actors, particularly district planners, MININFRA staff, and WASAC counterparts, strengthen investment planning and costing, justify budgets, oversee feasibility studies, and think about sustainability beyond initial capital expenditure.

The project also helped shift sector dialogue on WASH finance from general discussions to more concrete exploration of financing options and institutional reforms. Through exchanges involving MININFRA, WASAC, development partners, and financial sector actors, attention was given to repayable finance, blended finance, and the conditions required for bankable WASH investments. This was significant because it connected sector financing challenges with practical questions around project preparation, tariff viability, climate resilience, and the readiness of institutions to engage with commercial and development finance. In this sense, the project helped create a stronger bridge between sector planning processes and emerging efforts to mobilize new sources of finance.

IRC and VEI, working with WASAC and other sector actors led by Water For People, also supported project preparation processes, including feasibility studies, climate resilience, and the development of more investment-ready proposals. In this context, climate resilience considerations refer to integrating risks, such as flooding, drought, and infrastructure vulnerability, into project design and investment planning, rather than treating them as separate environmental issues. This support helped WASAC strengthen not only technical analysis but also the quality of documentation needed to engage potential funders. By improving feasibility analysis, investment framing, and resilience considerations, the project helped make WASH investments more credible and better prepared for potential public and external financing.

Success in WSS rehabilitation engineering designs also led to concrete financing results. Private operators were able to apply for a loan amounting to USD 8 million from local financial institutions. This example shows how stronger project preparation capacity can improve the credibility of WASH investments and help institutions access financing for the next stages of project development.

District level

Strengthening district WASH governance structures

While national institutions provide strategic direction, the sustainability of WASH services ultimately depends on effective governance and management at the district level.

The work therefore began with capacity assessments of District WASH Boards (DWASHBs) and district WASH teams in the ten focus districts of the project to better understand how these structures were functioning in practice. The assessments found that, while most districts had established boards, their functionality was inconsistent. Common constraints included limited operational budgets, irregular meetings and follow-up on resolutions, weak monitoring systems, low motivation among members, inconsistent implementation of audit recommendations, and insufficient technical capacity to assess new technologies or plan for long-term sustainability. In several districts, staffing for WASH monitoring and sustainability was also suboptimal. In contrast, some districts lacked adequate funding even for basic district WASH board functions such as supervision visits and coordination.

Clarifying roles and responsibilities within district WASH governance structures was an important step toward improving coordination. DWASHBs bring together a broad range of district actors, including the Vice Mayor for Economic Development, the District Water and Sanitation Officer, sanitation and hygiene officers, representatives of water users, schools and health facilities, WASAC branch managers, security authorities, and water and sanitation service providers. Their functionality was strengthened through refresher training, support on planning and accountability, inter-district learning exchanges, and the introduction of tools such as community scorecards and digital monitoring pilots. In practice, this helped boards move from largely administrative structures toward more active problem-solving platforms. This support was reinforced by project district facilitators who worked closely with district teams and DWASHBs, helping sustain follow-up, documentation, and use of governance tools in routine district processes.

The need to better integrate private operators and WASAC branches into district governance became increasingly clear through these district processes. As delegated management arrangements evolved and rural water systems became more dependent on coordination between districts, utilities, and operators, boards were used more deliberately as spaces to review service performance, community feedback, and operational constraints. Through annual reflection meetings, refresher trainings, and coordination support, Isoko y'Ubuzima helped districts engage these actors in more regular dialogue. This contributed to more coherent governance of rural water services, including greater attention to issues such as infrastructure protection, public tap management, unpaid bills, non-revenue water, and preventive maintenance.

District WASH planning and investment processes

Strengthening district WASH planning and investment processes was another key area of intervention. In the ten focus districts, this work built on earlier capacity strengthening in district WASH planning and full life-cycle costing, which helped district teams move beyond short-term lists of infrastructure investments toward more realistic planning for sustainable services. On that basis, the project supported all ten districts to develop District WASH Investment Plans that identified priority investments while also considering operation and maintenance, capital maintenance, financing needs, and service sustainability over time.

These plans were not developed as standalone technical documents. They were informed by district-level assessments and discussed through annual and semi-annual reflection meetings that brought together district authorities, DWASHB members, private operators, CSOs, WASAC branch representatives, and other local stakeholders. These forums allowed districts to review progress, identify service gaps, agree on priorities, and jointly plan follow-up actions. In practice, they also created opportunities to link planning with resource mobilization, as districts used the plans and reflection processes to justify budget requests, engage partners, and coordinate contributions from different actors.

The planning processes also strengthened institutional ownership by linking WASH priorities to broader district development and performance frameworks, including district plans and Imihigo (the district's annual performance contracts). This helped ensure that WASH investments were not treated as standalone initiatives, but as part of wider local development priorities. By combining stronger planning tools with regular reflection and stakeholder dialogues, the project helped districts improve both the quality of WASH investment planning and the coordination needed to implement it.

Reflection, learning, and accountability mechanisms

District-level learning and reflection processes were supported in all ten focus districts through semi-annual and annual WASH reflection meetings convened by district authorities. These platforms brought together local government officials, WASAC branch staff, private operators, CSOs, community representatives, and other district stakeholders to review sector performance, share lessons, and identify priority actions for improving service delivery. The project strengthened these district review processes as part of existing governance arrangements, helping make them more regular and more useful for joint planning and follow-up beyond the project period.

Evidence generated through participatory and service monitoring tools, including the Sustainability Service Checklists and the Community Score Card (CSC), played an important role in informing these discussions. By bringing community feedback into district dialogue, CSC processes helped make reflection meetings more grounded in user experience. In several districts, community members raised concerns about poor communication on tariffs, weak management of public water points, and delays in maintenance of damaged infrastructure. These findings were then discussed with district authorities, private operators, and WASAC representatives, creating a clearer basis for corrective action and follow-up.

These reflection processes also helped strengthen district ownership of WASH services. As district authorities became more engaged in reviewing service performance, convening stakeholders, and following up on agreed actions, their role in mobilizing local resources and sustaining services became more visible. In practice, the meetings helped districts connect monitoring, coordination, and planning while also creating space to address operational bottlenecks with service providers and local partners jointly.

In some districts, CSC experience also informed broader use of participatory accountability approaches beyond WASH, including in sectors such as health, education, and governance. Within WASH, integrating it into district planning cycles and, in some cases, Imihigo discussions strengthened the link between citizen feedback and local decision-making. In practice, CSC processes contributed to improved transparency in tariff communication, better management of public water points, and stronger oversight of infrastructure maintenance, showing how accountability tools could support more responsive local service governance.

4. Key results: systems change and sustainable services

The results below reflect broader sector changes in Rwanda during the project period. The paper does not claim that these changes were caused by Isoko y'Ubuzima alone; rather, it identifies the specific ways the project contributed through tools, evidence, convening, planning support, and district-level follow-up.

WASH systems change

Over the course of implementation, several shifts were observed in the functioning of Rwanda's WASH system, particularly in sector coordination, evidence-based planning, and accountability. Early Building Blocks assessments highlighted systemic constraints affecting the sector, including fragmented planning processes, limited coordination across institutional levels, and uneven use of data to guide sector decision-making.

One area where change became visible was the strengthening of coordination between national and district actors. Evidence and lessons from annual and semi-annual reflection meetings in the ten focus districts increasingly fed into national dialogue spaces such as sector review processes, the Sector Working Group, and Technical Working Groups. This helped connect national institutions with district authorities. Building Blocks assessments also supported this feedback loop by providing a shared framework through which district experience could inform national discussion on bottlenecks. Isoko y'Ubuzima's main contribution was not to create new national systems, but to strengthen the use of existing ones by supplying evidence, structuring dialogue, and linking district experience to national review processes.

Accountability relationships between service providers, public institutions, and citizens were also strengthened through Community Score Card processes in the ten focus districts. These created spaces for communities, district authorities, WASAC branches, and private operators to review service performance and agree on corrective actions. By structuring dialogue around service quality and management issues, CSC processes helped make local WASH governance more responsive to user concerns.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how system strengthening efforts can contribute to improvements in sector coordination, institutional learning, and accountability. Rather than focusing solely on infrastructure delivery, these changes reflect the gradual strengthening of the governance foundations that support sustainable WASH services.

Sustainable services

Strengthening the institutional foundations of the WASH sector is closely linked to the sustainability of service delivery. By focusing on planning processes, governance mechanisms, and accountability relationships, Isoko y'Ubuzima helped create conditions for more reliable and sustainable WASH services over time.

Through district WASH investment planning, full life-cycle costing, and repeated reflection processes, national and district institutions increasingly considered the long-term financial and operational requirements of maintaining services. This was visible, for example, in the revision of national multi-year action plans and in district investment plans that gave greater attention to capital maintenance, climate resilience, and the costs of sustaining services beyond initial construction. It was also reflected in how institutions such as MININFRA, WASAC, LODA, and district teams discussed infrastructure: less as one-off assets to be built, and more as services requiring ongoing financing, maintenance, and oversight.

The Building Blocks process helped reinforce this shift by informing both implemented and prioritized actions, including district full life-cycle cost WASH investment plans, review of delegated rural water management arrangements, support to a national billing and customer management system for rural water supply, revision of District WASH Board SOPs, climate-resilient project proposal development, and the upgrading of the WASH MIS. This helped connect sector assessment with concrete reforms and resource mobilization priorities.

Improved coordination also contributed to service sustainability. In the ten focus districts, annual and semi-annual reflection meetings brought together district authorities, WASAC branches, private operators, CSOs, and other stakeholders to jointly review operational bottlenecks and agree on follow-up actions. This was evident in cases such as Ngoma, where DWASHB discussions helped address vandalism of water infrastructure by engaging with security actors, and in Nyagatare, where the board played a role in following up on unpaid water bills that were affecting service operations. At the national level, stronger coordination around the Building Blocks process in the multi-year action plan also supported better planning and follow-up.

During the same period, Rwanda's overall Building Blocks score rose from 3.4 in 2022 to 4.0 in 2024. Isoko y'Ubuzima contributed to this broader trend by supporting the Building Blocks process itself, strengthening district-level systems in ten focus districts, and feeding priority findings into sector review and action planning.

Table 1: WASH Sector building blocks Scores

	Building Blocks	2022	2023	2024
1	Policy and Legislation	4	4	4.5
2	Water Resources Management	3.8	4	4
3	Infrastructure Development	3.8	3.8	3.8
4	Monitoring	3.4	3.4	3.4
5	Regulation and Accountability	3.4	4.2	4.2
6	Learning and Adaptation	3.4	4	4
7	Institutions and Coordination	3.2	3.6	4
8	Planning	3.2	4	4.5
9	Infrastructure management	3	3.6	3.8
10	Finance	2.4	3	3.8
	Average	3.4	3.8	4.0

Scores were generated through national WASH sector Building Blocks assessments facilitated by IRC under Isoko y'Ubuzima and validated through the Sector Working Group. The Building Blocks methodology assesses sector performance on a scale of 1 to 5 across ten system dimensions. The table shows the strongest gains in planning, institutions and coordination, regulation and accountability, and finance. These were areas where Isoko y'Ubuzima provided direct support through the Building Blocks process, multi-year action planning, district investment planning, and finance-related capacity strengthening. Monitoring did not improve over the same period, underscoring the continued weakness of sector data systems. Social accountability mechanisms – such as the previously explained Community Score Card - also played an important role in strengthening service sustainability.

Qualitative Information System assessments also showed measurable progress in governance over time at the district level. Between the 2022 baseline and the 2026 assessment, district WASH office scores rose from 60% to 95% in Rwamagana, from 50% to 95% in Kirehe, and from 45% to 95% in Ruhango. District WASH Board scores also improved: from 55% to 90% in Rwamagana, from 40% to 75% in Nyagatare, and from 35% to 90% in Ruhango, although progress remained uneven.

Overall, the strongest gains were seen in planning and budgeting, accountability and regulation, reflecting the project's support to district planning, DWASHB strengthening, refresher trainings, and reflection processes. Monitoring and information systems remained comparatively weaker in several districts, largely because reliable water data systems and an accessible WASH MIS were still limited. By 2026, all district WASH offices and most DWASHBs had reached scores above 75%, indicating substantial, though incomplete, strengthening of district governance structures over the project period.

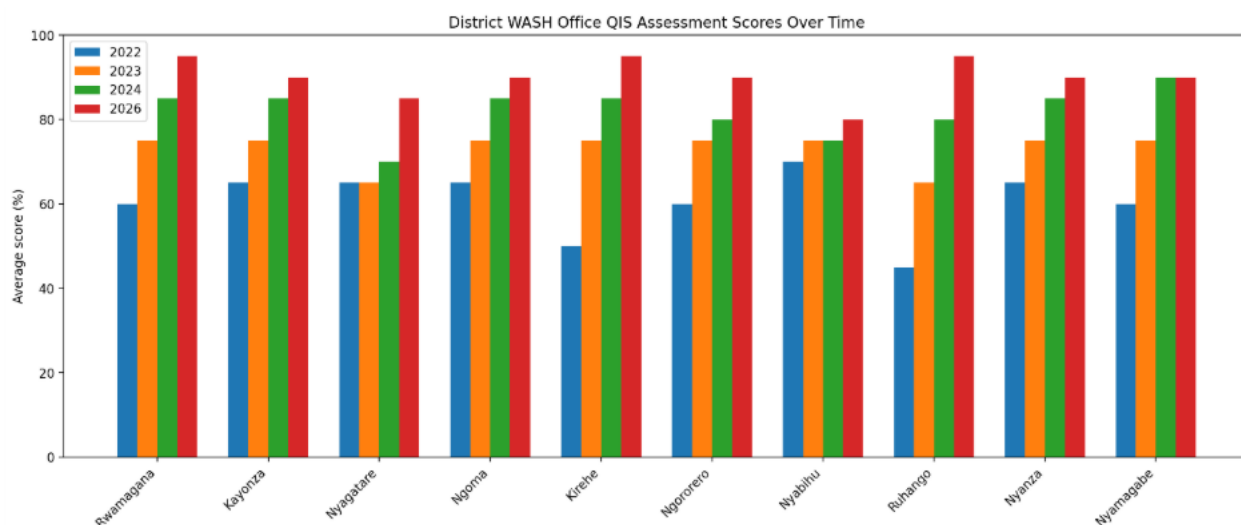


Figure 1: District WASH Office Qualitative Information System Assessment Scores over project time

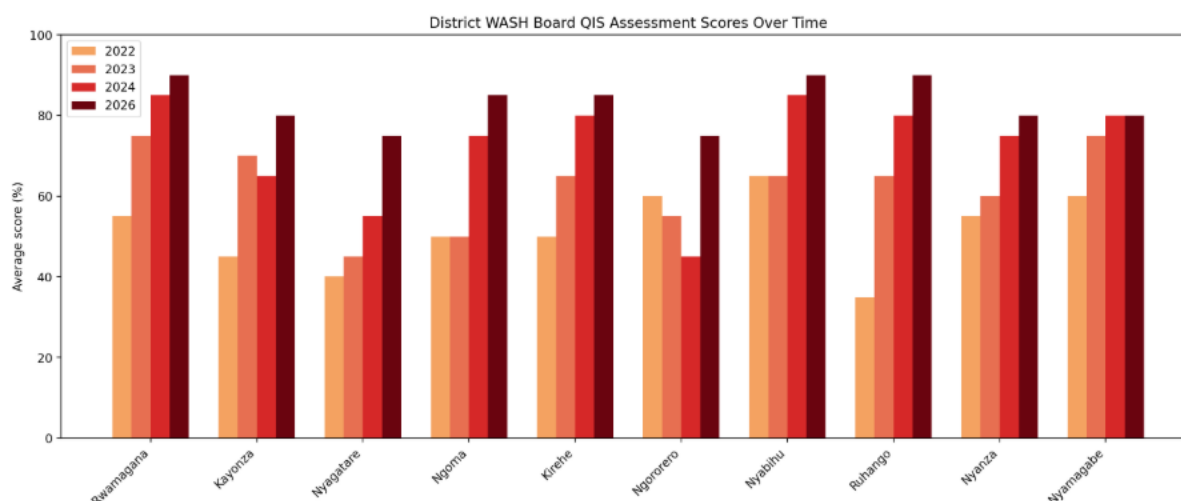


Figure 2: District WASH Board Qualitative Information System Assessment Scores over project time

Perhaps most importantly, several governance and learning mechanisms supported through the project became more functional within existing sector institutions. At the national level, Building Blocks assessments were used in sector review and planning processes; at the district level, reflection meetings and District WASH Boards became more active spaces for coordination, follow-up, and joint problem-solving. This does not mean that all these mechanisms are fully institutionalized. Still, their stronger functionality within existing structures suggests greater readiness to sustain service-oriented planning, coordination, and accountability practices beyond the project. All ten project districts also began using their investment plans as planning and resource mobilization tools, suggesting that these processes were increasingly informing routine district decision-making rather than remaining project exercises.

Taken together, the Building Blocks and QIS results suggest that governance and planning functions improved more quickly than sector-wide monitoring systems, indicating real progress in systems but also uneven institutional maturation.

In Nyabihu, the district was able to use detailed engineering designs developed through the WASH investment planning process under Isoko y'Ubuzima to leverage RBC funding under the World Bank-financed SPRP for the rehabilitation of nine water supply systems, demonstrating the value of preparing investment-ready plans and designs ahead of funding opportunities.

5. Key challenges and adaptive responses

Institutional turnover and competing priorities

Systems strengthening initiatives depend heavily on the continuity and engagement of public institutions. Changes in personnel within national institutions, utilities, and district administrations occasionally affected the continuity of sector processes. Staff turnover is a common reality within public administration systems and can influence how quickly new approaches or tools are adopted. When key individuals responsible for sector coordination, planning, or technical oversight changed roles, institutional memory related to system strengthening processes sometimes needed to be rebuilt.

In addition, WASH sector reforms often competed with other development priorities at both national and district levels, requiring institutions to balance multiple responsibilities. These dynamics slowed the regular convening of some Technical Working Groups, follow-up on jointly agreed priority actions, and the routine circulation of assessment findings across institutions. In some cases, this also affected the collective follow-up of Building Blocks assessment findings and multi-year action plan priorities, limiting the extent to which shared analysis translated into coordinated partner action.

This was particularly visible in the reformulation and relaunch of some Technical Working Groups. Although the process was supported and validated at the sector level, the groups did not consistently convene, as intended, under the leadership of institutions such as MININFRA, the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), and the Ministry of Health. As a result, their potential contribution to technical coordination, problem-solving, and synergistic planning fell short of expectations, illustrating that establishing or relaunching a platform is not sufficient unless routine convening and institutional ownership are sustained.

In response, the project placed increasing emphasis on institutionalizing learning processes rather than relying solely on individual champions. Capacity development initiatives were designed to reach broader groups of sector professionals across institutions, helping ensure that knowledge was distributed across teams rather than concentrated within a few individuals. Training programs, sector reflection meetings, and peer learning platforms also served as entry points for newly appointed staff to become familiar with sector tools and governance processes.

Capacity constraints at national and district levels

Variations in technical and managerial capacity across institutions also influenced the pace at which system strengthening tools could be applied. In some cases, national and district institutions faced constraints in applying systems analysis tools, interpreting monitoring data, or translating diagnostic findings into concrete reforms.

At the district level, these capacity constraints were particularly visible in areas such as long-term planning, financial analysis, and coordination among sector actors. As a result, some districts initially faced difficulties in fully applying systems tools such as building blocks assessments or integrating life-cycle costing considerations into planning processes.

Sector monitoring remained an ongoing challenge. Despite support to strengthen WASH information systems and improve the use of data for governance, the WASH MIS remained not fully operational. District-level assessments in 2026 continued to identify gaps in data accessibility, harmonization of WASH MIS with district administrative data, and the routine use of reliable water data for decision-making. This meant that progress in planning and accountability was not always matched by equally strong progress in monitoring and information systems.

To address some of these challenges, the project adopted a capacity strengthening approach that combined formal training with practical application and peer learning. Training programs were designed not only to introduce systems concepts but also to provide hands-on experience using planning and monitoring tools.

Adaptive management responses

Implementing system strengthening initiatives in a complex institutional environment requires a high degree of flexibility and continuous learning. Therefore, partners used an adaptive management approach that allowed sector actors to refine strategies and adjust interventions as new insights emerged.

Adaptive management was supported through regular reflection meetings at national and district levels, which allowed sector actors to review progress, identify emerging challenges, and agree on practical adjustments. Feedback from these discussions informed ongoing refinements of tools, training approaches, and coordination mechanisms. Over time, this iterative learning highlighted that the effectiveness of systems tools depended less on their technical design and more on how they were embedded within institutional processes. As a result, greater emphasis was placed on integrating tools into sector dialogue platforms, planning cycles, and routine reflection meetings, ensuring they supported ongoing decision-making rather than functioning as standalone analytical exercises.

Even with these adaptations, some constraints proved harder to shift within the project period. In particular, the limited functionality of some national Technical Working Groups and the continued weakness of the WASH MIS showed that tools and platforms alone do not guarantee systems change. Where routine convening, institutional follow-through, or data system ownership remained weak, progress was partial and uneven.

As implementation progressed, it became evident that sustainable systems change required stronger alignment between national institutions, district authorities, utilities, private operators, and communities. Adaptive responses therefore also involved strengthening collaboration among these actors.

6. What we've learned

Systems change requires institutional ownership, not only good tools.

A key lesson from Isoko y'Ubuzima is that system strengthening depended less on the technical quality of the tools introduced than on the extent to which institutions owned the processes around them. The project brought in practical tools such as Building Blocks assessments, QIS, Full Life-Cycle Costing, and structured reflection platforms. However, the experience showed that these tools only influenced sector practice when they were embedded in institutional routines with clear convening responsibility, follow-up, and space for joint reflection. Where this happened, tools helped actors move from diagnosis to action; where it did not, their influence remained limited.

This was visible in the contrast between areas where progress was stronger and those where it was weaker. At the district level, tools were used repeatedly throughout annual and semi-annual reflection meetings, district planning processes, and DWASHB discussions, giving them a clear institutional home and allowing learning and experience to accumulate over time. By contrast, at the national level, some Technical Working Groups did not function consistently after being relaunched, and the WASH MIS remained weak despite continued attention. This suggests that simply providing good tools is not enough. Systems change is more likely when institutions not only accept a tool technically but also take responsibility for convening around it, using it regularly, and acting on its findings.

Trust remained important, primarily because it helped develop the conditions for ownership. As collaborative relationships strengthened among national institutions, districts, utilities, and service providers, sector actors became more willing to use assessment and reflection processes to engage in honest discussion of bottlenecks and practical adjustments. The deeper lesson, therefore, is not simply that systems change takes time. It is that tools contribute to systems change only when they are anchored in institutional incentives, routines, and relationships strong enough to sustain their use beyond the project itself.

Importance of data, reflection platforms, and learning loops

Structured data and reflection platforms played a central role in strengthening sector learning. Systems assessments and monitoring frameworks helped identify governance constraints, coordination gaps, and service delivery challenges, but their value was greatest when findings were discussed through sector reflection and coordination platforms. These discussions created learning loops in which evidence informed dialogue and dialogue shaped planning decisions and governance reforms.

At the same time, the experience showed that progress was uneven across the system. Planning and coordination improved faster than monitoring, suggesting that institutions were more ready to adopt reforms linked to existing planning and budgeting processes than those requiring stronger shared ownership of data and information systems. The continued weakness of the WASH MIS reflects this challenge. The broader lesson is that data alone do not strengthen systems: evidence must be linked to reflection, institutional dialogue, and clear responsibility for follow-up if it is to support adaptation and improvement.

Value of national–district alignment

One important insight from the project is that system strengthening is more effective when national and district actors engage in shared reflection and planning processes. District experiences provide critical insights into operational challenges affecting service delivery, while national institutions can translate these insights into policy adjustments and sector guidance. Where communication between levels is weak, policy reforms risk becoming disconnected from operational realities. Sector dialogue platforms, joint reflection meetings, and shared monitoring frameworks proved effective in bridging the gap between policy development and service delivery. By improving communication and coordination across governance levels, sector actors were better able to respond to emerging challenges and support more sustainable service delivery outcomes.

Need to institutionalize capacity-building approaches.

While short-term training introduced new concepts and tools, the project showed that sustainable capacity strengthening depends on embedding learning within sector institutions and professional networks. The experience suggests that participation in training or course completion alone is not enough to demonstrate changed practice. More important was whether learning became linked to concrete institutional roles, planning processes, and ongoing professional responsibilities. Training had a lasting impact when practices became part of institutional routines, allowing knowledge to circulate despite staff turnover and uneven capacity. The project also created approaches that could be adapted beyond the ten focus districts, particularly through the WASH Systems Academy and the district reflection model.

Private sector engagement must be treated as structural reform.

The experience in Rwanda showed that strengthening private sector participation requires more than supporting individual operators. Operational challenges—such as tariff setting, regulation, performance monitoring, and access to finance—are shaped by the broader institutional environment. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated engagement among regulators, utilities, districts, and operator associations. Treating private-sector engagement as a structural component of sector reform, rather than as parallel service delivery, has helped strengthen the institutional conditions needed for sustainable and professionalized service delivery. The experience also suggests that some constraints affecting private operators, especially tariff adequacy, infrastructure condition, and contract duration, are not easily solved within a single project cycle and require longer policy and regulatory processes.

Accountability mechanisms strengthen responsiveness when embedded in governance.

Community Score Card implementation highlighted that accountability mechanisms are most effective when embedded in formal governance structures. When citizen feedback was linked to district reflection meetings and planning processes, it informed decision-making and corrective action.

7. Recommendations and calls to action

For government institutions

Institutionalize core governance processes beyond individual office holders.

Frequent staff rotation can weaken institutional memory and slow the consolidation of governance reforms. Government institutions, particularly the Ministry of Infrastructure and sector regulators such as RURA, can address this by further institutionalizing sector planning, coordination, and reflection mechanisms that anchor decision-making beyond individual staff members. Regular sector review processes, technical working groups, and structured learning platforms should remain embedded and monitored within formal governance arrangements to maintain continuity in planning and monitoring. A practical step would be to require Technical Working Groups to report periodically to the Sector Working Group on agreed priorities, follow-up actions, and lessons learned, thereby creating a light accountability mechanism for regular convening and joint analysis.

Strengthen the enabling environment for sustainable rural water services.

Strengthening the regulatory and financial environment remains essential if private operators are to function as sustainable service providers while remaining accountable to district authorities and service users. Institutions such as MININFRA, WASAC, and RURA can further consolidate this enabling environment through tariff review, clearer contract and audit arrangements, stronger performance monitoring, and better planning for infrastructure rehabilitation and capital maintenance. This should also include active cultivation of partnerships with development actors, financial institutions, and civil society to pilot, test, and scale viable service models. Together, these measures would help address persistent constraints affecting private operators and contribute to greater service reliability.

Embed citizen feedback in routine district decision-making.

Participatory governance tools have demonstrated the value of structured dialogue between communities and institutions. Government actors can build on these experiences by embedding Community Score Card processes within formal district governance structures, particularly through District WASH Boards and district planning cycles. Institutionalizing such mechanisms would help ensure that citizen feedback becomes a routine input into service improvement and infrastructure management decisions.

Revive a coherent national monitoring system for the sector. Reviving and institutionalizing the National WASH Management Information System (WASH MIS) as a centralized monitoring platform would significantly strengthen sector oversight. A functional WASH MIS, coordinated by national institutions and used by districts, regulators, and utilities, could support evidence-based planning and improved regulatory monitoring, while enabling better tracking of progress toward national policy targets under the National Water and Sanitation Policy and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST2).

For development partners

Invest in long-term system performance, not only short-term delivery.

Institutional reforms, including governance strengthening, regulatory oversight, monitoring systems, and sector coordination, require sustained engagement and cannot be achieved through isolated interventions. Partners can therefore contribute more effectively by prioritizing investments that reinforce institutional capacity and sector governance over time.

Align external support behind government-led platforms.

Rwanda has established sector platforms such as Sector Working Groups and Technical Working Groups to guide policy dialogue and coordinate sector activities. Aligning external support with these platforms and participating consistently in joint sector review and planning processes led by relevant ministries and agencies can reduce fragmentation, strengthen national ownership of sector reforms, and ensure that development assistance contributes to nationally defined priorities.

For scaling and replication

Scale proven governance and learning practices within Rwanda.

Institutional practices that proved useful under the project could be further integrated into routine sector management and adapted beyond the ten focus districts. At national level, this includes continued use of Building Blocks assessments to inform sector review, priority setting, and action planning. At both national and district levels, the WASH Systems Academy could be embedded more systematically in induction, professional development, and sector learning processes. At district and community levels, practices such as QIS assessments, district reflection meetings, and Community Score Card processes could be further integrated into routine planning, coordination, and accountability arrangements. Scaling such approaches in ways that match their institutional level could strengthen alignment between national policy frameworks and local service delivery systems.

Use Rwanda's experience to inform broader sector reform efforts.

Rwanda's experience under Isoko y'Ubuzima does not offer a ready-made model for all settings. Still, it does provide useful lessons for countries with similar decentralized governance arrangements and delegated service delivery structures. In such contexts, the project suggests that strengthening the institutional ecosystem around service provision, including coordination, planning, regulatory oversight, accountability mechanisms, and sector learning platforms, can support more sustainable WASH services. Rather than offering a universal blueprint, the experience points to the value of adapting system strengthening approaches to national and local institutional realities.

8. Conclusion

Isoko y'Ubuzima has shown that strengthening WASH systems is not a parallel agenda to service delivery; it is the foundation on which sustainable service delivery depends. Through its work at both national and district levels, the project helped strengthen the institutional conditions that shape how water, sanitation and hygiene services are planned, financed, coordinated, monitored, and held accountable in Rwanda.

Rather than focusing only on infrastructure expansion, it invested in the governance processes, planning tools, learning mechanisms, financing approaches, and accountability relationships that allow services to function more reliably over time. This included support to national planning and coordination processes, district WASH governance structures, district investment planning, professional learning through the WASH Systems Academy, work on financing and project preparation, and the use of Community Score Cards and reflection platforms to connect citizen feedback with decision-making.

The experience documented in this paper also reinforces a broader lesson: sustainable and inclusive WASH services require stronger systems, not just more infrastructure. In Rwanda, the project helped show how system strengthening can improve coordination between national and district actors, encourage greater attention to life-cycle costs and service sustainability, strengthen oversight of delegated rural water service delivery, and make local governance more responsive to user concerns. These are gradual but important shifts. The experience also showed that system strengthening is uneven: while planning and governance functions improved, monitoring and some national coordination mechanisms remained weaker. They do not suggest that systemic constraints have been resolved. Still, they do show that progress is possible when institutions are supported to learn, coordinate, and act together around shared sector priorities.

As Rwanda continues to pursue its ambitions under the National Water and Sanitation Policy, NST2, and SDG 6, sustained investment in system strengthening will remain essential. This means continuing to invest in institutional capacity, sector coordination, district planning, monitoring systems, accountability mechanisms, and the enabling environment for sustainable service providers. It also means treating learning, reflection, and adaptation as core functions of the sector rather than temporary project activities. For government, development partners, and sector practitioners alike, the central message is clear. If sustainable WASH services are the goal, then sustained investment in the systems that support them must remain a priority.

References

1. Adank, M.D., Mugwaneza Ishimwe, B. and Verhoeven, J. (2026). *Making Capacity Development Stick: Evidence from Rwanda's WASH Systems Academy*. IRC: The Hague, the Netherlands. Available at: <https://www.ircwash.org/resources/making-capacity-development-stick-evidence-rwanda%E2%80%99s-wash-systems-academy>
2. Huston, A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). *Building blocks for WASH system strengthening*. IRC: The Hague, the Netherlands. Available at: <https://www.ircwash.org/resources/understanding-wash-system-and-its-building-blocks>
3. IRC (n.d.) Isoko y'Ubuzima [project website]. Available at: <https://www.ircwash.org/projects/isoko-y%E2%80%99ubuzima>
4. Mugwaneza Ishimwe, B. (2025). *Building resilient WASH systems in Rwanda: A story of transformation and scale*. [online] IRC: Kigali, Rwanda. Available at: <https://www.ircwash.org/news/building-resilient-wash-systems-rwanda-story-transformation-and-scale>
5. National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) (2018). *Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey 5 (EICV 5), 2016/2017*. Kigali: NISR. Available at: <https://statistics.gov.rw/data-sources/surveys/EICV/integrated-household-living-conditions-survey-5-eicv-5>
6. National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) (2024). *EICV7 Thematic Report: Utilities and Amenities 2023/24*. Kigali: NISR. Available at: <https://statistics.gov.rw/integrated-household-living-conditions-survey-7-eicv-7/eicv7-thematic-report-utilities-and-amenities-202324>
7. WASH Systems Academy (n.d.). WASH Systems Academy [learning platform]. Available at: <https://washsystemsacademy.org/>
8. Water For People (n.d.). Isoko y'Ubuzima resources [project website]. Available at: <https://rwanda.waterforpeople.org/isoko-yubuzima-resources/>