
Praxis Series Paper No. 4

June 2017

Bethlehem Mengistu



From an implementing partnership with local NGOs to partnering with local government

Sharing WaterAid Ethiopia's
transition



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bethlehem Mengistu is WaterAid Ethiopia's Country Director. She led the organisation's process of phasing out its partnerships with local non-governmental organisations in Ethiopia with members of the East Africa regional team. Prior to becoming Country Director, she worked as Regional Advocacy Manager covering East Africa and also Pan Africa Programme Manager at WaterAid. She has held senior roles within international and regional organisations including CARE, ActionAid and the Nile Basin Discourse in the areas of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), transboundary water management and development, good governance and gender.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Big thanks to the WaterAid Ethiopia team for their hard work and commitment during the transition period, especially to Manaye Seyoum, Dagim Kassaye, Michael Negash, Zinash Kefale and Atsede Bezuneh. Thanks also to the East Africa Regional team and colleagues in London for their invaluable support throughout the process: Lydia Zigomo, Paul Obura, Fiona Wilks, Patrick Nyamohanga and Adeola Akintoye. And finally to Louisa Gosling for her support and encouragement towards developing this piece on Ethiopia's unique approach to partnership.

Copyright © INTRAC 2017

First produced in 2017 in the UK by

INTRAC
Oxbridge Court
Osney Mead
Oxford
OX2 0ES
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851

Fax: +44 (0)1865 201852

Email: info@intrac.org

Website: www.intrac.org

Suggested citation: Mengistu, B. 2017. *From an implementing partnership with local NGOs to partnering with local government: sharing WaterAid Ethiopia's transition*. Praxis Series Paper No. 4. Oxford: INTRAC.

Pictures: WaterAid/Behailu Shiferaw

INTRODUCTION

From 2015 to 2016, WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE) transitioned from working in partnership with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) towards working directly with governments to enable service delivery and strengthen the systems for a sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. Three factors influenced this decision: WaterAid's global strategy (2015-20), a country programme evaluation in 2014, and a directive from the government of Ethiopia in 2015, limiting international NGOs (INGOs) from sub-granting to local NGOs.

This paper provides critical insights from WAE's experience of changing its approach. It begins with an overview of the factors informing the transition, before discussing the three phases of the exit process (completion, sustainability and phase out). It ends with a reflection on key lessons and recommendations for ensuring smooth phase out and sustainability in dynamic contexts.

BACKGROUND: THE DRIVE TOWARDS WORKING DIRECTLY WITH GOVERNMENT IN ETHIOPIA

In its 2015-20 **global strategy**,¹ WaterAid is determined to influence long-term sustainable change in the provision of safe WASH services. We use evidence from our research and practical experience to influence governments, service providers and institutions to prioritize effective and affordable delivery of safe water, sanitation and hygiene. This ambition requires that we work in the most strategic and contextually relevant partnerships to catalyse universal access to WASH.

In working with governments, we aim to support the development of robust governance, financial, institutional, environmental and technical capacity and systems to reach those who may otherwise miss out, with a particular focus on women and children. We influence and inform national policies and support the strengthening of planning, implementation and monitoring systems. Our role is to support governments at all levels to be fully accountable to citizens and to take full responsibility for ensuring sustainable WASH services are accessible to all. As such our aims of directly working with government are to:

- Support **sector-strengthening**
- Make **service provision more efficient and effective**
- Help the public sector **meet universal service obligations** by focusing on the poor
- Bring about **extra resources, information-sharing, dialogue** and **capacity-building**
- **Relieve the burden on public expenditure**, allowing governments to spend money on other pressing issues
- **Support governments to be more accountable by** engaging with citizens

Our global strategy strongly coincides with shifts in Ethiopia's WASH sector. The government has laid out a vision for realising universal access while prioritising equity, quality and sustainability of WASH services. Development partners support what the government wants to achieve, and the One WASH National Programme (OWNP) guides implementation (**Box 1**).

¹ WaterAid. Everyone, Everywhere 2030. WaterAid's Global Strategy 2015-2020. <http://www.wateraid.org/uk/who-we-are/our-strategy>

BOX 1: THE ONE WASH NATIONAL PROGRAMME

The OOWNP is Ethiopia's sector-wide approach that facilitates an integrated, harmonised and aligned delivery of WASH by the water, education, health, and finance ministries, as well as non-state actors, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It emphasises the integral role of WASH in development and enables cross-sector collaboration for holistic and sustainable development results under 'One Plan, One Budget and One Report'. Phase I of the OOWNP was implemented from 2013-15, while Phase II runs from 2015-20. WaterAid played an influential role in supporting the development of the OOWNP and is currently implementing its district level projects as per the principles of the OOWNP via the district wide approach (**Annex 1**).

As a respected player with a 25-year history in Ethiopia, WaterAid is well placed to assume an influencing role using evidence generated from our practical implementing experience to influence others and form a strong position within the OOWNP. With a local as well as a national presence, we are able to bridge the gap between different levels – ensuring local knowledge reaches national decision-making platforms, and that OOWNP implementation modalities and guidelines reach regional and local level government and strengthen local WASH systems.

In order to realise its global intent of building capacity and systems of government, WAE has shifted its approach from working with local NGO partners focusing on service delivery to working directly with local government on service delivery, capacity building and systems development. This is informed partly by recommendations from a **country programme evaluation** in 2014. Some of the critical findings and recommendations from the evaluation, which were also intended to enable WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE) to align to the global strategy, included:

- Influence the way OOWNP partners invest their significant resources as this offers great potential to leverage good practice and accountability, whereas achieving a meaningful scale of service delivery in a country with a population of 100 million and an annual population increment of 2.4 million would clearly be very difficult for WAE
- Scale back geographical spread, focus on a few areas and deliver quality/influential programmes to inform practice and policy
- Reduce WAE's number of partners

These, and other recommendations in the evaluation, led WAE to begin the process of limiting its partner base to maximise impact and deepen its investment. Coincidentally, in 2015, the government of Ethiopia issued a **directive** which limited INGOs from sub-granting to local NGOs. It also increased its demands for INGOs to be accountable and directly invest in maximising WASH gains by playing a closer oversight role of their investments in communities. This had significant implications for WAE who had traditionally focused on local partnerships for delivery of WASH services. As such, we phased out most of our sub-granting based partnerships with local NGOs and commenced partnering directly with district, regional and national government while maintaining non-sub granting partnerships with local NGOs.

Given the trends in the operating environment this shift was not unexpected. However, we did have our reservations. Partnering with local NGOs was, and still is, an approach we value globally because realising an ambitious vision such as universal access to WASH requires collaborative investment and partnership amongst all stakeholders. However, considering the context, we welcomed the new way of working.

A THREE-PHASE EXIT PROCESS

Prior to implementing its new approach, WAE had over 10 grants with a similar number of partners, of which some had been long-term relationships. A large component of the work delivered by partners was service delivery, with complementary capacity building and advocacy provided by WAE. While around 90% of partners were quite large in scope and reach, had diverse funding bases, and were not reliant on WaterAid for their sustainability, we had been integral to the development and establishment of a few organisations.

The recommendations of the country programme evaluation in July 2014 were indicative that size and the number of partnerships would change in WAE's next country programme strategy. As such, WAE's management team at that time initiated a conversation about exit with leaders of partner organisations. Implementation was carried out in the later part of 2015, and finalised by March 2016, under the leadership of a new management team. All formal communications were led by the Country Director. The exit process was guided by a detailed plan, which covered three important phases: **completion** (of the current year projects), **sustainability** (of project interventions) and **phase out** (smooth completion of the partnership with the partner NGO). This plan was shared with partners and delivered in a consultative manner. Communication with partners was continuous to ensure the provision of support and transparency. However, like all separation processes it was not easy, nor did it render conclusive consensus, especially with those WAE had been in partnership with for more than 10 years.

COMPLETING CURRENT PROJECTS

The completion process for projects was quite straightforward as most grants had reached their end of period. It consisted of frequent meetings and communication (formally and informally) with leaders of partner organisations, which facilitated follow-up and affirmed expectations. However, the process was not uniformly smooth. There were times where we had to step in to accelerate the completion of agreed deliverables with partners. This was observed with the long-term and a few short-term partnerships in particular. Regarding the long-term partnerships there were various instances where at the end of two or three year projects, WAE often continued working with the same partners on different projects; thus, partners may have taken it for granted that they would continue working with WAE after they completed the project in hand. In hindsight, the phase out process might have been smoother if WAE had normalised project phase out from *the beginning of its partnerships* by planning and implementing clear exit strategies. For the future, we have learned that it is important to consider exit strategies in projects with the government and other partners from the outset.

ASSESSING PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

The assessment of project sustainability was a bit more complex and required closer oversight and guidance from WAE. This is linked to the fact that sustainability of WASH investment is a sectoral challenge. The intent of the sustainability assessment was to ensure longevity of the WASH services through verification of the institutional, financial, technical and environmental sustainability components required for effective handover to local district government. The assessment was also used to identify learning, knowledge generation and innovation, and

increase programme effectiveness and impact. A sustainability checklist tool was prepared by WAE's management team² and covered four areas: institutional, financial/economic, environmental and technical sustainability. Although the tool was factored in at the project design stage and was expected to be part and parcel of project implementation, the main challenge was motivating partners to use the tool. In these cases, we had to provide direct support and/or lead some of the sustainability assessment and handover processes to ensure commitment to donors and communities were met. **Box 2** details some of the lessons learned which emerged from the exercise and will inform WaterAid's future programming.

BOX 2: LESSONS FROM USING A SUSTAINABILITY CHECKLIST

Institutional sustainability

It is important for partners to clearly design a mechanism by which stakeholders, especially the leading WASH stakeholders in the district, can be fully engaged in project implementation – and take over projects after phase out.

The legalisation of WASH committees would better ensure sustainability and transferal of WASH management responsibilities to the community.

Financial/economic sustainability

The establishment of revolving funds and local spare part shops would allow WASH committees to have better access to spare parts and decrease the rate of malfunctioning facilities.

All tariff-setting, i.e. prices for water supplied should be informed by counsel from district officers and technical experts and discussed and agreed by the community.

Technical sustainability

More work is needed on the soft components of project implementation (e.g. awareness creation) recognising that they are just as important as hard components (e.g. construction), particularly when it comes to cultivating good governance of WASH services and facilities.

Environmental sustainability

Partner projects were built with environmental sustainability in mind. Key methods such as terracing and planting fruit trees and other vegetation around the water source were used in order to protect the water at the source. However, given the climate variability Ethiopia faces, more consideration is required not only in source protection but also in restoration and recharge.

PHASING OUT

The separation from partners was not without its challenges. Although we clearly and consistently explained our motives and the need for phase out, it was challenging for many partners to understand and accept the organisation's reasoning. This was especially the case in long-term partnerships and because many had been mutually beneficial. It is partly for this reason that communication between WAE and partners was tense at times. Various one-to-one communication was required to finalise key project processes as per agreed timelines.

² See: <http://www.wateraid.org/~media/Publications/sustainability-framework.pdf>
INTRAC Praxis Series Paper No. 4

NEW AND EVOLVED WAYS OF WORKING

In order to facilitate its new ways of working after phase out, WAE has been piloting the District Wide Approach (DWA). The goal of the DWA is to bring about a holistic approach whereby different actors in the sector can join hands to create an environment for self-sustainable WASH services (**Annex 1**).

We have found that, as a unit of government, the district is a manageable and less bureaucratic space where we can affect noticeable change. The district level allows us to see development work from a more inter-sectoral view point – for example, the inextricable interdependence between the SDG target of universal access to WASH by 2030 and the goals for universal access to education, health, and so on.

In addition, some of the positive outcomes from the transition from local NGO partnerships towards working directly with government include:

- WAE now has **closer access to institutions that are responsible for delivering universal access to WASH, i.e. local district authorities**. The shift towards working with governments puts WAE in a better position to influence those who set the agenda and sector standards. We can build capacities and influence policies to achieve our sector strengthening agenda and our aim of universal WASH access.
- When **working closely with decision-makers**, there is **increased likelihood of uptake and scalability of our investment**. If we can demonstrate the viability, importance and benefits of our work we are more likely to see changes in these institutions.
- There is **closer accountability to communities** at the district level as we implement alongside one another.
- We now have **closer oversight of the quality of our work**, ensuring greater accountability and quality investments which will enable us to ensure our investments are sustainable.



Kenerian, six, collecting clean water at the new school water point. Geyi village, Mettu district.

BOX 3: SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP EXIT – THE IMPACT ON PARTNERS

One of WAE's partners with whom we reached over 7,500 users with water, 9,000 with sanitation and 20,000 with hygiene with a budget of 26 million Birr used the content of the partnership project to fundraise 67 million Birr to scale-up the project deliverables with another donor. This leveraged WAE's initial investment and the benefits much more widely; and demonstrates how partnerships can have far-reaching impacts even once they have finished.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This process has enabled WAE to generate a lot of valuable learning about partnership and transition in dynamic contexts. Recommendations to other INGOs include:

Recognise power relations in partnerships – we, as INGOs, must be conscious of our own behaviours and the power involved in sub-granting partnerships. We can strive to balance accountability and equity in the ways that we work with our partners. This means equity in interactions, enabling equal rights to be at the table, and validating contributions that are not measurable simply in terms of cash value or public profile.

Ensure mutual benefits – a healthy partnership needs to have advantages for both parties and collective gain. Only then will it be sustainable and effective.

Keep the end in mind – it is important to reflect on who we choose to work with, whether we invest in creating new networks or organisations, or whether we invest in what already exists. These decisions affect the ownership and sustainability of organisations. It is also important to understand why we choose to invest in a partnership. Are we partnering for partnering sake? Or are we doing it for meaningful, purposeful and shared gain? With long-term partners this can become blurred. It is useful to reassess this regularly and particularly when new grants become available.

Plan the exit from the beginning – know when the partnership has been completed and when it has achieved its desired impact. This needs to be decided from the beginning by setting clear expectations and assessed by tracking back to key milestones.

Periodically appraise and audit long-term partnerships to ensure consistency in accountability and programming quality. While maintaining long-term partnerships can enhance institutional memory and impact, this should not compromise diligence. It is important for the INGO at country office level to play a very hands-on role in appraising the quality of the WASH approaches, technologies and innovations, and what other actors are getting from the partnership.

Map out what each partner brings to the table – it is important to map out value gains, and review the resources that both parties bring to the table, including expertise, skills, finances, governance, and reputations. It is also critical to identify any gaps and do so in a transparent way.

Fully engage with stakeholders at all levels – we must be clear about the expectations of the community and government from start to finish, ensuring the smooth handover and sustainability of the intervention. INGOs mustn't leave this all to partners or be too hands-off – we are accountable at all levels and are responsible for the organisation's brand, reputation and credibility.

Remember: there is no perfect partner, WaterAid included! INGOs and partners have a lot to learn from each other – particularly now that development actors must show how central WASH is to wider human development in line with the SDGs.

REFERENCES AND USEFUL RESOURCES

REFERENCES

WaterAid. [Building the systems for sustainable services: Ethiopia Country Strategy 2016-2021](#).

WaterAid. [Everyone, Everywhere 2030. WaterAid's Global Strategy 2015-2020](#).

WaterAid. 2011. [Sustainability Framework](#).

FURTHER READING

Brehm, V.B with Harris-Curtis, E., Padrao, L. and Tanner, M. 2004. [Autonomy or Dependence? Case studies of North-South NGO Partnerships](#). INTRAC: Oxford.

Hayman, R. and Pratt, B., eds. 2016. [Civil society sustainability: facing up to new challenges in organisational legitimacy, credibility, and viability \(Special Issue\)](#). Development in Practice, 26(5): 527-680.

Mengistu, B., Rakoto-Harisoa, R., Traore, A., Mustafa, S., Mitole, W., Keatman, T., Crichton-Smith, H., Gosling, L. and Battle, C. 2017, forthcoming. Learning note on working with government: lessons in partnership for sector strengthening. WaterAid.

USEFUL WEBSITES

INTRAC aid withdrawal and exit strategies

<https://www.intrac.org/projects/aid-withdrawal-exit-strategies/>

INTRAC civil society sustainability

<https://www.intrac.org/what-we-do/civil-society-sustainability/>

WaterAid Ethiopia sustainability

<http://www.wateraid.org/uk/where-we-work/page/ethiopia>

ANNEX 1: KEY LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTING THE DISTRICT WIDE APPROACH IN ETHIOPIA

BY BETHLEHEM MENGISTU, WATERAID, 2017



Ebise, 11, is happy she will not have to go up the hill to get water. Negeza, Liben Gamo, West Shewa, Oromia.

THE 3 W'S AND HOW TO UNPACKING DWA

What

The District Wide Approach (DWA) has been piloted over the past year by WaterAid Ethiopia to draw practical lessons that will help develop the approach further and concretize our thinking. During this period we have made a number of mistakes, but we have also learnt from the process that the approach must be contextualized and not looked at as a one-size-fits-all model. We believe that DWA is a better, not easier or cheaper, way to ensure universal access at the district level. We believe so because the district, as a unit of government, is a manageable and less bureaucratic space where we can effect noticeable change by looking at development work from a more inter-sectoral view point – for example, the inextricable interdependence between the goals for universal access to WASH and goals for universal access to education, health, etc.

As our ambition is one of a lasting and holistic change, we want to see over the next five years an approach that enhances government leadership, strengthens country systems and holds service providers to account for responsive services that sustainably reach everyone everywhere.

Thanks to guiding programmes such as the One WASH National Program (OWNP), government efforts at all levels are being harmonised and all actors agree on one common system – from planning through procurement and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. However, even with the institutional architecture in place, there is considerable variance in how effectively it is working and systems for coordination, planning, and budgeting are not uniform across different

levels of government. At lower levels of government, for example, knowledge on the OWNP implementation systems is still inadequate.

Where

It is within this context that we tested the DWA in one of our areas of operation – Burie district, in West Gojjam, of Amhara Region.

Why

The goal of the DWA is to bring about a holistic approach whereby different actors in the sector can join hands to create an environment for self-sustainable WASH services.

How

Key steps followed were:

- i. Pre-pilot analysis – the team spent time in the district to analyse and discuss the District Development Plan (of which WASH is a part). During this time, our team, along with the district government representative, looked at the plan, mapped out the investment of all stakeholders towards that plan (including WaterAid Ethiopia’s contribution), the bottlenecks challenging the effectiveness of the WASH sector, and discussed roles and accountabilities (power mapping) as well as the systems and processes.
- ii. WaterAid Ethiopia’s internal reflection – after the field level analysis, the team reconvened for a country programme-wide consultation to review and examine the field level findings and also articulate and develop WaterAid Ethiopia’s DWA Guide/Framework, and an annual action plan to guide the pilot.
- iii. Launching of DWA in Burie – the launch attracted more than 100 participants including parliamentarians and district development actors from different sectors and the community. Representatives from the National WASH Coordination Office were also present to help participants understand the role of the Office and the implications of the OWNP.
- iv. After the launch of DWA, with our technical support, the district drafted and signed the ‘**Team of Charter**’ (ToC). The ToC brought together government and non-government organisations (including UNICEF, SNV, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Deutsche Stiftung Weltbevölkerung, iDE, Facilitator for Change etc.) working in Burie district into one accountability platform. The intent of the ToC is to facilitate coordination, harmonisation and efficient use of resources in WASH and other sectors. It was prepared by the local government and signed by majority of the WASH actors operating in the district.

LESSONS FROM THE PROCESS

Key principles and lessons from the piloting of the DWA are as follows:

- i. Recognition of the district’s role and leadership is key – it is important for WaterAid to play the role of facilitator and catalyst rather than leader of change. Our intent is not to take over the State’s responsibility for delivery of services to its people, but rather to help the government redefine and strengthen its own leadership.
- ii. Strengthening accountability amongst development actors in the district – universal access to WASH will only be realised if all sectors are aiming towards similar results, with an emphasis on generating holistic results for development. Universal access to WASH will not be meaningful without universal access to education, health, etc. As such WaterAid can utilise the DWA to promote shared accountability amongst development

actors in the district, including the community who should hold performance to account over time.

- iii. Improving WaterAid's own understanding of decentralisation – the effectiveness of decentralised governance directly affects the provision of basic services. DWA offers a great opportunity to test the effectiveness of decentralisation as an approach. As such the aim is not to create islands of success in selected districts, and then replicate these elsewhere. It is rather to use selected districts as change nuclei in a complex, multi-dimensional development system.

Remember

The DWA and programmatic approach (PA) are not one and the same. DWA is a tool which draws principles from, and operationalises, the PA at the district level. The PA is an overarching approach that packages WaterAid's work at all levels.

The amount of time and resources required should not be underestimated. A considerable amount of time was needed to understand the district dynamics and to bring the government on board. Proper roll out of DWA requires WaterAid's direct presence at the district. For this reason, part of the process entails technical support provision, coaching and mentoring to establish and strengthen systems. Systems cannot be built from afar, but from within. This required WaterAid Ethiopia to look at its own systems and ways of working.

WHAT WILL SUCCESS LOOK LIKE BY 2021?

Our exit from the district is determined by the presence of a self-sustaining, self-regulating and self-financing sector.

Key initial indicators of an effective district WASH system via the DWA:

- A district WASH plan that draws from the OWNP
- All WASH stakeholders in the district contributing to this plan
- A district WASH plan that is drafted against actual needs, is costed and developed in a consultative process where partners participate
- A clear baseline showing the district WASH status
- The presence of a well-resourced district coordination mechanism
- The presence of a monitoring system that tracks WASH assets, levels of service, quality and financing, which is able to inform planning and decision making.

For further information on WaterAid Ethiopia's programmes and innovations please contact:

Bethlehem Mengistu
Country Director
WaterAid Ethiopia
Bethlehemmengistu@wateraid.org

Or

Manaye Siyoum
Head of WASH
WaterAid Ethiopia
ManayeSiyoum@wateraid.org



INTRAC is a company limited
by guarantee No.2663769,
Registered in England;
Registered Charity No.
1016676