

# **Making systems work: Local government approaches to improving WASH service delivery in Malawi**

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## **Abstract/Summary**

District government water offices in Malawi face significant financial barriers to delivering WASH services at scale. Government budgets are constrained, and the few resources that reach the district level are often under-utilized. This paper sheds light on some of the key systemic barriers to improved WASH service delivery in Malawi and shares examples from district government water offices of innovations developed to sustain service delivery with limited resources. Common approaches that have emerged can be clustered into three main categories: designing systems within district government resource constraints; supporting community structures in management roles; and building strong district teams. Insights on these innovative approaches have proven useful for both district level government to manage in a resource constrained context, as well as for NGOs implementing projects that integrate aspects of institutional sustainability.

## **Introduction**

Despite years of investment in water provision through installation of shallow wells, taps, and boreholes, national estimates indicate that approximately 27% of rural water points are non-functional in Malawi (Government of Malawi, 2016). This functionality gap can be largely attributed to a lack of timely operation and maintenance of facilities. In the early 1990s, decentralisation policy stated that the responsibility for ensuring rural water points are maintained would lie with the district government water offices (Government of Malawi, 1998). However, the current average monthly operational budget of district government water offices is the equivalent of about \$400 USD (Government of Malawi, 2015), which can be hardly enough to cover office rental, utilities, and vehicle maintenance, leaving very few funds for fuel or other activity costs. A community based management (CBM) approach was adopted in an attempt to mitigate many of the resource challenges faced by government in providing maintenance services to rural areas. This approach has faced many challenges, including low functionality of water point committees (Chowns, 2014).

While recognizing that a lack of resources is indeed a major restricting factor in the level of services that district government offices are able to provide, it is often used as a scape goat for not making concerted efforts to improve service delivery. On top of purely financial limitations, there are a number of key systemic challenges that face district government water offices that are contributing to the continued plague of low functionality and failing CBM systems. These include, but are not limited to:

- prioritization of project implementation activities over routine management activities;
- systems that are not set up within resource constraints;
- poor support and mentorship of community-based management structures;
- poor coordination of NGO approaches at district level;
- lack of teamwork within water offices; and

- a pre-occupation with technical skills development that overlooks building important management capacities of permanent stakeholders.

This paper will describe some of the approaches that various district government water offices have taken to address these systemic challenges in the effort to improve WASH service delivery in Malawi.

### **Context, aims and activities undertaken**

Since 2008, WASH Catalysts, a venture of Engineers Without Borders Canada, has been working to shift the WASH sector in Malawi from a projectized to a service delivery approach. Our mandate has been to strengthen the country systems that create the enabling environment for improved WASH service delivery, working primarily with national and district level government as the primary duty bearers in the sector. As a result, our staff have collectively spent several years embedded in district government water offices building an understanding of the main challenges and emerging positive approaches to improving WASH service delivery in rural areas. Current areas of focus include institutionalizing a Water Sector Wide Approach; advocating for increased devolution of funds to district government water offices; improving project design for institutional sustainability; and developing a network of district government innovators for low-cost approaches to service delivery.

Over the last two years, we have been running a unique fellowship program that encourages financially stretched district government water offices to make creative use of their existing resources to fulfill important routine activities that support operation and maintenance of community water points. As part of the fellowship program, district government water offices are invited to apply to WASH Catalysts with innovative approaches they have for improving rural WASH service delivery in their areas.

The overarching design constraint for submissions to this fellowship is that the idea must be implemented within the existing recurring government budget of their offices. Once accepted into the program, WASH Catalysts provides thought partnership to further develop the innovative idea, as well as an embedded staff member in the water office for a period of 4 months to support the pilot of the proposed approach. We do not provide any financial support to get the idea off the ground. After the initial pilot, we periodically bring together all the districts that are part of the program to share and learn from each other, and a WASH Catalysts staff member will travel to the district to provide follow up support to overcome any new implementation barriers.

### **Main results and lessons learnt**

The implementation of the fellowship program has encouraged district government offices to generate practical solutions for improving rural WASH service delivery using existing resources. Since the inception of the fellowship program in 2014, fourteen of the twenty-eight districts in Malawi have been inducted into the network. There have been quarterly peer-to-peer learning forums for fellows to share successes and challenges faced, as well as building the relationships between fellow districts. A number of promising approaches have emerged in response to the key systemic challenges that are not only useful for district government water offices, but a number of NGO projects have found these approaches helpful when considering designing their projects with better sustainability. Many of the emerging approaches relate to designing systems within resource constraints, supporting community structures in management roles, as well as building stronger teams. Some examples of approaches are highlighted below:

#### **1) Designing systems within district government resource constraints**

The management of any system in the absence of a project will have to stand on the budget of the government, no matter how meagre this budget may be. To fit within resource constraints, many districts have come up with approaches to budget for alternative lower-cost materials and methods.

- In Nkhata Bay district, the fuel budget for extension staff allowed only 8 trips to the field in a month but the district had over 40 hand pump mechanics to meet with in the same time period. They re-designed their system to meet mechanics in groups and to use public transportation when possible rather than buying fuel for every field trip.
- In Nkhotakota district, the water office has started buying cheap school exercise notebooks to capture routine monitoring of water point functionality instead of printing costly data collection forms. They copy the questions over from the previous page each month and then fill in the updated data.

## 2) Supporting community structures in management roles

Resource constrained systems naturally encourage community based management approaches as a theoretically more manageable system. However, strong monitoring and follow up support to community structures such as hand pump mechanics and water point committees is essential for this approach to be effective.

To better support hand pump mechanics, many offices have developed ways of keeping in regular communication with the mechanics, providing mentorship to overcome technical challenges or community conflicts, and raising awareness about the mechanics at community level.

- In Mzimba district, the water office prepares letters for the district Heads of churches to disseminate information about hand pump mechanics through their church communication lines. The letters include a flyer on the roles and responsibilities of the mechanics and their contact information.
- In Mulanje district, community police groups were identified as a means to distribute hand pump mechanic contact information and terms of service to communities, which can help to bolster the profile and trust of the mechanics in communities.

One of the challenges in supporting individual water point committees is that they are so numerous. In Malawi, a single district will have upwards of two thousand water points to monitor with only limited staff and resources. Working closely with these groups has been a useful way to extend the reach of the water office without having to travel to every single water user.

- In Machinga district, the office leveraged the 14 Area Development Committees as a network to increase the reach of the district government water office. The district negotiated a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with each Area Development Committee to have them act as liaisons between the district and hand pump mechanics and water point committees in their respective areas.
- In Nkhotakota district, Area Development Committees visit water point committees in their area monthly, facilitate water point repairs, mediate community water issues, and submit reports to the water office. The district government water office stays in regular contact with the Committees and provides technical support on an as-needed basis.

## 3) Building strong district teams

When district government water office staff are brought into and share a common vision, it is easier for them to support each other in achieving individual outcomes. The implementation of WASH infrastructure often focuses on building the technical capacity of permanent stakeholders, or even contracting out these technical jobs, and avoids addressing the management and operations skills required to function as service authorities. Building non-technical skills of extension workers in facilitation, management, and conflict management through projects can

improve community interactions.

- In Nkhata Bay district, extension staff submit pieces of the budget relevant to their work to the overall budget for the office. This helps increase ownership over the work and increases accuracy of the budget as extension staff have a good idea of resource requirements for fieldwork.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Improving rural WASH service delivery by permanent institutions takes careful consideration of the resource envelope, planning for support of community structures, building strong district offices, and ensuring that NGO approaches are aligned with each other and with government. The simple innovations outlined in this paper are the result of a concerted effort by district staff to understand the implications of their office's role in sustaining services, and by taking steps to make their operations more efficient. With non-financial support, WASH Catalysts Malawi has been able to collaborate with district government water offices by offering thought partnership and change management process support. By working with as many district offices as possible, we will be able to build a growing majority of districts in Malawi who are thinking critically about how their office can effectively manage WASH service delivery using existing resources. It also shows NGOs and partners working at district level that there are tangible ways to improve sustainability of services through focusing on permanent institutions and the budget available to them in the long term.

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