

# REFLECTIONS

## LESSONS FROM EVALUATIONS:

### ENSURING ACCESS TO SAFE AND CLEAN WATER RESOURCES

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#### INTRODUCTION

Economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection must go hand in hand to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Access to safe water is a recognized human right and subject to dedicated targets within the SDGs. However, most, especially vulnerable groups' limited access to water is rooted in power, poverty, and inequality, which is aggravated by climate change and poor water governance.<sup>1</sup> As a central actor in the United Nations Development System, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supports both the delivery of water supply as well as the governance and policy reforms for equitable water access.

To inform future initiatives, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) has undertaken a review of lessons from past evaluations of UNDP's initiatives for ensuring access to safe and clean water resources. The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence-based advice to UNDP country offices on 'what works' (or doesn't) and 'how' regarding the design and implementation of such programmes.

#### METHODOLOGY

This is a rapid evidence assessment<sup>2</sup> designed to provide a balanced synthesis of evaluative evidence posted to the [UNDP Evaluation Resource Centre](#) over the past decade. In addition, UNDP IEO's Artificial Intelligence for Development Analysis (AIDA) prototype was piloted to identify relevant documents for inclusion. Country-level evaluations conducted by the IEO were an important source, given their independence and high credibility. High-quality decentralized evaluations commissioned by country offices were considered. Additional resources were included, such as evaluations of UNDP water-related programmes commissioned by donors and/or implementing partners, and evaluation syntheses. Within each review, the emphasis was on identifying consistent findings, conclusions, and recommendations that capture relevant lessons for UNDP. The analysis seeks to offer practical and timely insights to support effective UNDP decision-making. It is not a comprehensive study of the general and scientific literature. The lessons draw broadly on eight

independent country programme evaluations, 29 decentralized evaluations, three assessments of development results, and eight other evaluations.

## CONTEXT

Water should be sufficient, safe, acceptable and physically accessible, and affordable for personal and domestic uses.<sup>3</sup> Water is a basic human need for survival, a human right, and a core commodity for developing societies. In a 2018 synthesis report,<sup>4</sup> the United Nations noted that water is central to achieving the SDGs.<sup>5</sup> It is a precursor to most, if not all, SDG targets and a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights. Water threads together the interaction of society, the environment, economy, and peace. However, the world is off-track to meet SDG Goal 6, "to ensure availability and sustainable management of water (and sanitation) for all". In fact, about 2 billion (or 26 percent) of the world's population still lack safely managed drinking water services. Only 14 out of 109 countries have reported having high participation levels of communities in water and sanitation decision-making.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted some compounding impacts brought by lack of access to water, such as high transmission of the virus leading to an increase in mortality.

In 2020, the SDG 6 Global Acceleration Framework was launched with the aim of closing gaps in pursuing SDG 6. The framework identified five key accelerators for SDGs. These are (1) optimizing financing, (2) improving data and information, (3) bolstering capacity and development, (4) boosting innovation, and (5) strengthening governance. UNDP contributes to these accelerators through the implementation of water-related programmes and activities such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and Water and Sanitation (WaSH). In this paper, UNDP IEO has identified six key lessons from a decade of implementing programmes to support access, delivery, and governance of water resources.

## AT A GLANCE – LESSONS LEARNED

1

**Strengthening citizens' participation in water governance increases revenues, accountability, and integrity in the water sector and is a mechanism to enhance access for vulnerable groups.**

2

**Improving the cost recovery of water delivery services benefits the end users, strengthens the system's sustainability, and frees it from reliance on external subsidies.**

3

**Water management benefits from decentralized implementation modalities with facilitators on the ground that help to contextualize and tailor programme design and implementation to local needs and practices.**

4

**Large and complex joint water programmes benefit from the aggregation of comparative strengths of UN agencies, bringing different methodologies and diverse counterparts to engage on a multidimensional issue.**

5

**Water governance that is agile and flexible for national and subnational implementation accelerates the achievement of SDG 6 targets.**

6

**Programme coherence between Integrated Water Resource Management and Water and Sanitation programmes creates positive synergies to improve the water sector.**

## LESSONS LEARNED

### **1 Strengthening citizens' participation in water governance increases revenues, accountability, and integrity in the water sector and is a mechanism to enhance access for vulnerable groups.**

Good water governance plays a crucial role in the equitable access and delivery of water. Inclusive water governance enables the active participation of diverse stakeholders in identifying and solving challenges and is more transformative. Successful WaSH programmes tend to have voluntary water governance committees composed of consumers, civil society, water utility companies, business owners, and the government (i.e., Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mongolia, Pacific Islands).<sup>7</sup>

The role of water governance is to ensure that there is a collaborative effort to improve the performance of the water sector. This collaboration includes public, private, international, national, and voluntary organizations working under conducive legal regulations.<sup>8</sup> In Palestine<sup>9</sup> and Tajikistan,<sup>10</sup> by increasing participation, access to information, and involvement in the implementation of various stakeholders, the demand for accountability and integrity also increased.

There needs to be a balance between the economic and business sides with affordability and access to water, especially with vulnerable groups that have fewer resources. By having a seat at the decision-making table in water governance committees, citizens are able to voice their concerns directly with other actors in the water supply chain. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mongolia, and Sierra Leone, water utility companies, as members of the water committees, were able to hear the customers' issues and suggestions, especially the poor and vulnerable. In turn, water utility companies were able to tailor their responses. Furthermore, the interaction between the citizens, water utility companies, and the government may help identify vulnerable groups. In some settings, citizens' committees developed nuanced vulnerability criteria aimed at identifying those that cannot afford water services. This facilitated direct social assistance to those in need.<sup>11</sup>

Building capacities on water governance, supplemented by technical and business skills at the institutional and individual levels, improve the economic sustainability of programmes. In Mongolia, Sierra Leone<sup>12</sup> and Uzbekistan, individuals with skills related to the newly developed water systems maintenance created a pool of technicians that were able to work across the water supply chain. In Yemen,<sup>13</sup> the local productive capacities of small and medium enterprises were improved to assist in the rehabilitation of the water sector. In Uzbekistan, the support to the agribusiness sector drove the customer demand for improvement of the water-related services. In the Pacific, building the capacities of local communities created a set of new programme managers that added to the limited talent pool in the region, which helped to scale and replicate good practices.

### **2 Improving the cost recovery of water delivery services benefits the end users, strengthens the system's sustainability, and frees it from reliance on external subsidies.**

Water is both a human right as well as a commodity that needs to be managed. Evaluative evidence shows that the most effective and sustainable water access and delivery programmes are also profitable and financially stable. (i.e., Mongolia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Palestine, and Tajikistan).<sup>14</sup> Diversifying financial resources is a critical element to improve and sustain water-related services, especially those at an early stage of development. In successful programmes, the primary

source of funding is water tariffs. UNDP programme funds and other financial resources, including government subsidies, were important complementary sources. For example, in Uzbekistan and Mongolia, the government complemented the budget of water utility companies. While in some countries, large private companies provided funds to access to water projects through Corporate Social Responsibility (i.e., Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan).<sup>15</sup>

Successful programmes showed that improving water-related services encourage the customers to pay the water tariffs (or additional water tariffs). Water taxes are used to improve the water supply and delivery chain. Also, at the onset of programmes, the actual cost of distributing water to individuals was calculated to guide levies applied to water distribution services and use. Knowing the actual cost of water production and delivery prevents undervaluing water-related service costs. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, action plans for tariff structure were developed based on the valuation of the water-related services up to the municipality level. In addition, the capacities of utility providers in maintenance work and customer relations were increased. This led to increased funds and technical skills to operate, maintain and improve the water service system. This, in turn, raised consumers' satisfaction and motivation to pay. This chain of results led to reduced financial losses by the water utility providers and lessened the need to raise future tariffs, which benefited the consumers.

Going below the cost-recovery margin negatively affects the sustainability of water-delivery systems by building reliance on subsidies or external programme funding. It also encourages inefficient water use by the end users and reduces ownership (i.e., Angola<sup>16</sup>). Effective programmes include the cost of repairs, replacements, and upgrading for operation and maintenance at the design phase. Otherwise, infrastructure were only operational within the programme's life span (i.e., Angola, Mongolia, Uzbekistan).<sup>17</sup>

### **3 Water management benefits from decentralized implementation modalities with facilitators on the ground that help to contextualize and tailor programme design and implementation to local needs and practices.**

Water-related issues are very context-specific. Hence, the operational approach in implementing such programmes should be tailored to the local conditions. The most common variable across successful programmes was a strong facilitator or Programme Implementation Unit on the ground (i.e., Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Angola, Maldives, Mongolia, Pacific Islands, Philippines, Sierra Leone, and Tajikistan).<sup>18</sup> Owing to a local Programme Implementation Unit, it was easier to integrate traditional knowledge into the programmes and facilitate exchanges across different programmes sites. In Mongolia, indigenous techniques of constructing dry wells and snow water harvest to address prolonged dry seasons were introduced, which link to the culture of revolving pasture. In Sierra Leone, community buy-in to the water programme was anchored in integrating traditional water governance beliefs and traditions in managing newly built water infrastructure.

Local facilitators were able to transform water projects into platforms to discuss community-level developmental issues. This helped communities connect water with other essential topics such as livelihoods, peace, security, etc., and appreciate a systems perspective in moving towards their development agenda.<sup>19</sup> In Mongolia, the lack of livelihood alternatives forced communities to unsustainable practices such as coal and wood burning, overgrazing, and insufficient water and soil management, which hastened environmental degradation. Unearthing the core problem and targeting activities to address the underlying issue (livelihood) showed that locals were more than willing to adopt ecologically friendlier practices to improve their water supply.

## **4 Large and complex joint water programmes benefit from the aggregation of comparative strengths of UN agencies, bringing different methodologies and diverse counterparts to engage on a multidimensional issue.**

Joint programming on water brings out the comparative strengths of each UN agency in implementing water-related programmes, such as medium to highly complex WaSH programmes (i.e., Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Maldives, Mongolia, Pacific Islands, Philippines, Tajikistan).<sup>20</sup> In Angola, UNDP's strong engagement at the ministerial level worked hand-in-hand with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 's robust work with civil society. This led to synergistic work at downstream and upstream policy junctures, strengthening of the national water and sanitation policy framework. Bringing in different ministries as partners in joint programming also promotes a multidimensional approach. In Mongolia,<sup>21</sup> UNDP's entry point was its partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Green Development and the Ministry of Construction and Urban Development, while UNICEF's entry point was with the Ministry of Education. The joint programme helped create new synergies with various ministries around water issues. In addition, having diverse actors led to improved stakeholder cohesion, increased oversight, and enhanced the programme's accountability and oversight. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, joint programming on WaSH involving UNDP, UNICEF, and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) attracted additional co-funding.

In operationalizing a joint programme, UN agencies coordinated yet individualized implementation of programme components is more effective than implementation through pooled funding. Using the preferred programme implementation modality that is befitting each UN agency's operational strength was vital to the successful implementation of joint programme components. Parallel implementation also decreases the transaction costs of installing common pooled resources and management (i.e., Iraq and Mongolia). In a joint WaSH programme in Angola, UNDP, International Organization for Migration, and International Labour Organization took advantage of their strong working relationship with the government and used a national implementation modality. In the same joint programme, UNICEF used civil society implementing partners. Individual UN agencies used their own operation and financial systems, which allowed the programme to be delivered efficiently. A dedicated coordinator managing the synergies in a joint programme was also seen as a critical element in the joint programme's success. It is important to note that a prerequisite to this lesson is that the government being assisted has a larger project absorptive capacity and considerable manpower, which is not the case in Small Island Developing States.<sup>22</sup> In the Pacific, rather than joint programming, Joint Presence Offices with UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (which has been dismantled since 2018) were used as vehicles in delivering water-related programmes in more isolated and smaller countries/territories (i.e., Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu).<sup>23</sup>

By engaging in joint programming on water, methodologies honed by various UN agencies achieve broader adoption (mainstreamed, replicated, scaled, and sustained). Examples include the “Governance, Advocacy, and Leadership in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene” (GoAL WaSH), which highlights UNDP's comparative advantage in governance work and the approaches developed in Every Drop Matters – a partnership with UNDP and the Coca Cola Company which promoted responsible water management (i.e., Armenia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Nepal, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan).<sup>24</sup>

## **5 An agile approach to water governance that is flexible for national and subnational implementation accelerates the achievement of SDG 6 targets.**

Established in 2008, the UNDP GoAL WaSH<sup>25</sup> hoped to accelerate the achievement of the water and sanitation targets of the Millennium Development Goals and ultimately of the Sustainable Development Goals through reforms in water governance.<sup>26,27</sup> The general approach of GoAL WaSH allows it to tailor itself to the country's needs. These include, "1) *Identifying the gaps, needs, constraints, and opportunities in national water and sanitation plans, strategies and capacities, 2) supporting development and reform of action plans, policies, laws, coordinating mechanisms and regulatory functions and, 3) supporting the implementation with accountability and transparency*". GoAL WaSH has developed numerous guidelines and case studies, such as creating Vulnerability Criteria, which can be applied in various contexts.

To respond to specific country needs, the GoAL WaSH *modus operandi* was applied both at the national and community level. In Liberia, it supported the establishment of a regulatory agency for the water supply and sanitation sector. In Paraguay, the GoAL WaSH strengthened service delivery capacities at the municipality level, including urban, rural, and indigenous communities. In El Salvador, the national and local levels of interventions were combined. Initially, the GoAL WaSH supported government capacities to develop and implement a new regulatory and institutional framework for water supply and sanitation and supported the dialogues toward enacting a national water law. Despite these efforts, the process of water sector reform became highly politicized, and the reform has not been adopted. In the subsequent stage, the GoAL WaSH was refocused on the subnational level. In the Torola river basin, it supported local actors to establish mechanisms for improved transparency, accountability, and efficiency in water management at the local level. It successfully raised greater participation and involvement of local actors in the issue. This resulted in increased economic contribution from the regional municipalities to improve local water conditions, which eventually surpassed the support given by the project, approximately tripling the original investment.

## **6 Programme coherence between Integrated Water Resource Management and Water and Sanitation programmes creates positive synergies to improve the water sector.**

To provide access to sufficient quantities of quality water (WaSH approach), management of water sources such as aquifers, rivers, and watersheds is essential (IWRM approach). Likewise, waste and pollution could severely affect water quality and sources if sanitation and hygiene are not factored into WaSH programming. A 2021 SDG 6 synthesis<sup>28</sup> of 90 evaluation reports across several UN agencies noted that UNDP's IWRM programmes were usually aimed at government and coherent with agriculture and climate change results. Though overlaps exist between IWRM and WaSH programmes, most WaSH programmes were directed at community-level beneficiaries and were coherent with health outcomes.

Working simultaneously from the policy level and with beneficiaries allows for a holistic approach to water issues. In the case of the Pacific Islands, an integrated WaSH and IWRM programme benefited from the upstream (IWRM) and downstream (WaSH) experience of UNDP to deliver water-related outcomes. In Fiji, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu,<sup>29</sup> WaSH targets and implementation plans were mainstreamed at the national level and were given equal importance alongside IWRM strategies (i.e., watershed management, National IWRM Strategy). By integrating WaSH programme components with comparably well-funded IWRM programmes, access to quality water was improved (i.e., Pacific Islands, Slovakia, Uzbekistan).<sup>30</sup>

Because the scope of an IWRM programme is wide and often transboundary, it produces a vast amount of data that could serve as a baseline or value addition to WaSH programmes (i.e., Cambodia, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, Niger, Pacific Islands, Slovakia, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).<sup>31</sup> Successful WaSH programmes dovetailed on the data produced by IWRM programmes, such as identification of vulnerable communities and gender issues generated by IWRM programmes.

In Cambodia, strategic studies were conducted under IWRM programmes such as a Vulnerability Reduction Assessment, Rapid Gender Assessment, and Village Situation Analysis. The Rapid Gender Assessment contributed to the design of water-related activities with differentiated approaches for men and women. In Israel, Jordan, and Palestine, Climate Vulnerability Assessments were conducted focusing on agriculture, human consumption, extreme floods, and drought and wetland ecosystems. Similarly, some IWRM programmes developed voluntary water groups which have implemented WaSH activities (i.e., Cambodia, Niger, and Palestine).

Water collection relates to women's household work and is intrinsically tied with gender equality and women's empowerment. UNDP has paid limited attention to document outcomes related to gender and water. Most documented gender-related results were in IWRM and less in WaSH programmes. There has been a general lack of explicit lessons about gender equality and women's empowerment related to water evaluations.<sup>32</sup> Instead, it has been mainly folded into social inclusion programming (i.e., youth and other vulnerable groups) directed toward their participation in water governance.

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<sup>2</sup> Rapid evidence assessment (REA) is a process of bringing together information and knowledge from a range of sources to inform debates and urgent policy decisions on specific issues. Like better-known systematic reviews, REAs synthesize the findings of single studies following a standard protocol but do not analyse the full literature on a topic: REAs make concessions in relation to the breadth, depth, and comprehensiveness of the search to produce a quicker result.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 15, 2002.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goal 6 Synthesis Report 2018 on Water and Sanitation', United Nations, 2018, <https://www.unwater.org/publications/sdg-6-synthesis-report-2018-on-water-and-sanitation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sustainable Development Goal 6 ("Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all") and its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goal Target 7.C ("Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation") set out ambitious goals with clear indicators to track progress towards equitable access to water and sanitation.

<sup>6</sup> UN-Water, 'Summary Progress Update 2021 – SDG 6 – water and sanitation for all, Version: July 2021', UN-Water, 2021, <https://www.unwater.org/publications/summary-progress-update-2021-sdg-6-water-and-sanitation-for-all/>.

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<sup>9</sup> Soussan, J., 'Evaluation of UNDP's Water and Ocean Governance Programme', 2013.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, 'Independent Country Programme Evaluation: Tajikistan', UNDP, 2019, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/evaluations/detail/12565>.

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<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that there were more significant gender-related lessons on water before 2010. This synthesis covers 2010-2020.

#### ABOUT THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OFFICE

By generating objective evidence, the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) supports UNDP to achieve greater accountability and facilitates improved learning from experience. The IEO enhances UNDP's development effectiveness through its programmatic and thematic evaluations and contributes to organizational transparency.

#### ABOUT REFLECTIONS

The IEO's *Reflections* series looks into past evaluations and captures lessons learned from UNDP's work across its programmes. It mobilizes evaluative knowledge to provide valuable insights for improved decision-making and better development results. This edition highlights lessons from evaluations of UNDP response towards keeping people out of poverty.