

RESEARCH BRIEF:

AMPLIFYING LOCAL VOICES TO REDUCE FAILURE IN THE WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SECTOR

LED BY:

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

There needs to be a culture shift towards greater responsibility, and particularly shared accountability, for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) failures and challenges. Participants made three suggestions:

- 1 **Create cross-organisational platforms for sharing** – in-person organised forums for discussion of challenges and failures between organisations in a similar geographical area or with a similar project focus;
- 2 **Improve coordination between organisations** – by improving communication between partner organisations, including government departments, greater transparency would increase the sense of shared responsibility for project outcomes, and hence increase the likelihood of failures being discussed;
- 3 **Change the role of the funder** – Funders have a large influence on how projects are planned and executed and should encourage flexibility in project planning to allow change in the face of failure, and encourage openness through mandating the reporting of challenges and failures.

BACKGROUND:

WASH endeavours regularly fail. Sometimes this means that entire programmes do not achieve their stated aims, sometimes these failures are setbacks which can be rectified with sufficient reflection and action.

This research aimed to develop an evidence base of how and why field-based WASH professionals in four sub-Saharan African countries believe failures occur, their experiences when sharing and discussing them within their organisations, and how they believe a culture conducive to publicly sharing and learning from failures could be nurtured.

RESEARCH APPROACH:

108 field-based WASH professionals from Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe were interviewed. Individuals were recruited through purposive sampling and represented local private, public, non-governmental, and academic stakeholders in WASH.

Required approvals to conduct the research were granted by University of Leeds and local human research ethics committees.



KEY FINDINGS:

Participants identified seven main causes of failures in WASH projects:

- 1 **Politics and bureaucracy**, including a lack of political will to invest in WASH, bureaucracy that slows or stops projects from moving forward, or populism which results in only projects that “look good” politically being implemented.
- 2 **Unrealistic funder expectations** which, combined with a competitive funding environment means that organisations find themselves overpromising in terms of activity and timelines, and reluctant to report problems as they arise;
- 3 **Poor coordination and communication** between WASH actors, particularly government stakeholders, results in confusion, duplication, or issues being overlooked
- 4 **A 'project mentality'** meant that interventions had a short-term focus resulting in activities being rushed, monitoring and evaluation happening only at the end of a project, and poor integration and embedding of interventions into existing operational activities;
- 5 **Idealistic planning**, such that there often is insufficient time or budget to properly conduct needs assessments, operation and maintenance, or monitoring and evaluation. The most commonly cited failure was a lack of project sustainability after initial funding had ended;
- 6 **Inadequate community engagement**, which was tokenistic, inadequate, or poorly timed, resulted in the implementation of projects that are inappropriate for the context or do not address the priority needs of the community
- 7 **Insufficient capacity**, ranging from a lack of formal training at multiple organisational levels, to a lack of authority for field-based WASH professionals to respond to challenges;

Amongst peers (professionals in similar roles in the same organisation), sharing of failures and challenges is common. However, this often does not extend to staff at higher levels within the organisation, or with staff at partner organisations.

There is an assumption that blame must be apportioned for failures and the “size” of the potential blame impacts on what failures are shared, with smaller, easily rectified failures being shared more willingly than larger, more complex failures. In organisations that rely on donor funding, there is a perception that discussing failures will lead to a curtailment of funding. This reduces willingness to share failures, although it is seen that discussing ‘challenges’ is an acceptable and necessary part of reporting.

ARE YOU A WASH PROFESSIONAL?

Take the pledge to promote a culture of sharing and adaptation in the WASH sector by signing The Nakuru Accord:

<https://leeds.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/nakuru>

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on this project, please contact the Principal Investigator, Dr Dani Barrington (dani.barrington@uwa.edu.au), and remember to follow the WASH Failures Twitter account: @FSM_Fail.

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