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Strategic Directions for WASH Systems Strengthening in the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025

SUMMARY

To meet the SDG WASH targets it is now widely recognised as essential to have strong systems to support the delivery of WASH services and goods 'for all', everywhere, and forever. For WASH, the system is the institutional structure, policies, regulations, plans, procedures, standards, and monitoring and review mechanisms which form the basis for the provision of WASH services. An intentional shift to systems strengthening was initiated in UNICEF's WASH Strategy 2016-2030 and subsequently has been strongly emphasised in UNICEF's previous (2018-2021) and the new (2022-2025) strategic plans.

While the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) Building Blocks and Collaborative Behaviours have established consensus around the 'what' and the 'how' of sector development, these alone do not answer how a specific country will rapidly, efficiently and equitably reach their sector targets – because local factors play a key role in determining what is needed. Therefore, in-depth assessments are needed in countries, at both national and sub-national levels, and using the latest most localized evidence to formulate solutions that the majority of sector stakeholders can put their support behind.

This paper outlines some of the key challenges remaining in the WASH enabling environment and proposes some major pillars to anchor UNICEF's programming going forward. These include strengthening its thought leadership in the sector, around major themes such as financing and monitoring and covering all sub-sectors, including water supply, sanitation, hygiene and institutional WASH. A second pillar focuses on strengthened country programming and deployment of its financial and human resources in ways that contribute to achieving national sector goals. Country programmes need to adopt a long-term system strengthening perspective, be based on strong sector analyses with solid data and monitoring systems, and seek to draw on the comparative advantages of different partners. Results should be judged not only be their overall numbers and value-for-money, but by their equity, financial sustainability and climate resilience.

Why systems strengthening?

A 'system' can be defined as a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole. To meet the SDG WASH targets it is now widely recognised as essential to have strong systems to support the delivery of WASH services and goods 'for all', everywhere, and sustainably, including a continued focus on the demand side to ensure behaviour change and service affordability. For WASH, the system is the institutional structure, policies, regulations, plans, procedures, standards and monitoring and review mechanisms which form the basis for the provision of WASH services.

An alternative term that is often used to denote systems in WASH is 'Enabling Environment' which covers not only 'What needs to be achieved?' (Sector Building Blocks) but also 'How will it be achieved?' (Collaborative Behaviours), as introduced by the Sanitation and Water for All partnership (Figure 2). The five SWA building blocks are shown under the 'WASH sector governance functions' in Figure 1. The four collaborative behaviours recognise the importance of building on and strengthening national systems, and where possible, not introducing parallel systems for the purposes of a donor programme, which tend to erode and diminish progress in building more permanent systems.

In UNICEF's WASH Strategy 2016-30, it was argued that "business as usual" will not achieve the SDGs, leading to the definition of six programming approaches and nine principles for reaching the global WASH targets under the SDG Agenda 2030. An intentional shift was therefore initiated in the WASH Strategy, and emphasised later in UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-21, to strengthen systems for achieving the SDGs. A framework and tools were provided for UNICEF country offices to develop tailored programmes (see Figure 1). The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2022-2025 brings an even greater focus to

strengthening WASH systems and includes a results area that includes several systems indicators (see below).

Key gaps

The status of the WASH Enabling Environment is currently measured through global monitoring by the UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS); country-led initiatives such as WASH Bottleneck Analysis Tool (BAT) and sustainability checks; sector review tools such as donor assessment reports and joint sector reviews; and UNICEF's own annual Strategic Monitoring Questions (SMQs).

Figure 1: UNICEF Enabling Environment Framework
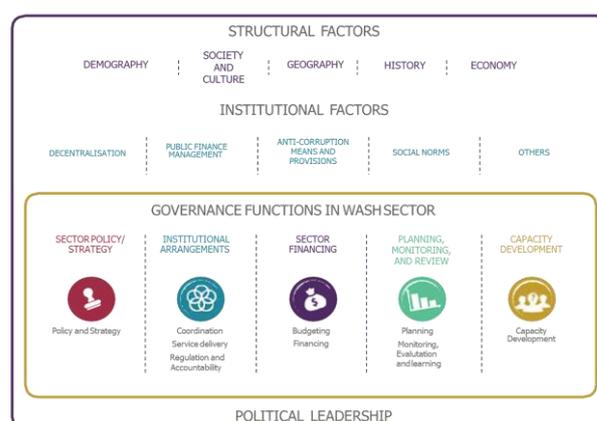
Source: UNICEF (2016)

Figure 2: SWA Collaborative behaviours

Source: Sanitation and Water for All (2021)

According to the bi-annual GLAAS report, several areas of the enabling environment have been strengthened over the past decade, with steps being made towards the progressive realization of the Human Rights to Safe Drinking-Water and Sanitation, more updated WASH sector policies and strategies, stronger sector coordination and alignment, and improvements in the national monitoring systems to track progress, among others. Indeed, UNICEF together with its partners have made important contributions to strengthening the enabling environment for WASH at both national and sub-national level. These results have been detailed in UNICEF's WASH Annual Results Reports, lessons learned papers (UNICEF, 2020) and global webinars[1], and a publication summarising SMQ reports (UNICEF, 2019).

However, many challenges remain in the WASH sector, mostly in low- and middle-income countries. Common weaknesses include:

- Lack of robust policies, in particular for sanitation and hygiene.
- Poor collaboration with other sectors such as health and education
- Inadequate data and monitoring of safely managed service levels as defined by indicators for SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2.
- Low levels of public funding and poor absorption of public budgets.
- Tariffs not covering operational costs.
- Lack of private sector investment.
- Sector fragmentation due to weak leadership of national and sub-national authorities (including poor coordination of external support agencies).
- Weak government capacities at both national and sub-national levels, and low levels of professionalisation of service providers.
- Lack of political will.
- Fragmented and insufficient regulation of water and sanitation sectors, in areas of

service quality, consumer protection, tariff setting, competition, environment, and public health.

These same countries are further challenged by climate change, fragility, protracted crises, lack of social cohesion, urbanisation, and an ongoing global pandemic.

What does the WASH Sector need to do to continue strengthening systems?

While the SWA Building Blocks and Collaborative Behaviours have established consensus around the what and the how of sector development, these alone do not answer how a specific country will rapidly, efficiently and equitably reach their sector targets – because local factors play a key role in determining what is needed, such as political economy, institutional arrangements, geo-climatic and socio-economic contexts; and because countries do not have the resources to address their sector bottlenecks all at once, hence requiring prioritizing and sequencing in the implementation of solutions. Systems strengthening therefore becomes both an art and a science, requiring up-to-date evidence on the sector status and combined with an in-depth analysis and reflection on what approaches and interventions would work the best to remove bottlenecks and accelerate sector development.

Furthermore, among many sector partners there remains a poor understanding of the 'enabling environment' and the importance of systems strengthening compared to the more visible 'results' achieved when building more infrastructure. In many programme countries, the political agenda pressurizes Ministers to build infrastructure and count new population served, but without systems strengthening efforts this progress is not sustainable. Hence, efforts are

[1] https://unicef.sharepoint.com/sites/PD-WASH/SitePages/Country-learning-on-strengthening-the-enabling-environment.aspx

needed to build a stronger case to invest in systems strengthening.

UNICEF and its sector partners therefore need to continually develop the evidence-base and evolve their conceptual frameworks through analysis, dialogue, advocacy and consensus-building. This includes strengthening the application of systems strengthening approaches to fragile and protracted crisis settings. Some major areas of intervention, covering the main building blocks, include:

- Developing and implementing up-to-date policies and strategies.
- Continued measures to improve accountability, which require better application of existing tools or introduction of new tools – covering public financial management (PFM), auditing, institutional reform, and mechanisms for all sector partners to coordinate and collaborate. It is critical that all stakeholders put their weight behind national policies and strengthen national leadership and capacity – for example through promoting sector-wide approaches (SWAps), supporting joint sector reviews (JSRs) and the SWA mutual accountability mechanism (MAM) – as well as expanding WASH coordination mechanisms and platforms to include WASH in schools and health care facilities.
- Improved planning and implementation through a strengthened evidence-base, using the right mixture of data (e.g. financial tracking, public expenditure reviews (PERs), budget briefs, WASH service coverage and equity analysis, sector wide sustainability checks, improved data on WASH in institutions, and climate risks analysis), research studies and evaluations. This includes sector stress testing and integration of a risk informed approach to prevent sector collapse.
- Investment plans, financing strategies, and costing, value-for-money and cost-benefit studies. In these analyses, options should be compared that are sustainable and climate resilient, ensuring explicit comparison of their efficiency, effectiveness and equity.
- Increasing the priority of the sector and improving the use and volume of financing in the sector, through political prioritisation (e.g. cost of inaction studies, fiscal space analysis, budget expenditure reviews), domestic resource mobilization, household financing (e.g. microfinance), attracting private sector financing (identifying attractive business models that lead to financially viable service providers), strengthening service providers, tariff revision, supplier and market strengthening; and raising funds from innovative instruments (e.g. blended finance, climate funds).
- Strengthened regulation (i.e. through the WASHReg tool) and formalization of service providers, and selection of an appropriate service delivery model for each context.
- Capacity development, covering all the above areas, with a focus on identifying capacity gaps and strengthening professionalization and sectoral capacities (both public and private operators), and with an emphasis on long-term sustainable outcomes across the sector, and not targeted only to achieve success in donor projects.
- Engage more with civil society organizations and interest groups such as women and the youth in planning, implementing and monitoring of WASH programmes. This includes seeking income generation or generate business opportunities and/or employment, which are often easier to move ahead and galvanize attention and support

What can UNICEF do better, drawing on its comparative advantage?

First, we need to be clear what are the objectives for which the enabling environment is being strengthened – most simply captured in four words: Effective (or impactful), Equitable;

Resilient (or sustainable); and Efficient. These apply across our major results areas, relating to household water, sanitation, hygiene and WASH in institutions, with a focus on schools and health care facilities. Furthermore, there is need to test and adopt models that work at scale in both rural and urban areas, and across humanitarian and development contexts, meeting these four objectives (see Figure 2).

UNICEF's Enabling Environment Framework (Figure 1) will continue to be used to meet these objectives, with an emphasis on how we work, as outlined by the SWA collaborative behaviours (Figure 2). The latter emphasizes government leadership, partnerships and strengthening of both joint platforms (e.g. coordination, knowledge management) and single systems (e.g. procurement, monitoring). It is crucial that UNICEF acts collaboratively at all levels and forms strong partnerships in meetings its aims.

Two connected pillars are proposed for systems strengthening work: thought leadership on systems strengthening and solid country programmes. A third pillar will cut across these and receive special attention, to ensure pillars 1 and 2 are tailored for different contexts, in particular preparing for new directions on systems strengthening in a changing world. These are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Pillars to strengthen WASH systems
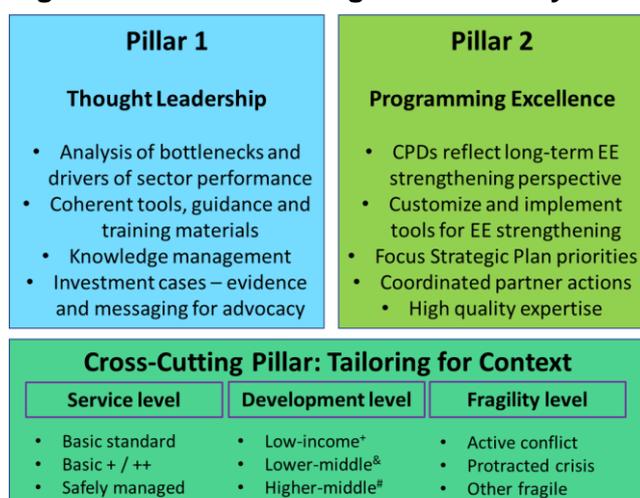
Pillar 1. Thought leadership

UNICEF will continue playing a lead role in systems advocacy, learning and model development at global, regional and country levels.

While good progress has been made towards meeting the direct result targets in UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2018-21, it is crucial to recognise that there is a more important 'bigger picture' beyond UNICEF's direct programming that can only be achieved through strengthening of WASH systems and the broader enabling environment. Hence, we need to continue researching and understanding the determinants of WASH systems performance in a range of contexts, develop new or adjusted approaches to systems strengthening, and implement them more impactfully. Furthermore, these models should achieve coherence across various HQ and regional initiatives (game plans, strategies, frameworks, guidance documents, etc.) and should be easy for countries to adopt and adapt.

Activities include:

- Develop and disseminate country case studies synthesised into cross-country learning, including findings from previous evaluations.
- Develop deeper country analysis and learning from specific enabling environment tools and datasets, such as UN-Water GLAAS, WASH Bottleneck Analysis Tool (BAT), the Sector Wide Sustainability Check (SWSC), the WASHREG approach, the WASH guidance note for leaving no-one behind (LNOB) and other tools available. This includes examining the relationship between the status of / improvements in the enabling environment and overall sector performance in terms of outcomes, measured by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP).
- Contribute to systems strengthening through the implementation of those tools.
- Understand how to better analyse the WASH sector from a resilience and risk-informed

angle, going beyond bottleneck analysis to understanding the enabling environment as a complex system – e.g. 'stress' testing based on multiple risks (conflict, instability, protracted crisis, natural disaster, climate change, water scarcity). The risk-informed WASHBAT can provide additional analysis of sectoral bottlenecks. Besides, the development of climate rationale, water demand management analysis and other climate-resilient WASH initiatives can help mainstreaming climate resilience in the sector.

- Develop specific investment cases for systems strengthening – including how systems are key for achieving the safely managed standard, water security and delivering WASH in protracted crises. The Water Security for All (WS4A) or the Hand Hygiene for All (HH4A) global initiatives could provide some ideas on how to develop and adjust country investment cases.
- Lead sector dialogues, consultations and coordination on the enabling environment with partners and with experts – at global level (e.g. SWA) and at regional level (e.g. SDG6+5 initiative in ESAR) which support localisation of the SDG WASH targets. At national level, supporting Joint Sector Reviews (JSR) and other sector coordination forums is at the core to UNICEF's work.
- Engage with International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and help leverage their resources behind sector strengthening initiatives. Explore stand-by agreements for more regular partnerships with IFIs (e.g. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank - AIIB).
- Assess how to capture and report 'indirect' results from systems strengthening efforts.
- Update and disseminate training & guidance materials on the overall enabling environment and specific building blocks.

Pillar 2. Programming excellence.

Country programmes will assess how to better plan and implement systems strengthening in both national and sub-national contexts.

When 'Results' are aggregated quantitatively or narrated in a global or regional report, it is easy to lose the reason why different systems strengthening activities are needed in specific contexts. In order to implement more cohesive programming, UNICEF has introduced (together with partners) a common framework (Figure 1) with sequenced activities agreed with governments across multi-year planning cycles. However, with evolving contexts, higher SDG ambitions and new evidence and tools constantly becoming available, UNICEF country offices need to continually revisit their work plans and approaches they are using to have the maximum impact using limited funding.

Activities include:

- Adopt a long-term system strengthening plan in countries, guided by an overall Vision of where the sector should be in 5-10 years' time and based on an enhanced understanding of a theory of change for the enabling environment. That long-term plan needs to be incorporated in CPD (country programme documents) and annual plans with specific activities and allocated resources.
- Improve sector analysis for country programme development, using a range of customizable tools (e.g. WASH BAT, sustainability monitoring, stress testing the building blocks) – leading to improved Situation Analyses, Strategy Notes and Country Programme Documents.
- Advocate for multi-year and unearmarked funding, thus enabling country offices to develop programme excellence and long-term plans.
- Catalytically use UNICEF's unearmarked resources to unlock sector opportunities and to mobilize additional funds that contribute to strengthen the sector.

- Support implementation of multi-stakeholder initiatives that contribute to the Enabling Environment, such as the Africa Sanitation Policy Guideline, AMCOW, SWA, the Continental Africa Water Investment Programme (AIP), the Sahel Alliance and other regional/sub-regional and country initiatives.
- Shift of WASH programming to be climate resilient. Including supporting government and implementing partners in that process.
- Define and implement a standard set of actions that can be pursued during an emergency response for ensuring sectors recover from crises (sector recovery plans) and withstand future shocks. One area of special focus in on addressing busines continuity during crisis and the loss of key sector personnel ('brain drain').
- Support nationally led joint coordination platforms to improve coordination and joint programming between water resources, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, and between rural and urban. This includes exploring feasibility of sector coordination initiatives such as sector-wide approaches and pooled financing. It also includes strengthening institutional commitment by ensuring joint activities are written into UNICEF's and partner's work plans and with funding.
- Strengthen sector monitoring and review mechanisms, and innovations therein, ensuring opportunities such as Joint Sector Reviews are utilized to strengthen sector accountability across all sub-sectors and partners.
- Ensure linkage of different evidence and policy tools with each other, such as costing tools, financing studies, WASH BATs and JSRs, drawing on experiences of countries that have implemented these tools together.
- Clarify who the 'at risk' groups are being left behind (using the new Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) guidance note), and ensure the planning, budgeting, risk assessments,

monitoring and innovations are putting at risk groups at the centre.
- Bring greater emphasis to affordability schemes, and ensuring smart subsidies are reaching the right target groups, and that vulnerable groups are not excluded from markets.
- Recognise opportunities to 'build back better', drawing on political will and being ready with solutions for improved analysis, planning and programme implementation.
- Support structured sector-wide capacity development to build resilience in the sector, with a focus on developing local expertise.
- Promote and support coherence in WASH programming and identify synergies with other sectors.
- Advocate and nurture high-level political engagement, e.g. with Prime Minister's offices, and seek WASH champions.

Cross-Cutting Pillar. Tailoring for context

Recognizing the evolving context in many countries, we need to not only ensure relevance in the current contexts we work, but we also need to move towards a new model of systems strengthening to meet the safely managed WASH standards and the needs of middle-income countries.

The process of development of a country programme document (CPD) – the situation analysis (SitAn), strategic moment of reflection (SMR) and strategy note (SN) – provides ample opportunity for the country context and needs to be understood, the comparative advantages of UNICEF to be identified, and the strategies, activities and resources for the next multi-year programme to be jointly agreed with the government. As national economies and WASH sectors are constantly changing, and as new evidence, tools, best practices and innovations come to light, the CPD will need to constantly evolve from one programme to the next. Therefore, this third pillar cuts across the first two

pillars, and ensures a full consideration is given to the future challenges that country programmes will face, at different ends of the spectrum – from crisis settings at one end (conflict, protracted crisis, climate crisis), to countries moving up the development ladder, at the other end.

Another shift needed in the UNICEF programming model is in countries where there is a high degree of national ownership of sector development and at least a moderate degree of systems capacity, markets and financing. These countries include, for example, those that are now upper-middle-income countries but with significant continued WASH challenges, such as China, Indonesia, Mexico, and Iraq. In this category of country, UNICEF should fully reorient its efforts from service delivery towards upstream work of supporting the enabling environment, and thereby indirectly contributing to the government and sector results.

Figure 4: Indicative intensity of WASH programming approaches
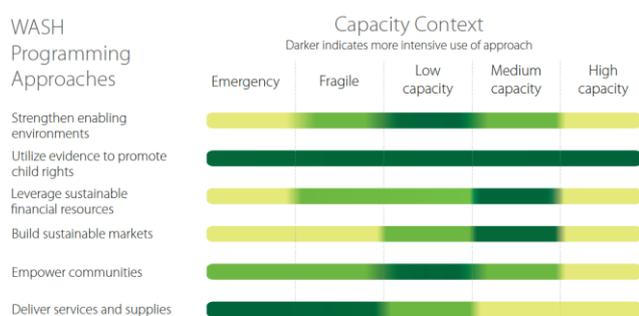
Source: UNICEF (2016)

For example, some areas of service delivery may be weak such as equity, quality or resilience, or else there may be areas of the country where the sector building blocks need strengthening, such as monitoring or public finance. In some countries, UNICEF might be able to leverage funding, blend financing or stimulate the private sector, while in others the focus might be to access technical assistance or develop credible

evidence at key moments of sector development. The number of countries in this category will increase over time, even during the Strategy Plan period 2022-2025. Those programmatic approaches will require retooling our capacity, revisiting our staffing (e.g. seniority, skill sets), adjusting our results structure and refining fund-raising efforts.

Activities include:

- Develop a system of identification and categorisation of countries by their capacity, and their needs for support.
- Identify and test different models of development for medium capacity countries with different needs.
- Explore how to capture and report the indirect results achieved as a result of UNICEF's support to the enabling environment, and include them in the results reporting.
- Learn lessons from upper-middle income countries on how UNICEF's programme evolved over the transition period.
- Develop and apply guidance on different areas of support in medium capacity environments, related to equity, quality, resilience, financing and knowledge.
- Report results of upstream activities (indirect results), using enhanced SMQs that capture the sector issues faced in these countries and UNICEF's specific contributions.
- Support technical assistance at-scale, training government staff at lower levels to deliver.
- Provide or support independent monitoring systems and surveys to strengthen accountability.
- Support key studies demanded by governments for sector advocacy and domestic resource mobilisation.
- Innovate on ways to engage the private sector, such as business incubators.
- Support national reform strategies and update standards in countries that have not fully addressed the changes of recent decades and the demands of the SDGs.

Ways of working

With its global workforce of over 700 staff and presence in over 120 programme countries implementing WASH activities, it will be crucial to work as a global team in implementing the Strategic Plan 2022-2025. Global level provides global thought leadership and produces a range of guidelines and tools, as well as leadership on knowledge management and capacity development (see Figures 3 and 5). Regions help countries in implementing these global guidelines and tools, and provide their own tailored training materials and M&E support to countries. Countries express their demand for support and also provide feedback on how the guidelines and tools are working, and share lessons which are usable by other countries (see Figure 3).

To implement these approaches, it will be essential to work in partnership and influence partners through global platforms and cooperation agreements. UNICEF currently achieves global influence through its leadership of the WASH Cluster, its co-leadership of the Joint Monitoring Programme (with WHO), its hosting and active engagement in the SWA partnership (through various committees, sub-committees and working groups, and its role in the ministerial meetings). UNICEF plays a key role in UN-Water's expert groups, and contributes importantly to the implementation of the UN-Water SDG 6 Acceleration Framework. In addition, UNICEF exerts thought leadership on water and climate, the resilience agenda, sanitation programming (e.g. CATS), WASH in institutions, WASH affordability, and evaluation (e.g. the SDG6 evaluation across United Nations agencies conducted in 2021), among others.

At regional level, UNICEF also plays a strategic role in sanitation conferences and has close engagement with AMCOW and regional development banks.

UNICEF also continues its close engagement in several hubs and networks such as Menstrual Hygiene Hub, Hand Hygiene Hub, Solar Hub, Rural Water Supply Network and WASH in health care facilities.

Figure 5: Connecting levels
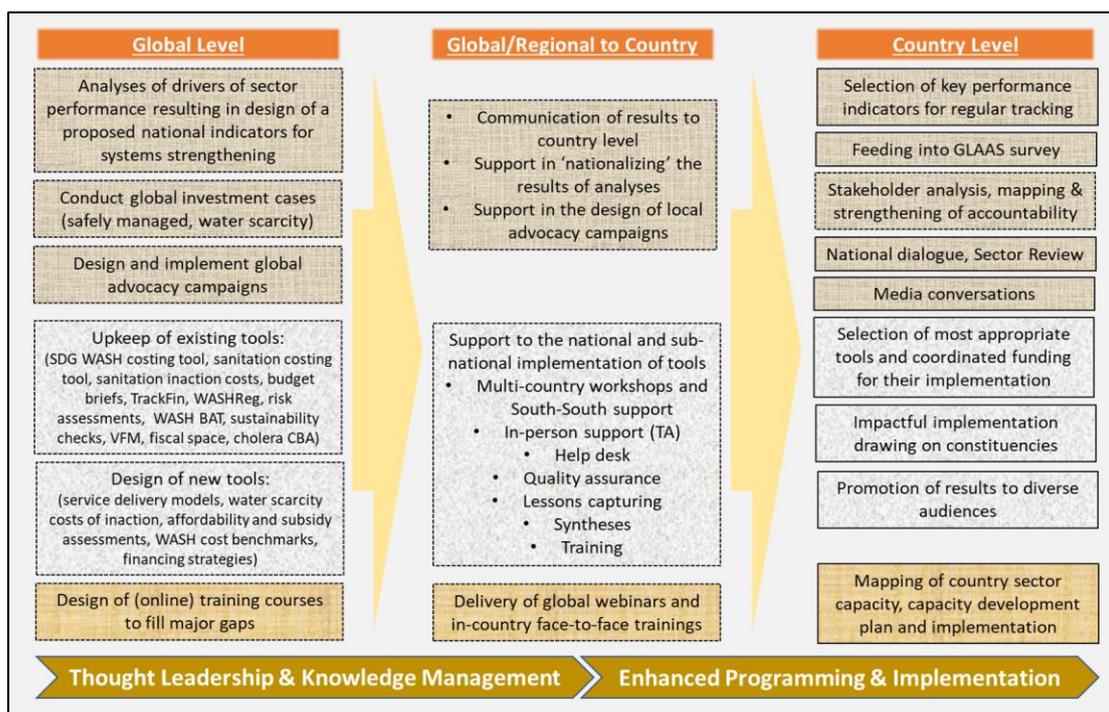
Way forward

The shift to a greater focus on systems strengthening also raises the question of what leadership and technical skills are required of the WASH teams in headquarters, regional and country offices; and the different types of support being requested by government counterparts and by the sector at large. In headquarters and regional offices, a large proportion of staff are closely engaged in strengthening the enabling environment as one of the major programming approaches, and the different game plans and frameworks[2]. It is therefore recommended that more core budgets are made available to ensure this core function is promoted, both within UNICEF and with government counterparts, development partners and local institutions.

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About the Author

Guy Hutton, Senior Adviser for WASH, NYHQ, UNICEF.

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[2] E.g. Water Game Plan, Game Plan to End Open Defecation, Urban Framework, Climate Resilient Framework, etc.

About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

Discussion Papers explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

Fact Sheets summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

Field Notes share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

Guidelines describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

Reference Guides present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

Technical Papers present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

WASH Diaries explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

WASH Results show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

COVID-19 WASH Responses compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

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