

The importance of learning showcased by a USAID Ex-Post Evaluation of a Millennium Water Alliance WASH Program



by Laura Brunson and Anna Pollock

“It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure.” -Bill Gates

Many of us, whether driven perfectionists, small entities trying to build a reputation, or large, grant-funded NGOs, are wary of talking about failure. We've been conditioned that failure is inherently bad, something that should be hidden from public view. In the NGO world we have come to understand that any admission of failure may result in a damaged reputation or future funding cuts.

In reality, anyone working with the rural WASH sector in Africa knows that the failure statistics are unacceptably high, and most of us (unfortunately) have played a part in building up those stats. But, instead of shirking responsibility, in recent years leaders in the sector have become more thoughtful, taking to heart the notion that we can only improve by understanding and learning from our past failures. Reports like USAID's [“Ethiopia Millennium Water Alliance Activity Ex-Post Evaluation,”](#) published May 2018, remind us to heed opportunities for learning.

Though MWA has changed methods of operating, planning and implementing significantly in the past ten years, we are still excited to continue learning, reflecting, and pivoting through evaluation and discussion, and we appreciate this excellent opportunity made possible by USAID.

One of the key activities of the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) is to generate and disseminate lessons learned, supported by evidence and information. So, when USAID's Water CKM project approached MWA about the opportunity to work together on an Ex-Post evaluation of the 2004 – 2009 Ethiopia WASH program, we took it. Of course, we had concerns that this evaluation might publicly show that water points and latrines constructed a decade ago are no longer fully functioning, and a casual take-away might be negative about MWA and its partners. But, in keeping with our mission, we embraced the opportunity to learn by assisting the evaluators, reviewing their findings and then reflecting on these with our members. The evaluation, review, and reflection processes showed both how much has changed in planning and implementation in the intervening ten years and what areas warrant further change to improve sustainability.

The study findings, primarily from seven of the 24 implementation woredas, showed that there are many challenges regarding sustainability and functionality over the long-term:

- Of the 13 water points observed during the ex-post evaluation (out of 505 water points constructed/rehabilitated), five were fully functional, five were partially functional, and three were not functioning.
- Poor water quality continues to be a significant concern; *E. coli* was found in seven of 10 water points sampled for quality.
- Time required to queue, collect water and travel to and from the water point is a concern; total time was over 30 minutes in most of the areas visited.

- A few issues affecting water point functionality were found to be: community water committee ability to consistently manage water points, lack of woreda government involvement in implementation and management, lack of funding for maintenance and repairs, and climate factors.

The ex-post evaluation team provided seven key recommendations, listed below:

1. Support government entities in playing a stronger role in sustained maintenance and oversight.
2. Examine alternative rural water approaches to improve upon the community management model.
3. Account for life cycle costs when planning for water infrastructure and tariff setting.
4. Assess the suite of water needs and sources when designing new water access projects.
5. Seek stronger, more consistent alternatives to simple education-based behavior change approaches in areas with poor sanitation and hygiene norms.
6. Improve people's understanding and appreciation of water quality.
7. Address land tenure issues during activity design and throughout implementation.

These are important and at times challenging recommendations. The good news is that MWA and the WASH sector have already changed, slowly but significantly, during the 10+ years since this program was designed. Design expectations, recognized determinants of sustainability, and a primary focus on waterpoints and hardware have all changed.

In recent years momentum has been building for a sector-wide shift to a systems-based approach for WASH, similar to one that has been in place much longer in some health sector work. MWA is one of many organizations that have changed planning and implementation modalities to include a district-wide focus, seeking to serve everyone in a district, alongside the broader systems focus. These changes mean looking far beyond just infrastructure to think about financing and costing, government and institutions, monitoring, capacity development, regulatory environments and more.

As part of this shift, life cycle costing, household water quality, expanding the voice and input of communities, improved monitoring of services, increased service-levels and innovative models for financing, service-delivery, and maintenance are all considered during early stages of planning and throughout implementation.

Global data about sustainability issues, questions about making communities and WASH Committees (WASHCOs) responsible for water point operations, and recent sector discussions have led MWA also to pivot our approach to working with government. This shift, reflected in MWA's [Global Strategy](#), is described by the guiding principle, "placing government at the center." An excellent example of this is MWA's Kenya RAPID program, started in 2015 and also with funding from USAID, which uses a "[facilitation](#)" approach by which NGO implementers, instead of doing direct implementation, serve as facilitators to support local government leadership of program activities. In Ethiopia, MWA's current work focuses on increasing government involvement and leadership at all levels, including planning for how to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The study findings about WASHCO management practices and challenges add to the debate taking place in the sector on the community management model. While MWA and implementing partners have evolved over the past years in how capacity development and WASHCO support is conducted, based on

these USAID recommendations and the sector debates, it is necessary to consider the efficacy of other models and explore alternative options such as multi-village piped schemes, prepaid water meters that dispense water, household self-supply and increased involvement of government (as discussed above).

As a consortium organization, during the past decade MWA has also evolved in its operational methods. At the time when the Ex-Post Evaluation program was developed and implemented, MWA hosted no staff in Ethiopia; the program was overseen by the MWA global board and implemented by members. As noted in this evaluation, during this time period each implementing partner worked in separate geographic areas using their own implementation methods. This style of minimally coordinated implementation was found to result in challenges in evaluating impact, sharing lessons learned and providing the type of impact and value that MWA seeks to add.

Our coalition implementation model has evolved to incorporate many of the principles of collective impact such as a shared monitoring framework, a coordinating unit with full-time staff in program countries, and increased partnership development with an intentional focus on learning and consistent standards of implementation. MWA's newest program development work in Ethiopia, thanks to generous funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and partner matching, is moving further towards a collective impact model, focusing on utilizing the key strengths that each partner offers to ensure that the impact on the WASH systems and progress towards the SDGs is greater than any one entity would have alone.

However, as the future Ethiopia program unfolds we need to address areas noted in the ex-post evaluation that we have not yet, as a sector or as an organization, fully figured out. As examples, the effect of land tenure issues on household or community decisions to invest in improved sanitation structures and post-construction support to ensure maintenance of rural water schemes are critical gaps.

Overall, the challenges and recommendations described in the ex-post evaluation serve as another reminder that despite the ease (and desire of many donors) of focusing only on the tangible, implementation-based activities, other aspects are important too. We must constantly seek to learn, innovate, evaluate and then use the evidence and data to collectively continue to improve, ultimately increasing long-term impact and sustainability.

MWA thanks USAID for providing this evaluation which has challenged us to take a longer look at what has changed in the past ten years and what we need to continue changing as we move forward in a new era of district-wide and systems-based implementation.

The full evaluation and recommendations are available [here](#). The 2004 – 2009 program in Ethiopia was funded by USAID and matching funds from implementing partners.