What are collective action approaches anyway?

Reflections from UNC Water and Health Conference

By: Laura R. Brunson (Millennium Water Alliance), Shawn Peabody (Environmental Incentives), Daniel Hollander (CU Boulder), Kimberly Pugel (CU Boulder)

"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success," Henry Ford famously said.

To explore questions of togetherness and success in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, the partners of USAID's Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership (SWS) and the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) hosted a side-session at the UNC Water and Health Conference in October. The audience— including donors, researchers, and NGO staff—heard real-world examples of collective action approaches from SWS and MWA and, through an interactive game, grappled with the challenges of working collectively with partners who all have different priorities and roles.

What are Collective Action Approaches?
At UNC, many used "collective action" to refer to approaches that facilitate stakeholders within the water or sanitation sectors to share information and collaborate on solutions. Others used the term more broadly to mean "people working together" or to describe any approach that deals with what political scientists call a "collective action problem", or a problem where disincentives exist that discourage joint action by individuals in the pursuit of a common goal.[1] Given growing interest in the field, we believe that the WASH sector needs a more specific term that will support the creation of a body of evidence about when, where, and how to apply these approaches.

We have observed a range of approaches used to address problems of coordination and collaboration among WASH stakeholders, donors, and implementers which often differ in the intensity of collaboration. In the image below, the level of consensus and accountability increase from left to right while the level of organizational autonomy decreases.

[1] Dowding, Keith, Encyclopaedia Britannica., s.v. "Internet." Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013.
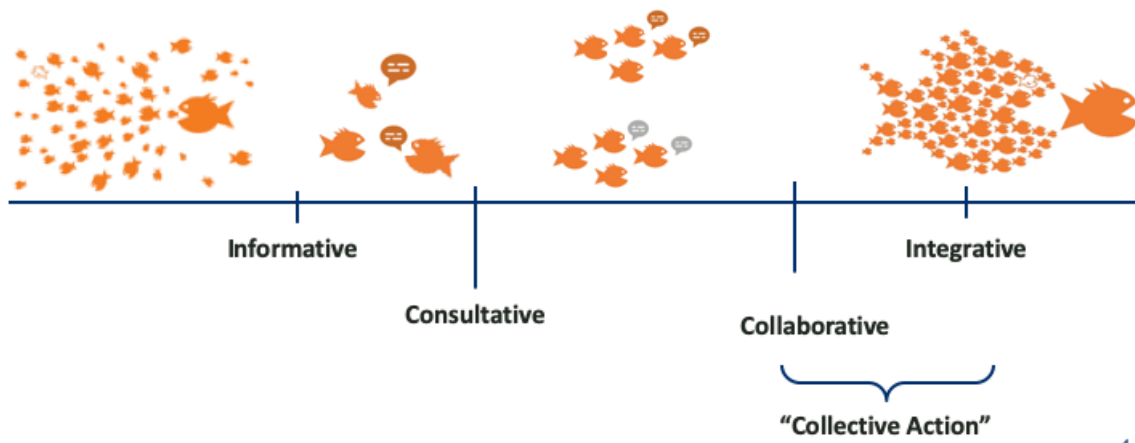
Figure 1: Range of approaches, from less intensive (left) to more intensive (right) forms.

The least intensive collaborations are informative platforms that simply improve the availability of information. Slightly more intensive are consultative approaches that aim to improve information flows (processes) and reduce the duplication of effort. Next, collaborative approaches aim to improve the way that services are delivered by building consensus on the bottlenecks and challenges that affect the stakeholders. Finally, the most intensive collaborations are integrative, which aim to mobilize members for joint actions according to a shared agenda.

By grouping and comparing similar approaches, we can more easily identify trends and lessons. Ultimately, a guiding framework of the range of related approaches could help organizations select the most appropriate approaches for their context and goals.

Within this range of collaboration, "collective action" refers more narrowly to **both collaborative and integrative approaches.** This definition best fits the recent wave of activities that seek to bring together stakeholders around a common vision and problem to change how WASH services are delivered.

Specifically, we define a collective action approach as: A process for improving a public service in which sectoral stakeholders regularly convene and take joint actions to address shared problems, and in which:
- problems are complex and their solutions require deliberation and action by many actors,
- members agree on a shared vision and shared problem definition, and
- stakeholders clarify responsibilities for service provision and hold each other accountable for actions.

Collective Action in Practice
MWA has been using a collective action approach in Ethiopia since 2017. With their partners, they agreed to use a collective action approach to:
- Strengthen ability for influence both within and outside of the coalition
- Enhance learning across partner organizations
- Increase efficiency of implementation and program progress
- Improve utilization of the best capacities of each organization for maximum progress
- Minimize overlapping or duplicating efforts

Already, MWA has seen that the partners are communicating more frequently, helping each

other with shared challenges, and are committed to a shared vision. For example, one organization asked for help to implement a technology that was new to them from an experienced organization working in a different district. In another example, Food for the Hungry and World Vision came together to jointly implement work in the same district. The two organizations pooled funds and hired a coordinator who supports both organizations, while also engaging with district (woreda) government on behalf of the shared program.

The SWS Learning Partnership is also implementing and documenting collective action approaches in Uganda, Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Kenya. While more evidence needs to be collected, promising results have been observed in the first three years of the program. In Woliso, Ethiopia, a collective action group came together to address the shutdown of the town's only fecal sludge dumpsite. As a result of engagement with the collective action group, the town administration identified a new site and began to acquire and develop it. In Kitui, Kenya, an SWS-supported coalition contributed to legislation that will clarify roles and responsibilities for the organizations and agencies involved in water service delivery. The legislation will formalize the collective action platform as an official county-level advisory structure and will provide regular budget to support the platform's functions.

The Future of Collective Action Approaches
Although the number of collective action approaches in the WASH sector is growing, the evidence base is still limited. Early results from MWA, SWS, and others are generally positive and indicate that an intentional process of engagement can improve the interactions and relationships of sector actors. More specifics regarding the costs and service-level benefits of facilitated collaboration have yet to be carefully documented, and could help inform future WASH sector interventions. Moreover, there is limited experience and a lack of guidance about how to adapt collective action approaches to the context of international development and the WASH sector. For example, how should teams approach developing a shared vision? Are there ways to speed the development of trust among individuals and partners within a collective action group? What considerations should be used when establishing a facilitation hub? When is a hub more effectively led by a group member and when is it better to use a neutral outsider?

These are the questions that the SWS and MWA teams will be working to answer. Over the next two years, SWS will publish its findings (as webinars, research briefs, academic articles and a synthesis report) on USAID's Global Waters. Among other updates and learning documents, MWA will soon publish a learning brief about partnership development within an alliance. Current and future documents and news are available on the MWA website.