

Learning from Long-term Strategic Planning in a District



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Acknowledgements

Embracing new practices requires open-mindedness in a group of stakeholders. The willingness to try new processes and consider new approaches was evident throughout the long-term, district-wide strategic planning process for how to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets for water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). The Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) appreciates the contributions of government officials, experts and sector heads at district (woreda), zone and regional levels. Without their commitment and dedication to strengthening WASH systems, this new long-term planning process would not have resulted in a success story to be shared.

A Core Design Team played a pivotal role throughout the planning process. This team was comprised of representatives from member organizations of MWA in Ethiopia including: CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, Helvetas, IRC WASH, Wateraid and World Vision. Special recognition is reserved for the team of experts from each of the three district sector offices of North Mecha, Dera, and Farta, as well as the staff from the NGO partners operating in these three districts. These government and NGO partners convened together repeatedly over a period of several months, giving much of their time and knowledge to this process.

IRC WASH is appreciated for sharing knowledge from other countries where district WASH planning has previously taken place and for facilitating the design of a Microsoft Excel planning tool (see a forthcoming learning document). Thanks also to the IRC Ghana team for hosting the Core Design Team in the Asutufi North District of Ghana during a launch event of their strategic plan in 2018 to help facilitate our learning about the process.

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Learning from Long-term Strategic Planning

Introduction

Globally there are many challenges to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets focusing on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), including lack of funding, inadequate coordination across stakeholders and sectors, and weak long-term operations and maintenance. The Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) has seen these challenges first-hand in Ethiopia, and the lack of strong operation and maintenance is a significant issue that results in money being invested in infrastructure but with minimal long-term benefit to communities.

To mitigate some of these challenges and achieve higher service-delivery levels aligned with SDG targets 6.1 and 6.2, a district-wide, long-term strategy was collectively identified as an important early step to support improved and sustained water and sanitation service delivery.

MWA, with members CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, IRC WASH, Helvetas, WaterAid, and World Vision, embarked on a process to support government in three focus districts (woredas) of the Amhara National Regional State, to develop long-term, costed, district-wide strategic plans for how to achieve full coverage of WASH by 2030.

Objectives of this learning document are to:

- Share with WASH sector actors the collaborative planning process undertaken
- Share lessons about what went according to the envisioned process versus what was changed during the long-term planning process
- Provide a model for government and WASH stakeholders to replicate or mainstream this collaborative planning approach.

A previously published paperⁱ provides information about the motivation to develop long-term plans and the envisioned process, from start to finish, for long-term planning.

Ethiopia Context

In September 2015, United Nations member states approved the 2030 Development Agenda and a set of Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the end of 2015 and articulated a new global development agenda to eradicate poverty and shift the world onto a path of sustainable development by 2030ⁱⁱ.

Since 2011, the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) has set out its development goals in two consecutive Growth and Transformation Plans, which identified water and sanitation as a critical priority area for achieving sustainable growth and poverty reduction. Growth and Transformation Plan I (GTP I) was implemented from 2011-2015 and Ethiopia achieved the MDG target on access to safe drinking water. GTP II, which covers the period from 2016-2020, is under implementationⁱⁱⁱ. GTP I and GTP II for WASH differ in service standards. Select GTP II targets (2020) for the WASH sector include:

- Provide water supply access for 85 percent of the rural population, of which 20 percent are provided with rural piped systems. For the urban population, the target water supply access is 75 percent.
- Decrease the non-functionality rate of rural water supply schemes to 7 percent and non-revenue water to 20 percent.
- Ensure all schools have access to potable drinking water and adequate gender specific sanitation facilities.

According to the Joint Monitoring Program data from 2015, in rural and urban areas of Ethiopia 4% and 38% of rural and urban populations, respectively, have safely managed water services. Meanwhile, 32% and 7% of rural and urban populations were found to still practice open defecation^{iv}. Targets required to achieve the SDGs and the government of Ethiopia's One WASH National Program (OWNP) II are much higher^v.

Thus, the idea to engage in long-term planning for improved coverage and services is well aligned with the Ethiopian government's targets. OWNP II was released and provides more ideas on how improved coverage will happen. However, GTP II and OWNP II do not provide detailed district-level plans^{vi}.

Millennium Water Alliance Ethiopia Programming

MWA has been working on WASH programs in Ethiopia since 2004. As part of a new program, with generous funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, MWA was given the opportunity to have a Bridge Program during which a long-term, district-wide planning process with three district governments in the Amhara National Regional State (see Figure 1) was facilitated. This Bridge Program built the foundation for a longer-term program in selected districts with a focus on district-wide work and a systems strengthening approach. It was hypothesized by the Hilton Foundation and MWA that a strong first step towards a successful systems approach is to establish a baseline of understanding about the current situation and then follow that with development of long-term plans which guide the work of all stakeholders in a district.

MWA members involved in the Bridge Program included: CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, Helvetas, IRC WASH, WaterAid, and World Vision. Three partners served as "district leads", which meant that organization served as the primary liaison to district government in their focus district. In this case, the district leads were CARE, WaterAid, and World Vision. The MWA secretariat led the planning process through convening workshops, facilitating discussions, fostering frequent communications, supporting plan reviews and write-ups and providing a training experience on strategic planning and management. IRC WASH provided technical expertise based on their experience in other countries and supported the design and delivery of trainings and provided technical support and coaching during the planning and review processes. The district lead organizations managed a significant portion of this planning process collaboratively with local (district) government partners.

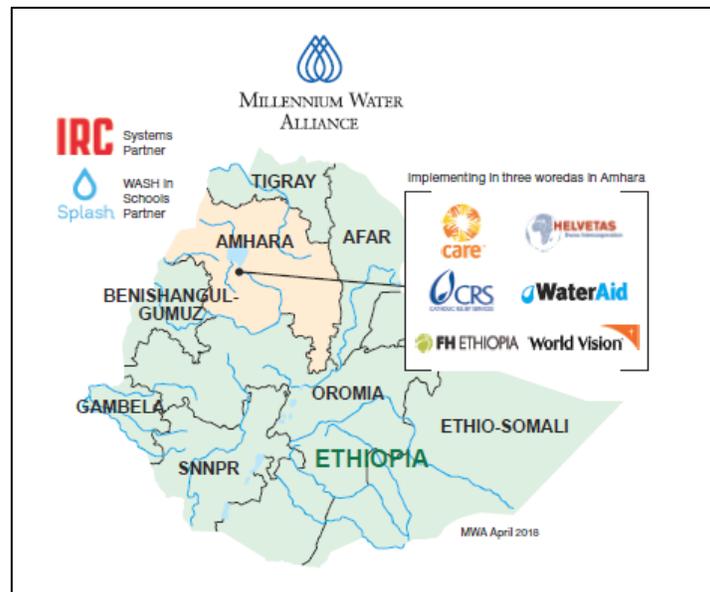


Figure 1: Location of target districts and partners in the Amhara National Regional State

A draft plan for the long-term strategic planning process was developed by the program partnership. This detailed process aimed to result in development of long-term costed plans as well as strengthened partnerships across NGO and government partners. Box 1 provides highlights of the planning process as it was envisioned.

Box 1: Envisioned long-term strategic planning process

The planning process was envisioned as a series of workshops that were inclusive of regional and zonal governments and incorporated the three focus districts as well as NGO partners. These workshops were then supplemented by smaller meetings between individual district government teams and the district leads with support from MWA and IRC WASH.

Planned Workshops:

- Workshop 1: *Starting and Visioning* – Ensure relevant parties understand the purpose, process and planning tools, while developing a shared vision for the long-term WASH strategic plan.
- Workshop 2: *Planning New Infrastructure for Universal Access* – Review existing district data and discuss infrastructure needs and full coverage costing.
- Workshop 3: *Planning for Safe and Sustainable Services* – Discuss challenges and questions about *how* to advance improved, sustainable and equitable service delivery of clean water.
- Workshop 4: *Reviewing Plans and Financing* - Review plans, finalize costing, discuss funding sources, assess next steps and ensure broad stakeholder buy-in.

Implementation in Reality

The drafted implementation process was utilized, but in reality, it was much less linear than planned and unexpected bumps occurred along the way. The next section provides a description of how the plan transpired in action and why the plan was adjusted.

Evidence-driven Approach

One of the often neglected resources needed when planning for a long-term goal/target is a strong and reliable evidence base. These strategic planning efforts would have been highly theoretical without the use of a strong baseline data set. Thus, before even starting the planning process, MWA gathered quantitative and qualitative data and utilized existing data from government sources to determine the gaps and opportunities towards working to achieve universal access in the target districts.

All assessments were conducted with local government leadership and/or participation and all data was reviewed and validated jointly involving development partners and government from different levels (district, zone and region). Portions of the data used during the long-term strategic planning process also came from local government offices based on information they already had. This evidence-driven approach was helpful to assist district level authorities in recognizing the benefits of:

1. Looking at the broader WASH systems as opposed to focusing primarily on infrastructure
2. Utilizing collaborative efforts of NGOs, the private sector, academic institutions, and user communities from the initial stages of planning
3. Considering the high non-functionality rates and how to address those during planning discussions.

Planning Tool Development

It was realized early in the process that the amount of information, assumptions and calculations necessary to develop a costed plan (taking into account Life Cycle Costing, population growth, inflation, etc.) to achieve full coverage is extensive. Furthermore the formulas are complicate and significant data entry is required. To simplify the process, IRC WASH supported development of an Excel tool that allowed baseline information, assumptions, costs and other data to be added as inputs and then results were automatically calculated. Details on the planning tool development and learnings can be found in an accompanying paper titled “Planning for district-wide WASH services in Ethiopia: Reflections on a strategic planning tool.”

Planning Workshops and Meetings

Pre-workshop

As a precursor to planning with government partners, MWA convened a workshop of NGO program partners for internal training, planning, and discussion. While some significant discussions had previously taken place at the national office level among key partners, the teams working in the focus districts in the Amhara Region had not been fully briefed or provided input into the envisioned planning process. Thus, it was helpful to take time to make sure all partners were together on next steps, purpose, etc.

Some of the activities of this pre-workshop included:

- Review of the Bridge Program key aspects
- Reminder of Sustainable Development Goal WASH targets and Ethiopia Government goals
- Discussion of the purpose and outcomes of the long-term strategic planning process
- Review of key assessment findings from the focus districts
- Discussion of steps in the long-term planning process
- Discussion of the Excel tool developed to support long-term planning
- Group practice exercises and feedback discussions.

Workshop 1 – June 2018

This first workshop was held with all NGO partners as well as district, zone and regional government partners. MWA convened this workshop in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia.

This workshop included:

- Discussion of the purpose of the long-term strategic planning process and an overview of key actors involved in the process
- Sharing of evidence from some of the assessments and data sets
- Visioning process whereby each district developed its 2030 vision
- Analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) for each district
- Presentation and discussion of the Excel planning tool and functionality.

Results: The in-depth SWOT analysis was valuable at identifying distinct opportunities for each of the three districts. Some challenges were identified during the visioning process as it was difficult for district sectors to envision what achieving the Sustainable Development Goals could look like or how it would be possible to get there. Due to this challenge, the visioning process had to be reworked and revisited during workshop 2. The depth of discussion about the Excel planning tool was not adequate given its complexity and partners found it difficult to use and comprehend through a one-time training exercise.

Intermediate meetings

Between workshops 1 and 2 each separate district team met to:

- Gain a better understanding of the Excel planning tool with support from district leads
- Identify needs for new infrastructure and rehabilitation for different technology options
- Gather additional data and information at the district level that were needed for long-term planning
- Consult stakeholders at the district level about the long-term vision.

Workshop 2 – July 2018

It was identified during workshop 1 that it would be helpful to have more time as individual districts during workshop 2; districts wanted more time for individualized and detailed planning. Thus, workshop 2 was provided separately for individual districts with 1.5 days of workshop per district. Additional stakeholders including private sector actors, community representatives, district finance offices, and representatives of the town water utilities were added to these workshops. This resulted in additional debate, and in some

cases, development of a revised vision statement and changes to other decisions made during workshop 1. Aspects of workshop 1 required repetition to get into more depth of understanding and detail.

This second round of workshops included:

- Continuation of the visioning exercise for long-term WASH in each district
- Discussion of strategies required to achieve the long-term vision (See Box 2)
- Early discussions about planning assumptions, including aspects such as unit cost per type of water scheme, including all life cycle costs^{viii}; number of people served per type of water scheme; life span per water scheme; and percentage served by safely managed versus basic service delivery per type of water scheme
- Discussion of additional assessment findings and baseline data
- Planning for water schemes and work required per village (kebele) to achieve the vision.

Results: A significant capacity gap in strategic planning and implementation ability among government partners was identified, along with the problem of having specific attendees change between workshops 1 and 2. Visions for each district were enhanced and initial discussions about the needs per village were instigated. The need for multiple intermediate meetings prior to the next workshop was identified and next steps, including deadlines, were agreed upon.

Box 2: Select Strategies for Achieving District WASH Visions

Below is a selection of strategies identified by the district planning teams as helpful towards achieving their long-term WASH visions:

- Securing the commitment of the leadership at different levels
- Technology options – from low-scale to more complex such as rural water piped systems, should be considered
- Increased community participation is needed
- Activities must be time-bound with clear deliverables
- Efficient collaboration is needed between NGOs, government and communities
- Increased budget allocation required at the district level
- Need for periodic review of water tariffs for communities and towns
- Capacitate the private sector/spare part suppliers (e.g. chlorine suppliers)
- Non-functionality rates – community participation needs to be scaled up
 - Establish Water User Associations – to start hiring own personnel, technical experts
 - Establish water structures at the village level
- Organize unemployed youth to support manufacture of spare part supply
- Power supply strategy – develop options for 24 hour “safely managed” access; cost implication analysis
- Develop an unsubsidized self-supply strategy
- Must use a household water treatment strategy
- Monitoring and evaluation needed as a standalone strategy

Intermediate Meetings

Between workshops 2 and 3 district teams met to:

- Elaborate on the stakeholder and SWOT analyses
- Fill in the 'new infrastructure' per kebele and for institutional facilities in the Excel planning tool
- Meet collaboratively as district government and district lead to discuss any challenges and issues
- Consult with the broader group of WASH stakeholders at the district level (private sector, NGOs, associations, community elders, artisans).

Workshop 3 - Strategic Planning and Management Workshop – August 2018

This workshop was a supplemental workshop added at the request of government partners to support capacity development in strategic planning and implementation. MWA arranged for the Ethiopia Management Institute to develop a tailored training to support this long-term strategic planning for WASH and to facilitate this workshop based on their expertise.

The strategic planning and management workshop included:

- Discussion of conceptual frameworks
- Review of potential strategic planning tools
- Group practice sessions
- Examination of evaluation and monitoring techniques
- Discussion of potential service delivery models to be used per district
- Revisiting of the visioning exercise for each district using new tools
- Presentation of WASH systems building blocks results^{ix}.

Between workshops 3 and 4 district teams met to:

- Revise planning document based on inputs received during the strategic planning training
- Share the draft planning document with their respective district administration and district WASH team for enrichment
- Agree on costing for different water supply technology options considering the local context.

Workshop 4 – September 2018

This workshop included:

- Progress updates and discussion based on intermediate meetings
- Discussion of existing and future options for financing the long-term plans
- WASH systems building block analysis sharing and discussion
- Discussion about operations and maintenance models that could be helpful as strategies
- Planning for improved water quality
- Sharing of initial data from a WASH in health care facilities baseline study
- Discussion of potential roles for private sector actors towards achieving the plans
- Review of the alignment of the long-term plans with national plans such as the One WASH National Program.

Results: Workshop 4 provided the opportunity to revise and correct the errors identified in the Excel planning tool formulas. The overall costs for identified technological options were exaggerated due to the errors which caused concern. Moreover, a thorough discussion was conducted and consensus was

reached to apply the indicative resource allocations from the OWNP document to the finance section of the long-term plans. The OWNP document provides recommended contributions from government, NGOs, community and bi-lateral organizations which should be utilized to finance WASH.

Workshop 5 – Writing Workshop – December 2018

As the culmination of all the meetings and workshops, a writing and review workshop was held a few months later. The purpose of this workshop was to review all the sections of the Excel planning tool and then sit together to draft the written long-term strategic plans. This required taking the assumptions from the Excel tool and documenting them so they can be available and understood by all stakeholders and potentially by future interested funders. As an example, if 5% of the capital expenditure was set as the required amount for direct costs, the narrative explained why that decision or assumption was made. The narrative was also to discuss the baseline situation in terms of water coverage, functionality rate, demographics of the district, WASH coverage challenges, WASH in institutions and a systems strength score and accompanying explanation from the WASH Building Block analysis.

Following workshop 5, draft plans were developed collaboratively for each district by district government with support from the district lead organization. Plans were then shared with MWA staff who conducted review and editing.

People

People are at the front and center of development work, particularly in this program where MWA is utilizing a facilitation approach^{viii}. This approach teaches NGOs to serve as catalysts for change in specific areas of the WASH system but without directly leading the work. Thus, this planning process was conducted by local government with the facilitation support of MWA and partners.

MWA supported government to assemble a team of experts drawn from District Offices such as Water, Education, Health, Agriculture, Administration, Women and Children, and Finance as well as Town Utilities to lead the planning process. The focal persons who did the majority of the work were the District WASH Team, composed of staff from Health, Education and Water sectors. The planning process was helped by the consistent presence and technical support of the NGO team including MWA staff, IRC WASH staff and colleagues from the district lead partners (CARE, WaterAid and World Vision). The Regional Sector Bureaus of Water, Education, Finance, and Health along with the Planning Commission and the One WASH Program Coordination Office were also active members during planning workshops and draft plan reviews.

“Considering the huge benefit of the SDG WASH strategic planning approach, tools and sense of ownership established by the district cabinet, we are encouraging other sector offices to follow suit in contextualizing their plans in light of long-term goals” - Tadesse Kassie, District Administration Head of Dera District.

Learning and Recommendations

This is the first time MWA has engaged in this type of long-term strategic planning in support of district governments in Ethiopia. This is also one of the first times this long-term planning has been done in the country, though other alliance members such as IRC WASH and WaterAid have experience in other countries. As anticipated, the planning process did not proceed as envisioned and many lessons were learned along the way. One of the most exciting outcomes was the interest expressed by government partners to replicate this process in additional districts. Below are lessons and recommendations to support replication in Ethiopia and beyond for WASH or other sectors.

Lessons Learned	Recommendations
<p>This process of developing costed strategic plans was new to most partners. While the envisioned planning process was linear and logical with clear steps that built on each previous step, the process went very differently. For example, pieces of workshop 1 were re-discussed and changed during workshop 3 and things planned for workshop 4 were organically raised in workshop 1, etc.</p>	<p>It is necessary to be very flexible in this process. The speed at which the workshops can proceed depends on who is in the room, starting points of the participants, amount of information already available, motivation to achieve high-level government goals, amount of staff time available, etc. Thus, facilitators must be able to pivot and change plans efficiently.</p>
<p>This process was useful to help district leaders envision what it could look like in their districts to move from the MDGs to the SDGs (full coverage across an entire district) and the types and amounts of materials, personnel expertise, new approaches and costs required.</p>	<p>Planning based on a foundation of evidence was critical. Without the evidence base, it would have been difficult to make a case for a systems approach that moves beyond hardware and for the importance of even developing the long-term strategic plans at all.</p>
<p>Developing fully costed strategic plans was a critical piece to assist government partners to visualize the significant gap between existing funding for WASH and the amount of funding that is needed to reach full coverage.</p>	<p>The budgets available from local, regional and national government are insufficient to engage in the type of infrastructure development, water quality activities, support to institutions and other requirements to achieve full coverage. Advocacy and evidence-sharing are required to encourage additional funding to achieve the plan.</p>
<p>Utilizing a life-cycle costing approach (including operational expenditures, direct and indirect costs, etc.) was challenging as this was a new approach which pushed beyond the norm of focusing mainly on capital expenditures. Additional time was required in the process for life-cycle costing to be accomplished.</p>	<p>Extra time should be built into the long-term planning process to allow for repeat discussions, added trainings or meetings, writing time, and other needs that may emerge.</p>

<p>Planning for technology implementation, maintenance and rehabilitation on a detailed village-by-village (kebele) basis proved to be difficult. The recommendation to plan for individual water points in individual kebeles was not well received. These efforts were only partially successful.</p>	<p>Allowing a long time for the planning process, simplifying the planning tools, and giving government a bigger voice in initially developing the planning tools and processes may help to mitigate these challenge.</p>
<p>The Excel planning tool was found to be highly useful because it had many calculations already built in, was set up with the functionality to change costs over time (with the understanding that as you get closer to full coverage some water schemes will support less people) and had the ability to support very detailed planning. However, the tool was also complicated to use and the planning teams found it more helpful to plan in separate Excel sheets they developed themselves and then move data into the tool as an afterstep.</p>	
<p>The long-term planning process helped to shift the paradigm away from the assumption that NGOs will likely fill all gaps in funding and implementation. This served to help local governments start to envision how they might fill these gaps.</p>	<p>Provide added support to local governments to make the leap in thinking from SDG targets and national goals to a vision for how this tangibly looks on the ground in terms of standards, service levels, quality monitoring, and actions. While national level targets can provide helpful frameworks, what is most important is the ability to translate that into local action.</p>
	<p>Start the process of planning between NGOs and government with an upfront signed commitment from local (or other as needed) government to provide at least 50% of the funds required to achieve district water coverage by 2030. This would increase the motivation to plan carefully and decrease the challenge of having only a small percentage of the required funding available to fulfill the plans at the start.</p>
<p>Capacity among both NGO and local government partners was found to be a barrier. Thus, time had to be added to the process to engage in unplanned training.</p>	<p>Conduct a capacity development assessment and strategy for key district WASH personnel prior to beginning the workshop to avoid unexpected gaps in capacity that cause delays.</p>

	<p>Beyond the plan development itself, subsequent trainings such as use of Excel or other tools, strategic planning and visioning, creative thinking, etc. can provide significant benefits to the process and to the participants.</p>
<p>Due to government leadership transitions and other issues, often different representatives from district and NGO offices showed up to different planning meetings and workshops. This resulted in the need to repeat/change previous activities or to shift plans which caused delays.</p>	<p>Set clear expectations and get commitments up front to ensure that the same people show up to each key meeting and workshop to avoid mid-stream changes in planning or repetition and delays. Given the frequent turnover in staff it is helpful to build in additional measures to manage this challenge during the planning process.</p>
	<p>Ensure that clear documentation is developed at every step of the process for each district so that if personnel transitions or other unforeseen events occur, previous work and decisions are clearly documented and respected.</p>
<p>The process was lengthy, challenging and significant change from typical government planning processes. Thus, it was a surprise that at the final stages of planning, government partners expressed a keen interest to replicate this process in other districts.</p>	<p>It is beneficial to improve the process based on learnings and recommendations and then expand it to additional districts and regions building on the feedback of government officials.</p>
<p>Additional Recommendations</p>	
<p>It is critical for government staff to engage in the annual and longer-term planning processes as opposed to hiring consultants to conduct planning as governments have often done previouslyⁱ. District staff engaging directly in the planning fostered a much higher level of ownership over the process and the plans than outside engagement has been shown to do.</p>	
<p>It is helpful to have an NGO serving as the convener or broker of local stakeholder relationships. Government actors tend to be siloed from each other and from other stakeholders, thus, having an NGO facilitate cross-sector, multi-stakeholder convening for planning is beneficial.</p>	
<p>Strategic plans need to be operationalized as annual action plans. Long-term plans also need periodic review to adapt them based on progress, learnings and emerging developments within the local context.</p>	

Next Steps

The MWA partnership completed the long-term plan development process with three target district governments. The next challenge is convening all partners in a district including MWA partners, other NGOs, government structures, private sector actors and communities to communicate and collaborate to utilize the long-term plans as a shared roadmap for implementation. MWA district lead partners will convene and communicate regularly with district government and other stakeholders to support collaboration and cooperation. MWA will convene bi-annual Program Management Group meetings with all partners in the districts where reflection and revision processes will take place. It is important to mobilize finances to translate these long-term plans into reality. Lack of resources could detour local governments from developing ambitious visions for the future. Thus, MWA will support government efforts to utilize these plans to mobilize funds and partnerships from a variety of sources.

References & Notes

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The Millennium Water Alliance is a permanent alliance that convenes opportunities and partnerships, accelerates learning and effective models, and influences the WASH space. We do this by leveraging and focusing our member and partner expertise to scale learning and quality, sustained WASH services globally. MWA's members include research institutions, NGOs and private sector entities. Members have world-class WASH expertise and engage in WASH work in over 90 countries around the world. Learn more at www.mwawater.org.

In Ethiopia, the Millennium Water Alliance has convened a coalition including CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, IRC WASH, WaterAid, and World Vision to support the work of the Amhara National Regional State in achieving the WASH SDGs in three districts. The vision of the work of this partnership is to support three district governments in the Amhara Region to implement their long-term strategic plans to achieve universal access to water by 2030.

This document is part of a series of learning documents produced from the 2017-2020 work of the Millennium Water Alliance and partners in Ethiopia. These papers can be found on the MWA website. Other papers address use of dispensers for safe water and development of strong partnerships for increased impact. This paper aims to share the process undertaken to support district government partners to development long-term, costed, strategic plans to achieve full coverage by 2030 and the lessons learned along the way. It was approved for publication by partners CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, IRC WASH, WaterAid and World Vision in December 2020.

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