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Working with local governments to increase access to WASH services: a case of WaterAid's participatory approaches in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to implement participatory processes are often complicated by realities which make objectives of participation unattainable. Hence, if participation is to mean more than good intentions, it is vital to understand the strategies deployed by international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) in participatory development. This study employed a qualitative case-study approach to evaluate the participatory processes employed in two WASH projects implemented by WaterAid Nigeria attempting work with Local Government Areas: the Sustainable Total Sanitation project and the HSBC Water programme. Water-Aid Nigeria's participatory development approach recognises the responsibility of the various tiers of government for its citizens' wellbeing, especially the need for partnership with the Local Government Area (LGA) towards the delivery of WASH services. The state, as the 'duty bearer', is responsible for the provision of WASH services. Thus, both projects centred on government capacity building and community empowerment through the establishment and capacity development of WASH units in LGAs, insistence on counterpart funding and the establishment of water, sanitation and hygiene committees (WASHCOMs). Despite these attempts, findings highlighted the persistence of inefficiencies within the LGA WASH system that rendered partnerships ineffective. At the community level, WASHCOMs were not sustainable. Despite the challenges of implementing partnerships between INGOs and LGAs, such partnership remains a way to improve the provision of WASH services in Nigeria and other low- and middle-income countries. To better work within the participatory model, WASH INGOs should explore how to better use existing LGA arrangements for service delivery. Additionally, the LGA, as a duty bearer, could foster genuine, non-discriminatory spaces for the participation of communities by taking political, socio-economic and cultural differences into account.

Key words: capacity building, counterpart funding, local governance, participatory development, partnerships

HIGHLIGHTS

- In the WASH sector, a growing feature of participatory development is the building of partnerships between different tiers of government and international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) to deliver development projects.
- In two case study projects in Nigeria, WaterAid elicited partnerships with Local Government Areas (LGAs) in WASH service delivery through the formation of WASH units, capacity building, insistence on counterpart funding and formation of WASH committees.
- Various frustrations existed with implementing LGA-INGO partnerships. Despite capacity building attempts, there was still inefficiency, bureaucracy and aid dependency within the LGA WASH system that served as impediments to effective partnership. Institutions and structures established to facilitate partnership with LGAs were not sustainable.
- To more effectively work within the participatory model, WASH INGOs could seek to understand the power dynamics in the LGA system and explore how to better use existing LGA arrangements.
- Additionally, the LGA, as duty bearer responsible for WASH service provision, could foster genuine, non-discriminatory spaces for participation of communities by taking political, socioeconomic and cultural differences into account.

INTRODUCTION

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 seeks to ensure safe drinking water and sanitation for all by 2030. As of 2020, 2 billion people globally lack safely managed drinking water services, 3.6 billion people lack

safely managed sanitation services, and 2.3 billion people lack basic hygiene services (WHO/UNICEF 2021). Globally, the areas with largest needs for water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services are rural areas or fragile contexts of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Nigeria. It is estimated that about 39 million people in Nigeria, representing about 19% of the country's population, lack access to improved sanitation facilities, while 45 million inhabitants do not have access to safe water services (ibid). The provision of WASH services in these contexts has been historically funded or implemented by governments, multilateral agencies, or international or local NGOs working with a top-down approach, where programmes are designed and implemented without the participation of stakeholders (Kamruzzaman 2013). A human rights approach to WASH, with its emphasis on accountability, access to information, non-discrimination, attention to vulnerable groups and participation, is a crucial aspect of achieving the SDGs (COHRE AAS SDC and UN-HABITAT 2007). Increasingly, participatory development approaches have been applied to WASH programmes in LMICs (Wamuchiru 2017).

In the participatory development, local actors are engaged in the development process. Participation by the poor and marginalised is expected to lead to a greater achievement of development goals and agendas (Ribot 2011). This approach was born out of the presumed failure of the 'top-down' development approach (Chambers 2008; Kamruzzaman 2013); it, therefore, rejects centralised decision-making processes in favour of an inclusive 'bottom-up' approach (Kapoor 2005).

Participatory development has several aims in promoting bottom-up planning and inclusion. First, participatory development seeks to promote local community empowerment (Kapoor 2005). Empowerment here means the pooling of financial and human resources to achieve collective strength and countervail power. It also means the enhancement of technical skills, planning and managerial competence, and analytical and reflective abilities (Kapoor 2005; Tsang *et al.* 2009). Second, participatory development seeks to ensure the ownership of development programmes (Ndabaga *et al.* 2015), where people take the initiative in establishing project activities. Lastly, there is a wide, if contested, assumption that stakeholder participation will enhance the sustainability of development projects by creating project ownership leading to willingness to assume responsibility relevant to project success (Gleitsmann *et al.* 2007).

In the WASH sector, a growing feature of participatory development is the building of partnerships between relevant governments and international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) to deliver development projects in LMICs (Sharma 2015).

This approach takes different forms but primarily involves INGOs working with private and public institutions to encourage beneficiary participation in WASH projects (Trinborg 2007). Instead of replacing the state (Rose & Miller 1992), INGOs work through state institutions to deliver services.

Attempts to implement participatory processes are often complicated by realities which make the goals of participation unattainable (Cohen & Uphoff 1980). Hence, if participation is to mean more than good intentions, it is vital to understand the strategies deployed by INGOs in participatory development and how these interact with the existing structural and political dynamics to either facilitate or stifle promises of participation.

This paper employs a qualitative case-study approach to evaluate participatory processes employed in two WASH projects in Nigeria. The Sustainable Total Sanitation (STS) project and HSBC Water programme (HWP) projects were both implemented by WaterAid Nigeria in partnership with Local Government Area (LGA) institutions (Table 1). The aim was to document the approach and effectiveness of INGOs working in partnership with local government institutions to deliver WASH services. Specifically, the paper outlines and explores (i) the strategies and procedures adopted by WaterAid in promoting local participation and empowerment; (ii) the effectiveness of these strategies; (iii) their effect on existing administrative structures, inclusion and power relations, and (iv) the broader implications for the long-term sustainability of WASH projects.

METHODS

The case-study organisation is WaterAid Nigeria. The specific projects are the STS, a large programme part-funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the HWP funded by the HSBC Bank in six countries including Nigeria. The case-study projects were selected for this research based on their avowed commitment to participation as a strategy for governing WASH in communities.

Data collection involved three phases: a pilot phase to plan the data collection and pilot the tools; a field-based visit for initial data collection through interviews, observations and document review; and follow-up interviews with the respondents.

Table 1 | Descriptions of two case-study projects implemented by WaterAid in Nigeria

	STS Project	HWP – Phase 1
Project aim	The project aims to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, inclusion and sustainability of all sanitation approaches in three states of Nigeria	The programme aims to significantly improve access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for people living in the poorest communities in Nigeria
Project partners	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Institute of Fiscal Studies, Federal, State and LGAs, and Beneficiary Communities	The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited (HSBC) water programme, Earth Watch, WaterAid, World Wildlife Fund, federal, state, and LGAs, and beneficiary communities
Years implemented	2012–2016	2012–2017
States covered	Jigawa, Ekiti and Enugu	Benue, Plateau and Bauchi
LGAs	**Jigawa:** Gumel, Kaugama Sule Tankarkar and Maigatari **Ekiti:** Ikole, Moba, Ilejemeje and Ekiti South West **Enugu:** Nkanu East, Igbo-Etiti and Udenu	**Bauchi**: Dass, Bogoro, Ningi and Ganjuwa **Plateau:** Pankshin, Kanke, Langtang North and Bokkos **Benue**: Logo and Ado
Target beneficiaries	625,000	Water: 173,000 Sanitation and hygiene: 316,000

States, LGAs and communities participating in the STS and HWP projects were used as the sampling frame. For the STS, fieldwork was carried out in two project states: Enugu and Ekiti. Two LGAs in Enugu and four LGAs in Ekiti were purposively selected. It was not possible to visit communities in Jigawa state because of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria, but remote interviews were conducted. For the HWP, all three project states of Bauchi, Plateau and Benue were included. Three LGAs from Bauchi and Plateau states and two from Benue were purposively selected from a list of all LGAs where the projects were implemented. For each LGA, two communities, one with the highest rate of open defaecation and another with the lowest rate of open defaecation, were purposively selected for water, sanitation and hygiene committees (WASHCOM) interviews.

A pilot trip was conducted in 2013 to determine the categories of interview respondents and pilot complete interview guidelines and questionnaires. Open structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were held with two staff from the STS project and three staff from the HWP project using a snowballing technique.

In 2015, data were collected through KIIs, focus group discussions (FGD), the observation of village sanitation planning meetings, and project document review. Interviews were conducted with LGA WASH staff (9), national NGO staff (4), WaterAid staff (6) and WASH consultants from the private sector (5). KIIs were conducted by the researcher in English using semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires. Interviews with WaterAid staff and WASH consultants were recorded. A total of seven FGDs were held with 11 WASH-COMs. FGDs were conducted with members of WASHCOM. Discussions with WASHCOMs and interviews with LGA staff were not recorded because respondents did not grant consent, but written notes were taken. Both discussions and interviews were conducted in person, except for LGA staff in Jigawa, which were carried out using Skype.

For the STS project, two community mobilisation meetings were observed in Enugu state, and four sanitation planning meetings were observed in Ekiti state. All community mobilisation and sanitation planning meetings were recorded. Additionally, a checklist was used to collect information on attendance and participation during meetings. Finally, 69 project and WaterAid strategy documents were reviewed.

In 2016, all key informants (LGA staff, WASH consultants and national NGO staff) were contacted again for follow-up discussions. Interviews were open-ended discussions to understand if there were changes in the project environment since the last interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted through telephone, Skype or WhatsApp and lasted an average of 2 h. A group chat room was established on WhatsApp with the five WASH consultants. The chat room allowed for continuous interaction about the interview questions for 1 month.

Interview documents were analysed qualitatively in Nvivo analytical software (QSI International, Doncaster, Australia) by indexing, coding, summarising, identifying and mapping patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responsibility for the provision of WASH services in Nigeria

The Nigeria National Water and Sanitation policy drafted in 2004 defines the responsibility of WASH service provision as being shared across federal, state and local governments. The policy was developed by the federal government of Nigeria with support from INGOs. The federal government of Nigeria is the primary custodian of the human rights to water and sanitation by being the signatory to relevant global conventions. The Federal Ministry of Water Resources is responsible for national policy formulation, data collection, monitoring and mobilising funds. They provide support, coordinate and regulate the other tiers of government and the private sector and in the fulfilment of their responsibilities. State governments, through water boards and rural water supply and sanitation agencies, are responsible for supplying potable water to their states, including the 'establishment, operation, quality control and maintenance of water supply schemes' (FMWR 2004: 10). State governments also provide technical support to local governments. Local governments take responsibility for the 'establishment, operation and maintenance of rural water supply schemes, in conjunction with the benefiting communities. This shall be through the establishment of a unit that shall be technically equipped, adequately funded and manned' (FMWR 2004: 10).

In addition to government responsibility, the policy defines the importance of non-state actor participation – including the private sector, NGOs and communities. Specifically, the role of NGOs is specified as providing technical expertise and additional finance.

Project descriptions

WaterAid, founded in 1981 and working in 27 countries, is an INGO focused on improving access to WASH in the world's poorest communities. WaterAid is committed to service delivery to governments and the communities where it implements its programmes. In addition to providing services, WaterAid influences the various tiers of government to respond to the need to provide WASH services.

The STS, implemented from 2012 to 2016, aimed to end open defaecation through a total sanitation approach for over 500 communities in 12 LGAs in three states. The HWP, implemented from 2012 to 2017, aimed to provide water access to 173,000 beneficiaries and improved sanitation and hygiene services to 316,000 beneficiaries in 10 LGAs within three states (Table 1).

First, participating states and LGAs were selected through a vulnerability assessment. Then, WaterAid established WASH units in all participating LGAs lacking them and provided office equipment and established project management systems. Staff were deployed to WASH units by LGAs. WaterAid strengthened the capacity of WASH units in project management and technical components of the projects. LGA WASH units then selected project communities, collected baseline WASH access data and established WASHCOMs in all project communities to support the implementation of WASH activities. WaterAid also trained LGA WASH unit staff to serve as community-led total sanitation (CLTS) facilitators for the project. The facilitators then conducted community sensitisation or 'triggering' meetings, where community members were persuaded to commit to end open defaecation. During triggering meetings, CLTS facilitators selected volunteer 'natural leaders' and village health promoters in each community to support hygiene behaviour change, toilet construction and an end to open defaecation. Following the triggering meetings, LGA WASH unit staff, natural leaders and WASHCOMs promoted latrine construction through ongoing household visits and community meetings. Communities were also encouraged to construct public latrines with funds provided by WaterAid through LGA WASH units. LGA WASH unit staff regularly monitored communities against national requirements for open defaecation free (ODF) certification, which is granted by the National Task Group on Sanitation after inspection by LGA, state and/or national sanitation groups. In addition to the sanitation work, under the HWP project, water points such as boreholes with hand pumps and motorised boreholes were also constructed in selected communities. Finally, an end line assessment was carried out in project communities to measure changes in WASH access at the end of each year.

Participatory development approach

WaterAid delivers its programmes through a rights-based approach. The rights-based approach perceives the State as the primary custodian (duty bearer) of the rights to water and sanitation, and therefore aims to build accountability into the WASH service sector by stressing to citizens their rights to WASH services and empowering citizens through partnership and participation to claim their rights from the state. The WaterAid Nigeria Country Strategy for 2011–2015 summarises how its interventions are to be carried out in Nigeria.

'The strategy is to maintain a clear focus. We will advocate the rights-based approach with emphasis on sustain-ability and collaboration with others. We will engage in direct partnerships and investments in local organizations and governments to both provide services and to drive demand and accountability through empowered citizens claiming their rights and exercising choice. We will also focus on equity and inclusion so that WASH reaches those who are often marginalised and missed out.' (WaterAid 2010: 4)

The implementation of both WASH projects by WaterAid included several key components used with the aim of increasing project participation, ownership, empowerment and sustainability. These include the formation of WASH units at the local government level, the establishment of WASHCOMs at the community level, require-ments for counterpart funding and capacity building.

LGA WASH unit formation

The HSBC and STS projects were implemented through WASH units, which are the lowest state organisation involved in delivering WASH services to communities in Nigeria. The establishment of WASH units in LGAs is required by the draft Nigeria National WASH policy. The primary responsibility of WASH units is the service delivery and maintenance of WASH facilities, including procurement and construction, as well as sanitation and hygiene behaviour change campaigns and community trainings.

The rationale for WASH units in WaterAid projects is illustrated by the following:

'WaterAid believes that local government authorities, who find themselves at the frontline of basic service pro-vision, are key to the achievement of the water and sanitation Millennium Development Goal (MDGs no 7).' (WaterAid 2008: 3)

'WaterAid in Nigeria focuses its efforts on facilitating the establishment of functional systems such as the WASH units in the Local Government system, WASHCOMs at the community level, and the establishment of Water Consumer Associations as owners and managers of small town water schemes.' (WaterAid 2010: 7)

Prior to the establishment of WASH units, various departments within the LGA were responsible for carrying out water and sanitation functions. The works departments were mainly responsible for the construction of bore-holes and latrines, while the health departments were responsible for hygiene and health education. The WASH unit as a sub-department attempted to bring together all LGA WASH functions under the same roof. Other LGAs where INGOs have not implemented WASH projects were not likely to have WASH units.

The WASH unit was headed by a WASH unit coordinator who was a staff of the LGA. The WASH unit coor-dinator related directly with WaterAid on project management issues. The LGA unit coordinator was directly responsible for implementing activities of the WASH unit, reporting daily to a programme manager, a staff of WaterAid. Other WASH unit staff included a monitoring and evaluation officer, hygiene officer, sanitation offi-cer, water officer and a finance officer. Salary of all WASH unit staff was paid by the LGA. The LGA was also expected to pay the unit a monthly imprest towards office administration. A management committee made up of state and non-state actors like traditional rulers, community leaders, LGA senior staff and members of civil society provided an oversight function to the WASH unit.

Administration of finances for the two projects was managed directly by WaterAid through the LGA WASH units. Funds for project implementation were transferred from WaterAid to the LGA WASH units, which oper-ated separate accounts for the project in their name. The LGA unit coordinator administered the delivery and use of funds with the supervision of WaterAid and the management committee. The signatories to the WASH unit account are, however, two members of the management committee who were not staff of the LGA. The LGA executive committee has no direct control over project funds. This is to ensure that non-state actors participate in decisions on how funds are utilised and that funds are not diverted to other LGA activities.

Community WASHCOM formation

WASHCOMs were the primary institutions through which communities were expected to participate in WASH projects. A WaterAid Nigeria internal document, in describing the rationality for WASHCOMs, states:

'The overall ownership and sustainability of projects…will primarily be attained through the community-led processes. WASHCOMs will be formed and involved in the project implementation cycle. The processes will ensure that communities are at the centre of their development taking the lead and responsibility at every level of project implementation. This will ensure social sustainability of projects and promote acceptance at the community level.' (WaterAid 2015: 4)

WASHCOMs in these two projects had 12–15 members and were responsible for deciding where WASH infrastructure like water points and communal toilets will be sited, supporting construction and providing operation and maintenance. They also support the construction of household toilets and community hygiene behaviour change activities. WASHCOMs were expected to meet once a month and keep minutes of meetings. WASHCOMs were also expected to keep financial records, equipment and labour costs, community maps and community action plans.

The community general assembly, a community decision-making forum made up of all the residents of a community, was responsible for selecting members of WASHCOMs. Members of WASHCOMs were selected to represent all genders, ages, social classes and zones in the community. To carry out their responsibilities, WASHCOMs worked through additional volunteers. Members of WASHCOM and other volunteers were unpaid.

Counterpart funding requirements

In the STS and HWP projects, WaterAid required the payment of counterpart funds, or cost share, between WaterAid, government and beneficiaries in line with the Nigeria National WASH Policy. A WaterAid report on the sustainability of water supply in Tanzania links attaining sustainability in WASH services to the financial commitment of project beneficiaries.

'Sustainability today invariably depends upon communities taking financial responsibility for their schemes, which, if achieved, will enable scarce resources from government and donors to be targeted specifically on areas where there is no improved water supply.' (WaterAid 2015: 11)

Three tiers of government were expected to make financial contributions towards the provision of WASH services in Nigeria (FMWR 2004). The federal government had the major responsibility for capital investment in the construction of rural water facilities (50%), while state and LGA governments were to contribute 25 and 20%, respectively. The remaining 5% was to be contributed by communities. In addition to contributing to the cost of constructing new water facilities, the various tiers of government and communities were also expected to share financial responsibility for the operation and maintenance of water schemes. Communities were responsible for 70% of the cost of operations and maintenance of rural WASH facilities, and LGA units were responsible for 30%. To raise funds for operation and maintenance, some communities charge a token for water collection. Communities that contribute counterpart funds for the construction of WASH facilities were expected to show ownership and establish systems for maintenance.

For the STS and HWP projects, the financial contribution from state agencies and other project beneficiaries known as the 'counterpart fund' was deposited into the LGA WASH unit account. This fund was then utilised for project implementation together with funds deposited by WaterAid. In addition, the LGA was expected to provide the WASH unit with weekly funds for project consumables and transport.

Capacity building of partners and beneficiaries

The STS and HWP projects both employed the capacity building of both government and community institutions, as WaterAid believes the lack of strong institutions and systems has led to poor WASH access in rural communities.

The WaterAid country strategy, in discussing the need for capacity building of partners at the local level, states:

'Capacity building is expected to lead to inclusive and effective participation of citizens in demanding accountability from government at the local level. The aim of strengthening capacity is to raise awareness of citizens on their rights to water, sanitation and hygiene services.' (WaterAid 2010: 9)

Capacity building was deployed in two stages. First, WaterAid staff and consultants strengthened the capacity of LGA WASH units, and then the WASH units were expected to build capacity in the communities. Capacity building of the WASH units focused on enhancing logistical support, such as the provision of office equipment, as well as technical support. Technical capacity was strengthened through training and workshops, including an annual partner round table where all project stakeholders came together to plan implementation. Other training, such as participatory budget tracking training delivered to WASH unit staff, allowed them to strengthen the capacity of communities to demand services from government in keeping with a rights-based approach. In addition to the trainings described above, each year LGA WASH units were also given an opportunity to identify additional capacity building needs.

The capacity building of WASHCOMs was facilitated by LGA WASH unit staff using WASHCOM mentoring plans. The plans included sessions on documentation, resource mobilisation, operations and maintenance of WASH infrastructure, developing community action plans and monitoring.

Effectiveness of the participatory development approach

Each component of the participatory development approach described above had its own successes and challenges within the two WASH projects studied.

LGA WASH units

In establishing WASH units and departments within the LGAs, WaterAid believes that governance and decision-making powers will be brought closer to the people, resulting in more effective community participation and empowerment. Narratives from interviews with WASH consultants and WaterAid staff echoed this vision and described the WASH units as leading to more effective WASH programmes:

> *'Before the creation of WASH units, interventions in the WASH sector at LGA level were scattered. The creation of WASH units helps bring all WASH activities in the LGA under one roof.' (LGA WASH unit staff)*

However, not everybody shares the view that the creation of WASH units in participating local governments is a necessary condition for successful implementation. Rather, some critical voices opined that WASH units are created by INGOs primarily to enable them to ensure the accountability of project funds and deliver services within LGAs without getting caught in the LGA bureaucratic bottleneck:

> *'We do not need new units. What is the works department doing? What is the health department doing? WASH units are just duplication of responsibilities.' (LGA WASH unit Coordinator)*

> *'WASH units are created to ensure the accountability of donor funds. It is not about sustainability and owner-ship.' (WASH Consultant)*

According to WaterAid, the creation of WASH units for these two projects was successful at reducing bureaucracy in terms of turnaround time for project implementation. Furthermore, the creation of WASH units increased the attention paid to WASH and budgetary allocations in the project LGAs.

> *'Our observation is that LGAs that do not have WASH units do not have a strong WASH activity. We believe that having WASH units is an important for implementing WASH programmes.' (WaterAid Staff)*

However, the WASH units are still part of the local government system, where a poor attitude to work and complacency were major issues affecting partnership and relationships between WaterAid and its LGA partners:

> *'The civil service mentality to work is very visible in the way [the LGA WASH unit staff] work. All the efforts we make to change orientation to project management has met a lot of difficulty.' (WaterAid Staff, STS project)*

Community WASHCOMs

Among the two projects, WASHCOMs were created in all project communities. WASHCOMs provided a platform for communities to discuss and reach decisions on WASH challenges. They also set user fees and collected them for the operations and maintenance funds.

However, the requirements of monthly meeting and record-keeping were not well followed in the STS and HWP projects. In WASHCOM observations, most had notebooks for keeping meeting minutes, but only 23% had records of meetings that were dated within a month of the fieldwork, and minutes were non-existent in several WASHCOM notebooks.

WaterAid Staff explained that WASHCOMs commonly do not meet regularly or keep records:

'Minutes of meetings is the immediate evidence of activity; when you visit WASHCOMs you will be told that the last time they met was six months ago. It should be fortnightly. After a project life span, you don't find any WASHCOM that will feed into the design I have described.' (WaterAid STS project staff)

However, a WASHCOM member explained that the regular frequency of meetings specified by the WASH Policy was not seen as necessary for the WASHCOM to effectively complete its mandate:

'We do not need to meet all the time. We all have lot of things we are busy with. When there is an issue, we resolve it wherever we are. Moreover, the cost of hosting the meetings is expensive. Whoever is hosting has to prepare food for those attending from his pocket.' (WASHCOM member)

Interviews showed that the vision of WASHCOMs transcending beyond the project cycle to define decision-making and the way activities are conducted in communities is seldom realised.

'In a field interview of existing structures, most communities cannot remember the names of members or the number of members in the WASHCOM. Functionality is directly proportional to inducement of funding and technical support. I have not seen any WASHCOM functioning actively without support.' (WaterAid staff)

Counterpart funding requirements

Despite the counterpart funding requirement, LGAs have been often unable to make direct financial contributions towards projects. In the 2015 WaterAid annual round table report, 95% of LGAs mentioned unwillingness of LGAs to pay counterpart funding as a major factor affecting the implementation of the projects in their respective LGAs. According to a WaterAid staff member:

'We have not had success with getting communities and LGAs to contribute counterpart funding. They do not take it seriously. They sign agreements, but nothing happens.'

Several reasons were presented for why LGAs and communities were unable to pay counterpart funds in these two projects. A major reason was the lack of financial autonomy of LGAs:

'LGAs in Nigeria run joint accounts with state governments. Projects are implemented jointly with the state government. LGAs do not therefore have autonomy over their funds. This makes payments of counterpart funds difficult.' (National NGO staff)

Another reason was not related to the availability of funds, but instead the structure of the LGA and decisions about where funds are spent. LGA staff reported instances in which LGAs drill boreholes through other departments instead of giving the money to the WASH unit:

'…the only funds that come to our department is the funds from WaterAid. The LGA budgets for boreholes and other WASH facilities. This money is given to the works department instead of the department for environment where the WASH unit is.' (WASH unit Coordinator)

The LGA is responsible for WASH financing with other stakeholder funds supplementing. The consistent failure of LGAs and communities to meet their counterpart funding obligations, as in these two projects, may lead to unequal partnerships as one group may feel obligated to the other.

Capacity building

Capacity building increased WASH units' abilities to implement project activities. Staff obtained project equipment and developed competence in various aspects of project implementation, including facilitation and monitoring.

Despite capacity building attempts, there still was inefficiency, bureaucracy and aid dependency within the LGA WASH system in these projects. Frequent transfers, poor attitudes to work, complacency and allegiance to civil service structures were impediments to effective partnership between WaterAid and LGA WASH units. This was also not unique to these projects. In a 2013 annual round table report, all 16 LGAs in attendance mentioned the frequent transfer of WASH unit staff as an impediment to project implementation.

Challenges also existed for capacity building the community level. WASHCOMs were expected to understand how to promote good hygiene behaviour, mobilise resources, monitor progress and carry out basic maintenance of WASH infrastructure. Discussions with WASHCOM members, however, revealed that the opportunity to attend WaterAid training meetings was considered a privilege because of the monetary incentives provided to enable project beneficiaries to attend.

> 'Community members and WASHCOMs compete to be nominated to attend training and consultative meetings. (WASHCOM member)'

Conflicts sometimes arose where members of WASHCOMs thought they should be nominated to participate in training activities instead of other members. The motivation for rural community members therefore was not the knowledge to be acquired from attending training sessions or the desire to put that knowledge to use, but the material incentives such as training allowances. Such conflicts can affect the effective functioning of WASH-COMs and the potential for collective action towards WASH service delivery.

Administrative structures and power relations

The establishment of LGA WASH units and WASHCOMs as part of the two projects affected existing administrative structures and power relations at both the local government and community levels.

WASH units and new power relationships

WASH units were created to sit as part of a larger department within the LGA, yet they were also formally tied to WaterAid as the manager of project finances. This administrative arrangement led to confusing reporting arrangements for some WASH unit staff:

> 'I report to two people, my director at the LGA and WaterAid STS project coordinator.' (WASH unit coordinator)

Reporting arrangements like this, where an LGA coordinator reports directly to a project coordinator at WaterAid, sets up new hierarchies thereby potentially creating conflicts between coordinators and their directors. The coordinators, who are officers junior to the directors, in this arrangement have autonomous power to deal directly with WaterAid and manage funds that are meant for the WASH unit on a day-to-day basis without involving the department directors. A national NGO staff explains:

> 'Some decisions in the WASH units are taken without the knowledge of the Directors. A good example is during the construction of institutional latrines. The directors in some LGAs were not aware of the cost of most items procured by the WASH coordinators.' (National NGO staff)

However, WaterAid staff interviewed provided narratives contrary to the accounts described above. WaterAid staff stated that Directors who supervised WASH units were fully aware of the daily interactions within the WASH units and received information on the activities of the unit, especially during the WaterAid annual round table meeting.

> 'We relate directly with WASH coordinators to reduce bureaucracy and speed up programme implementation. We hold several other interactive sessions with departmental directors.' (WaterAid staff)

This structure meant the WASH units, while reporting and existing within the local government system, and as part of a wider department, operated as autonomous units within the LGAs. The creation of self-functioning autonomous units within existing departments in the local government enabled timely project implementation. However, such arrangements created new power relationships within the LGA structure, which may have led to conflicts among staff members and therefore could have lowered the effectiveness of the unit at achieving its programmatic goal.

Furthermore, attempts to enhance the performance of WASH units also enabled WaterAid to implement its own bureaucratic processes and directly manage resources provided to LGAs. This was expected to increase project efficiency and reduce misappropriation of project resources, but in practice, WASH units unintentionally served as instruments of control, where WaterAid managed project implementation without having to relinquish power or funds to the LGA.

WASHCOMs and community power relationships

Under the STS and HWP projects, pre-existing associations in project communities were asked to take on WASH responsibilities instead of creating completely new WASHCOMs. It was expected that having existing committees to perform the role of WASHCOMs would maintain local power structures and ensure project sustainability. A WaterAid staff explained this reasoning:

'Instead of having separate committees which run parallel to community development associations, we have decided to work with existing committees while defining roles and responsibilities.' (WaterAid STS project staff)

In adopting existing community institutions, the projects took several steps to ensure that such institutions conformed to the requirements for the formation of WASHCOMs:

'…the existing associations are examined and made to meet the criteria set by the project. This may mean increasing the number of women on the executive committee of the associations or expanding it to accommodate other aspects of equality.' (WaterAid Programme Support Manger)

While the idea of working with existing community organisations intended to prevent duplication and lead to sustainability, the process of making local organisations conform to project standards had the unintended consequence of affecting community structures by altering existing power relationships. Some WASHCOMs in project communities reportedly became unintentionally authoritarian, taking over responsibilities originally intended for traditional rulers and other leaders in communities. WASH consultants revealed:

'…WASHCOMs are forming parallel government to that of traditional rulers in communities. They usurp powers and impose fines on households and use their members to execute that.' (WASH consultant)

'We have had cases where chairmen of WASHCOMs will ask a town crier to call for a meeting by ringing the village bell. This is the purview of the village chief and in this case the chief did not take it lightly.' (WASH consultant)

Decentralisation and the effect of new power relations on participation

By creating LGA WASH units and WASHCOMs, WaterAid attempted to create various decision-making centres to promote government and community participation in WASH service delivery, thus allowing governance to be decentralised and occur at lower levels. The theory was that decentralised institutions such as WASH units would be closer to WASH beneficiaries and provide opportunities for beneficiaries to participate in the management of WASH resources (Babu 2009). A number of challenges, however, limited the ability of WASH units to take responsibility within the projects and therefore limited the ability of beneficiaries to effectively participate in the management of WASH resources. Findings show that WASH units did not fit well into existing government systems, and LGAs were unable to meet project engagement requirements even despite capacity building attempts.

Some participatory approaches intentionally disrupt the order of hierarchal institutions, creating new and different spaces in which different rules of the game apply (Cooke & Kothari 2001); however, this was not the

intent here. With these projects, WASH units unintentionally set up new dynamics and power relationships between the state, civil society and beneficiary communities.

These new dynamics limited the participation of the decentralised institutions in the delivery of WASH services. The rules and structures that define the involvement of decentralised institutions, while seeking to ensure efficiency, may serve to prevent the empowerment of communities.

Weak or unsuitable institutional arrangements have been blamed for poor performance of decentralised systems worldwide (Willetts *et al.* 2020). Universal decentralisation of water services has been found to not only *not improve* participatory access to WASH services but may instead undermine effective governance (Marcus 2007).

In trying to implement LGA–INGO partnerships, INGOs often overlook an institutional capacity of local government agencies and instead give currency to a simplified view of strengthening capacity (Mosse 2004). Attempting to facilitate partnerships in the WASH sector through projects like the STS and HWP, which have clear timelines and strict targets, questions the promise of empowerment through participation.

Inequalities

The projects highlighted a few areas of deepening inequalities through the establishment of LGA WASH units and WASHCOMs.

Participatory approaches and the inclusion of the marginalised

First, the requirement for WASHCOMs to keep records results in targeting educated members of communities to become members and officers. While formal education is not an official guideline, there is a preference for educated people. These requirements may unintentionally exclude vulnerable and marginalised beneficiaries who may not have the educational level or be able to afford the time and money required to meet responsibilities.

Cooke & Kothari (2001) report that development institutions prefer, and require, various forms of participation and reporting techniques that are sometimes beyond the scope of marginalised people. Truly marginalised people and the oppressed are sometimes not welcomed into formal institutions and do not usually have the capacity to organise themselves into formal institutions like WASHCOMs, either due to lack of adequate skills or financial constraints. Consequently, they are left out of development. Cleaver (2001) observed that the mere setting up of formal organisations and the specification of their membership does not necessarily overcome exclusion because the wider structural factors that shape such conditions are often left untouched. Codifying the rights of the vulnerable must involve far wider reaching measures than the requirement that they sit on a committee, or individually speak at meetings.

Second, as previously discussed, the failure of both LGAs and communities to meet counterpart funding obligations may lead to their exclusion from WASH services. Wealthy community members or politicians may contribute their own funds if the community is unable to meet counterpart funding requirements, and may influence the outcome of the project to his or her personal advantage, as described by a project WASH consultant:

> '…*Decisions on where to site WASH facilities may be made solely by the person that has paid the fund on behalf of the community. This may mean that marginalised members of the community are denied access to WASH services.*' (WASH consultant)

These projects recognised the diversity within project communities and made deliberate efforts to ensure the representation of women, people living with disability and children. In some cases, separate meetings were held for different gender categories to encourage participation. There was, however, a lack of sensitivity by the projects to political and cultural differences within project communities. The public decision-making meetings such as CLTS triggering and community council meetings assumed an absence of such differences in project communities.

White (1996) observes that a quota for the inclusion of women, and women simply being there, as is the practice in WASHCOMs, does not mean that women eventually have a real say or that they will be able to represent others and speak for them. Such measures can only be facilitated by fuller participation which may be difficult to measure. These accounts may imply that women do not influence decision-making within the projects. The influence exerted by women may not lie within the technical institutional arrangement prescribed by the project. For

instance, WASH Consultants reported cases where women mobilised informally to boycott the use of certain water points because they were unhappy about where the water point was sited.

Genuine, non-discriminatory spaces for participation could be fostered by taking the diversity in communities into account in organising participatory processes.

Participatory approaches and shared responsibility

Attempts to implement participatory programmes by the projects through WASHCOMs illustrate an attempt to implement a neoliberal governance regime which looks to shift responsibility away from states, relies on multi-stakeholder networks independent of the state to provide WASH services normally associated with the state, discards centralised decision-making processes and attempts to get rural dwellers to bear some responsibilities for the provision of WASH services. The LGA-copying techniques of the private sector by 'contracting out' and 'outsourcing' responsibilities to WASHCOMs (Kapoor 2005; Fraser 2018). WaterAid performing the duties of the state seeks to encourage villagers as responsible citizens to play an active role in service delivery which is the responsibility of the traditional state (Rose 2000; Dean 2010). WASHCOMs as representative grassroot organisations are expected to strengthen local participation in the provision of WASH services by increasing the levels of democracy, transparency and accountability (Hoogesteger 2016).

Several factors hinder the implementation of this regime of neoliberalism characterised by shared responsibilities between the state and citizens (Sangameswaran 2010). WASH units within the LGAs do not fully capture or control government-related functions and capacities related to water provision, WASHCOMs find it difficult to keep up with their obligations and duties assigned to them, as was seen in these case-study projects. In some cases, elite power is reproduced through recentralisation and privileged access to decision-making (Taylor 2007), which was also described in these projects. The dynamics of communities and their real-life situations are sometimes not considered in designing participatory programmes. This limits the empowerment of communities and places a burden on communities.

Participation as an approach to sustainability and ownership

WaterAid deploys participatory methods as a strategy towards promoting the ownership and sustainability of WASH services. Sustainability, which forms the bedrock for the engagement of communities in WASH services, stems not only from a neoliberal rationality but also an economic rationality, in which donors seek to reduce expenditure on WASH services by ensuring the maintenance and functionality of WASH facilities through WASHCOMs (Kleemeier 2000).

The non-sustainability of WASHCOMs and other structures created by the projects calls into question the effectiveness of participatory processes in promoting the ownership of WASH services. Despite the promising theoretical framework, the vision of community project structures transcending beyond the project cycle to define decision-making and WASH service delivery in communities was not realised.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explores the strategies and procedures adopted by WaterAid to promote the participation of local government institutions and communities in WASH projects through the review of two WASH participatory development projects implemented by WaterAid in Nigeria. WaterAid emphasises the need for the state as a duty bearer to play a leading role in the provision of WASH services in Nigeria and for partnership and participation between states and citizens. WaterAid elicits the participation of LGAs and communities in the provision of WASH services through the establishment of WASH units in LGAs, the establishment of WASHCOMs, counterpart funding, capacity building and promotion of a rights-based approach, in which an attempt is made to use training and mentoring as a strategy to guide rural dwellers to demand for their rights from the state as a duty bearer. While well-intentioned, various frustrations existed with the participatory development processes, the capacity of LGA staff was limited, LGAs and communities were unable to contribute counterpart funds, and WASH units and WASHCOMs unintentionally created new power relationships which created inequalities and may affect sustainability. Despite these challenges, the creation of WASH units and WASHCOMs has increased coordination in LGAs and provided structures for decision at lower levels. Capacity building increased the ability of WASH units to participate in project implementation. Despite the frustrations of implementing partnerships between the LGA and INGOs, partnerships with the state remain a way to improve the provision of WASH services in Nigeria and other LMICs. To more effectively work with this model, WASH INGOs could seek to

understand the power dynamics in the LGA system and explore how to better use existing LGA arrangements in setting up participatory processes for the provision of sustainable WASH services. To ensure the payment of counterpart funds, one approach could be for donor agencies to place the responsibility for the payment of LGA counterpart funds on state governments since LGAs may lack financial autonomy. Additionally, the LGA, as a duty bearer responsible for WASH service provision, could foster genuine, non-discriminatory spaces for the participation of communities by taking political, socio-economic and cultural differences into account in organising participatory processes.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All relevant data are included in the paper or its Supplementary Information.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict.

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