UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures

WASH systems strengthening

Background to our work on this topic

Provision of equitable WASH services requires inclusive, well-functioning WASH systems. As such, our work provides evidence to enable and inform the strengthening of these WASH systems.

WASH systems can be thought of in terms of the actors that interact to deliver WASH services, and the key processes required (termed 'building blocks') such as financing, institutional arrangements, planning and monitoring. Our work supports both. Firstly, we engage in research partnerships that build the **capacity of key actors in WASH systems**, such as national and local governments, rights holder organisations and civil society organisations. Secondly, we produce evidence that supports **improvements in specific WASH systems functions** in different country contexts. We also work at a global level where our evidence informs sector debate and sets new agendas.

Our recent thinking and expertise

Our work spans a variety of projects and thinking that all aim to strengthen WASH systems. This includes the following five main areas.

Research to inform governance systems needed for inclusive, sustainable WASH services, with a focus on:

- Achieving accountability at different levels and in multi-stakeholder partnerships through our work in partnership with Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) supporting the Mutual Accountability Mechanism.
- Addressing gender and inclusion in social accountability approaches together with World Vision in Bangladesh.
- Local government roles in addressing the human rights to water and sanitation in Bhutan with SNV
- Facilitating inclusive approaches to service delivery, for instance in examining inclusion aspects of different models for rural water in a learning brief with SNV.
- Involvement of Rights Holder Organisations as legitimate and important parts of the WASH system.

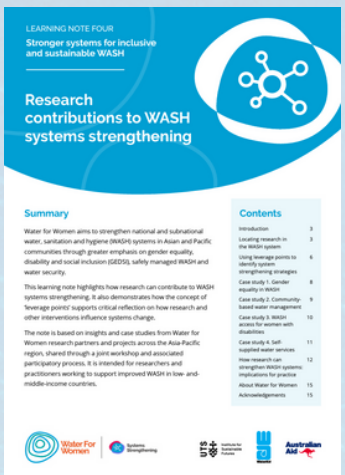
The role of research and evidence in systems strengthening was the topic of a Water for Women Systems Strengthening Learning agenda initiative that UTS-ISF led. Here we used Meadow's leverage points to look at how and where to intervene most strategically to effect systems change. We have also applied leverage points while working with local government actors in Nepal, and in thinking about how organisations learn.

Systems thinking and systems strengthening are closely connected, and we undertook work to investigate learning processes amongst WASH actors to identify entry points to leverage greatest WASH impacts, and have also looked at the application of socio-ecological systems in the context of WASH to support them to function in the face of disturbances.

Planning and monitoring building blocks for systems strengthening are critical. Our work with SNV on critiquing sanitation planning contributes to this, and a UTS-ISF-led Water for Women Initiative on monitoring safely managed water and sanitation services provides evidence and approaches to improve these sector functions.

Private sector roles as part of a wider system. We looked at small-scale enterprise in general through a multi-year research project, Enterprise in WASH, including examining local government roles to support private sector development, and also in 2022 led Water for Women synthesis work on private sector roles.

Selected examples of our work on systems strengthening

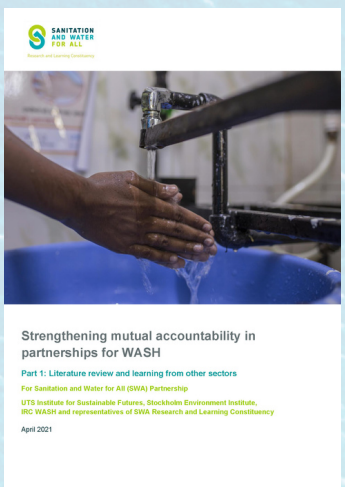


Research contributions to WASH systems strengthening

Drawing on UTS's and other Water for Women research partners' experiences, this learning note highlights how research can contribute to WASH systems strengthening. It also demonstrates how the concept of 'leverage points' supports critical reflection on how research and other interventions influence systems change.

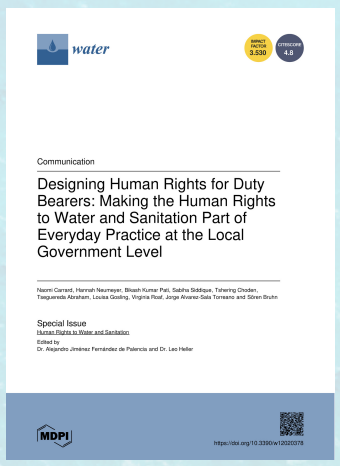
Strengthening multi-stakeholder engagement and mutual accountability in water, sanitation and hygiene: Cross-country synthesis, for SWA

This report synthesises findings across five countries, identifying enablers and challenges for effective multi-stakeholder collaboration. It also assesses multi-stakeholder engagement and mutual accountability efforts in each country to support progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 6.



Strengthening mutual accountability in partnerships for WASH Part 1: Literature review and learning from other sectors, for SWA

This report shares research to inform the Sanitation and Water for All's Mutual Accountability Mechanism by examining similar approaches in other sectors and providing a conceptual framework for mutual accountability in multi-stakeholder partnerships.



Designing Human Rights for Duty Bearers: Making the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation Part of Everyday Practice at the Local Government Level

This paper describes an approach to support local governments used across 12 countries by 37 civil society organisations to ensure everyone has access to water and sanitation services. For the human rights to water and sanitation to move from recognition to realisation, they need to become part of the everyday practice of local authorities.

Making rights real in Bhutan

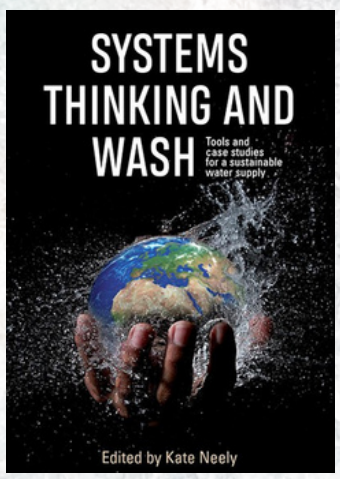
Make Rights Real is an initiative supporting use of the human rights framework to drive and shape the delivery of safe, sustainable, and universal water, sanitation, and hygiene WASH services. The approach was implemented by SNV Bhutan and this report captures the related action research process.

Outcome assessment of gender-transformative social accountability in Bangladesh

This policy brief shares findings of an outcome assessment of gender-transformative social accountability for inclusive WASH, undertaken as part of a Water for Women research project. While the notion of human rights is at the core of social accountability, these rights are not equally recognised, realised or respected by others.

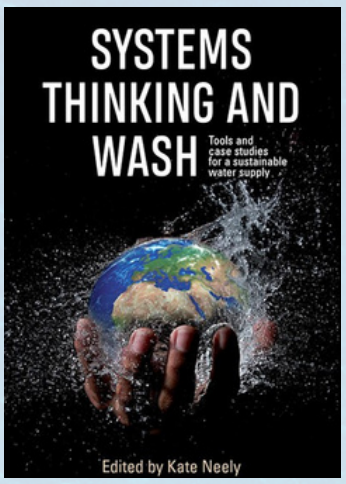
Sustainable services for whom? Ensuring rural water service delivery supports equality

Innovations in rural water service delivery are improving the functionality of water systems, but are the benefits reaching everyone? This learning paper examines the implications of contemporary thinking on rural water service delivery for equity and makes recommendations for strengthening systems so no one is left behind.



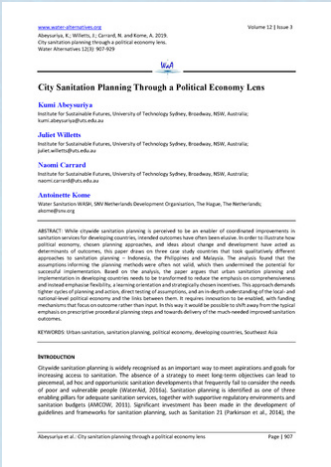
Learning for adaptive management: using systems thinking tools to inform knowledge and learning approaches

This book chapter explores how learning theory and systems thinking tools can help WASH organisations select the most appropriate processes and tools to facilitate learning, leverage greatest WASH impacts, and support their staff to optimise their learning potential. We draw on two key systems thinking tools: the Cynefin framework developed by David Snowden and Donella Meadows' leverage points.



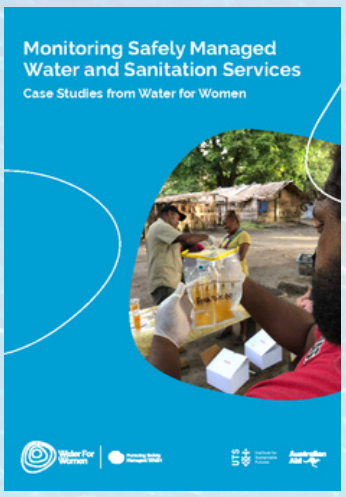
Social-ecological system resilience for WASH

Social-ecological system (SES) resilience thinking comprises principles and practices for ensuring systems continue to provide essential functions despite profound disturbances. This book chapter explains how SES thinking could be applied to improve the resilience of WASH systems.



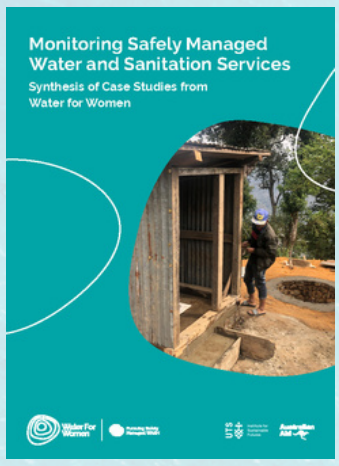
City sanitation planning through a political economy lens

An example of work focused on one of the systems strengthening building blocks. For citywide sanitation planning to be a genuine enabler of sanitation service improvements, this paper argues for consideration of the political economy and a flexible rather than prescriptive, procedural comprehensive planning approaches



Monitoring Safely Manager Water and Sanitation Services: Case Studies

The Water for Women case studies present a range of contexts, approaches and experiences on monitoring safely managed water and sanitation services in urban and rural areas across the Asia-Pacific region, including Solomon Islands, Indonesia, Cambodia, Bhutan and Papua New Guinea.



Monitoring Safely Manager Water and Sanitation Services: Synthesis

The Synthesis of Case Studies brings together the practical experiences and lessons from Water for Women partners in monitoring safely managed water and sanitation services in a variety of Asia-Pacific country contexts.

Rights Holder Partnerships as WASH System Strengthening

This article reports on a study on partnerships between water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) organisations as integral parts of the WASH system.

Civil society engagement with the private sector for inclusive WASH

This learning brief brings together the knowledge, experience and insights of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector civil society organisations (CSOs) in engaging with private sector actors in South Asia and South East Asia to foster gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI), sustainability of WASH programs, and critical thinking.

For more information: www.uts.edu.au/isf

For our WASH projects and resources: https://www.uts.edu.au/isf/explore-research/international-development/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash

Who we are: We work to create a world that is socially, ecologically and economically just and safe, where everyone has the resources and skills they need to flourish. UTS-ISF brings together expertise from a diverse range of disciplines to deliver practical solutions for our partners, and to empower our students to effect positive change in the years to come.

Let's collaborate: For more information or to collaborate with us, please contact Juliet Willetts – juliet.willetts@uts.edu.au