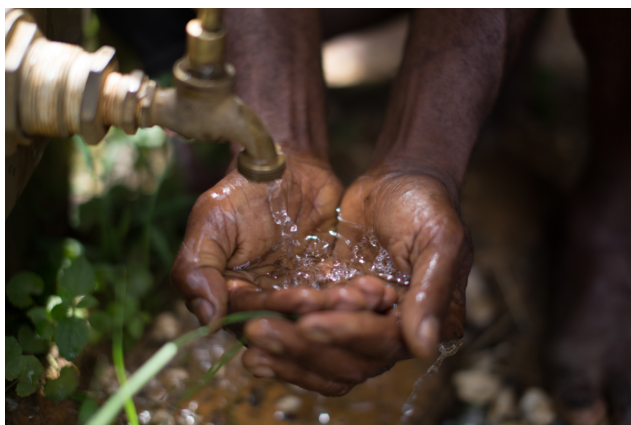


Reflections on Systems Change¹

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My Water+ Team colleagues asked for some reflections on how CARE and the WASH sector more broadly have changed over the last 15 years. Here are six areas where, thanks to the support of Bill Clarke and Osprey Foundation, we have been able to contribute, along with many other colleagues and partners, to expanding the impact and increasing the sustainability of WASH.



Breaking down silos: Working in silos provides a degree of comfort that suits many. There is a shared language, and recognized leaders and colleagues. The focus on specific issues can lead to significant but narrow learning. However, there is not the level of cross-fertilization or influx of new ideas from other sectors when we operate in silos.

Historically, there has been little recognition of the ways WASH is intricately linked at the community-level with other sectors and challenges. In the WASH arena, siloed working (CARE included) resulted in a focus on the number of taps and toilets constructed, and in many cases, only lip service to how these facilities would be maintained and sustained, or how sustainable WASH impacted health, education, food security, or equal rights for women and girls.

These silos have not broken down completely, but in recent years, CARE and others have expanded WASH approaches and action research to demonstrate the impact of WASH on neglected tropical diseases, environmental enteropathy and nutrition. WASH is an essential component of CARE's food and nutrition security programs, and our Water+ Team works closely with CARE's Food and Nutrition Security team in designing multi-sector approaches that improve food security at scale.

We've also seen collaborations result in a better understanding of the impacts of WASH on equal outcomes for women and girls, including menstrual health, psycho-social stress, violence against women and girls, and women's economic empowerment.

Finally, a greater attention to multiple use, and the many ways consumers actually use water, has helped us increasingly to bridge the gap between WASH and water for agriculture, and encourage the water and agriculture sectors to work together to manage both blue and green water resources.

Bridging the gap between stakeholders: WASH stakeholders include government, financiers (primarily governments, development banks, and foundations), the private sector, and civil society. Decades ago, our efforts in Mozambique to develop what we now think of as a systems approach were successful in the short term but ultimately failed because not all the players, CARE included, were working towards a common vision. Actors lacked control over outcomes, appropriate incentives, and accountability for their actions.

¹ This essay originally appeared as a chapter in CARE's Water+ 2018 Highlights (Retrospective) Report

We learned (or rather were reminded) that good governance — characterized by inclusiveness, transparency, participation and accountability — is key to achieving sustainable services.

Lessons learned from this experience and others in the sector later helped to inform a major program in Peru. Stakeholders had clear roles, incentives and accountability, and were intricately connected to each other.

The municipality and the community were jointly contracting small private contractors. This established a link between the municipality, community and contractor for subsequent maintenance and repair.

Basic training and accreditation of the contractors was carried out by the National University. The community participated in the monitoring of progress by and approval of payments to contractors. An on-line monitoring platform was established to track progress and improve accountability. We also drew on the experience of Peru's social investment fund to define the rules for movement of funds to and payments by municipalities.

These learnings directly influenced the design of the World Bank-financed investment project that followed. Bridging the gap between the various actors not only resulted in successful innovation, it forced CARE out of its comfort zone as an implementer and helped us aspire to a new role as a facilitator and influencer of systemic change at scale.

Shifting the role of NGOs from implementer to influencer: It has often been a challenge to live up to our aspiration to be a facilitator and influencer, because various actors have perceived CARE's role as an implementer and service provider. There is a historical tension between direct delivery of services by non-governmental organizations and "softer approaches" such as improving governance, advocacy and strengthening local capacity in the public and private sectors.

We have seen that when CARE is the direct service provider, there is vast potential to undermine the role of the public and private sectors. Unfortunately, this traditional narrative of aid is deeply rooted, and donors, governments, partners and our own organizational priorities have often pushed us to deliver services directly in the name of swift impact for the poorest.

We have had to steer hard to demonstrate the role of coordination, advocacy, research, capacity strengthening, and testing effective models in contributing to sustainable service delivery at scale.

Impact at scale through partnership: CARE achieves impact through influencing and partnership. One critical value of partnership is that it extends CARE's reach and leverage. For this to happen, there must be shared, or at least aligned, objectives between CARE and our partners.

We have learned that this requires continuous effort and communication between partners as opportunities and ways of working evolve, and a humility and flexibility to accept that the larger partnership must drive thinking, not CARE.

Investing in advocacy and research: Our successes in Peru and elsewhere suggested that we could influence change at scale, but only where we had evidence of what worked and what did not. We began to think about research in terms of how results would be used for influencing policy. We learned that evidence needs to be appropriate to the context and inform policymakers to work towards achievable policy solutions.

Our advocacy efforts contributed to change far beyond our control, including the passage and implementation of the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which increased U.S. government obligations to WASH, and to a doubling of the Kenyan Government's national budget allocation for WASH in schools.

Governance and systems: Improving governance has been a key element of our systems approach for many years. We have seen success in terms of sustained service provision and long-term impact in places such as Peru, Guatemala and Ethiopia where we have had a consistent presence and developed good relationships and shared goals with government, communities and other stakeholders.

Systems thinking has provided renewed energy to market-based approaches and innovative financing that allows us to approach WASH services as an entire moving system – not just a one-off service.

Maintaining the focus on governance and systems together with the other changes discussed above provides a roadmap for our future work. The Sanitation and Water for All Collaborative Behaviors and Agenda for Change support and endorse our endeavors, but the challenge remains persuading donors and governments that improving governance and systems (and the requisite changes in behavior) are far more important in the longer term than hardware.