



Photo credit: Plan Indonesia

Policy Influencing

Learning Brief from research into effectiveness of WASH approaches and innovations in the Civil Society WASH Fund

The Civil Society Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (CS WASH) Fund is a five-year programme supported by the Australian government with the objective of enhancing the health and quality of life of the poor and vulnerable by improving sustainable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene. Between 2013 and mid-2018, the Fund will have supported 13 Australian and international Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to deliver 29 WASH projects with an investment of AUD103 million across 19 countries. The Fund is expected to provide direct benefits to 3.5 million people and indirect benefits to over 10 million people.

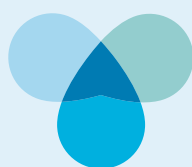
Toward the end of 2017 the CS WASH Fund commissioned a team from Aguaconsult UK to conduct in-depth research of CSO interventions in four cross-cutting areas: i. WASH policy influencing; ii. Gender and social inclusion (GESI); iii. WASH market facilitation; and iv. Innovation integration and uptake. The researchers worked with Fund administrators to prioritise the CSO interventions by focusing on those which have displayed promising approaches in these themes. Working together, they prioritised 23 CSO interventions, with 43 different unique interventions across the four themes. This Learning Brief presents the key findings from the research in the area of policy influencing.¹

1. The full research report can be downloaded at www.cswashfund.org/shared-resources/tools

HIGHLIGHTS

POLICY INFLUENCING

- Under the Fund, CSO partners have contributed to policy influencing in 31 different instances, including 7 national level policies.
- The most common area of policy influence is in sanitation and hygiene, but financing and pro-poor sanitation subsidies have also been influenced.
- One of the most important tools for influencing policy is credible evidence from field research or pilots which can inform dialogue at national level
- CSOs cannot influence policy reform singlehandedly; the most effective approaches are where they collaborate with other civil society groups and larger multi-lateral or bi-lateral agencies.
- The ability to influence policy often reflects the mandate of any given CSO, their own organisational policy objectives, staff profiles and the availability of tools and resources.
- The ability to influence policy takes time and requires CSOs to be (seen as) credible partners. The more successful examples are where CSOs have been active for 10, 20 or more years in a sector.



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Policy context and assessing the need for policy change

Most policy contexts of countries within the Fund are only partially mature. CSOs working under the Fund have had success in influencing policy change at both national and local level, with a main focus on sanitation and hygiene, but also in the area of financing and subsidies for latrine construction. The principal reasons for engaging in policy influencing are lack of policies, or incomplete policies, the failure of existing approaches to deliver intended service outcomes and efforts driven by equity concerns by focusing on pro-poor outcomes. Increasing private sector participation was cited as a driver for influencing policy in a limited number of cases.

The majority of country contexts where CSOs in the Fund worked on policy influencing fall into the 'moderate' category when assessed against the strength of the enabling environment and policy context. For the eight countries in this group it means that there may be policies in place, but these are not fully coherent or may have gaps or duplications. It can also mean that although policies are in place centrally, these may not be being fully applied at sub-national levels. Weak policy contexts were assessed for two countries, namely Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG), the latter having no policy at all for WASH until 2015. Two Fund CSO partners, WaterAid and World Vision, played an important role in the development of the new PNG national WASH policy.



Photo credit: Plan Indonesia

Understanding the policy context



Photo credit: Plan Pakistan

The research found that the most common ways CSOs assess policy context is by relying on long-term presence and by carrying out sector analyses. Only one CSO, WaterAid, uses a specific tool or methodology to understand the policy context and political economy of the WASH sector. There appears to be some link between successful policy influencing by CSOs and with those countries that include WASH as a topic (with aspirational targets) in broader national development plans.

Two approaches or tools can be identified as the most common to understand policy environments in which CSOs work. The first of these is simply having a long-term presence and engagement in a country and a WASH sector, through extensive country programmes and staff working closely with sector stakeholders. This was reported in the case of six CSOs (iDE, Plan, SNV, Thrive, WaterAid and World Vision), several of whom are found to have had the most promising experiences with policy influencing. The second major approach that CSOs reportedly use is to conduct a sector analysis to understand the enabling environment at different levels, the institutions and policy frameworks; such CSOs included iDE, IRC, Live & Learn, Plan and SNV.

Influencing policy change

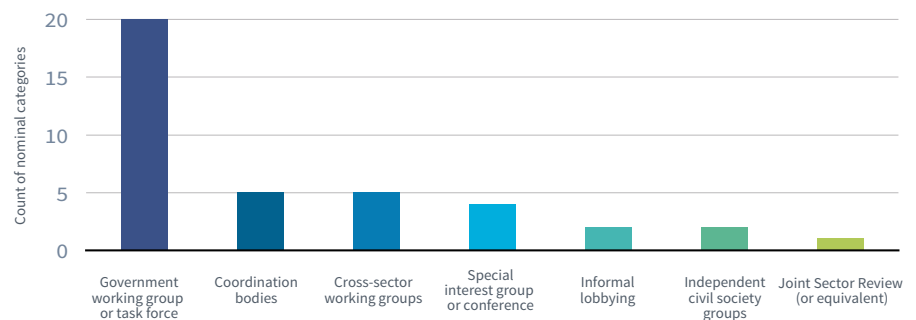
The more successful cases of policy influencing included CSOs with a pre-meditated strategy of working in collaboration with other organisations to lobby government. The most effective engagement was found via government-led or sanctioned working groups at all institutional levels. Informal lobbying through on-going one-on-one engagement was also found to be very effective. Field visits and learning exchanges facilitated by the Fund allowed space for such ‘soft influencing’. Those CSOs which already have an organisational mandate for policy influencing — with associated staff profiles and tools — perform best.

Figure 1: WaterAid's Political Economy Analysis Map, 'Every day' analysis of stakeholder incentives



Source: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/political-economy-analysis-toolkit>.

Figure 2: The most common mechanisms for WASH policy debate and dialogue



Across the range of CSOs there is a clear pattern of engagement through government sanctioned working groups; these are often referred to as WASH ‘task forces’ and exist at distinct institutional levels (see Figure 2 below). Such working groups were the most common mechanism cited by CSOs and include **national** task forces for WASH as is the case for the influencing work in Bhutan, Cambodia, PNG Zimbabwe; **provincial** groups such as the WASH coordination committees in Nepal and Pakistan; and **district** WASH working groups in Indonesia and Pakistan. CSOs also engaged with policy debate via broader (non-sector specific) bodies, such as district or municipal coordination platforms (Timor Leste) and Provincial Committees in Vietnam. Some CSOs established project-specific coordination committees as a means to influence local level policies (e.g. in IRC Pakistan).

Despite only being applied in a small number of cases, the approach of informal lobbying is important to mention, as these are cases with some of the strongest evidence of policy influencing (e.g. SNV in Bhutan and WaterAid in PNG and Timor Leste). In these cases, **informal lobbying** was used alongside – but not as a replacement for – more formal mechanisms such as government-led task forces but was seen as a vital element to ‘nudge’ key individuals and use soft influencing power through one-on-one meetings and continuous engagement over time. The learning events facilitated by the Fund were also very helpful as an incentive for government partners and, as one CSO staff puts it, ‘a way of influencing government thinking through this (soft power), ... *where people pick up ideas and internalise them which is much more effective*.’

Box 1: Sanitation marketing as a means to influence pro-poor financing subsidies: a tale of two approaches in Cambodia

Emerging from its turbulent past, Cambodia has historically presented an open policy space for sanitation, especially in rural areas. In response to this, two CSOs under the Fund have adopted quite different approaches to influencing policy around subsidies that can target the poor.

iDE adopted a purely market-based approach with great success in terms of increasing coverage resulting in over 250,000 sales of improved pour-flush latrines working with private sector entrepreneurs. However, it became apparent that this model was largely benefiting wealthier households and struggled to reach the poorest segments of the market. Subsequently, iDE introduced a Smart Subsidy pilot in late 2015 to improve its pro-poor focus of market-based approach. Also active under the Fund, **Thrive/East Meets West** introduced an Output Based Aid initiative providing small cash rebates to low-income households installing latrines

with payments made only on verification of construction quality and use. This programme intentionally partnered with government from the outset and is now seeking to scale up OBA through national frameworks with a gradual transfer of the subsidy element to public financing.

Each of these two distinct CSO interventions has sought to influence government policy for sanitation, and each in its way has benefited from a relatively open policy environment. In [2017 iDE published the results](#) of a randomised control trial study — financed by the CS WASH Fund — to assess the role of smart subsidies. The study found that this type of smart subsidy does not distort the more commercial marketing of sanitation products. A [similar study](#) by Thrive arrived at a similar conclusion from the interaction of OBA and sanitation marketing approaches, thereby validating both approaches as mutually beneficial to reaching bigger market share in Cambodia.

Affecting policy change

The majority of CSOs studied had good insights into policy reform cycles and approached influencing by aligning with government priorities; taking human rights and accountability approaches were also common. CSOs employed evidence from pilots as the most important tool for influencing policy. A small number also engaged with political champions and focused on budgetary commitments as entry points to affect policy change. Equally, political influence and resistance was cited as the most critical barrier, along with the lack of scale and leverage of CSOs to influence change on their own. Frequent government staff rotation is also a key challenge and can result in 'lost investments' for CSOs which take time to re-establish.

The majority of CSOs (80%) were assessed as having good insights which enable them to understand the way in which policy is developed, reviewed and applied at different levels of government and across markets. However, even with a strong understanding of the policy context, in certain environments with high levels of politicisation, there is a limit to how far CSOs can influence. For example, in Zimbabwe as staff from Welthungerhilfe stated, even though they have a good understanding of the policy environment, they cannot do much more than just try to 'avoid political landmines' and analyse the implications of the tensions between central and local government.

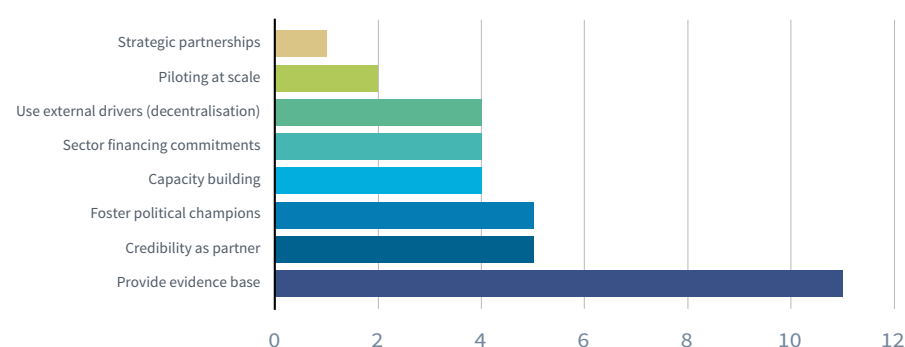
The most common approach taken by CSOs is to align with, or be supportive of, government. This is reflected by CSOs across almost all contexts with strong alignment

and engagement with government seen in nine countries from district to national level interventions. The logic is that by supporting and aligning with government priorities there is a greater likelihood of influencing what government does and ultimately to change policy. As one CSO staff reflects: *"Being seen as a supporter and financier of what Government wants to do gets you further than confrontation"*.

The next most common rationale is to use accountability and human rights as a justification for pushing for policy change; this is found in a diverse set of countries including Bhutan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Timor Leste, Vanuatu and Zimbabwe. In some cases, an indirect approach is taken by CSOs raising awareness amongst citizen groups and other civil society organisations who then in turn advocate with government. In part this rationale is adopted as it reflects broader organisational commitment to the human right to water and sanitation, for example by the CSO WaterAid in Timor Leste.

In terms of the 'how to' for effective policy influencing the most commonly adopted approach is to provide an evidence base to government about what works and use this to inform policy review (see Figure 3 below). This emerged repeatedly as a highly valued tool in influencing policy. In the case of iDE Cambodia whose work is primarily partnering with private sector sanitation entrepreneurs, provision of robust evidence was a means to engage on the policy debate around subsidies.

Figure 3: The most effective ways for CSOs to drive policy change



CS WASH Fund / Palladium

Box 2: Influencing policy change: "It's the politics stupid"

Politics is front and central to the messy world of policy influencing. Identifying and working with political champions was cited as a success factor by several of the more effective interventions. Plan Pakistan in particular took an ambitious approach by working with both provincial parliamentarians and district level elected officials to provide support for their work with promoting the Pakistan Total Sanitation approach in Punjab. Plan cites political buy-in as an important pre-requisite for integrating support for WASH into public sector planning cycles and budgetary allocations; building working relationships with high-level government officials with an interest in WASH can help to *'negotiate and navigate through government systems.'*

Equally, political influence was cited as the most important barrier to policy influencing. As one CSO states this is in part due to *'the lack of opportunity to obtain money or benefit financially'* from a change in policy, which then is manifested in political interest that can block progress or engagement. A related factor was staff turnover, meaning that the often lengthy and patient processes of building relationships with key government policy-makers could be undone with rotation of staff, thereby necessitating the re-starting of the process.

Main findings

CSO implementing partners have been able to play a substantive role in influencing and changing policy in ten countries. Greatest success has been in cases where CSOs already have policy influencing as part of their organisational mandates. Other key lessons are set out below.

Country size and scale of the sector can be a factor in creating opportunities for CSOs to have direct impact in policy influencing: under certain conditions working in small countries with limited sector networks and institutions the influence of CSOs is likely to increase. In these contexts, international CSOs have more ready access to key decision-makers through small professional networks.

Influencing policy is more successful when CSO interventions are aligned with, and supportive of, government, rather than acting in a more confrontational way: being a 'critical friend' of government is more likely to yield results in terms of policy influencing, than in being openly hostile or directly confrontational to government. Although this has been the most common position to take, it does not rule out the use of advocacy positions based, for example, on holding government to account as the ultimate duty bearer for the human right to water and sanitation.

Influencing policy requires collective action — CSOs can contribute to influencing policy change, sometimes in very substantive ways, but they rarely achieve this alone (direct attribution): CSOs can perform important functions and can complement the scale and leverage brought about by much larger bi-lateral and multi-lateral development partners. Some of the most promising cases of policy influence happen when CSOs and larger partners work in unison, with reinforcing messaging and advocacy positions.

Politics can be a barrier to change, but when understood and harnessed well, politics (and politicians) can also be positive contributors to policy influencing: having a good understanding of the political economy of the sector is an important factor for CSOs to operate effectively.

Understanding the broader governance and enabling environment beyond the WASH sector is important: the WASH sector does not operate in isolation and taking the time to understand governance, public financing and decentralisation frameworks is very important for the success of policy influencing work.

Participating in and engaging with national or sub-national sector task force or coordination platforms is one of the most effective ways of influencing policy: being present and an active participant on national or sub-national working groups or task forces sanctioned by government has proven to be one of the most important pathways for CSOs to be able to position themselves in an advocacy role and to be able to convey key messages to a broad sector constituency.

Robust, credible and relevant evidence from operational interventions and linking practice to policy dialogue is a crucial part of influencing policy: well-documented and credible evidence is a key factor in being able to influence both government thinking and market stakeholders. The old adage of 'seeing is believing' seems to then hold true, at least for influencing government thinking.

Informal lobbying and 'soft-power' can play an important role in influencing policy: informal lobbying can be a critical complement to – but not as a replacement for – more formal mechanisms such as government-led task forces. This approach can be a vital element to 'nudge' key individuals and use soft influencing power through personal one-on-one continuous engagement over time.



Photo credit: Plan Pakistan



Traditional Authority Mthirimanja celebrating Open Defecation Free status declaration. Photo credit: Plan Malawi

Recommendations

- If future civil society funding mechanisms include an explicit aim of influencing sector policy, then the initial selection of CSOs becomes of critical importance. The selection of CSO partners should therefore include a careful screening of track-record, history in a sector, relative standing in terms of reputation and profile and ability to navigate politically. This could be achieved by applying a simple policy-influencing 'audit', which asks questions such as 'is policy influencing part of the core CSO mandate?', 'does the CSO have the calibre of staff to understand political dynamics of a sector?' and 'does the CSO invest in processes, tools and methods for undertaking political economy analyses?'
- CSOs working to influence policy should invest time and resources in better understanding both the political economy of the WASH sector in the country in which they intended to operate, as well as broader dynamics beyond the WASH sector and how these may affect policy decisions.
- Understanding of political economy can be facilitated by the use of tools, such as Political Economy Mapping and sector enabling environment assessments; these tools are available in the public domain and CSOs should familiarise themselves with them and apply them regularly.
- CSOs working on policy influencing should ensure that they invest in monitoring and reporting systems that can produce timely, reliable and credible evidence from data. Moreover, they should be able to disseminate this in accessible and relevant formats that can feed into and inform policy dialogue. Such data collection and learning, is essential, both for its intrinsic (content) value and its utility for policy influencing.



The research into effective CSO approaches was carried out by Aguaconsult, UK; www.aguaconsult.co.uk



This learning brief on lessons for policy influencing was authored by Harold Lockwood, Aguaconsult, UK. March, 2018



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The CS WASH Fund is supported by the Australian Government and managed by Palladium.