

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH) SECTOR LEARNING: A POLICY STATEMENT BY THE MINISTRY OF ENERGY AND WATER RESOURCES (MEWR)

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INTRODUCTION

The National Water and Sanitation Policy 2010 (NWSP or ‘the Policy’) defines a forward-looking vision for dealing with Sierra Leone’s WASH challenges, and sets ambitious targets in water supply and sanitation coverage to be achieved by 2015.

To achieve these objectives, the Policy addresses the legislative, institutional, process, and technical aspects of water resources management, water supply, and sanitation. It defines a multi-actor, multi-level institutional framework with clear separation of policy, regulation, and service delivery roles. Reform of existing entities, the establishment of new ones, and an explicit focus on enabling the private sector and community structures to deliver services as well as public bodies are stated objectives. The NWSP also emphasises the role of research to develop innovative approaches to WASH policy and planning and better technologies in water and sanitation supply.

Issues of knowledge management and sector learning underpin all the Policy’s stated objectives even though they are not explicitly articulated in the NWSP.

Knowledge management enables government and sector actors to define the status of WASH nationally, regionally and locally, and assess the functionality of policies and interventions in the sector. Learning lessons from successes and failures enables pilot projects to be reproduced at scale, policies and interventions to be re-aligned where necessary, and their impact to be maximised. Access to and good use of knowledge are also prerequisites for defining the funding and investment needs of the sector and for developing people’s skills and competencies across sector institutions so that the intents of the NWSP can be realised.

Sector learning goes further by linking knowledge management to sector governance. It institutionalises the way knowledge is created, transferred and mobilised across the whole sector, improving accountability, policy formulation and service delivery.

Defining a framework for Sector Learning will strongly support progress towards achieving Government WASH targets because it will guide institutions to strategically align their mandates and activities to the wider NWSP framework.

THE SIERRA LEONEAN CONTEXT

Sierra Leone faces critical gaps in WASH knowledge, with a dearth of information relating to WASH, and weak capacity to utilise information within and across institutions. There is currently no framework for systematic capture and sharing of information and knowledge across the sector.

Information needs assessments and recording and collation of existing knowledge is rare, there is little attention to documentation, a lack of research, weak ICT infrastructure, and a general lack of modern systems for managing information. There is also little awareness of the importance of knowledge management and sector learning generally in Sierra Leone's WASH sector. There is no doubt that service providers and other sector actors have gathered a lot of information which could be useful to others; yet there is no mechanism by which such potentially valuable knowledge can be shared with others.

Key organisations such as academic and research institutions, Statistics Sierra Leone, the public utilities, and the Ministry itself with its sister Ministry of Health and Sanitation (which is lead body on environmental sanitation) lack essential human and logistical capacity for knowledge management.

Against this backdrop, the MEWR is beginning to take action with the help of its international partners through a nation-wide Water Point Mapping process (supported by the World Bank) and a complementary Hydrological Survey (conducted for the Ministry by Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, and the University of Portsmouth, UK).

While these efforts begin to establish a baseline for national WASH information, they are only a small part of the knowledge that the sector needs to generate. The wider issues of who has access to information, how it is to be updated, by whom, how analysed, how utilised in decision-making, and how shared, remain. Only when these issues are addressed can information become knowledge, and enable broad sector learning. This is the missing link in SL's WASH sector, which the MEWR is keen to address through partnership and collaboration with sector actors.

MINISTRY OF ENERGY AND WATER RESOURCES CORE STRATEGY

Addressing the above issues requires an approach to sector learning that goes beyond traditional issues of organisational 'capacity building'.

The Ministry recognises that all WASH stakeholders are producers and users of knowledge, and seeks to increase capacity across the sector and at multiple levels to enable these actors take ownership of challenges, problems, and the process of seeking solutions.

In line with both the NWSP 2010 and the Agenda for Change, the Ministry is committed to engaging with the spectrum of state and non-state sector stakeholders from international research and donor entities, the public, private, and NGO sectors, through to the holders of indigenous and local knowledge at community level.

MINISTRY OF ENERGY AND WATER RESOURCES: ACTIONS AND INTENTIONS

The following MoEWR initiatives relate specifically to defining an overarching framework for systematising the capture and sharing of information across the WASH sector as a whole, and institutionalising sector learning in Sierra Leone.

Defining the WASH Sector Learning Needs in Sierra Leone: The Ministry will facilitate a participatory and consultative process with the broad spectrum of WASH actors and stakeholders. This process will identify and gain sector consensus within a defined timeframe on the information and

knowledge management needs of the sector in Sierra Leone and the mechanisms and processes to create, use and share knowledge.

Sector Learning Framework/Strategy Document: Arising from the above process, the MEWR will produce a WASH Sector Learning strategy document to set out its vision and thinking. It will clarify roles and responsibilities as well as providing advice and guidance to frontline organisations such as state and non-state service providers, local councils, research and academic institutions, and the private sector. The Strategy Document will provide a Framework for shared learning and putting knowledge to use.

Guidelines and toolkits: Supplementing the Sector Learning Framework, the Ministry will develop context-specific guidelines and toolkits that will provide more detailed guidance as to how to undertake important activities. National guidelines are important to improve programme quality and standardise approaches. Key areas will include outlining mechanisms for bringing together the 'hardware' of technology with the 'software' of skills, research and innovation, and ensuring that knowledge can be captured, used and shared where technology is limited and literacy rates are a challenge.

Establishing and Consolidating WASH Knowledge in Sierra Leone: In line with the needs definition, framework, and guidelines to be developed, the Ministry commits to establishing a baseline of knowledge on the current and evolving status of WASH nationally. The MEWR and the MHS will support Local Councils, relevant MDAs, and relevant WASH actors including international donors, NGOs, and the private sector in generating data to agreed criteria and formats on the functionality of WASH service provision and the status of water resources. The Ministries will strengthen WASH monitoring and evaluation through establishing clear guidelines and indicators for service provision and resource management. They will commission and undertake necessary studies and sector analyses to identify knowledge gaps and provide evidence for policy and planning. The Ministry and its partner Ministry of Health and Sanitation will establish policies on levels of access and authorised use for WASH information.

Development of a Technical WASH Resource Centre (TRC): As a foundation for integrating and coordinating WASH sector learning in Sierra Leone, the Ministry will support the establishment of a Technical Resource Centre, hosted by a suitable service provider or consortium. The TRC will add value to the national baseline of information through catalysing the transformation of information into knowledge, and knowledge into learning. It will provide knowledge services to donor partners, government MDAs, Local Councils, international and national NGOs to inform policy and practice, generate research, and share lessons across the sector. The MEWR welcomes proposals from its partners on the shape and form of the resource centre, in the firm understanding that this will be a shared resource, bringing in all sector actors to collaborate, promote, build and foster a culture of learning that will inform WASH decision-making at all levels.

SUMMARY

Institutionalising WASH sector research and learning in Sierra Leone is essential to create, transfer and mobilise knowledge for effective policy-making, better service delivery, and to achieve the development outcomes that the Government aspires to in the NWSP and the overarching Agenda for Change.

Through this Policy Brief and its attendant outputs, the Ministry aims to prioritise sector learning across WASH policy, planning, and service delivery in Sierra Leone, and establish an enabling environment for all stakeholders to contribute to, benefit from, and put to use shared knowledge and research.