



**WASH SDG
Innovation Brief**
Uganda

WASH SDG Innovation Fund

The Netherlands Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Sustainable Development Goal programme (WASH SDG programme) aims to sustainably improve access to, and use of, safe drinking water for at least 450.000 people, sanitation for at least 2 million people and improve the hygiene behaviours of 1.6 million people by the end of 2023. To enhance and complement the impact of the WASH SDG programme, the WASH SDG Innovation Fund was established in 2020. The aim of the fund is to encourage the trialling of innovative models and approaches within the WASH sector.

In the context of the WASH SDG programme, innovation is defined as the transformation of ideas into goods or services that deliver value and for which customers are willing to pay. For an idea to be considered an innovation, it must be replicable at a reasonable cost and meet a specific need. Innovation entails creatively responding to change, encompassing activities such as generating new ideas, conducting research and development, improving processes, and revitalising products and services.

Consequently, the innovation component of the WASH SDG programme provides an opportunity to pilot and assess innovative approaches and practices within the WASH sector, gathering evidence of their impact, or lack thereof.

Innovation Fund project Uganda

The Innovation Fund project in Uganda aimed to pilot innovative approaches to enhance access to clean water and sanitation services in four health centres located in Agago district. The specific objective was to address the challenge of limited finances associated with WASH services in health centres. As such, the primary goal of the Innovation Project was to augment revenue generation for the health centres through the utilisation of alternative funding sources, alongside the engagement of WASH entrepreneurs responsible for the operation and maintenance of the facilities. The project was implemented by WASEU in partnership with JESE from March 2021 to December 2022.

In many cases, including Uganda, health centres face a significant challenge of limited income from government funds to cover the operation and maintenance (O&M) costs of their WASH facilities. The existing Primary Health Care fund in Uganda falls short in adequately supporting WASH infrastructure and services at healthcare centres. As such, there is a need to increase the revenue generation by health centres. The WASH SDG Innovation Fund specifically targets the enhancement of revenue generation by these health centres. As a result, access to WASH services for patients and healthcare staff is expected to increase, ultimately resulting in preventing the further spread of diseases and enhancing overall healthcare.

The interventions implemented under the Innovation Fund focused on broadly three strategies: cost recovery planning (CRP), training of WASH entrepreneurs on O&M and creating a conducive environment for innovative change.

Cost recovery planning

Cost recovery planning refers to the process of developing strategies and alternative financing mechanisms to ensure that the costs associated with providing WASH services are adequately covered and sustainable over the long term. In the Innovation Fund, the revenue generated through such strategies is accumulated in one primary fund: WASHFIN, which is managed by WASEU. WASHFIN operates in the following manner: loans are provided for operation and maintenance purposes of WASH services to both health centres and WASH entrepreneurs. Simultaneously, the fund is replenished through various means. Examples include an initial investment from, in this case, the Innovation Fund, the establishment of user fees, operation and maintenance charges, as well as seeking external funding from government bodies or other partners. Three innovative strategies for healthcare centre revenue generation implemented under the Innovation Fund were:

- **Healthcare canteens:** Through this approach, entrepreneurs obtain a loan from WASHFIN to establish and stock canteens within health centres. Typically, health centres do not offer essential items such as food, drinks, or necessary supplies like pads or diapers. Access to shops outside the health centres can be challenging, especially for pregnant or ill patients. By providing resources in close proximity, this initiative supports patients while enabling entrepreneurs to generate revenue through the canteens. A portion of the earnings is then contributed back to the health centre's fund.
- **Establishment of woodlots:** Healthcare centres have taken steps to establish woodlots by planting new trees. These tree seedlings are procured from a women's group supported under the WASH SDG programme and are subsequently maintained by the health care centres. By cultivating woodlots, health centres not only generate revenue in the long term but also contribute to sustainable resource management and the preservation of the environment.
- **Use CRP as a lobbying tool:** Cost recovery planning was effectively utilised as a lobbying tool by the health centres to advocate for WASH improvement at their respective facilities. A notable example is the Patongo Health Centre, where the CRP played a crucial role in persuading the local government to allocate additional funds specifically for primary healthcare. These funds were then utilised for essential repairs on the health centre structures, including the improvement of WASH services.

Key learning: Aligning innovative approaches with revenue generation for health centres



Health centres are more likely to adopt and embrace innovative approaches when they are directly linked to generating additional revenue. By demonstrating how innovative approaches can contribute to revenue generation, health centres become more motivated to explore and implement innovative strategies.

Key learning: Spill-over effects of cost-recovery planning tools



The innovative approaches implemented under the WASH SDG Innovation Fund have also been adopted by administrative units to improve household and institutional sanitation. In addition, town councils have also adopted the cost recovery planning as a tool to lobby for the improvement of sanitation facilities. This underscores the potential for wider adoption and replication of innovative approaches for sanitation challenges.

During the implementation of the Innovation Fund, entrepreneurs underwent comprehensive training in the repair and maintenance of existing water sources as well as upgrading health centre toilet facilities. Moreover, the Innovation Fund facilitated the certification of these trained entrepreneurs by both the district and the Ugandan Ministry of Water and Environment, qualifying them for contracting opportunities with health centres.

As a demonstration of their expertise, the entrepreneurs successfully repaired a solar-powered water pump station within the community and constructed a water supply network for one of the health centres, ensuring a reliable water supply for both the local community and the healthcare facility. Local entrepreneurs were actively supported in tasks such as repairing solar panels, installing an inverter system, constructing the water supply pipe network, and restoring the water storage facility. To further enhance sustainability, the District Water Office has committed to financing the operator training, where the trained operator will collaborate with the Water User Committee. Furthermore, the repair of the pump enabled the health centre to collect user fees, contributing to the WASHFIN fund.

During the training, special attention was given to addressing the needs of women and persons with disabilities. Entrepreneurs received training on how to include menstrual health needs in toilets, adapt toilets to the specific needs during pregnancy, improve the privacy of toilets and make toilets disability-friendly. For instance, the establishment of a drainable pit latrine facilitated easy access for persons with disabilities through the construction of a ramp.



Key learning: Building local capacities through the practical skilling of entrepreneurs

Practical skills training not only enhances technical abilities but also empowers entrepreneurs to contribute to gender and socially inclusive WASH services.

Creating a conducive environment for transformative change

The success of the Innovation Fund relies not only on the implementation of innovative approaches but also on the project's contribution to various enablers that create a conducive environment for transformative change. Beyond the development and testing of innovative solutions, community engagement, the involvement of key stakeholders, assessing the legal framework and generating national-level buy-in, have played a crucial role in driving sustainable impact.

Community engagement

Community engagement and sensitisation played a vital role in fostering local participation and ownership in WASH improvement initiatives at health centres. Through community dialogue sessions, community members and local leadership were made aware of their role in contributing to the enhancement of WASH facilities. As a result, communities surrounding health centres have actively participated in providing local materials for the construction and rehabilitation of WASH facilities. An illustrative example is the mobilisation of resources for the construction of a two-stance drainable pit latrine at one of the health centres, where each household member from the sub-county made a cash contribution of 3,000 UGX.

In addition, the concept of cost recovery planning, initially introduced for sanitation purposes, has gained traction among community leaders. They have recognised its potential in other productive activities such as small-scale businesses and agriculture.

Key learning: Engaging communities through local leadership



Engaging local leadership from the start builds community confidence and ownership, ensuring sustainability beyond project implementation. By involving local leaders at all levels, communities confidently participated in the Innovation Fund's interventions.



Training key stakeholders

A collaborative approach was adopted to engage all stakeholders involved in providing WASH services in healthcare facilities. Key stakeholders were provided with comprehensive training on the practical significance of WASH, the utilisation of the WASH FIT **(1)** tool, and its role in effective planning, monitoring, and management of WASH services in healthcare facilities. The training sessions also focused on enhancing their understanding of how WASH can contribute to improving the quality of care in healthcare facilities. Subsequently, action plans were developed to address areas of improvement in WASH service provision within the targeted healthcare facilities. The project followed up on these plans by providing support and guidance to both existing and newly recruited staff members. This intervention was particularly crucial as it ensured that newly established Health Unit Management Committees and staff members were actively involved in monitoring the WASH facilities within their respective health centres.

(1) The Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Facility Improvement Tool (WASH-FIT) is a resource used to evaluate WASH facilities in health centres or similar settings, aiming to identify areas for improvement and enhance their performance and sustainability

Key learning: Early stakeholder engagement



Government, particularly the district government and relevant officers (in the Agago district case, the water officer, health officer, and engineer), should be involved in the planning of specific interventions. Engaging these stakeholders in the early phase strengthens collaboration, streamlines implementation, and ensures the harmonious integration of projects within existing systems. This proactive engagement also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to improved coordination, increased resource allocation, and enhanced sustainability of the interventions in the long run.

Key learning: Dialogue and one-on-one meetings on financial expectations



Policy Dialogue meetings and one-on-one engagements proved highly effective in generating the necessary buy-in, specifically regarding financial expectations. During the initial stages, the district government and health centre management had high financial expectations from the Innovation Fund. There was a lack of understanding that the fund does not simply provide free WASH infrastructure. The sustainability of the fund's setup, i.e. allowing health centres to generate their own sustainable income, should be emphasised to key stakeholders before and during implementation.

Assessing legal framework

During the implementation of the Innovation Fund, certain limitations that hindered the promotion of innovation in the repair and construction of toilets in health centres were revealed. Existing procurement guidelines posed obstacles to introducing innovative practices, particularly in repairs and ensuring gender and social inclusivity. Additionally, the public procurement regulations did not facilitate the direct engagement of WASH entrepreneurs outside the formal procurement process. The companies that did build the necessary experience to bid for local government construction contracts were often not from Agago and rarely employed local entrepreneurs, leading to limited essential operational and maintenance skills within the local WASH ecosystem

Therefore, another enabler is a legal framework that encourages local healthcare centres to implement innovative approaches. In the Agago context, this challenge was partly addressed by ensuring the certification of entrepreneurs by the District, allowing them to be hired by healthcare centres.

Key learning: Early policy assessments on the guidelines for infrastructure and O&M at health centres



In any context, clear guidelines for health centres to independently contract entrepreneurs are necessary. It is crucial to resolve such "grey areas" to foster more innovative solutions for addressing O&M issues at the health centre level.

Generating national level buy-in

Engaging regional and national-level government is crucial for sustaining the results of the Innovation Fund as well as scaling up to other regions. At the national level in Uganda, it is widely recognised that the Primary Health Care fund alone is insufficient to cover the operation and maintenance costs of WASH facilities. The innovative approaches implemented under the WASH SDG Innovation Fund in Agago have garnered significant appreciation from national WASH stakeholders, which has been expressed by officials from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Water and Environment during national-level dialogue meetings.

National stakeholders have shown their commitment to incorporating the lessons learned from the innovation fund and replicating them in other healthcare facilities nationwide. This endorsement signifies the potential for wider adoption of innovative approaches in addressing WASH challenges across the country.

The way forward

The WASH SDG Innovation Fund in Uganda has successfully piloted innovative approaches to enhance access to clean water and sanitation services in health centres. The project focused on revenue generation for health centres through cost recovery planning and the training of entrepreneurs, while also contributing to an enabling environment for transformative change. Several key learnings have emerged from the project, pointing towards areas for upscaling and replication.

Firstly, setting up canteens operated by entrepreneurs in health centres has proven to be a viable approach to generating revenue while improving patient comfort and well-being. This model can be expanded to other health centres, providing additional income streams and enhancing the overall patient experience.

Secondly, facilitating partnerships between entrepreneurs and health centres strengthens local capacities and creates opportunities for sustainable O&M of WASH infrastructure. By linking entrepreneurs to health centres, O&M needs can be effectively addressed while empowering local businesses.

Thirdly, stakeholder dialogues have played a critical role in building consensus and understanding for successful innovation implementation. Engaging stakeholders, including community members, local leadership, and government officials, fosters local participation, ownership, and long-term sustainability. Lastly, the practical skilling of entrepreneurs through hands-on training has been essential for enhancing technical abilities and promoting gender and socially inclusive WASH services. Providing comprehensive training on repair, maintenance, and inclusive design ensures that entrepreneurs can effectively contribute to WASH infrastructure management.

These four areas for upscaling – canteens at health centres, linking entrepreneurs to health centres, stakeholder dialogues, and practical skilling of entrepreneurs – present opportunities to replicate successful approaches and maximize the impact of innovative solutions. Additionally, generating national-level buy-in and addressing legal frameworks will be crucial for sustaining and scaling up the results of the Innovation Fund across Uganda's healthcare facilities.

The positive spill over effects observed in communities and administrative units further highlight the potential for broader adoption of these innovative approaches beyond health facilities alone. By disseminating successful strategies and aligning them with revenue generation for health centres, the WASH sector can address sanitation challenges more effectively and promote sustainable development.