LEARNING BRIEF: PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN AN ALLIANCE FOR INCREASED IMPACT

Background

Ethiopia is home to more than 110 million people, with many living in rural areas[i]. For the rural population, according to the 2017 Joint Monitoring Program report, four percent have access to safely managed water service, 30 percent have basic water service and 26 percent have only limited water service, with the rest consuming water from unimproved or surface water sources[ii]. Many households spend 30 minutes or longer obtaining drinking water daily. Government statistics and 2018 assessments show that water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) coverage in schools and health care facilities is highly inadequate and that the surrounding systems needed to support long-term functionality and sustainability are weak[iii,iv].

The Ethiopian government is in the process of revising national level policies and planning documents aligned with the national and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Millennium Water Alliance (MWA), a permanent global consortium of NGOs working on WASH, is an early actor engaging in district-wide, service delivery-focused systems work in Ethiopia. Momentum for this idea is building within Ethiopia as other actors are trying similar approaches. The work of MWA has the potential to broadly support the sector by piloting new approaches and models for strengthening service delivery systems and improving service levels towards achieving SDG target 6.1, "By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all[v]."

History of MWA in Ethiopia

MWA has been implementing WASH programs in rural Ethiopia since 2004 to improve WASH service delivery. By convening members and partners, MWA has worked collaboratively to provide WASH services for more than two million rural Ethiopians in several regions. MWA has been using the collective impact framework to support greater impact by organizations working together rather than separately. MWA Ethiopia has used a common monitoring, evaluation and learning system for all the partners in our collaborative programs since 2012. With the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the 2030 SDGs, a more intentional push was made to build a strong partnerships and utilize all principles of collective impact to achieve greater collaboration and rely less on the siloed efforts of individual organizations. This paper documents the processes used to develop strong partnerships among NGOs and shares some lessons learned along the way.

Partnership Development Purpose

This paper discusses:
1. Activities conducted by MWA to develop trust and partnership across a group of NGOs.
2. Methods used to engage in collective impact.
3. Lessons learned about partnership development in an alliance.

MWA convened and led a short-term, 2017-2019, program titled, "Bridge Program," funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (Hilton Foundation). This work involved the MWA secretariat serving as the hub, IRC WASH providing technical support, and six WASH NGOs including CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Food for the Hungry, Helvetas, WaterAid, and World Vision providing the on-the-ground implementation work and collaborative long-term planning with district governments. One of the key deliverables of this program was to develop strong partnerships both among the NGOs collaborating on the grant and with government partners, without whom the work cannot achieve long-term sustainability. The long-term goal of this work was to contribute to Ethiopia's nation-wide achievement of safe, affordable and sustainable water service delivery by 2030. This requires working hand-in-hand and in a supportive role with government which has a mandate to provide improved WASH services. Given the nature of the SDGs and the type

of systems strengthening work required to achieve them, new ways of working and new approaches are needed. Trying to make this type of progress without trust and strong partnerships seems impossible. Additionally, there is a specific intention to ensure that innovations and methods that are proven successful get replicated in the work of partner organizations beyond this specific program. Successful replication beyond a program is more likely through existing and trusted relationships.

This paper focuses exclusively on the development of partnerships and use of the collective impact framework across a group of NGOs working on this joint program. Other documents from this and a follow-on program touch more broadly on the work of the alliance with government, aligned with some of the ideas about setting up multi-stakeholder collaborations at several levels of government through learning alliance methods[vi,vii].

Four Critical Steps to Partnership Development

> **Box 1: Partnership Definition**
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> Brinkerhoff (2002) recommends the following definition for partnership based on an extensive literature review, "Partnership is a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually-agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labor based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner. Partnership encompasses mutual influence, with a careful balance between synergy and respective autonomy, which incorporates mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability and transparency[viii]."

Previous MWA efforts in Ethiopia provided some support to collaborative learning and partnership development, however, partners mainly operated in different areas using their own preferred approaches and partnership and learning activities were intermittent and minimal. Thus, a move to tangible use of collective impact required significant changes in behavior, use of new activities, and increased hub leadership to guide this partnership development. The MWA secretariat was ideally positioned to serve as the hub (or backbone) due to its role as a non-implementing partner, which allows impartial support as well as time and focus for the collective impact activities, while other partners were able to focus on technical support and implementation using their areas of comparative advantage.

Later in this learning brief, the efforts to achieve the five tenets of collective impact are shared. But first and foremost, the partnership had to be built and a foundation of trust developed across partners.

> "Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships."
> Stephen R. Covey

It was MWA's hypothesis that if we were able to get the right people from each organization and develop trusted relationships, then we could work more efficiently and effectively to accomplish the shared goal and objectives. A foundation of trust is imperative to engage in business and international development programs[ix,x,xi]. Six NGOs were in the program, many of whom often do similar work and find themselves competing at times for grant funds, recognition of work and so on. Developing trust with a group of organizations that sometimes compete and that each have their own agendas, organization cultures, methods, etc. is not a simple or quick process.

Step 1: "Get the right people on the bus"[xii]
The purpose of building this NGO partnership was to develop a consistent, strong group of people who could serve as leaders and champions of the program and the new approaches that were being planned to address the challenging

WASH SDGs. This group was named the Core Design Team (CDT). The first step was to get the right person from each organization on board to build the team. To find the right people and support high-level leadership buy-in, the MWA secretariat developed a terms of reference (TOR) for the proposed initial team. The TOR included roles and responsibilities, estimated time commitment, and a recommended level of authority and decision-making ability each person should have within their home organization. The request to nominate an appropriate person was submitted to the Country Director from each organization with the request that they nominate the appropriate person who fit the suggested criteria. Country Directors responded positively to the request and each nominated one person.

Step 2: Build trust and relationships

With the Core Design Team in place, the MWA secretariat arranged for partners to engage in a three-day workshop away from Addis Ababa where team members work. Going out of town was intentional to remove distractions and provide an alternative environment to promote creative thinking and open-mindedness. Being out of town also allowed for shared meals and informal interactions at various times of day (e.g. walks, gym, coffee) beyond a formal meeting environment.

At the start of the workshop some partners knew each other from national-level meetings or other collaborations, but others were relatively unacquainted. The agenda for the workshop included multiple team-building activities for people to get to know each other and build respect and understanding. For example, early in the workshop each participant was asked to fill out a fun personality survey[xiii]. Results were shared with the group along with explanations of the result characteristics. This resulted in both laughter and better understanding of personality characteristics of team members. Interestingly, most people at the table had the same personality style. The workshop also included program planning, discussions about differences between this program and previous work, an overview of collective impact and how it would manifest during the program, roles and responsibilities, and a pre-mortem to consider how failure might occur and suggestions on how it could be avoided.

Box 2: Favorite team building activities

1. Each person thinks of two of their favorite activities not related to their job and then acts them out silently while other colleagues guess what the activities are. This activity was used during the CDT start-up workshop. Some participants demonstrated playing football, others going to church and others time with their children. This activity was deemed a favorite success because over a year later team members continue to remember this and laugh and discuss together about their acting and their favorite activities.

2. At the beginning of a meeting with additional technical partners, during typical introductions each person was asked to share how they got involved in the WASH sector. Answers varied from being good at science to personal childhood or family experiences with lack of WASH services. The opportunity to learn the varied motivations and experiences of partners was impactful and seemed helpful in building trust.

The MWA hub continued the intentional team-building through the year. Activities included consistent monthly meetings, shared brainstorming and problem-solving, ongoing team-building activities, joint monitoring and learning trips, frequent planning sessions, theory of change revision, and a CDT trip to Ghana to learn from the work of other organizations. The importance of these activities cannot be overstated. The team-building activities, though at times seemingly silly, allowed team members to learn things, both personally and professionally, about each other and helped to foster a shared sense of camaraderie (See Box 2 for ideas).

Step 3: Build Ownership

The CDT played a crucial role in designing and planning the work of the Bridge Program and the follow-on program. As such, the team was tasked with working together to solve implementation problems and delays, support government partnership development, engage in planning processes and debates about best practices, develop shared positions on topics[xiv], develop a new collaborative method for conducting a series of assessments, and move outside the comfort

zone of some to plan system strengthening approaches that moved far beyond infrastructure development[xv]. It was critical to engage in these activities and decision-making steps as a group to foster ownership across all partners and organizations. Over time there was a move from organization individualism to one of being an integrated part of the collaborative program.

Step 4: Be Intentional

Similar to the use of team-building activities, though seemingly small, many activities or decisions were made intentionally to promote shared responsibility and the team nature of the partnership. Select examples include:

- Written and verbal communications to the group nearly always included a reference to "our collaborative work" or the "work of the partnership" or the "team."
- A statement was made that if any one partner does not succeed then none of us succeed; we succeed only if we all succeed together.
- A review process and workshop were conducted to support team members to learn not just about each other, but also about some of the core competencies that each organization can bring to the partnership. For example, one partner has key expertise in working with small town utilities while another is excellent at supporting government-led monitoring systems. Understanding these value-adds created more appreciation across the team (see Box 1 for Brinkerhoff's definition about focusing on comparative advantages).
- A shared document repository was developed so all partners had consistent access to the same information.
- Opportunities for learning and participation in events were shared by various partners with the team.
- Meetings and events were often held, on a rotating basis, at the offices of team members, thus giving everyone the opportunity to both visit and to host each other.

Utilizing the Five Key Elements of Collective Impact

There are said to be five critical elements necessary for collective impact[xvi]. Below are details of how these five areas were implemented in this work.

1. Common Agenda

Development of a common agenda began even before the program officially began. A shared Theory of Change (TOC) was developed collaboratively with project partners, donors and government representatives before the grant proposal was developed. Over time, as learning and knowledge increased, the TOC was revised by the CDT to better reflect new information. As the program progressed into long-term work, a shared vision along with more specific goals and targets were developed to guide the follow-on five years of collaborative work.

2. Backbone Role

The backbone (or hub) role was served by the MWA secretariat in alignment with its value proposition and role in the program. In this role, MWA convened and planned meetings, monitoring visits, learning trips, and planning/design workshops; developed and shared meeting/visit minutes and notes; developed and maintained a shared document storage system; led intentional team building activities; consulted other partners to gather new ideas; supported development of a shared monitoring plan; influenced national and regional government on behalf of the partnership; and drafted program documents such as a memorandum of understanding signed by all organizations, a communication protocol, a data management plan, etc. The MWA secretariat also met one-on-one with each partner organization bi-annually to assess progress and discuss learning opportunities or roadblocks. The MWA hub provided the coordinating role with regional government, donors and other technical support partners such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Splash. The MWA hub developed program proposals and reports for the donor and government and, with support from IRC WASH and input from all partners, provided support and leadership on development of five collaborative position papers and several learning and communications documents.

3. Shared Monitoring System

Since 2012, MWA program partners have had a shared monitoring system for programs of the alliance in Ethiopia. Continuing during the Bridge Program, a shared monitoring system was developed collaboratively, building on a series of baseline assessment studies and the idea of understanding changes in the system as well as service delivery levels. Shared monitoring for the program has been expanded by MWA and IRC WASH to include use of tools such as outcome harvesting, process documentation and WASH systems building block assessments to better understand systems change and behavior change among critical actors.

4. Mutually Supportive Activities

This program works in three districts[svii], with each district incorporating the work of at least two partner organizations. In many cases each organization is charged with doing a different set of activities to capitalize on the comparative advantages of each partner. However, for success it is imperative that these activities are closely linked with those of the other organizations working in the same district. Alignment and coordination of activities are critical to ensure that activities are mutually supportive and not undercutting each other (e.g. one organization selling water filters via a business model versus another organization handing out water filters for free nearby), and that activities are coordinated appropriately with local government priorities, activities and participation. For example, it would be unhelpful for two organizations to organize workshops requiring district water office participation during the same week. The CDT seated in Addis Ababa supported aligned activities through planning and communications. Further, this was supported by the presence of a lead organization in each district that served as the hub for that district. District leads were charged with liaising with district government, communicating updates to the MWA hub and ensuring coordination, but not overlap, of all activities of the program in the district. Additionally, linking all activities to the shared vision and theory of change helped to encourage aligned activities.

5. Constant Communication

CDT meetings were held nearly every month to share updates, collaboratively solve challenges and discuss specific topics such as position papers or planning required. Outside of meetings, there were frequent shared monitoring visits or meetings with government where all were invited to join. Emails were sent regularly to provide updates about specific aspects of the program, to share an opportunity, or to appreciate the helpful contributions of one or more organizations to a specific target or event. The email updates started with mainly the MWA hub sharing updates regularly. However, over time, other organizations also started providing updates about specific pieces of work or learning documents/opportunities with the team.

Key Lessons from Partnership Development

1. Budgeting for partnership is critical

The workshop that started the partnership and subsequent events and activities would not have been possible if budgets had not been intentionally earmarked for partnership and learning activities. This budgeting was done during the program planning and proposal development stage. Each partner was recommended to set aside a set amount of funds specifically for partnership development. It was also very influential to have a donor who prioritizes partnerships and was willing to allow the time and resources to engage in partnership development.

2. Buy-in of senior leadership is important

A specific request of Country Directors to assign a person to be part of the CDT was an integral aspect of the success of partnership development. Country Directors controlled who was nominated to the team and their buy-in was encouraged in order to allow their nominee the time and resources required to fulfill their CDT role. It should be noted that Country Directors were also convened by the MWA hub two to three times throughout the year so that the CDT could provide updates, request support for critical areas, and get input and suggestions.

3. Celebrate successes

Program partners were frequently asked to engage in program activities such as planning meetings, reviews, learnings, workshops, etc. One of the more unique modalities of engaging together was pausing to celebrate key achievements and recognize progress. Some of these moments were just brief recognitions during applicable meetings where key achievements or organizations were applauded by the partner team. Often one or more organizations were requested to share how they attained a successful outcome in a specific area. At other times formal celebrations of achievements were linked to workshop sessions where shared milestones were celebrated across NGO and government partners. These events and approaches helped to building a cohesive team spirit across alliance partners and with government.

4. Joint program monitoring and learning exchange visits are valuable

Meetings and workshops were critical to the success of the partnership development. However, one of the most helpful activities the partnership engaged in was convening together outside of formal office settings. This took place through one international learning trip and multiple monitoring and learning exchange visits. Partners came together and shared vehicles to travel together to project sites to learn from pilot activities, review progress at field sites and learn from the unique activities of each other. These types of trips provided both excellent learning opportunities but also interactions in vehicles, on walks to sites, during lunches, etc. that go beyond typical meeting interactions. In most cases, government partners were also part of these visits, serving to build trust and relationships beyond just the NGO partners. These joint monitoring and learning exchanges proved highly valuable in building transparency, accountability, and willingness to have open discussions about progress and challenges.

5. Pulling people outside their comfort zone is difficult but important

Developing cohesive teams is difficult. One effective way to support this is to push people outside of their comfort zones together so that they have this shared experience. Asking people to engage in personality tests, openly discuss potential failure triggers, and act out or do silly things in front their peers can help build these shared experiences. Additionally, an international trip was found to be an excellent way to build partnerships as all team members had the experience of being the foreigners in a new country and had new shared experiences and stories as a group. Pushing people and organizations beyond the status quo was found to require repetitive discussions, examples, learnings and activities. Causing a paradigm shift is a work in process.

6. Having a hub (backbone) to foster partnership development is crucial

While partnership development is often discussed as an important aspect of development programs, in reality it is not easily done and a champion is required to take the lead. This fits with the constant communication required for collective impact; a hub is required to lead the communication, convening, and partnership development planning required to develop strong partnerships. Literature also recommends that the hub is an outside entity who has this as their priority function[xvi]. In this example, this was found to be true because the MWA hub was able to serve a neutral role since it was not competing for pieces of direct implementation work and could focus fully on the hub role.

7. Staffing changes and priorities must be accounted for

Challenges were experienced with the CDT because at times the focal person was on leave, out of the country or otherwise occupied with other projects. This resulted in an organization sending a delegate to meetings. However, despite the presence of a delegate, often critical communications were missed and information was not adequately relayed to and from the CDT due to the missing focal partner. It is recommended to have a second person nominated from each organization who can be kept updated on all critical program/partnership information to easily support when the focal person is unavailable.

8. Critical to link national-level partnership activities with regional and district partnerships

This program started with an extensive focus on developing a partnership team at the national level in the capital with WASH leadership staff from each organization. However, the organizations' staff working at the regional level and in the districts are also critically important. It is these team members who build the strongest relationships with district or regional government officials, do the on-the-ground work and know best what the new learnings and challenges are. Thus, when designing a follow-on program, a new similar group will be developed to convene regularly at the regional level to support partner staff to build relationships and trust among this group. The district hub role will be continued and additional communication linkages and shared information channels will be developed between the national, regional and district teams.

Box 3: Reflections from a program partner

"Previously, we were working in different areas, we didn't know what anyone was doing or where. We only were seeing the reports from each organization. There was no strong partnership. Even the reporting mechanism, we would send a report; there was no detailed discussion or learning from each other. We achieved our targets, but it was like having different donors….. But because of this partnership and this collaborative impact now we have achieved our targets in this one-year program and we learned a lot. Learning from each other. Even beyond the MWA program because we have these relationships, now I know more about what other organizations are doing even in their other programs. It brings us additional knowledge. I hope we'll continue like this."
- Core Design Team member reflecting on the work of MWA Ethiopia prior to the Bridge Program versus during the Bridge Program.

Examples of Partnership Success

Several outcomes of the Bridge Program suggest that progress was made in developing strong and impactful partnerships. Box 3 provides reflection from a program partner as shared in a debrief after the program ended.

1. Partners support each other

Similar to all programs, challenges were experienced by various partners throughout the course of the program due to staffing changes, competing priorities and technical difficulties. Based on the strong partnership developed, as opposed to criticizing each other or looking at the challenges of others as an opportunity to show their own strength, partners stepped up to support each other. For example, when one partner had a staff transition that resulted in challenges fulfilling a specific commitment, another partner allowed their staff to temporarily provide the necessary support in that district to accomplish the committed activities. As another example, partners frequently offered each other car rides to various meetings or field sites rather than each person feeling compelled to utilize only their own organization's vehicles. In another example, one organization was underperforming in an implementation area as compared to other partners. To resolve this, the organization arranged a collaborative field visit and learning discussion with another partner to improve its own performance. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that partner staff in the districts call each other regularly to ask questions, seek advice or congratulate each other on personal and professional achievements.

2. Feedback from partners

One of the best non-research-based measures of success is input from partners about their perspectives on the partnership. Approximately nine months into the partnership development process, one CDT member noted that it would be nice if their other collaborative programs operated more like this one, where meetings include much more than just reporting on progress and where partners actually care about each other and help each other. During a meeting a month after the conclusion of this work, partners in the CDT said the following when asked about their proudest achievements of the program, "The partnership between NGOs that has been developed," and "The progress

we've made towards actually using the collective impact model." Toward the end of the program, both CDT members and Country Directors offered appreciation for the strength of partnership developed. Furthermore, they acknowledged the significant difference between previous programs and this new program where intentional partnership development and use of collective impact tenets are key aspects.

3. Replication of approaches

Building on the trust and time spent together, partners started doing more both formally and informally to learn from each other and adopt ideas and practices from the collaborative work into their organization's WASH programming even beyond the boundaries of this program. For example, one of the organizations who implemented dispensers for safe water determined that this is a valid and useful technology that is approved and wanted by government. Now they are making a plan to replicate use of dispensers in other, non MWA, program areas. Another partner has started using the long-term, district-wide planning approach utilized in the MWA program in other districts where they work. The benefit of strong collaborative partnerships across NGOs and governments, the intentional learning and reflection processes, and the use of evidence are increasingly recognized as helpful approaches for use by both government and NGO partners. As a final example, partners sat together to plan for the next five years of WASH in schools work. Previously each partner would have fulfilled their WASH in schools work using their preferred methods and technologies. Alternatively, for this program, partners sat together to go over each detail of how individual partners were thinking to conduct WASH in Schools work. Four organizations assessed together which methods and approaches they thought would be most effective and agreed to implement these consistently across the WASH in Schools work of all the organizations in the coming years.

Next steps

The MWA partnership has received generous funding from the Hilton Foundation to continue this systems-based, district-wide work for another five years (2019 – 2024). This work will build on and continue the collective impact and partnership work started during the Bridge Program. At the district level, the lead organizations will continue to have a district hub role. Given the interest in regional influencing and coordination, the MWA secretariat will develop a larger hub role at the regional level to support coordination, aligned activities, learning and documentation, and government relationship strengthening. At the national program level, the MWA hub will continue to support partners in this role. Additionally, at the national level it is hoped that a group of organizations, all engaging in district WASH systems strengthening work, will come together and become a collaborative national hub to influence government and support each other and shared learnings.

MWA's work in Ethiopia feeds into MWA's role as a global leader in convening, accelerating, and influencing. During the time of the Ethiopia Bridge Program, MWA also served as the hub for a 35 million USD resilience program in Kenya with more than 20 partners including private sector entities, government and NGOs. MWA aspires to continue strengthening and refining the hub role, utilizing collective impact, and building strong partnerships as a key opportunity for accelerated learning and increased impact in the WASH sector.

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Millennium Water Alliance

Learning Brief: Partnership Development in an Alliance for Increased Impact

fh
food for the hungry

WaterAid

CRS
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

care

World Vision

IRC