

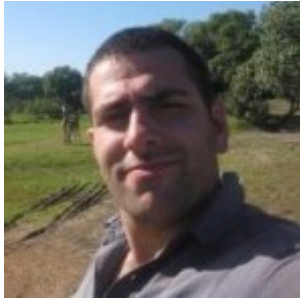
SEEKING SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN MALAWI'S WASH SECTOR



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Megan’s aim is to see the development sector move past the limitations of working through projects to catalyse fundamental transformations in permanent institutions.

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS	2
CONTENTS	3
TABLES	3
FIGURES	3
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
2. THE UNSOLVED PROBLEM OF SUSTAINABILITY	5
3. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' UNTAPPED POTENTIAL	5
4. THE INADEQUACY OF THE SECTOR'S RESPONSE	7
4.1. PROJECTISED THINKING: A SYSTEMIC PROBLEM	7
4.2. THE ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES FOR SECTOR EFFICIENCY.....	8
4.3. HOW SECTOR POLICY FORUMS MISDIAGNOSE THE ISSUES	10
5. A WORKING ALTERNATIVE	11
5.1. EWB'S THEORY OF CHANGE.....	13
5.2. EMBEDDING LEARNING CAPACITY INTO THE SECTOR	19

TABLES

TABLE 1 DISTRICTS' POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY	6
TABLE 2 PROJECTISED VERSUS SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED THINKING	8
TABLE 3 SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED PRINCIPLES.....	12

FIGURES

FIGURE 1 EWB'S THEORY OF CHANGE: PRINCIPLES, FUNCTIONS, GOALS, AND VISION	13
FIGURE 2 EWB'S LONG GAME: A VISION FOR THE SECTOR.....	19

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thanks in part to the efforts of many NGOs and generous funding from donors, coverage of water and sanitation infrastructure in Malawi has increased. Nevertheless, the sustained usability and continuous improvement of those facilities remain problematic. Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) believes that the sector has the administrative structures and funding to solve the sustainability problem; what it lacks is the coordination and learning to make it happen and ensure efficient delivery of services at scale.

The underlying cause is thinking in terms of projects and assuming that investing in more infrastructure is sufficient. In fact, this approach creates disincentives for local districts—the level of government responsible for service—to develop solutions independent of donor funding. Even efforts to build capacity often fail because they are not designed for the district staff’s skills and resources. The national government inadvertently exacerbates the problem by rewarding districts for absorbing donors’ projects rather than achieving good outcomes with their own limited resources. And, sector policy forums are often not designed to capture learning from the districts’ experience.

The result is an inability to innovate and capture efficiency—something the sector must do to maintain its current infrastructure while expanding service to keep pace with population growth in an era of constrained funding. An alternative to the current projectised approach is to shift to a service-oriented approach, based on a better understanding of the districts: what drives staff behaviour, what districts can do, what policies will effect the desired change.

Districts already have much of the capacity they need, EWB believes, but lack incentives for innovation and performance. Where capacity is weak, programmes based on human-centred design—matching the support to the skills and resources of existing staff—will be more effective than technocratic solutions imposed from above. To encourage the shift to a service-oriented approach, EWB helps local governments find cost-effective solutions, brings a district-level perspective to national-level policy forums and strengthens sector learning and critical thinking. It focuses on three areas:

- changing the discourse in the rural water supply sector to emphasise operations and maintenance;
- influencing sector financing policy to enable district-led solutions; and
- institutionalising critical thinking and learning in sanitation interventions.

The focus areas are also EWB’s exit strategy: once a service orientation is put in place, district-centric approach and learning capacity are ingrained in the sector: Malawi’s national government, development partners and local districts will be able to develop their own effective, efficient solutions to the sustainability challenge.

This document clarifies the sustainability problem in Malawi and outlines the three changes in sector thinking that EWB believes are required for a systemic response to systemic problems. Further, it describes how EWB positions itself as a catalyst of that systemic change. By taking the steps defined in this document, EWB believes that the sector can create a more efficient and effective response to realising sustainability at scale

2. THE UNSOLVED PROBLEM OF SUSTAINABILITY

Approximately 100 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and 10 major donors are working in Malawi's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. Combined, their budgets exceed an estimated US\$ 100 million annually¹. They implement, influence and fund projects, but have yet to achieve the most important result—sustained services at scale. Perpetual access to services for everyone, independent of unpredictable NGO and donor resources, continues to elude the sector.

In terms of putting in place the infrastructure to increase water and sanitation coverage, Malawi has performed well in recent decades. However, the sustainability of facilities remains a major challenge. Efforts tend to be isolated, inefficient, and unilateral. Although the UNICEF-WHO Joint Monitoring Programme reports improved rural water supply coverage in Malawi at approximately 77%, the 2010 Sector Performance Report, produced by the Malawian Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, cites evidence that infrastructure functionality is only 45% to 75%, depending on the district. Similarly for sanitation, Malawi has increased sanitation coverage and thereby reduced open defecation from 35% to 11% between 1990 and 2008; however, sustained usability and continuous improvement of sanitation facilities remain problematic.

EWB believes that sustained services at scale can be achieved and, crucially, that the sector has what it needs to solve the sustainability problem—adequate administrative structures and money. What it lacks is a way of fitting the pieces together efficiently through coordination and learning.

3. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

The strength of Malawi's institutional setup is its local government structures. The councils in each of the country's 28 districts have the capacity to deploy funds and administer projects. Relatively high institutional capacity means that, unlike countries such as South Sudan or Cote D'Ivoire, Malawi may be only years, not decades, away from a high-functioning public administration that can sustain service levels at scale².

Indeed, WASH organisations in Malawi understand the need to address the challenge of sustained services at scale and the role that districts must play. The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development,

¹ Based on estimates of annual development partner expenditure for current commitments to the National Water Development Program plus national non-development partner supported budgets and estimates of off-budget NGO figures.

² According to the 2011 AMCOW CSO, Malawi is among the low-income, non-fragile countries that is at stage 2 (of 3) in transitioning to country-led programmatic approaches to service delivery by developing capacity within sector institutions, drawing on service delivery capacity in the broader economy, and linking services to reforming core government systems.

UNICEF and WaterAid are among the entities investing more resources in finding solutions to the sustainability problem. Policy dialogue forums around the Sector-Wide Approach, the National Monitoring and Evaluation framework, review of Operation and Maintenance guidelines, and sector governance reform are active. Malawi is ripe for positive change, and in fact has the potential to be a leader in the African community in terms of how to efficiently use public resources to achieve sustainable services at scale³.

Despite the willingness of government departments, donors and NGOs to talk about sustainable services, however, individual stakeholders are not responding to the challenge with realistic, scalable and efficient solutions. The result is that the sector spends more than it needs to for increased access to water and sanitation—funding is wasted when facilities fall into disrepair. Unless it changes, the sector will not reach its WASH coverage targets. But where exactly is the inefficiency? The problem is that the districts are not being used to their full potential. This untapped source of capacity and innovation represents a missed opportunity to increase sector efficiency. Districts are currently under-resourced but, with knowledge of the local context, they are well positioned to develop low-resource solutions to sustainability challenges and they have well-established structures with the potential to fully perform the necessary roles to ensure sustained service delivery. Table 1 describes three key roles for the districts.

TABLE 1 DISTRICTS’ POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUSTAINABILITY

EXAMPLES	
Creating and sustaining community behavioural changes that enable water point repairs and continual improvement of sanitation facilities	Incorporate new approaches—such as community-led total sanitation and community sensitisation to increase willingness to pay for water repairs—into existing management structures and reporting lines.
Enabling markets by supporting private service providers and defining roles	Support private pump mechanics and sanitation providers by explaining the role of mechanics to communities and regulating mechanics’ activities. Use existing contacts with communities and private service providers (development committee meetings, field-staff visits) to ensure that communities have a clear understanding of what the district will pay for and what communities must pay themselves.
Planning, coordinating and monitoring stakeholders	Monitor water and sanitation services indicators based on their own context and using their own (rather than the project’s) resources. Coordinate with other sectors that collect related data. Set expectations that NGOs harmonise their approaches with public policy and engage district structures with genuine collaboration rather than simply reporting activities or paying to use district field staff for implementation.

N.B. Some districts already play these roles to a certain extent, depending on the individuals and circumstances in the district.

³ The challenge of efficient public resource usage is one that will need to be solved across the continent. The AMCOW Regional Synthesis Report for Africa (November 2011) projects a minimum annual shortfall of USD\$6 billion for capital investments across the region.

BOX 1: OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE EFFICIENCY

The Malawi Sector Investment Plan (SIP), completed in April 2012, indicates that the sector needs a greater than four-fold increase in annual investment to reach 98% water coverage and 40% sanitation coverage by 2030. SIP, a tool for sector investment planning, assumes that the costs per unit access cannot be reduced by sector efficiency: the only way to achieve coverage targets is to implement more projects. The proposed investment levels are accordingly high.

Yet Malawi could achieve the same targets more cheaply and more quickly if it focussed on increasing efficiency, rather than increasing only investment. SIP assumes that the districts have insufficient capacity, but in reality districts already have the potential to use their current resources more effectively.

For example, in Salima district, open defecation-free rates of 50% have been achieved just by adapting existing management structures, without additional funding. In Mangochi district, 60% of communities targeted by innovative district management structures have increased payment collection for water point repairs, a common cause of handpump failure, also without project funding. Clearly, better efficiency is indeed possible.

4. THE INADEQUACY OF THE SECTOR'S RESPONSE

Collectively, government, NGOs and donors are not increasing the efficiency of the sector quickly enough to solve the sustainability problem. The sector needs to develop effective responses that can work within the districts' limited resources. Instead, the sector draws the limited time and resources of district staff into off-budget, NGO-driven interventions that undermine district staff engagement with communities and incentivise them to take action only when donor money is available.

That the relationship between the sector and the districts is causing efficiency losses is just a symptom of a larger problem—the sector's own inefficiencies. The sector has shown a pattern of responding to the sustainability problem by introducing new projects. This pattern exacerbates the problem and undermines district structures.

4.1. PROJECTISED THINKING: A SYSTEMIC PROBLEM

Malawi's institutional culture is dominated by 'projectised thinking'—the patterns of thought and practice that cause the sector to behave as though sustainable services at scale can be achieved by implementing isolated projects that increase service levels within the project term. This approach sees funded projects as the only solution, makes false assumptions about sustainability, and is ineffective at learning how to scale solutions.

TABLE 2 PROJECTISED VERSUS SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED THINKING

	PROJECTISED THINKING	SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED THINKING
Solutions	The only way to work on a problem is to fund a project and achieve planned outputs.	Changing relationships between stakeholders can enable on-going problem solving.
Sustainability	The sector should focus on increasing coverage; sustainability will happen by handing over solutions to government and communities.	Investing in increased coverage must be accompanied by investment in the permanent institutions needed to sustain the service levels.
Scale	Solving service problems locally within a funded project environment will lead to scaled solutions for the whole country through sharing ideas in sector forums.	Solving service problems locally within a funded project environment can only scale if solutions can be implemented using local resources.

4.2. THE ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES FOR SECTOR EFFICIENCY

Sometimes projectised thinking is about new infrastructure—installing new boreholes using project funds. Sometimes it is about capacity—conducting trainings to build skills. And sometimes it is even about sustainability—funding a project to repair or rehabilitate broken infrastructure. But all of these approaches fall victim to the patterns described above and thus fail to solve the problem. Sustainable services at scale cannot be achieved by funding and implementing isolated solutions without developing low-cost solutions for Malawi’s districts. Nor can it be achieved by strengthening districts’ capacity (or holding them accountable for sustainability) without providing the tools that allow them to act.

Projects are not, by themselves, a problem. Indeed, projects get things done and are needed to reach coverage targets. The problem arises when projectised thinking prevents districts from taking an effective role in improving sustainability and sector efficiency. Five behaviours characterise the systemic problem of projectised thinking.

4.2.1. Funding approaches do not incentivise district innovation

Sector behaviour: The need to spend project money trumps the need to support cheaper, more efficient solutions at the district level.

District effect: Incentives to find low-resource solutions are undermined in districts because it is easier to obtain project funds than to innovate.

Example: A district water office (DWO) in northern Malawi has been working with an NGO since 2002 on a database to house information about the status of all water points in the district; the NGO funds data collection. In 2010, the district had an opportunity to coordinate with the District Health Office, which already collects comparable information; the district could then afford to update the database from its regular budget. But rather than tackling the relatively minor challenge of coordinating with the other agency, the DWO opted not to act until the next instalment of funding from the NGO arrived. The NGO had created an expectation that monitoring would always be funded, thereby eliminating any incentive for

the DWO to innovate and creating a sense of dependence. The NGO, accustomed to equating funding with solutions, had perpetuated that dependence.

4.2.2. Parallel structures undermine district authority and capacity

Sector behaviour: Creating parallel structures for large projects at the district level is a waste of sector resources.

District effect: These parallel structures take district staff time and energy away from their regular mandate, reducing their ability to work on sustainability issues.

Example: A district in the southern region of Malawi is one of four targets for the Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project, funded by the African Development Bank. The project is tasked with installing approximately US\$ 7 million worth of water and sanitation infrastructure in two years as well as funding other activities. The central government manages the project and has hired a district level consultant, who controls the resources at the district level and is responsible for planning, budgeting and tendering. Consultants are meant to backstop capacity gaps in the district; however, because the project was centrally designed, the consultant's team ended up duplicating roles that the district can already play, such as budgeting, infrastructure allocation and community engagement. Within the project's construction, the district bears legal responsibility for infrastructure installation and is responsible for the outcomes of the project; the added time spent by the district to manage its relationship with the consultant's team did not only duplicate structures that cost money, but also distracted the district from its regular activities.

4.2.3. Capacity building does not match actual district needs

Sector behaviour: Capacity building for projects seeks to create ideal district systems within a short time and ignores the principles of 'human-centred design'.

District effect: The tools and systems introduced are often inappropriate for the district staff's skills and resources and are therefore soon dropped.

Example: Since 2002, the most widely supported capacity-building approach has been to provide districts with ArcView GIS software (a GPS mapping interface) and field staff expenses for collecting rural water infrastructure data. To update this information, the districts would require about 20 times their recurrent (non-project) resources and the use of complex software to conduct even basic data analysis⁴. The project managers who support this form of capacity development believe that GPS coordinates give high-resolution 'better' data for monitoring water points; the users find such monitoring systems complicated and expensive. Since the support comes with the project, however, districts cannot refuse it. Moreover, they lack the experience to give feedback on the tools. In contrast to centralised, technocratic project design principles—which specify the tools for a given project, key to human-centred design principles is ensuring that the system being introduced is usable by the district.

⁴ Based on average recurrent operational funding to districts in Malawi and the costs of GPS mapping estimated in Katharina Welle, 'Water and Sanitation Mapping: A Synthesis of Findings', WaterAid, 2007.

4.2.4. Projects do not identify or enable long-term district roles

Sector behaviour: Rehabilitation and repair projects are implemented in isolated areas without strategies for enabling districts to take them over.

District effect: Districts are therefore disengaged, gaining limited understanding of how they can sustain and expand the outcomes after the projects end.

Example: A district in the central region of Malawi is a target for a mechanics' training and support programme funded by an international NGO. On the surface, this project appears highly successful: it has achieved functionality rates that exceed 90%; the NGO is coordinating with and reporting to the district council, and the model has been adopted for other areas by other organisations. However, the approach relies on high levels of financial and management support from the NGO, which hires middle managers to support and train the area mechanics and funds monthly meetings. Because this NGO is reporting to the district council, the project is seen to be well-coordinated; but it does not work with the district to find ways of achieving the same outcomes within the district's resources. To date, no strategy that translates this intervention into something that the district can own and implement when the project ends exists. The approach is vulnerable: it depends on international funding.

4.2.5. Public structures do not incentivise district service performance

Sector behaviour: The national government defines district performance in terms of its ability to absorb donor-driven projects.

District effect: District staff therefore lack incentives to produce sustainable service delivery outcomes independent of projects.

Example: The Local Development Fund (LDF) is a multi-sector, country-wide financing mechanism designed to support improved local governments' service delivery in several sectors. Part of the fund is performance-based to incentivise districts. The indicators measure year-to-year relative change in water and sanitation coverage, which is a positive step towards measuring services rather than project outputs. However, the performance indicators for water and sanitation places minimal emphasis on sustainability or any proxy indicators for sustainability, such as water point functionality or latrine improvements. When the word sustainable is used, it is not defined, leaving no way to truly distinguish between 'access' and 'sustainable access'. In addition, performance is not linked to individual rewards for district staff, whose job prospects are determined by their capacity to produce reports and use earmarked funds from centrally controlled projects. Thus district staff are not rewarded for innovation that allows them to achieve outcomes with minimal resources.

In all five categories of projectised thinking, the result is a failure to innovate and capture efficiency.

4.3. HOW SECTOR POLICY FORUMS MISDIAGNOSE THE ISSUES

Given the massive inefficiency taking place, why does the sector not recognise the problem? In policy forums—where approaches are funded, where discourse determines the approach, and where thinking defines the discourse—projectised thinking limits the ability of sector actors to see and realise opportunities that increase efficiency.

4.3.1. Forums are project oriented, not service oriented

The sector assumes that the only way to solve a problem is through heavily funded projects; few participants in policy forums are looking for (or presenting) solutions that can scale using the minimal resources available to local government. Most of the lessons learnt and best practices shared in forums describe how a particular project worked, rather than distil lessons about the communities themselves, their relationship with water and sanitation infrastructure and the causes of unsustainability.

Policy forums are themselves often ‘projectised’—they are usually part of a donor project cycle and thus they have a limited time span, and often lack clear statements of purpose and stakeholder ownership. The result is that most stakeholders use forums to advance their own agendas, rather than engage in genuine dialogue and sector learning.

4.3.2. Forums take decisions that affect districts but do not learn from districts

Sector forums are usually not structured to hear and learn from the districts’ experience. The forums are generally technocratic rather than learning oriented, so even when local government representatives participate there is little interest in how sustainability solutions can be adapted to districts’ motivations, challenges, and constraints and therefore be brought to scale. Without a solid understanding of the districts’ experience, the sector struggles to arrive upon a common and clear conceptual framework for comparing the effects of different financing and project approaches on district behaviours and incentives. Without such a framework, it is difficult for the sector to see the implications institutional design has for effectiveness, learn from mistakes and successes, or change its financing structures to promote growth in district capacity.

The sustainability problem cannot be solved from outside, by spending more money on rehabilitation projects or coming up with the best new idea or model. Districts must be enabled to play the roles appropriate to their contexts without relying on centrally planned, one-off project funding. If the sector does not increase its efficiency, achieving independence from donor funding, meeting its targets and outpacing population growth⁵ will all be more difficult.

5. A WORKING ALTERNATIVE

The sector must embrace a working alternative to patterns of projectised thought and action. Those patterns are systemic, and systemic problems require systemic action—a collective change in approach that enables a shift towards new, service-oriented patterns of thought and action.

Specifically, in order for sector actors to support, rather than undermine the potential of local governments to address sustainability issues more efficiently, EWB believes that there are three alternative patterns that should characterise all sector initiatives. These alternative patterns build on the sustainable service-oriented principles described in Table 3.

⁵ For an analysis of Malawi’s population growth versus carrying capacity of the sector, see the Malawi Water Supply and Sanitation Investment Plan, Castalia Strategic Advisors, March 2012.

TABLE 3 SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED PRINCIPLES

PRINCIPLE	PROJECTISED THINKING	SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED THINKING	SUSTAINABLE SERVICE-ORIENTED MANTRA
Solutions: define sustainability problem	Sector defines problems in broad terms: 'Communities must play role', or 'Districts have low capacity'.	Sector develops incisive, precise problem statement describing specific behaviours, and articulates how district could change those behaviours taking into consideration obstacles and incentives.	'If we can't articulate what prevents the behaviour changes we seek, we haven't defined the problem'.
Sustainability: match action to system	The sector defines goals in terms of field-level output targets defined by project implementers. Any measures to improve chances for sustainability are limited to what can be conceived and executed within individual projects.	Sector chooses sustainability strategies grounded in on-going actions by local government, and what they can and will actually do.	'It's always better to achieve fewer outputs that districts can and will maintain than to achieve more outputs'.
Scale: leverage policy and structural change	Sector thinks about scale in terms of packaged solutions that expand through more project funding, separating policy and structural issues.	The sector integrates thinking on solutions and scale; influencing a well-bounded set of actors to create the necessary policy and structural changes to support positive behaviour change at the district level.	'Scaling a solution requires specific policy and structural changes, and we will engage only with the actors who matter on only the changes that matter'.

With systemic shifts towards sustainable service-oriented principles, EWB believes that the sector could change its behavioural patterns and enable districts to be effective. EWB envisions the following changes:

Funding approaches incentivise district innovation

Sector behaviour: Sector analyses and understands effects of district funding on incentives to innovate and works with districts to end dependence.

District effect: Districts understand that outcomes depend on their ability to identify and solve problems, with limited resources, and are supported to perform those functions.

Large projects use existing public service structures efficiently

Sector behaviour: Projects use existing district capacity and backstop only those capacities that districts cannot supply.

District effect: Districts have local control over budgeting, planning and resource allocation; implementers help develop those capacities.

Human-centred design principles inform capacity building efforts

Sector behaviour: Capacity-building programmes target changes that increase district efficiency.
 District effect: Districts gain innovation, management and planning capacities and give feedback on capacity-building programming.

Project interventions find workable solutions that are adopted by districts

Sector behaviour: Project implementers design interventions that include a role for districts, implementing projects in phases to ramp up districts' involvement.
 District effect: Districts take the lead in defining sustainability problem and solutions and have NGOs support in developing competencies.

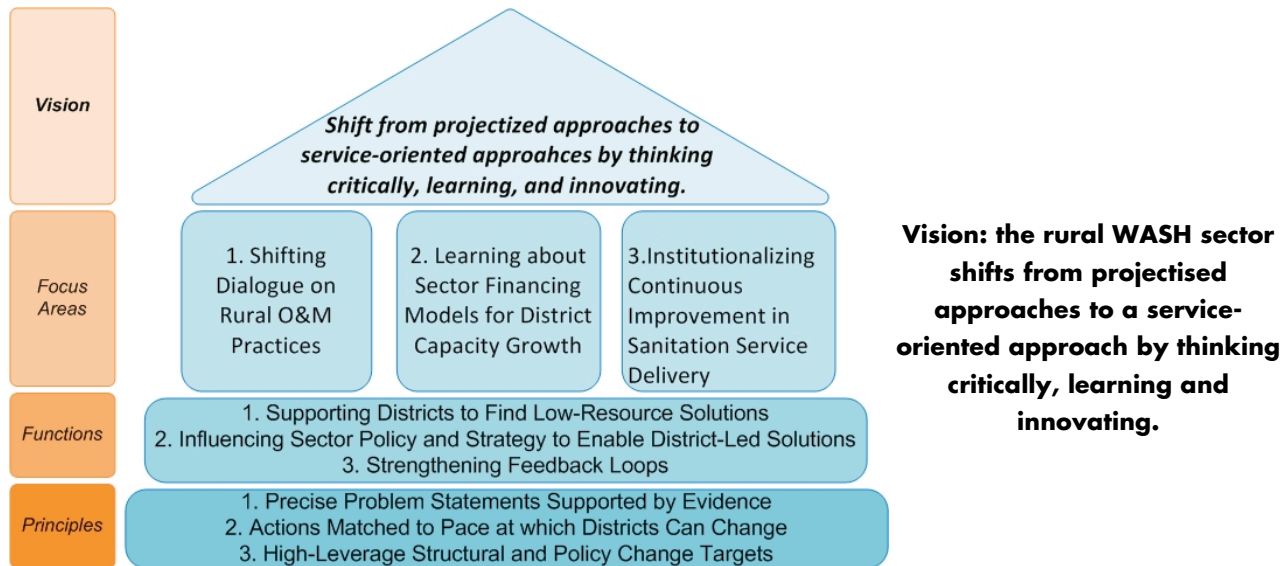
Public service structures incentivise district performance

Sector behaviour: National government defines district performance in terms of identifying and acting on service delivery issues within recurrent resources.
 District effect: District staff consider projects as off-budget interventions from which they can learn about problems and develop the ability to sustain service delivery after project ends.

5.1. EWB'S THEORY OF CHANGE

To catalyse the sector's adoption of the three principles and effect the necessary structural changes, EWB works on the systemic problem of projectised thinking. EWB has developed a version of what Triple-S and IRC call a service delivery approach⁶ (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 EWB'S THEORY OF CHANGE: PRINCIPLES, FUNCTIONS, GOALS, AND VISION



⁶ Harold Lockwood and Stef Smits, 'Supporting Rural Water Supply: Moving Towards a Service Delivery Approach', IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre and Aguaconsult, 2011.

EWB's theory of change—how EWB achieves its vision—is structured in terms of the three principles (Table 3) that guide the organisation's overall behaviours, three functions currently being performed via EWB staff interventions, and three strategic focus areas that guide our objectives, as follows:

- EWB performs three functions that embody the service-oriented principles of Table 3.
- EWB performs those functions in three strategic focus areas to take advantage of specific opportunities for structural changes and innovation.
- EWB leverages its extensive networks in the sector to publicise those changes and begin shifting norms.

Once the competence of service-oriented thinking is embedded, the sector can translate the three principles into more sustainable and efficient ways of operating.

The three functions put into practice the three principles.

Function 1. Direct support to local government to find efficient and effective sustainability solutions

EWB works in partnership with 20 districts in Malawi to help them define the highest-leverage sustainability problems they can solve, given their resources, and then act on those problems.

- EWB helps districts distinguish between broad problem statements, such as 'Communities do not pay for repairs', and incisive, actionable problem statements, such as 'Most communities do not pay pump mechanics regularly because they believe they are employed by the district'.
- EWB and partner districts conduct targeted research together, bringing in outside help when needed to ensure the required level of precision in their problem statements.
- EWB then helps them match potential solutions to their abilities and develop solutions that can be sustained within their resources; EWB does not provide funding. Districts' willingness to sustain solutions is EWB's prime indicator of success. Because their willingness to act is so crucial, EWB focuses on the districts' priorities even if other problems are arguably more important.

BOX 2: RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

To position itself to work towards its vision, EWB has built close relationships with more than 20 districts, three national ministries, all the major implementing NGOs, and all the major development partners. EWB's approach has been to understand the highest-leverage actors' experience, using human-centred design to appreciate and document the day-to-day bottlenecks, incentives, challenges and opportunities that drive their behaviour. EWB's field staff, who are typically placed within local government, spend a year or more learning the local language, living in a village or similar representative community settings and getting to know their counterparts as individuals.

Function 2. Influencing sector policy and strategy to enable low-resource, district-centric solutions

EWB brings its district-level perspective into sector policy and strategy forums and helps participants answer the question, 'How will this national policy or strategy enable districts to play the required on-going role?'

- EWB sits on six national policy and strategy forums and contributes to discourse on national sanitation strategy, sector capacity, sector financing design, performance metrics for districts, sector monitoring, and operation and maintenance of rural water supply. These six forums include the stakeholders needed to nudge the sector towards service-oriented thinking and reassessing the role of local governments.

-
- EWB's contributions challenge old assumptions about how local governments will respond to new projects, take ownership of interventions and play an on-going role after the project term.
 - EWB analyses stakeholders' positions and points out where a forum fails to identify the real issues at the district level. Such analysis adds precision to national-level understanding of districts' capacity and informs comparisons of policy choices.
 - EWB offers alternative approaches and helps sector actors identify new possibilities that expand districts' on-going role.

Function 3. Strengthening field-district-national feedback loops to enable sector learning

In national forums EWB is filling a learning gap—but only temporarily. EWB helps national-level actors develop their own information-gathering systems and resources.

- EWB demonstrates the value of district-informed policy and strategy by documenting and sharing examples of how good national decisions can promote district ownership, effective execution and innovation for operational efficiency.
- EWB brokers relationships between national and district leaders who can share insights about low-resource district solutions.
- EWB partners with innovative and learning-oriented representatives of development organisations and the national government, to identify relationships, information channels and other opportunities to understand local realities, including changing the format of national forums that allow direct input from districts.
- EWB creates common learning spaces, such as the Sharing Highlights in Total Sanitation (S.H.i.T.S) newsletter, which publicises district-level innovation in sanitation and hygiene promotion.

EWB works in three strategic focus areas—ones that the organisation believes contribute most to achieving EWB's vision, are ripe for change and are amenable to influence.

Focus area 1. Changing rural water supply operation and maintenance discourse to address the fundamental challenges to sustainability

Operations and maintenance are critical to the longevity of rural water supply infrastructure; longevity means more cost-effective investments. By demonstrating how districts can develop innovative approaches to address core O&M issues using their existing capacities, EWB helps facilitate a shift in policy and practice to support sustainable district-owned solutions, rather than continued reliance on donor-driven projects.

BOX 3: DISTRICT OWNERSHIP OF A VIABLE SOLUTION

A widely used water point sustainability strategy in Malawi is village-level operation and maintenance (VLOM), implemented through community-based management, in which communities finance and repair their own water points. This approach is fairly effective for some communities, but others are not raising the necessary funds.

EWB worked with the Mangochi District Water Office and discovered that the main problem was targeting: communities that were not paying for handpump repairs were approached in the same way as communities that had no water points. EWB introduced targeted water investment triggering (WIT), which the district could implement using existing field staff and operational funds, independent of donors. Based on the community-led total sanitation approach, WIT is a participatory method for creating a realisation among community members that drinking contaminated water means ingesting feces, thereby increasing community members' willingness to pay for repairs to water points.

In a pilot, 70% of communities followed through on commitments to create household payment plans within two months of the triggering. The key indicator of success, however, is that district staff refined the approach: after triggering the first 10 villages with WIT, they proposed the improvement that contributed most to its effectiveness, using local mechanics to select target villages. Sustaining the district's role in creating community behavioural change requires this kind of iterative improvement to be driven by the district, as is happening in Mangochi.

Focus area 2. Influencing sector financing policy to enable district-led solutions

How districts are financed affects their capacity to identify problems and solutions on their own. The sector lacks a basis for comparing the effects of different financing approaches, however, and therefore does not learn from its experience. EWB works with development partners to explore possibilities, contribute insights from EWB observations, and study the behavioural effects of financing at the district level. Once development partners understand the effects of financing policy, they can adapt their programmes to maximise districts' capacity growth.

BOX 4: HELP IN COMPARING FINANCING APPROACHES

The sector’s high-level discourse on institutional design lacks granularity in its comparison of funding approaches. For example, both UNICEF and the Africa Development Bank (AfDB) fund water and sanitation services using decentralised structures, and to the casual observer, the main difference between them is that UNICEF funds districts directly, whereas AfDB channels funds through the centrally managed National Water Development Program (NWDP).

This understanding, though accurate, is not the most relevant for comparing effects on district behaviours and consequent efficiency. EWB is working with AfDB, UNICEF, and the Institutional Development and Capacity Building Technical Working Group (ID&CB TWG), a policy advisory committee under the Malawi Water SWAp, to establish the necessary basis of comparison. EWB’s district-level knowledge allows a finer-grained comparison:

FUNDER	ROLES IN PLANNING	DISTRICT ENGAGEMENT	MANAGEMENT OF FUNDS	EFFECTS ON DISTRICTS
UNICEF	Districts create plans and choose which interventions to pursue based on what they think is needed, how much they can manage, and what they believe UNICEF will fund.	UNICEF has desk officers assigned to work with each district and devolves responsibility to districts based on sliding scale of risk assessment for each.	Funds are managed by district itself using its bank account; financial reports are submitted to UNICEF.	Many districts show increased willingness to innovate; also managing the burden of financial reporting.
AfDB	Plans are made centrally by NWDP and AfDB based on available money; more detailed plans are created at district level by consultants to NWDP.	Consultants are meant to coordinate with district and make use of field staff hired for the project; consultants often act unilaterally because of the need to spend large amounts of money in a short time.	Funds are managed by consultants and NWDP staff, who have less experience creating budgets for water and sanitation activities than district staff.	District administrative staff spend time assisting consultant-driven activities; they do not have to manage large funds.

Focus area 3. Institutionalising critical thinking and learning in sanitation interventions

The sanitation subsector is the most ripe for innovation in Malawi because stakeholders recognise the importance of districts for reaching coverage targets. EWB helps them develop solutions that work efficiently at the district, such as integrating sanitation into the routine work of district field staff without project funding and supporting a harmonised monitoring and evaluation system for districts. EWB also aims to help the sector develop and embed methods for introducing new approaches (e.g., sanitation marketing, school-led total sanitation) that districts can adapt and employ without perpetual project funding.

BOX 5: STRENGTHENING FEEDBACK LOOPS FOR SECTOR LEARNING

When implemented well, the community-led total sanitation approach has been effective in reducing open defecation in rural communities, thus leading to public health benefits. The national government has decided to scale this approach and formed the Open Defecation-Free Task Force as a national stakeholders' forum to develop and coordinate execution of a strategy and provide technical advice, with the goal of reaching country-wide ODF status by 2015. The stumbling block is scaling the approach with minimal resources.

As a member of the task force, EWB has included in the strategy tactics found to improve efficiency at the district level, such as integrating the approach into field-staff job descriptions and using natural leaders. Working also at the district level to test these tactics, EWB has identified positive deviations and ways to support districts in scaling. The successful adopters have been publicised in the S.H.i.T.S. newsletter, and other districts are now taking up the ideas.

BOX 6: EMBEDDING A KNOWLEDGE-SHARING TOOL IN THE SECTOR

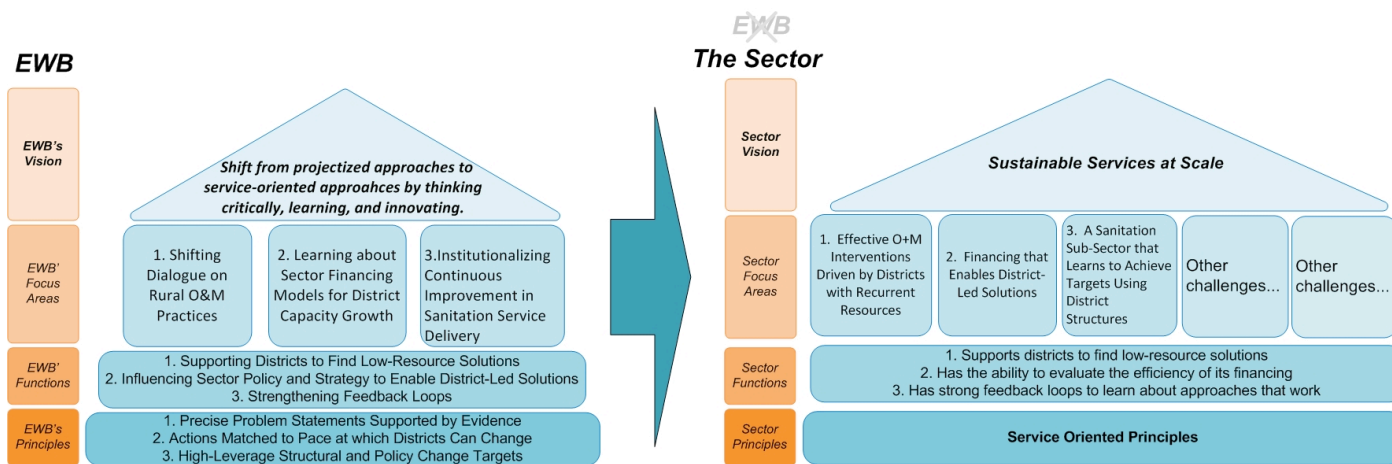
Since 2009, EWB has been publishing the S.H.i.T.S. newsletter, in which national, NGO, and district actors share success stories and challenges. This tool for information sharing has evolved into a knowledge centre, offering examples of how districts have sustained CLTS activities using innovative approaches to scaling with minimal resources. The newsletter has attracted a large readership and prompted unsolicited praise from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Water Development, numerous districts, donors and NGOs. The district response has been most encouraging: in Malawi, districts compete for recognition and therefore take opportunities to publicise their leadership in innovation.

In 2012, the Water and Environmental Sanitation Network (WESNet), a coalition of WASH NGOs that represent civil society at a national level, expressed interest in developing its own newsletter focused on sanitation operations and maintenance and sector financing and solicited EWB's support. By the end of 2012 EWB expects to be co-editing this newsletter with WESNet, eventually handing it over entirely.

5.2. EMBEDDING LEARNING CAPACITY INTO THE SECTOR

In each of its strategic focus areas, EWB attempts to fill a gap that the sector should eventually be able to fill on its own: EWB’s theory of change does not include perpetual investment from the organisation. EWB’s exit strategy is to help Malawi’s institutions—national government, development partners, and the districts themselves—develop the capacity to learn about efficiency, evaluate approaches and effect district-led solutions (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 EWB'S LONG GAME: A VISION FOR THE SECTOR



When progress is made, EWB communicates how principles in the functions performed have been applied. For most organisations in the sector, structural limitations or positioning will make it difficult to perform exactly the same functions. However, believes in its capacity to demonstrate the value of EWB’s principles and help local institutions translate them into their work.

This aspiration is lofty, but EWB anticipates progress within three to four years. Ultimately, the success of any shift in sector thinking will depend on strong leaders within the sector itself who share the same vision and put in the work to realise it. EWB considers it a privilege to be able to work with them.