

Institutional change in the urban WASH sector

A review of theory and practice

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Cover image: JIRAMA staff working in Antananarivo. Credit: Tsilavo Rapiera

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Introduction

This report examines the theory and practice of supporting change processes in urban water and sanitation institutions – a chain of actors that includes local governments, water utilities, and a mix of private and public service providers – to help them reach all urban citizens, including the poorest, with water and sanitation services. The report presents findings from a literature review of institutional change processes in the WASH sector, supplemented by case studies of WSUP’s work and interviews with WSUP staff¹ that explore their personal experiences of participating in institutional change interventions.

Why focus on institutional change?

‘Getting institutions right’ is now central to development policy (Cleaver, 2012; Andrews, 2013; Unsworth, 2015; Merrey et al., 2007); effective institutions are seen as fundamental to poverty reduction, economic growth and good governance. Development agencies are increasingly allocating resources towards institutional reform projects, with the aim of crafting efficient institutions. The World Bank, for example, has significantly increased its investments in this area: while institutional reform interventions featured in less than 1% of its projects before 1980, they represented 65% of all World Bank funded programmes between 2000 and 2010 (Andrews, 2013).

This shift in focus is especially apparent in relation to environmental management and provision of basic services such as water and sanitation, which are increasingly being discussed in relation to governance and institutions, rather than as a technical issue (Sehring, 2009). This focus on institutions has been integral to WSUP’s approach since its inception, through its emphasis on creating long-term partnerships with local service providers to strengthen the delivery of pro-poor WASH services.

What do we mean by institutions?

Institutional economists refer to institutions as ‘the rules of the game in society’, and to organisations as ‘the players’ (North, 1993:5). They argue that institutions have a formal nature (constitutions, rules, regulations, laws, rights, etc.) and an informal nature (sanctions, customs, norms, traditions, etc.). Institutional change interventions therefore aim to influence both these aspects.

In the context of WSUP’s work, the term ‘institutions’ encompasses a chain of actors operating at a national or local level. The term is predominantly applied in reference to ministries, municipalities, regulators, asset holders, and water and sanitation utilities, but can also refer to a mix of private and public service providers such as independent private water operators and community-based organisations.

¹ Current and former WSUP staff working in programme management, project design and delivery, business development, funding, sector finance, research and evaluation in Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique and the United Kingdom.

What do we mean by institutional change?

Within institutional theory, two main schools of thought focus on institutional change in a development context: mainstream institutionalism and critical institutionalism.

Mainstream institutionalism follows the principles of 'development by design'. This approach aims to identify the 'design principles' which structure institutions (Ostrom, 2015; 2005; 1992; McGinnis, 2011). The underlying assumption is that it is possible, through rational planning, to design and implement the 'correct' institutional arrangements (Cleaver, 2012). This model has been very influential for policy-making and has been promoted by international donors due to its practical appeal (Franks and Cleaver, 2009).

Critical approaches to institutional change highlight the limitations of 'development by design' (Andrews, 2013; Unsworth, 2015; Booth, 2012). This emphasises the messy and unpredictable nature of institutional change, which is characterised as a long-term progression driven by a wide range of political, cultural and social factors. Critical institutionalists argue that institutional change does not emerge through planned institutional engineering, but through complex processes whereby individuals, often with limited resources, improvise and innovate to create new institutional arrangements in an adaptive and iterative way. This means that institutional change processes are often difficult to influence, and that institutions are not necessarily amenable to crafting (Cleaver, 2012).



Image: Tertiary network construction in Chamanculo, Maputo.

1. The challenges of achieving institutional change

The literature on institutional change highlights the messy and complex nature of institutional change, and the difficulty of influencing institutional change processes to achieve pre-established policy goals. This was widely validated during interviews with WSUP staff.

Two main challenges were put forward:

1.1 Structural constraints

Structural constraints can take different forms:

1.1.1 Political constraints

Institutions are always nested within wider political and institutional frameworks. As a result, local decision-making at the institutional level always interacts with wider forces of political economy. Conflicts between stakeholders and institutions can become real obstacles to change due to vested interests, power issues and unclear or overlapping mandates.

1.1.2 Cultural and social constraints

The status quo is also difficult to change because institutions are as much governed by informal norms and prevailing institutional cultures as they are by formal rules (Cleaver, 2012). A wide range of culturally and historically determined practices and ideas about how things should be are deeply embedded in the habits and routines of institutions' staff. Examples of cultural and social constraints given by interviewees include:

- **Cultural norms imposing inter-generational and/or hierarchical respect**, which can prevent younger or non-managerial staff from challenging the status quo and expressing new ideas;
- **Complex bureaucratic practices and decision-making processes** that have developed over decades and are deeply embedded within institutions, contributing significantly to slowing down the pace of change;

- **The donor culture which is predominant in some settings**, creating the expectation that pro-poor WASH services are to be funded by external donor agencies rather than central or municipal government internal funds;
- **Prevailing mind-sets and expectations about how the WASH sector should operate**, such as the assumption that owning a toilet is an individual responsibility as opposed to a public health issue that would require involvement from national or local authorities; and the perception that residents of low-income urban areas are difficult to serve and have limited ability to pay, as opposed to a wide and yet unreached customer base that are willing to pay for improved services.

1.1.3 Organisational and managerial constraints

Change is also difficult to implement because of gaps in capacity within institutions. These can include limited technical skills and financial resources, but also in some instances a lack of staff motivation due to poor working conditions and disincentives such as low pay, low level of responsibilities, and a strong hierarchy.



Image: Lusaka Water & Sewerage Co. water kiosk in Linda, Lusaka. **Credit:** Gareth Bentley

1.2 Measuring success

Institutional change is not easy to define. While all stakeholders in the sector subscribe to the theory of institutional change, perceptions of its aims and how they should be achieved can vary greatly. Misalignment over what a successful end-state looks like adds another layer of complexity to institutional change interventions. These different - and sometimes conflicting - perspectives on institutional change can be categorised as follows:

1.2.1 Technical and managerial perspective on institutional change

Institutional change is conceived here as an internal organisational and technical issue, relating to inefficiencies such as poor management and lack of profitability. From that perspective, institutional change is easily measurable against a set of quantitative targets and management and performance indicators. Success is defined mostly through increased operational efficiency and progress towards financial sustainability.

1.2.2 Political economy and/or social perspective on institutional change

This perspective argues that institutional change cannot solely be treated as an internal organisational issue as institutions do not operate in a vacuum - they are dependent on broader political, social and economic external dynamics. Institutional change is therefore seen as primarily a political-economy issue. Often linked to this political-economy approach is a 'social' view concerned with the social impact of change. The implication is that success cannot be measured solely through financial sustainability and operational efficiency; it must be primarily about institutions' ability to deliver their social mandate, and includes a focus on poverty reduction, inequality and the gendered dimension of change.



Image: Water pipeline excavation in Mombasa.

1.2.3 Critical perspective on institutional change

This approach focuses on the process of change rather than its immediate outputs, emphasising questions of legitimacy and ownership of change, especially where international organisations bring in change from outside. From this perspective, institutional change must be inherently endogenous and internally-driven to be sustainable, with external organisations just playing the role of catalysts and supporters. Success is therefore defined through local institutions' ability to implement 'their' change, and to fully own the change process.

2. How can sector professionals respond to these challenges?

Given the challenges inherent to achieving institutional change, a key question is whether WASH sector professionals can influence and facilitate institutional change processes – and if so, in what ways. To answer this question, this section draws on first-hand experience from WSUP country programmes to explore the practices of WASH sector professionals involved in institutional change interventions; and outlines their strategies to drive change. These strategies tend to rely on four overarching principles for influencing the change process:

1. Possess or acquire a **deep understanding of the local political context** and power dynamics;
2. Build **strong partnerships** with institutions;
3. Ensure **full buy-in from institutions** when implementing change;
4. Recognise that institutional change is a long-term process, and that **plans for change need to be realistic, phased, and flexible**.

2.1 A nuanced understanding of the local political context is critical to drive change

In-depth knowledge of the local political context is fundamental to supporting institutional change. This is true on two levels: at the level of an institution's external environment, i.e. the wider political context; and on an internal level, i.e. the politics and power dynamics within an institution.

2.1.1 The external environment: understanding the wider political context

Awareness of the wider political context is critical for two reasons. First, it can help WASH sector professionals better understand and overcome some of the political-economy challenges they face. For example, in Maputo, the sanitation sector was characterised by strong political tensions and disputes between service providers

over responsibilities and mandates (see Case Study on p9). These grew to become a real blockage to collaboration and change. By being aware of these tensions, and by understanding their underlying causes, WSUP was able to act as a mediator and to re-open lines of communications between these institutions. By establishing common learning events and a forum in which key institutional stakeholders could engage, WSUP provided a much-needed opportunity to re-connect, negotiate and discuss ways forward.

Secondly, while politics can be a challenge, it can also present opportunities. Change is very often politically motivated, and sector professionals must recognise opportunities when they emerge. In Maputo for example, municipal elections provided an opportunity to encourage the Mayor to increase municipal funding allocations towards sanitation in low-income areas, as it brought him visibility and appreciation from low-income communities prior to the election. Many WSUP members of staff interviewed recognised this type of political incentive as a contributing factor of change - a way of *"pushing political leaders' buttons"*.

2.1.2 The internal environment: understanding power dynamics within institutions

Understanding internal power dynamics within institutions is vital as historical arrangements, informal rules and relationships mean that effective decision-making power do not necessarily lie in the hands of official decision-makers. Understanding these informal dynamics and where power really lies is key to working with the right people – those who can effectively drive change.

Internal power dynamics can act as obstacles to change. For example, power dynamics and rigid hierarchies within institutions often mean that field staff struggle to voice the issues they face on the ground to management, resulting in uninformed managerial decisions. To overcome this, WSUP staff will often ensure that they work

NAVIGATING POWER DYNAMICS: Introducing a pro-poor sanitation tariff in Maputo

In Maputo, Mozambique, WSUP has been supporting the regulator (CRA) to establish and implement a sanitation tax since 2014. The sanitation tax would take the form of a tariff set at a rate of 10% of customers' water bills. The revenue collected through the tariff would be spent on improving sanitation.

Sector stakeholders, from the Municipal Council of Maputo, CRA, development agencies and implementing organisations, agreed on the benefits of the tax but opinion differed on how it should be implemented and what it should achieve. On the one hand, some advocated for the tax to be 'social' or redistributive – a mechanism through which high- and medium-income residents and businesses subsidise the costs of sanitation improvements for low-income communities. On the other hand, other stakeholders within the local institutions wanted it to be a basic cost recovery mechanism applied on a city-wide scale, aimed primarily at increasing internal revenue and improving the overall financial sustainability of the service provider, without necessarily including a pro-poor orientation.

After the structure and detail of the tariff was finalised, its implementation was delayed due to political factors. Presidential and municipal elections meant political leaders were reluctant to introduce a potentially unpopular tax increase. Differences of opinion between CRA and the municipal government over who would have the mandate to collect and manage this new revenue stream also became a blockage.

In 2014, CRA and the Municipal Council designed a proposal for a Transitional Regulatory Framework for the organisation of sanitation service delivery, which would include the final definition of the rate to be paid under the sanitation tariff. In January 2018, the Council signed a contract with FIPAG, the asset holder for the city's utility, for the implementation of the sanitation tariff in Maputo. When the sanitation tariff is eventually implemented, it is likely that it will be charged to three groups of water supply service customers: domestic customers consuming more than 5m³ of water per month; commercial customers, both public and municipal; and industrial customers. Customers currently charged the lower water 'social tariff' will be exempt, as will customers using 5m³ of water or less per month, or customers served by communal taps.

This illustrated that negotiations between stakeholders over the nature of change are central to the process of institutional reform, particularly when views diverge.

alongside staff operating at different levels within the institutions – with management and political leaders, but also with field and technical staff. This enables them to stay informed of the challenges and to act as a link between different hierarchical levels within the institution. By doing so, they can represent the issues of field staff and expose political leaders to the realities on the ground, thereby encouraging a move towards more informed decision-making.

2.2 Building strong partnerships with institutions is key to driving change

All WSUP staff interviewed for this report argued that building strong partnerships with institutions is key to driving change. This has been at the core of WSUP's approach from its inception. In each of WSUP's countries of operation, long-term relationships with institutions have been developed, and are leveraged to support

and drive the change process. The WSUP interviewees revealed that partnership-building with institutions is a long-term process, in which both formal and informal relationships play a role. In the case of WSUP, partnerships have tended to grow organically through the years, as WSUP staff utilised emerging opportunities and existing networks. While approaches to partnership and relationship-building differ for each of the WSUP programme countries, a pattern still emerges as explored below:

2.2.1 The WSUP journey for partnership-building with institutions

Step 1: Establish first formal contact through a funding agreement

First contact is established through providing the institution with a funding opportunity, leading to a formal partnership agreement for the implementation of a pilot or small-scale project, designed in collaboration with the institution. Capacity development and technical assistance

are usually central to the project. WSUP staff start building relationships within the institution and demonstrating the value of the partnership and of WSUP's expertise.

Step 2: Build a relationship of trust

Over time, WSUP identifies political leaders and/or key decision makers within institutions who can act as sector champions – those with the will and capacity to drive change – and seeks opportunities to engage with them. The formal connections initially established with these stakeholders evolve over time into informal relationships of friendship and trust, as WSUP staff support their journey. WSUP becomes a valued key stakeholder for its technical expertise and ability to understand challenges faced by service providers.

Step 3: Embed a position of influence

Relying on a limited number of trusted individuals to drive change is a risk, given institutional turnover amid short-term political cycles. As the relationship with the institution grows, WSUP staff reach out to a wider range of individuals – in particular, technocrats who have experience, know-how and more stable positions – with the aim of institutionalising WSUP's position of influence and mitigating the risk of change in political leadership.

Step 4: Enter a negotiation dynamic to influence change

At this stage, WSUP's advice and opinions are valued by the institution at different levels, regardless of whether a formal funding partnership is in place. At this point, the relationship has evolved from a transactional donor-recipient relationship into one of trust and

BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP: Establishing a Low-Income Customer Service Department in Mombasa, Kenya

WSUP has developed a close working relationship with Mombasa's water service provider, Mombasa Water Supply and Sanitation Company (MOWASSCO) since establishing a permanent presence in the city in 2013. WSUP signed a funding agreement with MOWASSCO under the Mombasa Water Operators Partnership, where WSUP led efforts to improve water and sanitation services delivery to low-income areas (LIAs). Members of staff from WSUP were based within different offices of MOWASSCO, alongside top- and mid-level management. This provided an opportunity to learn about the utility and to better understand its internal politics and the political context within the County Government of Mombasa, the owner of MOWASSCO.

As pro-poor service delivery was a new concept to MOWASSCO, WSUP staff identified 'change agents' from senior and middle management to drive institutional change, with WSUP taking a supporting role. The champions attended a pro-poor master class on LIA service delivery models with utility managers and regional government representatives from Kenya and across Africa and Asia. Representatives from the MOWASSCO Board of Directors, management and junior staff went on learning visits to national and regional utilities with pro-poor functions.

Subsequent meetings and discussions with various levels of staff within MOWASSCO led to a formal assessment of MOWASSCO's pro-poor capacity. The Assessment was conducted with County Government staff, the MOWASSCO Board and within the utility, from senior management to junior staff. The Assessment was led by staff from each respective professional level. The open and intense engagement with key stakeholders increased their understanding of the concept of pro-poor service delivery and secured their buy-in.

MOWASSCO became more willing to undertake significant institutional reform in order to improve water service delivery to poorer residents of Mombasa. This was partly due to the relationship with WSUP and their trust in WSUP's expertise and intentions. Close working relationships with key MOWASSCO staff, including the Managing Director, ensured that management at all levels of the utility were supportive of establishing a new unit specifically for low-income customers.

The Low-Income Customer Services Department (LICSD) was set up in 2014 and is now regarded as an authority on the social dimensions of extending services to low-income areas of Mombasa by other departments within the utility. The LICSD has so far been responsible for a shift towards household connections rather than water kiosks and the development of a social connection policy with phased payment.

open collaboration. It therefore becomes increasingly possible to influence the change process by finding an agreement or ‘making a deal’ with the institution over what change should look like. This can involve negotiating an increase in the levels of internal funds an institution allocates to pro-poor WASH; incentivising and supporting institutions to make operational changes (WSUP, March 2015); or setting pro-poor targets and KPIs (WSUP, July 2018).

There is evidence of such dynamics between WSUP and local institutions across many of WSUP’s countries of intervention, with varied levels of engagement depending on the maturity of the partnerships. A good example of a successful partnership-building journey is in Mombasa, the second-largest city in Kenya, where the official water and sanitation service provider underwent a process of internal change to orient its services towards lower income consumers (see Case Study, p10).

2.3 Change requires full buy-in from institutions

“We will not achieve anything worthwhile if we try to undertake something without the complete buy-in and partnership in the institutions”.

A key message throughout the interviews is that change can only be effective and sustainable if it is undertaken with full institutional buy-in. All new arrangements have to be fully accepted and validated by staff if they are to be legitimised and institutionalised (Cleaver, 2012). According to the interviewees, there are three main aspects to achieving institutional buy-in:

2.3.1 Change must be endogenous

To be sustainable, the drive for change must emerge from within, as opposed to being imposed from outside. All interviewees highlighted that external organisations which pushed agendas and imposed reforms onto institutions in a top-down manner generally failed to generate long-term change. Similarly, NGOs that demand pro-poor service provision without fully understanding the challenges service providers face are unlikely to achieve their desired impact. Change will come if the needs that institutions have themselves identified and prioritised are responded to.

WSUP staff therefore strive to position themselves as trusted partners who try to understand the issues and provide support wherever the institution’s staff thinks it is most needed, rather than as outsiders coming in with ready-made solutions. An illustration of this is in Ghana, where a WSUP staff member was given a desk within a Municipal Assembly – thereby being recognised and acting as a department within the Municipality, as opposed to an outside agency. This enabled them to work in full partnership with Municipality staff.

2.3.2 The change process must be fully owned by institutions

If change is to be sustained, the process itself is key: institutions must direct the process and implement new arrangements themselves. As stated by one interviewee – “*it has to be ‘their’ change*”. WSUP staff highlighted the importance of ensuring institutions’ staff are engaged and take the lead at each step of the decision-making and implementation process (for example, with regards to procurement, defining the scope of work, writing terms of reference, etc). Institutional staff should act as project leads, with external organisations such as WSUP acting as facilitators, providing capacity building and expertise where required.

2.3.3 Change must be socially acceptable if it is to be legitimised

Finally, while trying to influence change, sector professionals must be aware of prevailing social norms and procedures, and to communicate with an institution’s staff appropriately. Interviewees emphasised the importance of handling communication sensitively; of being aware of and showing deference to management, hierarchy and senior staff; and of following procedures and demonstrating respect for chain of commands. New arrangements need to be perceived as socially suitable and must align with the ‘right’ way of doing things if they are to be accepted and legitimised (Cleaver, 2012:45). Influencing therefore requires a deep understanding of the styles of thinking, of the social norms, and of sanctioned roles and relationships within institutions.

2.4 Institutional change is a long-term process; plans for change must be realistic, phased and flexible

Institutional change is a long and complex process that cannot be initiated and completed within a two or three-year project timeframe. Institutions often lack budget and capacity, and face barriers to change that are often beyond their control. Moreover, in institutions such as water service providers or utilities, the task can be huge – change needs to take place at all levels and impact all institutional business functions.

Given these challenges, the strategy used by the interviewed WSUP staff is one of pragmatism. Rather than designing hugely ambitious targets from the outset, their preference is to break issues down into specific components and approach them step-by-step. If plans for change are to be effective, they must be:

- **Realistic:** plans must account for the resources and capacity available to the institution;
- **Phased:** while there are a wide range of issues to cover, there are generally some immediate priorities that can be addressed on a short-term basis which can be addressed before moving on to other areas;
- **Flexible:** the strategy in place must be a living strategy which can be amended as the situation, dynamics, and financing situation changes.

In line with the above, WSUP typically begins by identifying priority areas (in close collaboration with the institution) and areas that can be addressed on a short-term basis given the finance and resources available. The following step is to work with the institution to develop a phased plan to address these issues; and finally, to support the institution to implement this plan, while being willing to adapt if required (see Case Study below).

MAINTAINING FLEXIBILITY: Reducing water wastage and institutionalising pro-poor service delivery in Antananarivo, Madagascar

WSUP's relationship with Madagascar's national utility (JIRAMA) was formalised in 2010 through a Professional Services Agreement. This Agreement was the foundation of a dynamic relationship through which WSUP has pursued its organisational aim – to improve service delivery to poor urban residents – through phases that align with the utility's priorities.

For example, a major strategic aim of JIRAMA is to reduce rates of non-revenue water in Tana; WSUP has been working with JIRAMA on NRW since 2009 (WSUP, January 2017). Following the introduction of District Metered Areas and associated activities that successfully reduced NRW, WSUP were able to leverage the city's increased water supply to persuade JIRAMA to commit to improving service delivery for the poorest. JIRAMA now aim to increase the number of poor people served, increase investment in network expansion in underserved areas, increase the hours per day of water accessible to poor consumers, and reduce the distances to water kiosks. Supporting NRW reduction therefore led to effective policy influence on pro-poor service delivery on a much wider scale.

The cost of repairing leaking pipes remains daunting, despite the long-term benefits that a properly maintained network brings, and so JIRAMA has moved towards reducing commercial losses which has a clearer short-term cost benefit. This has raised much needed revenue; however, the number of leaks repaired per year has been steadily decreasing from a high of more than 1,800 in 2016, with water savings declining commensurately. WSUP's aim is to support JIRAMA in addressing commercial losses while continuing to support NRW reduction, but with an increased focus now to support JIRAMA in securing more long-term systemic change to directly address intermittent water supply and move towards 24-hour supply across Tana.

Conclusion

Institutional change is messy and complex – it is a long-term process influenced by political, cultural and social factors, and led by many inter-dependent stakeholders with diverging views. Within this context, it is not surprising that top-down, short-term planned interventions, as conceived through the ‘development by design approach’, do not work. Overcoming the structural constraints that hinder change is difficult, and all WSUP staff interviewed acknowledged the challenge of driving institutional change to achieve pre-established policy goals.

Despite this challenging environment, WSUP staff have developed a set of practices and strategies aimed at supporting and facilitating the change process. Their strategies tend to rely on four overarching principles for influencing the institutional change process:

1. Possess or acquire a deep understanding of the local political context and power dynamics;
2. Build strong partnerships with institutions;
3. Ensure full buy-in from institutions when implementing change;
4. Recognise that institutional change is a long-term process, and that plans for change need to be realistic, phased, and flexible.

While institutional change is undeniably hindered by structural constraints, there are still opportunities for WASH sector professionals to influence institutional outcomes. This is generally achieved through a phased and iterative process, involving long-term collaboration with institutions and constant negotiation between stakeholders. Such an approach is vital to ensuring new institutional arrangements are established and sustained over time.



Image: Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company water dispenser. Credit: Brian Otieno

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