

Coordination of NTD and WASH activities for NTD control: lessons learned from Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya

WASH & NTD coordination is crucial in reducing the burden of NTDs

Globally, more than 1 billion people are affected by neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). Besides mass drug administration (MDA), water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions are crucial for the control and elimination of many NTDs. Access to WASH is an important determinant for NTD infection. To ensure that WASH interventions are targeted in the right areas where NTDs are endemic, coordination of activities between the WASH and NTD sectors is crucial.

In 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued the first Global Strategy and action plan for WASH and NTDs, encouraging new ways to partner and invest across programmes in support of the WHO 2012 NTD roadmap goals. In 2021, the second strategy was published, which has four objectives:

- 1) Increase awareness of the co-benefits of joint WASH and NTD action
- 2) Use WASH data in NTD programmes and NTD data in WASH programmes
- 3) Strengthen evidence and establish best practices on integrated approaches
- 4) Jointly plan, deliver and evaluate programmes to enhance accountability, sustainability and equity of programme impact.

An important instrument to reach these objectives is the development of a national framework for the WASH and NTD sectors. Such a framework brings together stakeholders from both sectors and provides a structure for the joint planning, implementation and monitoring of activities. Coordination of activities between the WASH and NTD sectors is often lacking in most NTD-endemic countries. In several countries, some coordination aspects have been put in place (such as technical working groups or mutual participation in each other's meetings). However, in practice, coordination and collaboration remains weak or irregular, and at times project-dependent. This is a missed opportunity as coordination can save resources, create synergies, and is an effective way towards NTD control.

Ascend's support for WASH and NTD coordination

Ascend provides technical assistance and funding for the coordination of WASH and NTD activities. Between October 2020 and January 2021, Ascend organised a WASH-NTD learning and exchange series with participants from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Uganda, Zambia.

During five online workshops, participants from the WASH and NTD sector from different countries shared experiences in terms of setting a common vision, building partnerships, analysing the situation, planning and programme design, and monitoring and evaluation. The workshops were facilitated by Ascend staff, members of the NTD NGO Network (NNN), WASH working group, and the WHO, and were based on 'WASH and Health working together - A how-to guide for neglected tropical disease programmes' developed by the NNN WASH working group and the WHO. In addition, the Ascend program provides technical assistance and support to specific countries for the implementation of coordination activities, such as the development of a national framework.

Understanding the WASH and NTD coordination in different contexts

Although partnership between the WASH and NTD sectors has been strongly encouraged, the level of coordination between the two sectors is different. **This learning brief explores experiences from three countries: Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya on successes and challenges from implementation of WASH NTD coordination.** The three countries were chosen as they are at different stage of implementation with Ethiopia being a frontrunner in this process. **Understanding common challenges and perceptions of added value will inform Ascend and other partners about the ways to strengthen WASH and NTD coordination for NTD control.**

Key data used

- *Observations and notes from Ascend WASH-NTD learning & exchange series with participants from 10 countries*
- *Desk review of country documentation and international guidelines and tools for coordination*
- *In depth interviews with 13 people in Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya working for government NTD and WASH programs, WHO and WASH and NTD NGOs*

What was achieved?

Ethiopia is a frontrunner in the coordination of WASH and NTD activities and has prior to Ascend developed and published a national intersectoral coordination framework, conducted a landscape analysis, and developed a district (Woreda) toolkit in March 2019. The country has a federal government system and with the support of partners (including Ascend) coordination has been cascaded down to the regional, zone and district (Woreda) level through advocacy during national and regional workshops and the setup of WASH and NTD task forces and TWGs. In 2019, the toolkit was piloted in 5 zones and 99 districts. In 2020, with the support of Ascend, high-level events were organized to launch coordination in all regions.

In **Uganda**, discussions about how WASH contributed to Trachoma had already been ongoing for quite some time. In December 2019, the Ascend programme supported the implementation of the international WASH and NTD collaboration toolkit and the development of a national framework. A series of meetings was held with the NTD secretariat to advocate for WASH-NTD coordination. A strong component of the work was the development of a decision matrix to prioritize areas for WASH interventions. The WASH-NTD focal point visited ten regions and collected data on NTD endemicity and community access to WASH through a participatory process with stakeholders.

In **Kenya**, the MoH started the coordination of WASH and NTD activities with the support of Sightsavers. The MoH through the WASH hub discussed how face washing messages could be integrated with handwashing messages in order to prevent Trachoma. In July 2019, the first TWG meeting was held with representatives of the MoH, Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Environmental Health (including the WASH hub), Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Water and Sanitation (WEESCORD) and WASH partners. As a next step, a WASH manual was developed for WASH partners to understand NTDs and the link with WASH. Thereafter, the MoH through the Division of Vector Borne and Neglected Tropical Diseases developed the 'The Kenya national breaking transmission strategy 2019-2023'. While the strategy and TWGs provide good guidance, respondents see the need to develop a national framework as a next step. This will help to define a common vision and objectives among actors and can provide a clear division of roles and responsibilities. Ascend supports the continuation and scaling up of these activities, including the development of a national framework.

What do country actors see as the added value of coordination?

In all three countries respondents have clearly felt the added value of coordination between the WASH and NTD sectors.

Coordination is **more efficient** as resources can be shared, the duplication of efforts reduced, and synergies created. For example, in **Ethiopia**, when WASH campaigns are planned alongside mass drug administration (MDA) campaigns, human resources can be shared, and the community is approached with a coordinated voice for both drug- and WASH-related messages.

Coordination is more **sustainable** as collaboration helps to “sustain the gains made” in NTD control. As most NTDs are infectious, there is a risk of increased infections and losing ground if access to safe water is not ensured.

“If we look at things like Trachoma, Sischto and the rest. I think there is a huge need to look at water safety and access, what are the issues around people utilizing the water and use so it is not only about having the water there, but is it clean, is it safe?. If we remove WASH we will not sustain the gains made, we will basically be going back to the drawing board because if people are continuing to use unsafe water contaminated water we will not sustain the gains met in NTD elimination and that is one of the key things why we should continue of having these two [NTD and WASH sector] having connected or interrelated.” – Respondent, Kenya

Coordination provides a way to work together towards a **common goal**, such as poverty alleviation. This is ultimately the aim of both the NTD and WASH sectors. Compared to other diseases, NTDs may also be more directly related to poverty as the socio-economic impact can be major, such as blindness related to trachoma. Coordination of activities makes it possible to assess together the potential co-benefits of each other’s actions on poverty alleviation.

“NTD and WASH objectives really share a lot of things in common. NTD talks about elimination, disease control eradication and the WASH objectives talk about access safety etc. So the commonality is sustainability, health, shared prosperity and equity, so it is obvious the integration of the two is very important for sustainability.” – Respondent, Ethiopia

Coordination contributes to **data and knowledge sharing** as well as **improved data quality**. In **Uganda**, coordination helped to build trust among ministry staff. People used to be reluctant when it came to sharing data, but this has become easier. Both sectors also share knowledge and learn from each other. WASH professionals learn how NTD infection links to WASH, where the NTD hotspot areas are, and how WASH interventions can be designed to target those areas accordingly. In **Uganda**, joint field trips with representatives from both sectors were organized to jointly look at the WASH-NTD situation at the community level and share knowledge and experiences.

“Before, each ministry or each department would feel when you ask for some information that you are competing with them. That you will use their information to gain from it, either for funding or you would look for challenges in their work and use it for your own advantage. But since we encouraged to collaborate with us, they easily give the information as they don’t look at you as competitor but as a partner that you are working with.” – Respondent, Uganda

What factors contributed to coordination?

In all three countries participants were in agreement about factors that facilitated WASH NTD coordination.

Political leadership was often mentioned as a key enabler for success. Attention paid by Ministers on international days such as World Water Day and World NTD Day helped create momentum for the coordination of WASH and NTD activities. It is also important that meetings are opened or chaired by high-level government officials. For example, in **Ethiopia**, the State Minister led the national high-level meeting on WASH and NTDs as well as regional WASH and NTD conferences involving government and NGO partners. In **Uganda**, meetings were co-chaired, so that the MoH chaired the morning session, the Ministry of Water and Environment the afternoon session, and the Ministry of Education and Sports the evening session. Furthermore, the government made a clear statement that sectors need to work together on so-called 'program-based planning' which was almost perceived as government policy. This made people understand the need to reduce vertical approaches and to work together across sectors. Joint field trips with representatives of both sectors, including high-level staff, were also organized to kick start coordination and create momentum. In **Kenya**, strong political commitment was seen during the Guinea worm campaign. Political leaders wanted to declare Kenya free from Guinea worm, and realized there is need to coordinate activities between the Water and Health sectors.

“What we don’t need is that kind of low level engagement. We really need high-level, something that is given priority by the Minister of Health, so we can reach out to the Minister of Water, the Minister of Education and any other agency. Once it has gained traction from higher level, then at the lower levels we are going to see the fruits.” – Respondent, Kenya

The presence of technical expertise and capacity was important to support countries in their process towards coordination. In **Uganda**, the capacity of the WASH NTD focal point was crucial to keep the coordination ongoing and sustain momentum. The person took leadership and spent a significant time building relationships with both WASH and NTD stakeholders at the decentralized level by developing data for the decision matrix to prioritize areas for intervention. Furthermore, the technical support provided by Ascend was highly appreciated as it helped to develop a national framework. In **Kenya**, capacity in terms of coordination between multiple sectors was already strong in the WASH and NTD sector, so the coordination efforts were not starting from zero.

“We got support from Ascend’s technical experts, which really helped us. During the workshops it helped us to come up with a national framework, they filled in the gaps needed to complete the document. Even in developing the data collection tools, she [an Ascend technical expert] supported us. Even when we had challenges in the field she was there. – Respondent Uganda

Funds for coordination made available by Ascend was instrumental to foster coordination activities. While in **Uganda** and **Kenya**, there had been efforts before to coordinate activities, it was often a challenge to continue without specific funding for coordination activities. Funding for NTD programs is perceived to be quite restrictive. Funding is often restricted to NTD related activities and cannot be used to involve other sectors. The Ascend grant had dedicated funds for coordination with the WASH sector. This made it possible for people to speak to each other and take coordinated action.

“Then of course the issue of funding. You realize that collaboration and coordination efforts are rarely funded. Because everyone sits back and says, okay, we are going to collaborate, but who picks up the bill? And to get them to

pick up the bill, you need sufficient advocacy, which also takes resources. So I appreciate that Ascend came in to help in the coordination effort.”
 –Respondent, Uganda

Participatory approaches for data collection was instrumental in **Uganda** to strengthen partnerships and the commitment of stakeholders. A lot of effort was made by the WASH-NTD focal point and colleagues to collect data for a decision matrix showing NTD endemicity and the WASH access situation at the decentralized level. Visiting the different areas, the creation of WhatsApp groups, and the collection and discussion of data with stakeholders in various meetings, has created a lot of trust and ownership of the need for WASH-NTD coordination. In the past, information sharing was more difficult, but people came to see each other as partners rather than competitors. Engineers from the WASH sector at the regional level also championed data collection in their district and were perceived as an enabling factor. As a next step, **Uganda** wants to make the planning process more participatory by involving the community in the planning process. It is important to bring them onboard as they need to own the decisions if the chances of sustaining WASH activities are to be increased.

“With participatory approaches you get a deeper understanding of the problem. When it is not participatory people do not understand the magnitude of problem and the need to integrate. Participatory means bringing people from different Ministries and going on ground and be able to move together, not one ministry that is working and others coming to the workshop and informing the others what they are doing. All of them come on board, analyse the whole situation, where are the problems?, what are possible solutions? and how best can we move forward? They all appreciate the whole process and feel part of it ”
 – Respondent, Uganda

The **COVID-19 pandemic** also helped to increase handwashing practices in **Uganda**. The water sector increased handwashing points and related communication, and this has pushed the health and water sector to work more closely together.

What are the common challenges faced?

It is difficult to sustain the participation of stakeholders for collaboration in the long term. In **Kenya**, important WASH stakeholders do not always join meetings of the technical working group. A reason may be that the added value of coordination is unclear to WASH stakeholders, that other priorities are more important and the lack of a jointly developed coordination framework that is owned by both the WASH and NTD sectors. In all countries, both the NTD and WASH sectors also deal with other issues than the coordination of their activities and may not prioritize this. A lack of commitment for coordination can also be explained by the fact that verticalization is challenged and stakeholders fear the loss of resources, benefits, credits and power. In the situation of verticalization all the funds, benefits and credits go to one Ministry, while in a horizontal approach this needs to be shared with other sectors. In **Uganda**, it was reported that some MoH staff claimed ‘diseases are our thing’. A paradigm shift is needed where the MoH realises that it is not only important player to address diseases and that other sectors can contribute to this.

A technical working group is just a body for technical advice and to review progress. But we really need to have a guide, we cannot say we are complete without a guide. If I can take an example of Christian preacher, they are not complete without a bible. So we need a bible, this national framework is what is then supposed to be our bible. It will be very useful in assisting us in doing what we supposed to do. It will also be a key document in targeting, because it will show us what specific places are we facing challenges” – Respondent, Kenya

Resource mobilization for interventions among government and development partners is a challenge. In **Ethiopia**, several workshops have been organized to persuade international partners to allocate funding for WASH and NTD interventions. Most partners promised to allocate human and financial resources in their annual activity plans and promote coordination between NTDs and WASH in their international networks. Similar meetings are done at the regional level. In **Kenya**, a need was identified to build capacity of health and WASH stakeholders at the national and county levels to understand the process of resource allocation and the need to include activities in the county's integrated development plans.

"We need to build capacity of the Health and WASH sector both at national and county level, so they get to understand the process of resource allocation. Because in Kenya one of the things that I noticed is that investments are based on plans or either presidential decrees. If something is not in the plan it is very difficult for governments to invest in and so how do you get these things into the government plans. At county level, WASH and NTD technical forums will then be used as 'advocacy wings' to ensure that all issues for which we need resources are raised in the county integrated development plans. " – Respondent, Kenya

High staff turnover was seen in all countries. In **Ethiopia**, during the implementation of the WASH-NTD toolkit at the district level, some districts were not well aware of the toolkit due to staff turnover. They did not understand the problems and challenges for interventions. Continuous refresher training, supervision and coaching are needed. To keep staff in coordination positions at the decentralized rural areas, government needs to organize retention mechanisms (with incentives such as housing and cars) was suggested. In this way, people don't lose the experience and expertise of a particular region.

The lack of availability and quality of data make good programming challenging. In **Ethiopia**, worries were shared about the reliability and completeness of the data regarding WASH coverage which is needed to select interventions and priority areas. In Uganda, issues regarding the quality of standards were reported as it is unclear what the standards are to adhere to. There is a difference between what is practical versus what is recommended. Not all professionals seem to pay attention to what the standards should be. Guidelines that apply to schools, e.g. regarding the use of latrines, do not apply to clinics.

"We are currently in the process of ensuring that we have data. Because with data you can do a lot of things, data informs, data can be used for advocacy, data can be used for everything. So one of the challenge that we really faced is lack of data that can really inform us about is the situation on the ground, what can we do about the situation. So data for me should be given priority if we have to move forward." – Respondent, Kenya

COVID-19 pandemic affected NTD control. In **Ethiopia**, at the district level, COVID-19 got more attention as this was an emergency issue. This received more priority than NTD control as the outcomes are seen immediately. This hampered the full cascading of the toolkit down to the district level. More advocacy and capacity building at that level is still needed. In all countries, it was a challenge to bring people together in meetings due to the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, in all countries, NTD staff were diverted to work on COVID-19 response activities, hampering progress in NTD and WASH coordination activities.

Ways forward

Several recommendations can be made to strengthen WASH and NTD coordination. Depending on the stage of the coordination, these recommendations can be relevant for different countries. In the near future, the Ascend programme should continue to support country actors with the implementation of coordination activities, but also keep an exit strategy for the programme in mind.

- **Embed coordination in national policy and governance structures.** This is needed to develop a joint vision, joint planning, joint funding and joint governance arrangements, including accountability frameworks for implementation of activities. **Ascend** could further support country ministries in the development and implementation of national frameworks. This process should not be rushed as ownership of the health and WASH sector is important to ensure that implementation is sustained after the Ascend program.
- **Strengthen sub-national-level coordination.** While coordination usually starts at the national level, the decentralized level is also very important. This coordination should also be embedded in local policy and governance systems, and close follow-up, supervision and capacity building of local stakeholders is needed to sustain coordination processes. **Ascend** can support country actors in their advocacy and capacity building efforts at the decentralized level.
- **Ensure continuous funding for coordination activities.** The way programs are funded can make or break NTD control. If no budget is available for coordination and engagement is not allowed with other sectors NTDs will likely not be controlled. Funding should be available for coordination activities (such as meetings) and staff positions for coordination should be created. Furthermore, any coordination tasks should be made explicit in staff job descriptions. **Ascend** can support country actors to ensure that coordination is part of (government) budget lines and human resource systems.
- **Work on continuous advocacy and building of trust among key stakeholders** including budget holders by showing mutual benefit and the added value of coordination. **Ascend** could support country actors in organizing high-level events to get the commitment of high-level political leaders as this seems a crucial barrier for coordination.
- **Strengthen data for decision-making processes.** To inform NTD-WASH programmes, high-quality data on the NTD endemicity and coverage of WASH interventions is important. **Ascend** could further support governments at the decentralized level to collect data, and develop decision-making matrixes to prioritize NTD hotspot areas for WASH interventions.

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