

Influencing change: ministers gather in Indonesia to address water and sanitation



Recently built toilet in Dien Bien, Viet Nam
Photo Credit: Juliet Willetts

by Juliet Willetts

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Multistakeholder action is a central tenet of the Sustainable Development Goals, embodied in SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals. It recognises that governments alone won't solve the complex development issues we face; there is a role to be played by civil society, private sector, international agencies and research institutions that is grounded in their effective collaboration and mutual accountability.

Global partnerships such as [Sanitation and Water for All \(SWA\)](#) have taken this idea as their central purpose, seeking to use multistakeholder action to increase political prioritisation, boost financing, and build better governance structures and institutions to achieve SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

This week the [2022 SWA Sector Ministers' Meeting](#), hosted by the Government of Indonesia, is taking place in Jakarta. Building on previous SWA High-Level Meetings, this session will focus on linkages between sectors. The aim is to increase financing and ensure that water and sanitation services are integrated into national climate, health, and economic policies and strategies. The meeting – which will be attended by some 70 ministers from across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific – has been organised for maximum impact. Months-long preparatory processes in relevant countries precede the meeting and the agenda includes follow-up actions to secure gains made.

The sector urgently needs this concerted push for greater investment. Progress against the more ambitious targets of the SDGs – to ensure drinking water is safe, on premises and available when needed, and that sanitation includes not just a toilet but a system to safely manage the waste – is slow. Asia and the Pacific are no exception. Countries such as Cambodia and Laos have as low as 28% and 18% [access to safely managed drinking water](#), and in Papua New Guinea access to the lower service standard of 'basic' access sits at 45%. A recent [webinar](#) held by the

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Department of Foreign Affairs and Trading (DFAT)'s Water for Women Fund and [associated case studies](#) also highlighted the absence of monitoring systems to report on this new higher service standard. Our own recent research shows some 760 million households in Asia and the Pacific [rely on self-supplied water services](#), and often with [compromised water quality](#) and little or no regulatory oversight. So much more needs to be done.

A key approach embedded in the SWA partnership is mutual accountability. It's based on a premise that progress in access to services can be made by facilitating different stakeholder groups to hold one another to account. Recent research led by University of Technology Sydney with the SWA Research and Learning Constituency examined the ways in which other [global partnerships support mutual accountability](#). Our findings offered lessons that SWA is actively expanding upon, including careful management of global-national dynamics, equalising power relations and co-designing mutual accountability processes at national level.

A [six-country collaborative study](#) by SWA Research and Learning partners also revealed functional multistakeholder platforms to be an [important precondition](#). Many achievements have already been made, and SWA's inaugural [report on the mutual accountability mechanism](#) shares multiple stories that offer inspiration: in Bangladesh the mechanism has led to increased funding, in Lao to increased alignment of multiple actor's work to government-led commitments.

One challenge faced in establishing mutual accountability processes is bringing 'external support agencies', a key SWA constituency, on board. In Australia, for example, DFAT is a member of the SWA partnership, but has not yet made commitments as part of the mutual accountability mechanism. In contrast [other donors such as USAID and FCDO in the UK](#) have made such commitments. And yet, the Australian Government is making significant, well-respected investments in the water sector such as the [Water for Women Fund](#) – that champions a focus on gender equality and inclusion in Asia and the Pacific reaching some three million people – and the wider [Australian Water Partnership](#). Perhaps a next step can be to formalise commitment within the partnership to these kinds of contributions into the future.

And turning the mirror on ourselves in the 'research and learning constituency' – we also remain a constituency that is behind in making commitments and clarifying how research organisations will support governments and other stakeholders to achieve progress. But bit by bit we are finding our feet and our role in the partnership. Formerly either absent or relatively silent, the constituency is gradually increasing membership of local research institutions and establishing a clearer purpose.

Conducting joint research or evidence synthesis has been an important pathway to enable collaboration, voice and collective action within our constituency. For example, we previously developed a [global water and sanitation research agenda](#) and conducted the above-mentioned study on mutual accountability. Right now, the constituency is conducting research in several countries including Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal on ways to improve multistakeholder engagement. In Indonesia this work – led by the [Centre for Regulation, Policy and Governance](#) and [Jejaring AMPL](#) – has had significant impact, mobilising more than 290 researchers in a recent webinar on water and sanitation research, and collaboratively working with other stakeholders on a new Mutual Accountability Forum that can serve as a national platform.

As a constituency ahead of the SMM, we have also jointly produced a [briefing paper](#) on climate change, water, sanitation and hygiene and resilience. Our intention is to make accessible the most recent evidence on how climate change is impacting water and sanitation services, and the kinds of changes needed to implement effective adaptation responses. The paper also makes arguments for multi-sectoral action underpinning this SMM's theme. During the meeting we will talk to and share the contents of this paper, whether in ministerial dialogues, over morning tea or in the corridors, and it has already been circulated widely.

It is easy to be sceptical about yet another meeting, but I believe the meeting this week can mobilise resources and make a difference – if we all play our respective roles, build trust, generate collective vision and make commitments.

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