UNC WATER INSTITUTE

Outcomes of a Meeting of Senior Finance Ministry Officials to Discuss Decision-making for WaSH

Policy Brief for the Steering Committee of the Sanitation and Water for All Partnership

In March 2013, The Water Institute and the Global Research Institute at the University of North Carolina (UNC) hosted senior government officials from six African countries at a meeting to discuss government decision-making related to water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH). The focus was on decision-making in Ministries of Finance, and the invitees were all officials who were involved in briefing Ministers of Finance during the preparatory process for the second High Level Meeting of the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) partnership, which took place at the World Bank in Washington DC in April 2012. The meeting participants - who came from Nigeria, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Liberia and South Sudan - took part in a full day meeting. In order that participants could speak freely, the meeting was held under the "Chatham House rule," meaning that information shared can be used, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker is revealed.

There were several observers at the meeting, including members of the SWA Secretariat and graduate students from UNC and Duke University. The meeting was chaired by Clarissa Brocklehurst, a UNC Global Research Institute Fellow who led the research, and Jamie Bartram, the Director of the Water Institute at UNC. Financial support was provided by UNC, the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Netherlands, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The meeting participants with researcher Clarissa Brocklehurst

The meeting covered a number of subjects relevant to Finance Ministers: the process by which they are briefed, their role in shaping WaSH investments, and their perceptions with respect to WaSH. Participants were asked to provide advice to SWA on how to make the biennial High Level Meetings more effective.

Process of Briefing a Finance Minister

The details shared by the participants made it clear that briefing the Minister of Finance is a complex process, even in small countries. The official channels to prepare and deliver briefing notes are long. Skilled bureaucrats will find ways to shorten the process, for instance by using draft or interim documents to informally brief the Minister in a timely way. All ministerial staff are keen to prevent their Ministers from being overwhelmed with ad hoc briefings, and to ensure that information

reaches them when it is well-timed and relevant.

The participants expressed their frustration with receiving "flat" briefings from government staff in the ministries that manage the sector (water resources, rural development ministries etc). By this, they meant that sector staff write briefings that are full of statistics and facts, but do not relate the subject to the concerns of the Minister or the prevailing political context. Senior officials who prepare material for the Minister need modular briefing materials that can be tailored to address the issues that are foremost in their Ministers' minds, and to respond to emerging political realities.

To this end, the participants recommended that advocates for WaSH develop an on-going, supportive relationship which will allow ministerial staff to know exactly where to rapidly obtain relevant information. Furthermore, they recommended that advocates develop a multi-Ministry, multi-stakeholder dialogue about WaSH. This dialogue needs to have started well before any major decisions or actions are to be made by Ministers; it cannot be a "last-minute" activity. They also recommended that advocates be ready to provide modular briefing materials, data and other information on short notice to respond to windows of opportunity identified by the Minister or his/her staff.

Role of Finance Ministers in Shaping WaSH investments

The participants made clear that their Finance Ministers consider themselves stewards of their countries' scarce financial resources, and are very concerned with getting **value for money** from investments**.** Finance Ministers are, above all else, driven to grow the economy, so they are keen to understand how WASH investments will contribute. This is particularly important as, in all the countries that the participants at the meeting came from, financial resources are very constrained.

Finance Ministers need to know not only that WaSH is a good investment, but which *kinds* of WaSH investments offer the best value for money. They are also interested in links to other sectors, such as other parts of the water sector (productive use of water, for instance), health or education.

Finance Ministers' Perceptions of the WaSH Sector

Participants were very frank that the WaSH sector has to overcome some perceived weaknesses in order to have higher credibility with Finance Ministers. These include: fragmentation (especially as multiple ministries are always involved), a lack of descriptive data, weak absorptive capacity and a poor record of sustainability. Finance ministries are particularly frustrated by the WaSH sector's inability to track and demonstrate progress. They also want to see multiple ministries involved in decision-making on investments in order to ensure cohesion, and are willing to act as conveners between ministries to facilitate this.

Sanitation and Water for All High Level Meetings

The participants were unanimous in saying that the current format of the SWA High Level Meetings, linked to the Spring Meetings at the World Bank, is one of the key reasons for their success. They suggested other formats they thought worth considering too, such as meetings convened by the African Union for

African countries, or meetings hosted by prestigious universities in the days that proceed or follow the Spring Meetings. However, they advised that SWA should not abandon the link with the Spring Meetings.

The participants also advised that High Level Meetings should be informative and educational to attract Finance Ministers to attend. In order to be able to make better decisions about WaSH investments, Finance Ministers want to better understand the sector. Listening, for instance, to informative keynote speakers is considered a good use of time; Ministers want to come out of a meeting "smarter than when they went in".

Recommendations

The recommendations for advocates of WaSH who wish to engage with Finance Ministries on WaSH investments can be summarized as follows:

- Establish and maintain an ongoing, multi-ministry, multi-stakeholder dialogue about WaSH, and engage the Finance Ministry
- Be ready to provide modular briefing materials, data and other information Make a strong case for WaSH as a contributor to economic growth and a sound, value-for-money investment on short notice to respond to windows of opportunity

The recommendations for the sector as a whole are:

- Work to overcome the perceived weaknesses of WaSH by improving monitoring and evaluation, reducing fragmentation through inter-ministerial collaboration, addressing sustainability and increasing absorptive capacity
- Include monitoring, evaluation and capacity building in investment plans to increase data availability and credibility
- Improve documentation of service delivery and sustainability
- Build linkages with other parts of water sector (water for production, agriculture)

Two specific recommendations for Sanitation and Water for All are:

- consider new formats for High Level Meetings, but don't abandon the link with the World Bank Spring Meetings
- ensure High Level Meetings are informative and a learning opportunity for Finance Ministers

Author

Clarissa Brocklehurst

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The Water Institute at UNC
Gillings School of Global Public Health
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Rosenau Hall, CB #7431
135 Dauer Drive, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7431
Phone +1-919-966-7302
http://www.waterinstitute.unc.edu

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