Working Together

A study of WASH and gender equality civil society partnerships in Timor-Leste

July 2022

Summary Brief

This summary brief shares highlights from a study that aimed to better understand connections and engagement between water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) civil society organisations (CSOs) and women's and gender equality and inclusion (GESI) CSOs in Timor-Leste.

Between 2018 and 2021, researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney with research partners from Indonesia and Timor-Leste, explored the drivers, benefits and challenges of partnerships and collaborations between WASH organisations and programs, and gender equality and inclusion (GESI) organisations. The research serves to inform how civil society organisations (CSOs) can partner more effectively to maximise mutual WASH, gender equality and inclusion outcomes.

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Introduction

Provision of clean water and sanitation remains one of the basic unmet needs for many people in Timor-Leste, with 43% of people not having access to basic sanitation, 15% of people not having access to basic water supplies, and 72% not having access to basic hygiene[1]. The lack of access primarily effects the poorest and most marginalised, especially those in rural contexts. Safely managed WASH services are commonly sought after and requested by women, as an area of life that they are often keen to participate in because access to clean water and sanitation is more pressing for them as they undertake the bulk of domestic labour and care work. Better access to WASH facilities would do much to improve the lives of the poorest women and help raise their status in society. Women (in all their diversity) have a lot of knowledge about water sources and management, as well as sanitation and hygiene which needs to be drawn on to design and implement effective WASH systems. Civil society organisation are often where these perspectives and voices are supported and amplified, and their advocacy and engagement with government helps to hold rights duty bearers to account. For these reasons, collaboration between CSOs on mutually beneficial goals of WASH and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) is important and the subject of this research project.

Between 2018 and 2021, researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney with research partners from Indonesia and Timor-Leste, explored the drivers, benefits and challenges of partnerships and collaborations between WASH organisations and programs, and GESI organisations. The research informs how CSOs can partner more effectively to strengthen mutual WASH, gender equality and inclusion outcomes.

1.At national level, latest official data from Timor-Leste data includes: 28% basic hygiene (page   70) 85% at least basic water (page 122) and 57% at least basic sanitation (page 142) Source: PROGRESS ON HOUSEHOLD DRINKING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE WHO/UNICEF JOINT MONITORING PROGRAMME FOR WATER SUPPLY, SANITATION AND HYGIENE 2000-2020 Accessed at: https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/jmp-2021-wash-households.pdf

Key Research Findings

The following key findings emerged from the research in Timor-Leste on WASH and GESI CSO partnerships:

1. **Types of partnerships:** CSOs in Timor-Leste have started to engage for mutually beneficial outcomes including furthering gender equality and improving WASH. Most WASH and GESI CSO partnerships were at an early stage of development, namely initial engagement on activities or in early discussions to share information. Of those interviewed for the project (23 participants[2]), 14 were in some type of engagement or partnership between WASH-GESI organisations, and nine expressed an interest to collaborate together, though to varying degrees.

2. **Drivers and Benefits:** The research identified many compelling reasons to collaborate. These included responding to observed community needs, particularly those identified by women and people with disabilities, economic empowerment, decreasing gender based violence, and strengthening advocacy agendas. Partnerships between WASH and GESI CSOs reportedly increased economic empowerment through WASH, and supported ways to improve family harmony and decrease violence, including towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or questioning (LGBQTI+) people. Combined efforts were seen to strengthen advocacy agendas, address gaps in services and improve project sustainability.

   Organisations in existing partnerships could readily point to key benefits of collaboration such as an increase in participation of women and people with disabilities in WASH programs leading to increased access to WASH for these people. Mutual learning and increased value of equality and WASH has increased the scope of the organisations work, contributing to their strategic plans. It also improved advocacy opportunities including connecting with and influencing government actors using evidence from communities and expanding networks and connections. Partnership activities had led to a positive change in the community's perspective on engineering, which was now considered to be a job that both women and men could do.

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2.   24 interviewees included 18 semi-structured interviews with CSOs, and four longitudinal interviews (two rounds) with direct partners of WaterAid Timor-Leste and WaterAid Timor-Leste who were the key research partner for this project.

3. **Challenges:** WASH and GESI organisations that are collaborating reported some challenges in their existing or emerging partnerships. These challenges included misalignment of organisational strategy, priorities and geographical focus and limited human resources practices, irregularity of communications and meetings (also affected by COVID-19), and organisational capacity and financial management capabilities. Further challenges in progress included changes in staff that broke continuity and caused delays and the need to rebuild relationships and trust, low confidence in WASH literacy, misperceptions of who is responsible for WASH, and concerns about transactional relationships and insecure funding leading to short term projects rather than building a solid social justice movement.

4. **WASH Systems:** The research identified a number of ways that WASH systems were strengthened in Timor-Leste due to partnerships between WASH and GESI organisations, including: i) service delivery outcomes for communities - as a result of women's needs and voices being connected more directly to WASH delivery organisations; (ii) sub-national mutual learning and capacity strengthening and (iii) National level policy as a result of combined and enhanced advocacy efforts between WASH and GEDSI organisations.

5. **Recommendations:** Recommendations for supporting more effective collaboration were identified including strengthening joint planning processes, training and ensuring understanding of data available on universal WASH and gender norms and issues. Other suggestions included targeting funding to existing priorities of gender equality CSOs, and for organisations to focus on their internal capacity and striving to be financially independent which could then strengthen and enable partnerships. Regular, open communication between partners was emphasised as being very important, including partnership check-in processes, and addressing changes in staff and rebuilding relationships as necessary and vital for continuity.

Researchers and interviewee discussing CSO partnerships in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020

Background

There is emerging evidence that WASH collaborations with women's and GESI organisations, including sexual and gender minorities (LGBTIQ+), can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes. However, there is a need to better understand how CSOs can work together to support stronger gender equality outcomes such as shifting assumptions about women and men's roles and responsibilities, increasing women's leadership and voice and improve WASH outcomes for all. This is particularly relevant for organisations adopting a WASH systems approach – in that a broad range of interrelated actors are considered relevant and essential for WASH to be delivered and maintained sustainably and safely. WaterAid defines a WASH system as: *"All the actors (people and institutions), factors (social, economic, political, environmental, technological) and the interactions between them that influence the achievement of inclusive, sustainable, universal access to WASH"*. [3]

Taking a WASH systems approach ensures that the partnerships and relationships between different actors are seen as not only relevant, but essential. Local CSOs, including those focused on GESI issues such as gender equality and disability rights, are core actors within a WASH system. Not only are the yare crucial to it's functioning given WASH services are not centralised by government, they are essential to ensuring the system meets the needs of people who are marginalised or otherwise excluded.

In Timor-Leste there is a vibrant civil society engaged on GESI issues, including with LGBTIQ+ communities, women's voice and leadership, women and girls with disabilities, and violence against women (including non-heterosexual women), as well as in WASH, and an interest to facilitate greater interaction. All these diverse voices and actors play essential and important roles in the WASH system, and strengthen the system as a whole.

Researcher and interviewee discussing CSO partnerships in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020

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3.   WaterAid (2021) Glossary of Terms – Systems strengthening. Available at: https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxoof256/files/2021-08/WaterAid%27s%20system%20strengthening%20glossary_August2021_0.pdf

WASH Context in Timor-Leste

While Timor-Leste has made significant progress in increasing water supply coverage, sanitation progress has lagged behind. There are persistent urban-rural disparities, and coverage will need to accelerate rapidly in order to reach all Timorese people by 2030. While the Government (Figure 1) recognises water and sanitation as a human right and has committed to achieving 100% coverage with water and sanitation by 2030 in the National Strategic Development Plan, bottlenecks remain. The capacity of both rights-holders to claim their rights to WASH and duty-bearers to deliver is currently limited, a result of a sector-wide service delivery approach that has worked against a rights-based model.[4] However, the space for strengthening the rights-based approach has been expanding in recent years with key opportunities such as:

- Decentralisation of power and responsibility for public services to the municipalities
- High level government commitment to social audit of government services
- Demonstrated effectiveness of programs to achieve open defecation free (ODF)
- Willingness from the government to collaborate with CSOs and communities to reach "Hygienic" status, which implies beyond "ODF" and improved outcomes for all.[5]

Through these WASH system-strengthening efforts in Timor-Leste, there are efforts being made to improve gender equality outcomes, shift gender norms and empower women and girls. Partnerships with rights holder organisations are an essential part of this systems thinking strategy.
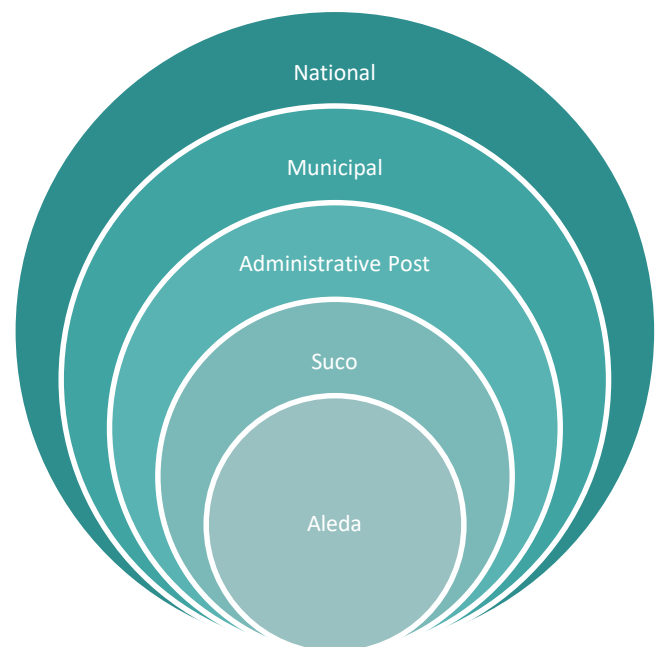

Figure 1. Representation of key players in the WASH system in Timor-Leste

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4. Human rights based approaches are about turning human rights from purely legal instruments into effective policies, practices, and practical realities. Source: humanrights.gov.au
5. In Timor-Leste, as well as the requirements for ODF status, Hygienic status requires the maintenance of ODF status for a minimum of six months, WASH access in institutional buildings, child and infant faeces management, handwashing with soap, and a hygienic toilet per household (not shared between houses as with ODF), and a handwashing facility with soap near the toilet.

Why this research?

This increasing appreciation of the benefits of cross-sector collaboration inspired researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney and researchers from the University of Timor-Leste and WaterAid to co-design a research project on the drivers, benefits, and challenges of engagement between WASH CSOs and gender equality and women's rights organisations. The 2018-2021 research was developed to inform how CSOs can partner more effectively to maximise both access to WASH and GESI outcomes.

The theory of change underpinning the purpose of this research, was that effective and mutually beneficial partnerships can lead to:

- Building a greater cross-sector voice and advocacy initiatives for equitable WASH;
- A deeper understanding of different part's of civil societies' insights related to the system, and contextual factors that influence both WASH and GESI outcomes;
- Improved capacity and ways to work together to shift harmful norms and attitudes at all levels, from community through to national decision-making; and
- Building stronger evidence around the GESI impacts of improving WASH access and the WASH impacts of improving equity and inclusion in service provision (mutual benefits).

The lead research partner in this research (WaterAid Timor-Leste) was instrumental in defining why this research was needed, who was to be involved, and what the key research questions were:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the drivers, benefits, and challenges of engagement between WASH sector CSOs and gender equality and women's rights and sexual and gender minorities organisations?

- How can CSOs partner more effectively to maximise WASH, gender equality and inclusion outcomes?

Research Methods

The research design was primarily qualitative. Researchers adopted an action research approach whereby research participants were supported and encouraged to use the interview process to reflect on their partnerships, and conduct partnership check in's using tools provided by the research team. The following methods were used:

- literature review on partnerships, coalitions, feminist theory, post development theory and the history of civil society in Indonesia and Timor-Leste

- workshop with 30 CSO representatives from 16 organisations in Dili

- in-depth interviews with 18 civil society organisations

→ More

- longitudinal research over 2.5 years (two rounds of interviews with WaterAid Timor-Leste and four of their formalised partners)

- social networks mapping as a workshop exercise

- joint analytical processes and joint development of recommendations for policy and practice between CSOs (WaterAid and CARE) and the research team

Three cross-cutting themes of leadership and voice; intersectionality; and empowerment were drawn upon to inform the research. This included both the questions asked, and the analysis undertaken. The research aimed to be transformative, addressing power dynamics at each stage of the research process.

24 interviewees included 18 semi structured interviews with CSOs, and four interviews with direct partners of WaterAid Timor-Leste and WaterAid Timor-Leste who were the key research partner for this project.

The interviews and analysis process drew on a framework to describe the spectrum of collaborations from "autonomous", to "collaborative" (**Figure 2**).

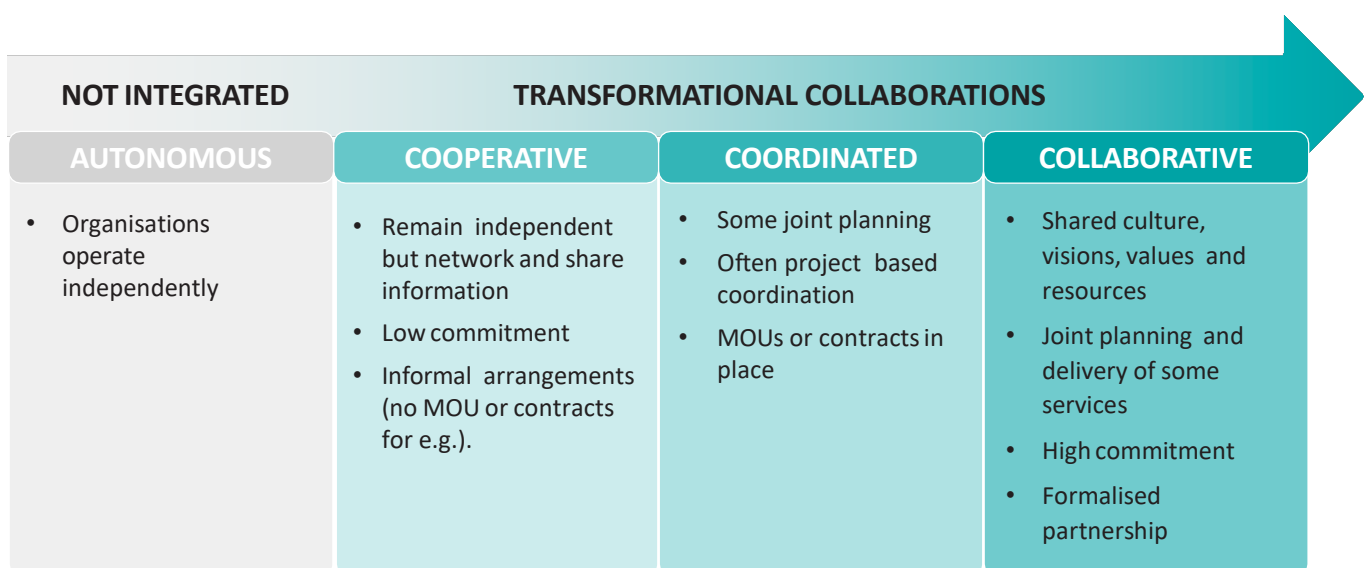| **NOT INTEGRATED** | **TRANSFORMATIONAL COLLABORATIONS** | | |
AUTONOMOUS	**COOPERATIVE**	**COORDINATED**	**COLLABORATIVE**
• Organisations operate independently	• Remain independent but network and share information • Low commitment • Informal arrangements (no MOU or contracts for e.g.).	• Some joint planning • Often project based coordination • MOUs or contracts in place	• Shared culture, visions, values and resources • Joint planning and delivery of some services • High commitment • Formalised partnership

Figure 2. Spectrum of collaboration, Winterford (2017) based on the work of Moore and Skinner (2010)

Feminism, the women's and LGBTIQ+ movements in Timor-Leste

Amplifying women's voices in Timor-Leste.
Image source: IWDA

To better understand how WASH and GESI organisations work within contemporary civil society context, the following brief history of key moments and actors in Timor-Leste women's and LGBTIQ+ movement are presented.

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste achieved independence on 20 May 2002. This followed two years of UN administration, 24 years of Indonesian military occupation (1975-1999) and around 400 years of colonial association with Portugal. As in most post-conflict societies, the effects of militarisation on society have not simply disappeared, and this has led to pervasive violence, such as the crisis of 2006, and high levels of domestic violence (Niner, 2020).

The 2002 Constitution of Timor-Leste formalises equality between women and men in law and states: 'Women and men shall have the same rights and duties in all areas of family, political, economic, social and cultural life' (The República Democrática de Timor-Leste RDTL, 2002) and there is broad general support for gender equality (Niner, 2018a). While many East Timorese in contemporary society believe women and men's roles are balanced, from a political-economy or feminist analysis gender relations remain inequitable. Disparities in economic indicators are reflected in women's low substantive political participation and in the labour force and unequal education outcomes at higher levels.

Timor-Leste has an active women's movement—largely a coalition of local women's CSOs, key women leaders and parliamentarians, many of whom played significant roles in the independence movement. The kernel of an East Timorese women's movement was created in the early 1970s with the establishment of the Popular Organization of Timorese Women (OPMT) as part of FRETILIN, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, which was opposed to colonial rule. Women are proud of the roles they played in the struggle for self-determination. As this is yet to be fully recognised, the women's movement continues to advocate for this recognition.

After the end of the Indonesian occupation, East Timorese women continued to provide the bulk of care for their families and communities under the most difficult of conditions, while they also built a small but strong movement for women's rights that drew upon the networks and alliances that had been established during the occupation period. The first National Congress of the Women of Timor-Leste was held in June 2000 and established Rede Feto, the mainstream umbrella organisation for the women's movement and developed a Platform of Action for East Timorese Women. Held every four years since then, this process has provided a road map for action. An admirable list of achievements include: gender mainstreaming policies; women making up one third of the national parliament; a progressive domestic violence law and the 'bolsa da mae' assistance for mothers.

In Timor-Leste all genders are expected to conform to strict binary gender roles with associated attributes and appearance. To shift these gender stereotypes several local civil society organisations support and advocate for the rights and needs of LGBTQI+ community in Timor-Leste. In 2016, CODIVA, Arcoiris Hatutan and other partners organized a Gay Pride celebration. This emerging movement has primarily been focused on awareness raising activities, and have reported that they now feel ready to enter a new phase of action involving advocating and influencing government programs and policy. Their advocacy agenda is particularly focused on education policies and providing programs about inclusivity in Timorese schools (Niner, 2018b).

These progressive forces along with Timor-Leste's extremely youthful population represent a great opportunity for positive change within Timorese society.

Partnership workshop during the inception phase of the project 2018.

Types of CSO partnerships and drivers for collaboration

Collaborations are emerging in Timor-Leste with a view to strengthening the WASH system and GESI outcomes. Of those interviewed for the project (23 participants), 14 were in some type of engagement or partnership between WASH-gender organisations, and nine expressed an interest to collaborate together, though to varying degrees. The existing connections took various forms including program implementation, knowledge and information sharing and informal networking. The connections reported were predominantly informal or emerging. Eight organisations mentioned having a formal partnership agreement in place.

Two organisations described national level forums in which WASH and GESI organisations share information and discuss ideas, the Forum Be'e Mos (Clean Water Forum) led by the National Directorate of Water and Sanitation Services (DNSAS) and the WASH and gender discussion forum led by Fokupers, established in 2017. Two GESI focussed organisations described sharing information with a WASH organisation and supporting each others' work at the community level.

From the semi-structured interviews, most organisations (five out of nine) who were partnering or connecting across WASH and GESI described their current WASH/GESI partnership as 'cooperative' and the others (four out of nine) described this as 'coordinated' according to the spectrum used in this research (Figure 2).   Most of the organisations interviewed for the longitudinal study (3 out of 4) who described their partnership as collaborative or between coordinated and collaborative (Figure 2).

Figure 3. Spectrum of collaboration, Moore, T., and Skinner, A. (2010) in Winterford, K. (2017)

Drivers for partnerships

Partnerships between WASH and gender equality organisation take various forms in Timor-Leste and have been driven by a range of factors. The most notable driver found in the research was overlapping and complimentary agendas due to the intersection between WASH and GESI objectives. Regardless of whether they were currently part of WASH/GESI partnerships or collaborations, all organisations reported drivers and motivations for working together. Six GESI organisations that worked closely with communities were motivated to cooperate with WASH organisations because of the WASH-related needs they saw in communities, particularly for women.

The key drivers between WASH and gender organisations reported can be grouped into the following three categories as explained on the following page:

1. Community WASH service gaps
2. Gender and rights outcomes towards equality
3. Partnership and agenda shaping outcomes

Researchers and interviewee discussing CSO partnerships in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020

Six GESI organisations that work closely with communities were motivated to cooperate with WASH-focussed organisations due to the WASH-related need they saw in communities, particularly for women:

"We need to work together so that the community can benefit from our partnership. Community needs can become a factor that push us to work together".

Drivers for partnerships

The key drivers between WASH and gender organisations reported can be grouped into the following three categories:

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Community WASH service gaps	• A direct response to an observed community need, for example, addressing the lack of clean water. • Responding to the particular needs of people experiencing marginalisation, including maternal health for women, menstrual hygiene and close by services for women and young girls, and appropriate WASH access for people with disabilities.
Gender and rights outcomes towards equality	• Supporting ways to improve family harmony by reducing tension around WASH service provision and decrease gender-based violence through improved WASH access. • Helping to end violence towards LGBTIQ people who face bullying and violence meeting their daily WASH needs. • Increasing economic empowerment through WASH both directly as a requirement for the business, for example, water to produce coconut oil and vegetables, and indirectly by improving people's health so they can be more productive. • Realising the mutual benefits of WASH and GESI including a more inclusive society and sharing ideas between partners.
Partnership and agenda shaping outcomes	• Utilising connected advocacy agendas to share WASH information at the community level and to lobby the government at the national level to improve WASH services and maintain centralised service provision. • Improving the sustainability of project outcomes through empowering women and improving WASH services. • Undertaking partnerships to address gaps in government services, including combining resources and funds to meet community needs for WASH, and reaching remote villages. • Partnering on how best to work with women who are skilled and effective WASH promoters.

Benefits of partnerships

The research identified at least 14 benefits of WASH and GESI partnerships around increasing participation and inclusion, mutual learning and capacity building, advocacy opportunities and connections with government and shifts in gender norms, perceptions and responses. This finding is positive as it demonstrates that many gender organisations are interested in WASH and that WASH outcomes can be strengthened through gender partnerships. It also indicates that he WASH system is made stronger where WASH actors support local rights groups to be active, including contributing to decisions, consultations, and as technical partners. Organisations within existing WASH and GESI partnerships or collaborations reported on positive power dynamics between CSOs such as positive working relationships, communication styles and organisational policies, and the supportive nature of networks and coalitions in Timor-Leste.

A WASH CSO reported that the trust level with the partner organisation is very high:

"The line of the communication between [us] has been very good, we understand each other well. The communication is very active. When problems came up, [the partner organisation] always raises the issues and explains why they react to something… We can say that our trust level is very high."

One national GESI-focussed organisation described the benefit that its women members gained from the organisations' cooperation with an international WASH CSO:

"Some of our members in seven districts have already accessed clean water. For example, in one community, the water arrived at their house. That is the result of working together between [WASH organisation and GESI organisation]".
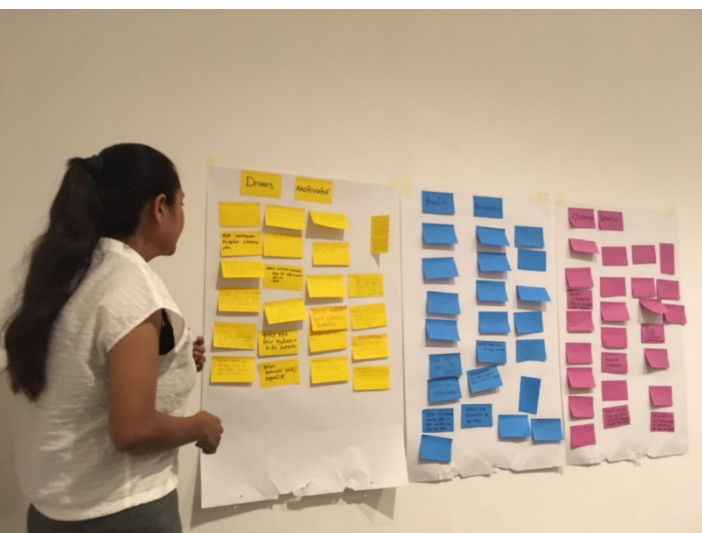
Workshop participants mapped the drivers, benefits and challenges of partnerships with WASH and GESI organisations in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020

Benefits of partnerships

Increasing participation and inclusion	• An increase in participation of women and people with disabilities in delivery of WASH services. • Securing WASH rights for people with disabilities by elevating their needs to relevant parties. • Increased access to WASH knowledge for women and people with disabilities.
Mutual learning and capacity building	• An increased value of equality within the partner organisations and communities. • Positive outcomes for mutual learning and developing capacity, including new methods and approaches to apply at the local level.
Increased influencing of national WASH actors	• Opportunities for collaboration on advocacy activities and outputs, to influence national actors who make up the WASH systems, such as government departments. • Increased scope of areas of work for the partnership organisations for example new WASH skills, or deeper gender equality knowledge to apply in WASH. • Capacity development for women's organisations so that they can represent and discuss WASH issues with other WASH system actors. • Strengthened WASH sub-national and local system responses to gender-based violence (GBV) through a referral network.
Shifts in gender norms, perceptions and responses	• Partnership activities led to a positive change in the community's perspective of WASH tasks and work which it now sees as both women and men's work and not only men's work. • Key contributions to achieving each organisation's strategic plan. • Partnership support to obtain data on the effectiveness of gender-focused activities. • Increased professional network and new organisational connections for more effective programs and improved sustainability of services. • A contribution to equal power dynamics and democratic decision-making processes in partnerships in Timor-Leste.

In depth: the benefits of collaborative partnerships

Benefits of partnering between WaterAid Timor-Leste and organisations who are carrying out gender equality work were reported to be numerous. The following points were made by interviewees directly reflecting on their partnership with each other, and are from four different partnerships that WaterAid Timor-Leste has fostered.

- *Transformation of staff. One of the key benefits identified was the capacity building and training provided by the gender organisation to the WASH organisation. In particular, efforts to support transformation of the staff themselves. It was also mentioned that a gender CSO had played an instrumental role in strengthening responses to gender-based violence (GBV) through a referral network.*

- *Government engagement and meaningful contribution to the national WASH system. A benefit of the partnership was explained to be the increased leadership of GESI organisations in influencing national WASH actors. This was facilitated by capacity building initiatives for women's organisations so that they could represent women's WASH issues themselves, with government agencies and representatives. As one interviewee reported: "their activities have influence at national level. They did different types of advocacy about people making decisions on how to consider women's suffering about sanitation and hygiene." An interviewee reported that there had been advocacy benefits from the collaboration, for example, one of the partners (as a result of gender equality training) started to voice and give their suggestions on the state budget related to sanitation and hygiene. Advocacy achievements as a result of the partnership included that: "Women's groups speak out about WASH problems in the communities. I think the big change is that the community aspiration reached to the Parliament. They also had a meeting with the women's parliament group."*

- *Increased awareness from both sides of the partnership. The benefits for both sides of the partnership (WASH and gender organisations) was identified by interviewees, with one explaining: "Bringing rights-based CSOs into the WASH forum has enabled an increased awareness of GESI within purely WASH CSOs and has also allowed the rights-based CSOs to better appreciate the importance of WASH for the fulfilment of human rights and development".*

- *Autonomy and trust.* *Interviewees reported that there is trust in the relationship and that the local gender organisation has autonomy to implement programs without strong oversight: "I think they trust us a hundred percent to implement all the program, because sometimes they participate in activities in the field just to take pictures etc, most of the time they only do a field visit once in three months." WaterAid also reported that the trust level with the partner organisation is very high: "The line of the communication between [us] has been very good, we understand each other well. The communication is very active. When problems came up, [the partner organisation] always raises the issues and explains why they react to something. Sometimes the Director does not want to sign if the contract will burden their staff or if the fee for their staff is so small. So we have to discuss to find the solution. [We] also do the same, when we have noticed something is wrong, we get their attention. We can say that our trust level is very high."*

- *Evaluating and adapting programs together.* *There was also evidence of processes to evaluate programs together, and share points of view: "Yes, they gave us the opportunity to present our opinion and ideas regarding the partnership and the program activities. Every trimestral meeting we evaluate all the programs that we have implemented within the three months. We can present our opinion and suggest further actions which they then did. But recently, for example, we need more staff because we don't have enough people to do the work. But they did not [expand] because of the COVID-19 situation."*

- *Different but complimentary benefits.* *In one particular partnership, the top three benefits reported by the local gender organisation were: i) capacity building 2) training 3) creating networks and forming new links. They also discussed the benefits of being engaged with the implementation of the Gender Facilitation Modules, community awareness and changes in roles between men and women due to the dialogue implementation. In the same partnership, the top three benefits to WaterAid were reported as being 1) government engagement; 2) providing good data and information from the project implementation 3) having a women's group stand up and speak about women's right to access water sanitation and hygiene. While the three top benefits for each organisation are different, they are complimentary and interlinked but show how benefits can be perceived differently between organisations.*

Challenges of collaboration

As with establishing all partnerships and organisations working together for the first time, there are lessons to be learned from collaboration. The research identified a number of challenges that have been faced in existing partnerships to date, which can be used to improve effective partnerships in the future. The 15 challenges outlined below broadly fit within three sub-categories: (i) organizational barriers; (ii) weak links in the WASH system; (iii) power dynamics and relationships.

The WASH ICSO mentioned that the biggest challenge to the partnership was changes in staff; *"so the new person needs to learn the process and start from the beginning. We need to explain again and again."*

A lack of alignment in geographical focus posed a barrier for two GESI-focussed organisations. One reported that; *"we tried to ask them [WASH CSO] but they said they need to focus on these two districts first, they have to wait and see before forming a new partnership.*

Photos: Researchers and interviewee discussing CSO partnerships in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020. Note that these quotes do not come from the interviews shown in the pictures.

Challenges of collaboration

Organisational barriers	• Misalignment of organisational strategy, priorities and geographical focus. Limited human resources practices, organisational capacity and facilities, particularly of smaller CSOs. • Changes in staff breaking continuity and causing delays in the partnership and project activities. • Lack of confidence on 'WASH literacy' including a fear of technical WASH aspects. • Practical challenges making payments to staff and getting funds into bank accounts.
Weak links in the WASH system	• Misperceptions of who is responsible for WASH, for example government, community, certain CSOs etc. • Transactional relationships, projectisation, and insecure funding often leading to projects rather than development of a movement.
Power dynamics and relationship aspects	• Funding relationships can lead to a power imbalance in a partnership (one way accountability). A lack of openness to collaboration due to hidden agendas and personal or political interests. Some actors who are in the WASH system, don't hold power and may not be seen (such as GESI organisations), and can be left out of being regarded as legitimate actors who need to be part of the system to make it stronger. • The challenge of partnering or collaborating outside of an organisations' specific area of focus was particularly noted by GESI organisations. They suggested there is a tendency to collaborate with others in the same sector where there are existing shared values and vision. • The challenge of finding time to collaborate, particularly with a new partner and new sector. Concern about sustainability, financial viability and the role of government in ongoing delivery of services. • Irregular meetings and infrequent communication. • Reduced budgets and communication challenges due to COVID-19 and restricted travel. • Unequal power dynamics related to the donor/recipient dynamic, how the financial arrangements are structured, and funding insecurity has left some smaller CSOs vulnerable. This undermines their meaningful contribution to WASH system strengthening.

Recommendations for more effective collaboration

The research provides evidence towards better understanding how civil society organisations are key to strengthening the WASH system overall. The findings of this research support and validate the approach taken by organisations such as WaterAid to build strategic partnerships and alliances with diverse rights holder organisations as core actors in the WASH system.

Through the research process, a number of important recommendations for more effective collaboration have been captured. These include ways to establish a foundation and vision, develop strong partnership practices and build on each other's strengths and complementary skills.

CSOs have a core role to play in the WASH system through delivery of services to local communities and elevating their broader needs to the national government. In addition, strong collaborations supported by better funding arrangements extend the WASH and GESI knowledge base. This leads to more nuanced and enhanced WASH and GESI outcomes for people in Timor-Leste.

Researchers preparing for field work in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020.

When asked what the ingredients were for effective partnerships, the local organisation said:

"keep in touch, good communication, good coordination, cooperation must be maintained. Use a variety of communication tools to stay in touch with each other".

Recommendations for more effective collaboration

WASH and GESI CSOs could consider working with national gender organisations, for example Rede Feto. These national organisations have strong influencing skills as seen in national institutions, for example women parliamentarians. They are critical actors to strengthening the WASH system.

Evidence gathered from WASH and gender community activities is key to underpinning advocacy efforts to shift national WASH policy; budget prioritisation and inform dialogue and processes. This includes investing the time in collecting and analysing gender and disability data. There is also scope to support GESI CSOs to have a better understanding of universal WASH and the components and functions of WASH systems.

CSO workshop participants mapping out CSO connections in Timor-Leste for the study 2018 – 2020

Recommendations for more effective collaboration

Setting foundations and shared vision	• Identifying alignment in strategic priorities as a foundation for establishing a partnership. • Setting clear commitment, agreement and terms of reference with agreed tasks and responsibilities is critical. • Effective joint planning before funding proposals are submitted. • Ideally ensure the response is to a direct need identified in the community. • Building on unique strengths and focus areas bringing together complementary roles. • Continuing to share best practices between partners and deliver on the strategic plan.
Partnership practices	• Regular, open communication and review of partnership status as well as activity status. • Taking the time that is needed for CSOs to get to know each other and strengthening trust between CSOs. • Capacity strengthening support to gain a deeper understanding of universal WASH and the specific components and functions of full WASH systems. This will ensure projects take a broader focus than water access and allow GESI organisations to fulfill their role as legitimate actors in the WASH system in a meaningful way. Generation and uptake of joint data sources and knowledge sharing for example a central database of six and disability disaggregated WASH information for CSOs and the government.
Building on complementarities	• Where partnerships are addressing the needs of the community, there is the opportunity to elevate these needs into national and sub-national influencing efforts. • Investigate strengthening the CSO Forum to play a clearer coordination role in Timor-Leste. • Review funding arrangements that ensure donor organisations respect the priorities that CSOs already have, organisations focusing on their capacity and striving to be financially independent before entering into partnerships. • A gender organisation referred to the Timorese fighting spirit as a strength to draw on to create effective collaborations; "In my opinion, civil society mostly works together well, we support each other. In Timor-Leste, the fighting spirit is still strong, we want our society to have a good life. Even though our country is independent, we still have many things to fight for."

Next steps and further research

The research conducted in Timor-Leste did not directly include a partnership between a WASH organisation and an SGM organisation because to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no such partnership exists in that context. Therefore, future partnerships and research could focus more deeply in this space, as the awareness and need for more diverse partnerships grows.

This Timor-Leste case study is accompanied by a similar study conducted in Indonesia, as well as a more general guidance document which has been developed by a range of rights holder organisations, including those representing LGBTIQ+ and people with disabilities. These resources can be accessed at: https://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au/

Acknowledgements

Selected further reading and references

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For more information about this research initiative: https://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au/

Annex A. Partnership check in template

This partnership check in template will be useful to any organisation partnering with another organisation. It has been developed with civil society organisations in mind, especially those working across sectors. It is suggested that this template be used to conduct a partnership check in with each other every six months or so, and ideas to further develop the partnership documented and followed up on at the next discussion.

Hello's and catch up – something you have each been doing related to work or life that has been interesting, exciting, challenging, informative *(each person shares something about their life and work)*

What is working really well with respect to our partnership? Why is this working so well? *(each person says something – or more than one thing. You can also use post-it notes or flip chart paper to facilitate the contributions)*

In what ways is the partnership supporting each other's strategic aims (the goals and focus of each organisation)?

What are the top three things that your organisation gains from being in partnership with each other?" *(discuss similarities and differences)*

Organisation 1:	Organisation 2:
1	1
2	2
3	3

Do both organisations feel that communication is effective in the partnership? Is there anything you would like to change or improve in any way?

Your hopes and dreams for the partnership: When you both look at the figure below of types of partnerships, where would you say you are now, and where would you like to move to in the future (if change is aspired to – it may not be).

AUTONOMOUS	COOPERATIVE	COORDINATED	COLLABORATIVE
· Organisations operate independently	· Remain independent but network and share information · Low commitment · Informal arrangements (no memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts for e.g.).	· Some joint planning · Often project based coordination · Memorandum of understanding (MOU) or contracts in place	· Shared culture, visions, values and resources · Joint planning and delivery of some services · High commitment · Formalised partnership

Spectrum of collaboration, adapted from Winterford, K. (2017)

Are there any challenges or issues about the partnership?
- What could be done to help with those challenges?
- How, when and who should action the strategies to address any challenges?

Are there any changes that each organisation would like to make to the partnership (way of working, managing finances, communication, focus of the project, anything at all) "we'd love it if you could…….", "would it be possible if you could do XYZ"

What (if anything) shall we do differently after this conversation to improve our partnership and ways of working?

- *Who will do it?*
- *When will they do it?*
- *How will they do it?*
- *What will be the benefit of this change/action?*

Other items you'd like to talk about in particular during this meeting

Date for the next partnership check in meeting