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# 76 DEVELOPMENT BULLETIN

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## DEVELOPMENT FUTURES: ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS TO END POVERTY



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**Cover photos**

Front: Immunisation day, MCH clinic, Port Resolution, Tanna, Vanuatu  
Talk back radio, community radio station, Lenakel, Tanna, Vanuatu  
Photos: Pamela Thomas

Back: Nikli community, Bangladesh, discussing ways to improve sanitation  
in their area where large scale inundation occurs 6-8 months of the year.  
Photo: Juliet Willetts



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# Development Bulletin

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## Development futures: Alternative pathways to end poverty

Papers and case studies include some of those presented at the international conference “Development Futures: Alternative pathways to end poverty” held under the auspices of the ACFID University Network and hosted by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney, November 21-22, 2013

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# The sum is more than the parts: Impacts of the Australian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Reference Group

*James Wicken, WaterAid Australia, Lee Leong, Plan International, Bronwyn Powell, International Water Centre, Juliet Willetts, Luke Lovell and John Kelleher, University of Technology Sydney*

## Introduction

Partnerships offer benefits, leverage and influence that single organisations are unable to achieve alone. Established in 2007, the Australian WASH Reference Group (WRG) is an informal network of diverse organisations working on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in developing countries. This paper offers the WRG as a case study of how diverse actors can work in partnership to strengthen civil society practice and outcomes. It outlines the history of the WRG and its operations, successes and challenges faced, and concludes with reflections on lessons learned that can be applied to other civil society groupings hoping to strengthen practice and influence policy within their sector. The information is largely drawn from the authors' experiences as long term members of the group, and from reviews of the WRG, including a Ways of Working Review (WaterAid 2012) and a Reflections Report (Plan 2012).

## The WASH Reference Group

The group emerged from a small collection of people scattered across a variety of Australian NGOs and academic institutions, all committed to WASH and sharing a common frustration with Australia's limited contribution to this sector. The broad collective aim is to improve Australia's response to the global water, sanitation and hygiene crisis, and the group seeks to do this by pursuing five objectives:

- making WASH a priority for Government and development agencies;
- mainstreaming WASH within Australian aid policies and programmes;
- improving the quality and volume of Australia's foreign aid for WASH;
- establishing and strengthening a Community of Practice; and
- building public awareness and support for WASH.

The WRG has an open membership comprising Australian-based organisations involved in WASH, including NGOs, academic institutions and independent contractors. The Australian Water Association is also a member and represents the domestic water industry. Membership is by agency, with individuals regarded as formal representatives of their agency. The group now has a membership of 30 organisations, represented by 60 individuals, encompassing most of the organisations in Australia working on WASH in developing country contexts. The cost of time and contributions to WRG work is covered by member agencies.

The group maintains a link with ACFID (the NGO peak body in Australia), primarily through joint contributions to ACFID papers and processes; however, the group operates outside of the ACFID structure, principally to maintain its open membership base which includes non-ACFID members.

## WRG ways of working

The WRG is led by a self-nominated Executive Committee (ExCom), including a chairperson. The ExCom's role is to agree on broad strategy, prepare a workplan for the coming year and to facilitate preparation for upcoming activities and meetings. ExCom members are expected to play a leadership role, represent the group as needed in external meetings and participate in all internal meetings. Feedback from internal reviews (Plan 2012; WaterAid 2012) prompted changes to membership processes of the ExCom, now re-opened annually for any member to self-nominate to the committee.

Meetings of the group can be broadly classified into three types: Community of Practice sessions, meetings with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT, previously the Australian Agency for International Development, AusAID); and planning meetings. Community of Practice activities include conferences, publications and sharing days. Joint meetings with DFAT are held approximately twice annually, with the agenda jointly agreed upon by DFAT and the WRG, and sessions co-chaired. These meetings present an opportunity to deliver key messages to DFAT and share information. Where possible a planning meeting is held ahead of this joint meeting. Additional meetings are organised on an as needs basis. For example in 2008–09, when the first Australian government water and sanitation initiative was announced, there were frequent meetings to prepare for and discuss with AusAID (now DFAT) the principles and priorities for the initiative.

## Achievements of the WRG partnership

Over the last seven years substantial progress has been made towards the objectives of the group. These contributions could not have been achieved by one agency alone and are the result of members working in partnership. Notable achievements of the group are:

- Successful advocacy to Government for increases in priority given to, and allocations for, WASH within Australia's aid programme. To date, annual government funding to WASH has increased from \$45 million in 2007–08 to \$279 million in 2013–14.

- Regular dialogue with DFAT on the effective spending of these resources and on Australia's role in ending the global sanitation and water crisis. This dialogue with DFAT has contributed to a change of direction and a new thematic WASH strategy which emphasises a pro-poor focus, behaviour change and sustainability.
- Enhanced knowledge, capacities and development practice of members through Community of Practice activities, such as increasing the evidence base documenting good practice in WASH. Examples include the inclusive WASH publication and website (WaterAid 2013), and the sharing experiences publication series on hygiene practices (WaterAid et al. 2011), hygiene promotion (WaterAid et al. 2010) and sanitation (IWC et al. 2008). These resources are now widely used globally within the WASH sector.
- Achievement of a strong focus on learning and knowledge, something that has been recognised by DFAT and has since become institutionalised in DFAT's funding window for NGO WASH programming, the Civil Society WASH Fund. A learning component was included in the initial funding round of this programme and has been strengthened in subsequent funding rounds. Significant resources have been allocated to knowledge building and all CSOs are required to resource knowledge and learning within their programmes and the fund itself includes a knowledge and learning manager to facilitate cross-institutional and cross-regional learning.

Whether these achievements have directly contributed to improved outcomes for beneficiaries is yet to be determined. Kelly and Roche's (2014) recent study of Australian NGO partnership models identified that evidence directly attributing partnership models with effective development outcomes is scarce. By improving its monitoring and evaluation the group will be able to better make this connection and contribute to this knowledge gap.

### Why is the model effective?

A number of key enablers have contributed to the effectiveness of the WRG partnership model. A core group of dedicated people working together with clarity of purpose has been a key reason for many of the achievements to date. For many people this has involved an additional voluntary commitment above and beyond their regular work. Whilst motivations for involvement differ, collective civil society interest, shared values and intent to work together towards desired changes are often noted as primary drivers for participation in this partnership.

WaterAid's resourcing of the group's secretariat has been critical, as it has always provided a coordinating function to the group, even when chairpersons and other members of the ExCom have left. The fact that WaterAid has resourced this role to date and the WRG has not had to seek financial contributions from members or donors has greatly simplified the group's workings. For WaterAid, performing this function has complemented its own strategy of increasing Australian Government support to WASH which has been a win-win situation for both the WRG and WaterAid. However there is a sustainability

question over how long WaterAid will continue to perform this function and the WRG has not yet explored how it would manage this issue.

Membership diversity has been another key strength. NGOs have been important in envisioning advocacy opportunities and providing practical programme experiences; academic institutions have introduced analytical rigor and technical expertise; and at times the water industry has helped the group differentiate itself from other NGO groups. These different skill sets have given credibility to the group with DFAT and parliamentarians and allowed the group to remain active, relevant and capable of responding to changing discourses (such as the post-2015 agenda), while affording members opportunities to undertake different roles and responsibilities as according to their capacities, interests and competencies.

Within the DFAT WASH team there has been an openness and willingness to engage in open dialogue. The WRG has been able to build a level of trust with DFAT that did not initially exist. At times, agendas of the WRG and DFAT align and the relationship is easy to manage, while at other times agendas differ and the relationship can become tense. Clear communication of intentions and plans, and a high level of trust between the WRG and DFAT have enabled points of tension to be overcome.

### Challenges and responses

Two recent reviews (Plan 2012; WaterAid 2012) revealed some challenges to which the group has sought to respond. The reviews highlight the need for ongoing review of partnership, communication mechanisms, ways of working and ensuring that there are feedback loops to communicate and problems or tensions. Power dynamics exist in every relationship, yet are often an unspoken part of partnerships (Clark 2003), and power relations are an ongoing and underlying challenge faced by the WRG.

At times the group has struggled to reach consensus and to be clear about attribution of activities. Given the large membership and different individual and agency viewpoints it can be difficult to achieve consensus on particular decisions, such as joint submissions. When looking to brand submissions as being on behalf of the whole group this process can be cumbersome, particularly in instances when not all agencies formally agree to or endorse a piece of work. Similarly, when WaterAid in its Secretariat role has played an active role in producing or communicating WRG agendas, there has been confusion as to whether these are WRG or WaterAid activities. One practical solution has been to develop a tagline to be included on any materials produced on behalf of the group which states 'Submission prepared by the WASH Reference Group with special input from...[agency names that agreed and contributed]'

Fowler (2012) emphasises that the quality of interactions between individuals in relationships contributes to the effectiveness of the partnership. Individuals as representatives of their agencies are the interface of partnerships, and hence individual competencies are

important. Within a working group setting, the following competencies are valued in individuals: diplomacy, technical competency, collaborative ways of working, an ability to negotiate, good interpersonal skills, and confidence in verbal communication. In recognition that within any group these competencies vary (for example, some individuals are more vocal than others), the WRG has consciously varied meeting formats to allow for different engagement techniques (particularly smaller group work) and tried to rotate chairs for different parts of the agenda. When this is not done, and meeting structures revert to a plenary format, more vocal participants limit the diversity of contributions.

The imperative of individual agencies to obtain funding means member organisations often have to balance collaboration with competition, which also means there are potential tensions in the group functions, most obviously when the group is lobbying for greater resources for WASH and securing some of these funds for member agencies. Meetings with DFAT around funding opportunities have seen greater participation of members. Other subtle potential tensions exist in terms of knowledge development and advocacy on setting agendas.

## Conclusion

Partnerships offer benefits, leverage and influence that single organisations cannot achieve alone. The WRG offers an example of how partnership can enhance efforts to strengthen civil society practice and influence government. The complementary and contributing roles of NGOs, academics and industry representatives are key to the success of the WRG. In addition, having a well resourced coordinating body has provided momentum and focus to the group. Individual relationships and competencies have played an integral part in the WRG's operations with trust and dialogue critical, particularly between civil society and government. The characteristics of the partnership which aided its success are: flexibility

and adaptability; an emphasis on learning through a Community of Practice; and learning to improve the functioning of the partnership itself.

A 'big picture' view of Australia's role in ending WASH poverty and inequality and identifying a range of strategic influence points means avenues to pursue this agenda continue, and different members of the group can continue to contribute. Lessons learned from this partnership model operating in the Australian WASH sector offer ideas for other sectors wanting to take collective action to alleviate poverty.

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