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INVESTING IN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: CALL FOR RENEWED FOCUS AND PRIORITY Ronald Sofo

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Key Points

- Investments in water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) services are critical in improving health, environmental, and socio-economic outcomes for individuals and communities.
- Priority should be given to innovative interventions that can facilitate improvement in delivery of water supply, safe sanitation facilities and decent hygiene practices.
- Capacity of provincial, district, and local level governments to plan and manage WaSH projects needs to be boosted.
- State utility and partners will need to develop viable operating model in close collaboration with provincial and district administrations to extend WaSH services, particularly in rural areas.

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INVESTING IN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: CALL FOR RENEWED FOCUS AND PRIORITY

By Ronald Sofe

The unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shone light on the importance of foundational measures of disease control. Complementing social distancing and mask wearing, handwashing remains central in the suites of measures implemented to curb spread of the infectious disease. However, frequent handwashing and good hygiene practice requires sufficient access to clean water supply and proper sanitation facilities. Therefore, investing in water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) becomes a very critical development agenda for many developing countries to ensure healthy livelihood and sustainable progress amid the challenges inflicted by the pandemic at this time. Ensuring access to adequate WaSH services will require considerable investments not only in new infrastructure, but importantly into mechanisms and systems to ensure sustainable delivery of water supply and sanitation facilities throughout communities and households. In advocating for renewed focus to prioritise investment in the WaSH sector, this paper reviews current situation, recent initiatives and challenges that impact tangible delivery of WaSH services in the country.

Why invest in WaSH?

It is widely acknowledged that the WaSH sector plays an important role in the development process. A recent research on the costs and benefits of investing in WaSH in developing countries shows that sustainable WaSH services are critical in improving health, environmental, and socio-economic outcomes for individuals and communities (WaterAID, 2021). The following are few examples of the benefits drawing from international experience which demonstrate strong case for investment in WaSH service delivery.

- *Socio-economic impact.* Improving WaSH service is key to improving socio-economic outcomes, including greater workforce productivity, enhancing gender equality and increasing educational attainment. WaterAID (2021) highlighted that improvement in health outcomes as a result of WaSH services can lead to economic opportunities through multiple channels, particularly by increasing educational outcomes and

worker productivity. For example, access to piped water supply saves time that otherwise spent on collecting water from nearby stream, thus enhancing one's opportunities to engage in income-generating activities as well as education attainment. Another impact is on gender empowerment. In places where there is water crisis, women spent most of the time collecting water. According to Kayser et. al (2019), the burden of water collection and time costs are disproportionately borne by women. As such, providing accessible WaSH services, for example piped water supply, can be a tool for empowering women and reducing gender inequalities.

- *Health benefits.* WaSH can reduce spread of communicable diseases by preventing human contact especially with waterborne diseases. According to World Health Organisation (2014), access to clean drinking water and hygiene services are key interventions for diarrhoea prevention, which kills nearly one million people each year. Improved hand hygiene practices can reduce the incidence of upper respiratory tract infections. Hand hygiene is an effective protection against the spread of infectious diseases including COVID-19, where current government guidelines recommend handwashing with soap (WaterAID, 2021).
- *Environmental consideration.* In addition to health and socio-economic benefits, WaSH interventions have positive impact on environment through reductions in environmental degradation. According to WaterAID (2021), lack of wastewater treatment and open defecation can contaminate both land and water ecosystems. Untreated sewage and wastewater can have harmful effects on environment and aquatic ecosystems. Without WaSH infrastructure that safely manages sewage effluents, wastewater and open defecation, this is catastrophic. Contamination of such can reduce recreational opportunities, particularly in rivers, lakes and other fresh water or coastal systems.

Current situation in PNG

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), access to improved water supply and sanitation for majority of people in urban and

rural areas are a struggle. Data from the United Nation Joint Monitoring Program estimates that of the total country's population in 2017, only 41 percent had access to safe drinking water while a worrying 13 percent had access to improved sanitation facilities. The impact of such poor access to critical WaSH services on public health is very alarming. There are frequent reporting of high incidence of waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea and typhoid in the country. This does expose many people to ominous risk of COVID-19. Besides the health implications, poor access to critical WaSH services such as water can contribute to loss of time, household income and productivity.

It appears that WaSH is not a mainstay in the country's development endeavour. This is evidenced in little support the sector continues to receive from the National Government. Kutan and Sofe (2020) observed that the underlying factor behind dismay performance of the country's WaSH sector is the lack of credible political leadership, compounded by non-existent dedicated ministry for planning, regulation and coordination role. Further, it is noted that the limited skilled water professionals and lack of funding support to the sector continues to constrain its ability to extend WaSH services throughout the country.

Step in right direction

The National Government through its PNG Development Strategic Plan (2010-2030) sets target of 70 percent of the population to have access to improved water sources and improved sanitation by 2030. This is premised within the development aspirations of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal # 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation, which is hoped to underpin WaSH initiatives to achieve the ambitious target. In progressing that, there have been recent initiatives showing great promise in supporting delivery of WaSH services in the country. These include:

- *National WaSH Policy (2015 – 2030)*. It was developed with a view to provide policy framework that would cultivate and drive positive reforms for cost-effective delivery of quality, safe and reliable water supply and sanitation services in both urban and rural areas. It was envisaged to trigger reduction in water-borne diseases, improved health outcomes and economic opportunities. Following approval of the policy, there were tangible progress in WaSH delivery. The establishment of a WaSH Project Management Unit (WaSH PMU) as the lead agency for the sector came about. The WaSH Strategic Plan (2017-2022) as perquisite to drive implementation of the WaSH policy was also drafted. One of the key outcomes was the conceptualisation of District WaSH Plan, an essential intervention in coordinating and implementing WaSH related investments at sub-

national level.

- *Role of State utility reinforced*. The Water PNG Limited (WPNG) merged with the Eda Ranu to take charge of the Port Moresby operation, reinforcing its capacity to provide reticulated water supply and sewage services. In so far as delivery of WaSH services is concern in urban centres, WPNG as State utility, has a very important role to play. There is prospect in expanding WaSH services into peri-urban areas and informal settlements within the peripheries of towns. To progress expansion of WaSH services into rural areas, WPNG could engage with district and provincial administrations, harnessing technical skills and planning capacity. There is likelihood of high cost and loss-making ventures, given the sector's natural monopolistic feature. But this can be managed effectively through application of the State utility's commercial service obligation.
- *District and rural WaSH*. The District Development Authorities (DDAs) with the support from development partners are engaging in the delivery of WaSH services in rural schools, health centres and communities (World Bank, 2020). Water tanks, toilets and handwashing facilities are being provided as part of the partnership. There is also establishment of District WaSH Committee who would be championing the WaSH service delivery at the sub-national level under the guidance of District WaSH Plans. There is value in prioritising funding and resources to attract and implement WaSH projects in rural areas where bulk of the population are living. Strong political leadership and willingness of development partners, private sectors and civil societies, would be key in sustaining implementation of WaSH projects overtime.

Challenges associated with WaSH

In spite of the promising initiatives and strong case for investing in WaSH, formidable challenges remain. The unfortunate delay in the establishment of National Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Authority (NWSHA) is worrying. Kutan and Sofe (2020) noted this as one of the formidable challenges confronting the WaSH sector going forward. As envisioned in the National WaSH Policy, the operation of NWSHA as central agency in the sector would be critical in ensuring appropriate regulation, coordination and capacity building. This is expected to trigger positive impacts, particularly in the rural WaSH endeavour.

In addition, the inherent capacity issues and limited commitment at the district level are inescapable. For example, there is acute need for dedicated WaSH officer at the district level who would be responsible to initiate and

drive development projects on water and sanitation.

This is compounded by ongoing financial constraint as evident in recent WaSH pilot projects which were largely driven and funded by development partners (World Bank, 2020). Among competing demand for rural development, it will be a daunting task for the DDAs to prioritise funding on WaSH activities. For sustainability of WaSH projects at district level, WaSH funding will have to be sourced internally.

Further, it is no secret that existing WaSH infrastructure, notably water mains, reservoirs and waste treatment plant are in dilapidated state throughout the country. The increasing water demand from growing population and rapid urban expansion are exerting pressure on existing infrastructure.

Conclusion

WaSH services are indispensable to livelihood. Investing in WaSH services are critical in improving health, environmental, and socio-economic outcomes for individuals and communities. It calls for renewed focus from all stakeholders and levels of government to embrace innovative interventions that would facilitate improvement in delivery of water supply, safe sanitation facilities and decent hygiene practices.

The capacity of provincial, district, and local level governments to plan and manage WaSH projects needs to be boosted. State utility and partners will need to develop a viable operating model in close collaboration with provincial and district administrations to extend WaSH services, particularly in rural areas. Equally, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive investment plan for rehabilitation of existing infrastructure to boost capacity to deliver WaSH services. This will include attracting private sector support through utilisation of tax credit schemes and corporate social responsibility.

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About the Author

Ronald Sofo is a Research Fellow with the Economic Policy Research Program at the PNG National Research Institute (PNG NRI). He also serves as the interim Manager of the PNG APEC Study Centre, housed within the PNG NRI.