

# LEARNING FROM LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND RESPECTING LOCAL SOCIAL NORMS

Abdulkhaleq Alwan

WASH Head of Department  
Yemen

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Three years of ongoing conflict and economic decline in Yemen have exhausted the population's adaptation mechanisms, destroyed infrastructure and seriously disrupted the country's economy. The number of districts facing potential risk of famine has significantly increased as the situation rapidly deteriorates.

The complexity of the situation is not only related to malnutrition and food insecurity, but also to other underlying causal factors aggregated by the conflict. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) situation has increasingly worsened, the total number of people in need of WASH assistance has reached 16 million and now includes 11.6 million in acute need. The lack of sufficient clean water, latrines and solid waste disposal, further aggravated by the arid and humid climate and flood risk, multiplies the risk of WASH-related disease outbreaks such as cholera, acute diarrhoea, malaria and dengue, especially for Internally Displaced

Persons and host communities. 50 per cent of undernutrition in Yemen is associated with infections caused by poor WASH, while cholera outbreaks is deemed to have been vastly induced by contaminated water resources.

One of the three governorates targeted by Action Against Hunger is A Hudaydah Governorate which has the largest share of the country's cholera cases with 158,958 suspected cases, 14.6 per cent of the country's total caseload.<sup>8</sup> Here we are implementing a multi-sectoral humanitarian response including Nutrition, Health, WASH, Food Security and Livelihoods. Our WASH sector interventions continue to build the capacity of the local communities and WASH public counterpart agencies. Among its different learning and accountability measures, Action Against Hunger WASH collects lessons learned during the delivery of our various WASH interventions to advise, and further improve, the delivery of WASH in

<sup>8</sup> WHO, 3rd of April 2018 Weekly Epidemiological bulletin Week #13

future projects.

## HOW WAS THIS 'LEARNING' COLLECTED

These learnings were recorded when the WASH Head of Department in Yemen conducted a field visit to one of Action Against Hunger's WASH in Nutrition projects<sup>9</sup> in the Hays District of Hodeidah governorate, together with the WASH hardware team in country. During this visit some major lessons were learned from the targeted communities which has informed the way the team works with communities, when installing water facilities.

## COMMUNAL WATER DISTRIBUTION POINT IN BAIT HODAISH VILLAGE:

When arriving in Bait Hodaish village, the WASH team found that the water

<sup>9</sup> WASH in Nutrition project 'Emergency assistance to crisis affected population in north and south Yemen targeting priority governorates of Hodeida, Hajjah, Abyan, and Lahj' funded by SIDA.

well, and the associated distribution tank facility, that had been installed by the Action Against Hunger project were functioning, however, they discovered that the targeted local community had made some changes. They had replaced the tank facility's main water outlet and distribution pipe with another larger outlet pipe, and re-installed the four water distribution taps. Additionally, two of those four water distribution taps had been fitted with 2m long plastic hose extensions. When discussing the reasons for these changes with the local community, the WASH team realised two major shortcomings with their original water distribution design:

- The pressure of the water flow coming out of the tank facility was low. This was due to the small diameter of the original outlet pipeline (supplying the four taps) causing the water to come out of the tank outlet flows by gravity only. This led to long water queues and resulted in a longer fetching time. This time could have been spent on other activities such as family care, education or food production. Replacing the original outlet pipe with another one with larger diameter could allow for heavier water flow and a shorter fetching time.
- The two water hose extensions added to two of the taps were specifically there to meet the needs of the children fetching water, as the original design was not suitable for them. In the community, children were the ones most often tasked with fetching water by using several

20-litre jerry cans carried by donkeys. Usually the children's parents would tie the jerry cans to the donkey's back to secure them for transport. When the children arrived at the well they were unable to untie the jerry cans from the donkey's back, and would not be able to lift the filled 20-liter jerry cans onto the donkeys' backs in order to re-tie them. The extended water hoses allowed the children to reach the jerry cans while they were still tied to the donkeys and fill them up without having to untie, or lift them.

#### **WATER ALLOCATION SYSTEM IN AL-MIKHRAF VILLAGE:**

When the WASH team arrived in Al-Mikhraf village they also found the constructed water-distribution point functioning, however, this time, it looked nothing like the original water outlet and distribution system installed earlier by the Action Against Hunger team. The original water outlet pipe and distribution taps had been removed and replaced by much larger outlet pipes on the four sides of the tank, onto which 20 short lateral distribution pipes with taps had been attached. The WASH team again discussed these changes with the local community and realised that key needs and social norms had not been addressed by the engineered design, provided by the Action Against Hunger contractors.

The community operates a water allocation model in their village, where all families belonging to one tribe have their

own water outlet pipe and tap. This allows the community to allocate drinking water amongst the various tribes in an equitable and satisfactory manner, avoiding social conflict during the daily water fetching. They also showed the team an earlier installed water facility, which allowed for the same water-allocation modality and explained that they had tried to influence the Action Against Hunger design, but that they were not able to change it from the agreed plan.

#### **WHAT WAS LEARNED FROM THIS?**

In both cases, it became clear that the best-practice water supplies installed by the Action Against Hunger teams were not fully fit for purpose for the communities in which they were installed. It was also evident that closer consultation with the communities, and a willingness to change the original design based on their feedback, would have delivered something more socially accepted by, and suited for, the local targeted beneficiaries.

#### **HOW WAS THIS LEARNING INCORPORATED INTO OTHER PROGRAMMES/INSTITUTIONALISED?**

This experience was a great coaching opportunity for the WASH teams on the importance of listening to local needs during the identification, planning, design and delivery of our WASH projects. It also illustrated how in many cases, and especially during emergency programming, the deciding factors in the field reveal that our systems sometimes have technical shortcomings

when following normative or standard designs.

The team learned the importance of respecting local social norms and the customary rules that organise and govern their daily life, recognising that locals are the best source of knowledge about what fits their needs. Accordingly, the team adapted the technical design of similar communal water distribution points that are to be implemented in future WASH projects as part of Action Against Hunger's water well rehabilitation package.

### RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO MORE OF?

- Involve communities in the identification, planning, design and implementation of our projects and interventions.
- Be willing to change our approach and plans based on community feedback and participation.

- Understand the context, social relations and customary powers, rules and needs of the community and the people we are working for.

- Respect social norms and customary rules to ensure appropriate programming and sustainable solutions.

- Don't be afraid to change plans and project design based on contextual community needs and feedback, best practice in one context might not be applicable in another.

The technical learning from this article can be relevant to other WASH projects, but the overall learning of involving the local communities and beneficiaries in the design of our interventions is applicable across all sectors and contexts that we work in. It is never too late; do not hesitate to approach the local population to get their feedback and learn how to further improve the humanitarian products delivered by your projects.

For more information contact: [washhod@ye.missions-acf.org](mailto:washhod@ye.missions-acf.org)



New water allocation system in Al-Mikhraf Village

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