


## Strengthening water, sanitation and hygiene governance: a critical review of Zimbabwe's WASH sector institutional arrangements

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### ABSTRACT

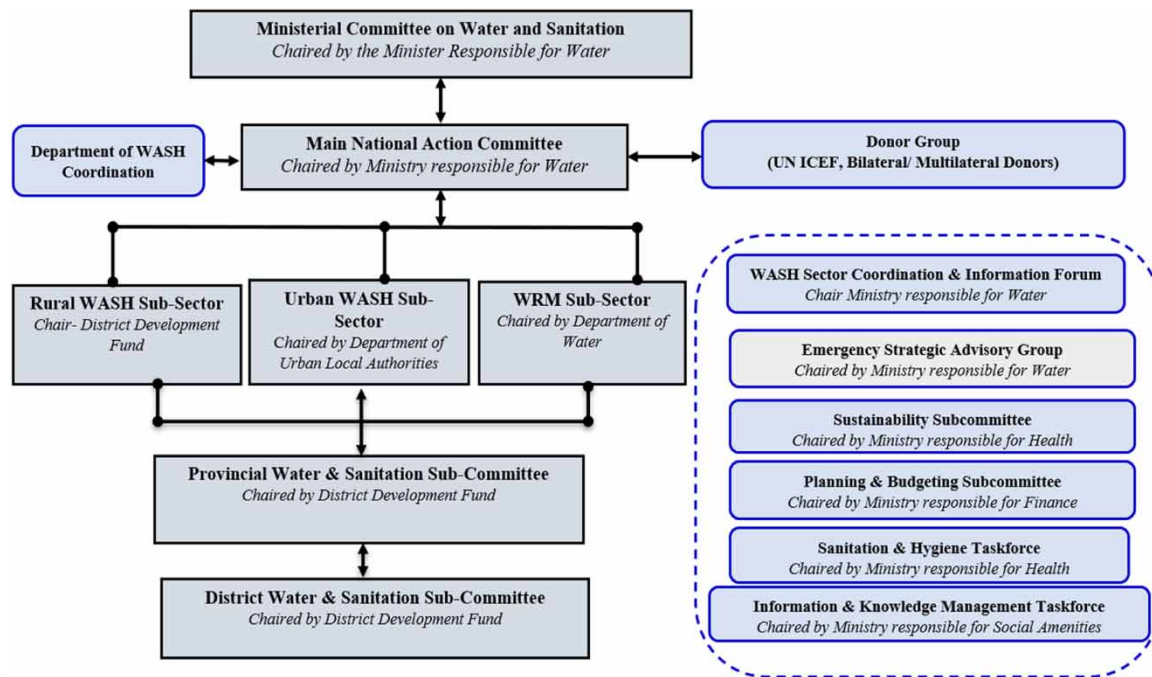
This paper sought to review the structural and operational modalities for Zimbabwe's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector coordination architecture with an objective to identify gaps and recommend areas for further strengthening. Data were collected using a mixed-method approach involving a questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, key-informant interviews and literature review. The study established that the institution of the National Action Committee (NAC) remains incapacitated to effectively deliver on its mandate. Its various committees are failing to convene meetings on regular basis, hence issues take longer to resolve. Decision-making and role clarity among members still remain indistinct, triggering undesirable conflicts. The legitimacy of the institution of the NAC also remains highly questionable, lacking legal bases to back its operations. In terms of information management, structures and systems are in place, only requiring support to make sure they thrive. Finally, financing including intersectoral coordination remains very weak and would need to be built-on, considering the potential of the coordination mechanism to enhance service delivery. A key recommendation emerging from this study is the urgent need for government to commission a review of the current multi-stakeholder platform in the best interest of aligning the coordination structure to the 2013 national constitution and national water policy.

**Key words:** coordination, governance, National Action Committee, service delivery, WASH sector, Zimbabwe

### HIGHLIGHTS

- On paper, Zimbabwe has an impressive WASH sector governance arrangement.
- The institution of the National Action Committee on WASH remains weak in its operations.
- WASH service delivery in Zimbabwe continues to regress.
- Systems strengthening for sustainable WASH service delivery urgently required to reverse current negative trend.

## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



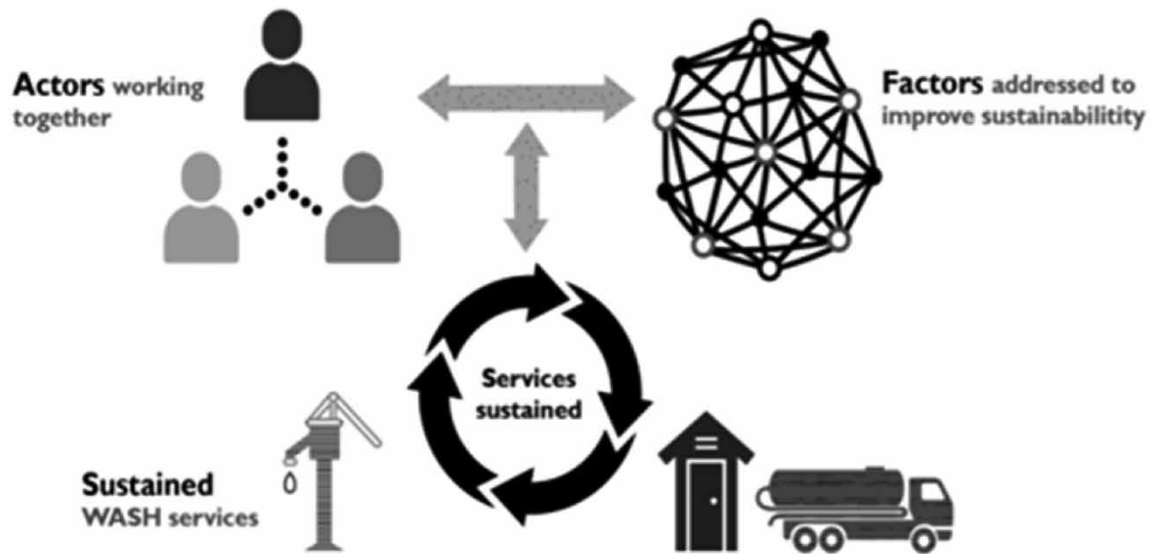
## INTRODUCTION

The past 50 years have seen development partners injecting billions of dollars into the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector across the globe. These investments largely prioritized the development of new WASH infrastructure with the hope that governments will take over and sustain services (Moriarty *et al.* 2013). Post-implementation evaluations, however, reveal the opposite. Failure rates of rural water supply systems remain high across Africa, with various systems tumbling into a state of disrepair far sooner than their design life (Hollander *et al.* 2020). Local funding and accountability for service delivery continue to fall short of what is required to sustain infrastructure, resulting in a high degree of service disruptions.

In September 1990 and as part of the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade, African countries adopted the National Action Committee (NAC) for the WASH sector (GoZ 1991). This move according to Butterworth *et al.* (2010) was meant to plug the glaring gap between infrastructure investment and sustainable services through looking beyond infrastructure provision to systems (Figure 1).

In Zimbabwe, the NAC for the Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme was established in the late 1980s with an objective to address the complex challenge of sustaining basic WASH services. This marked the design and implementation of interventions explicitly aimed at addressing system weaknesses (Huston & Moriarty 2018). These interventions sought to understand, engage with and positively influence the network of actors and the interacting factors that deliver services ultimately leading to improved service delivery and sustainability (SWS 2020).

In 1998, a new Water Act was enacted following the rationalization of water resource management approaches resulting in the establishment of the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) and the seven catchment councils. In 2004, a Rural WASH Policy document was drafted for cabinet consideration. A subsequent review of the document in 2009 picked major gaps in the policy, a key part of which was the need for clarity on sector leadership and climate change issues (NAC 2010). These institutional issues were raised immediately after the harsh lessons learnt in 2008/2009 when Zimbabwe experienced one of its worst cholera outbreaks in the living history of mankind (Mason 2009). A ministerial retreat was held in Nyanga in June 2010 for the key sector ministries to review and rejuvenate the sector coordination mechanism (Jiménez *et al.* 2020). The outcome of this ministerial retreat was a coordination framework bringing together the three sub-sectors of rural WASH, urban WASH and the water resource management.



**Figure 1** | System for sustaining WASH services (Hollander & Cunningham 2020).

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The success of the 2030 Agenda requires a clear institutional apparatus to lead the coordination, implementation and monitoring of individual sustainable development goals (SDGs) across sectors (UNDP 2015). Ensuring the existence of vibrant institutional frameworks is critical for countries to ascertain whether these goals can successfully be mainstreamed into national policies. Obscured institutional clarity, roles and responsibilities among stakeholders have always been a challenge hindering the successful implementation of SDGs. While traditional measurements of an activity's successes and impacts focus directly on recipients served (Drinking Water 2020), new metrics are required to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the system's approach. Existing indicator frameworks and metrics, such as the SDG 6 for WASH, fail to capture the changes in a system and its strength although SDGs 16 and 17 make an attempt to capture the same.

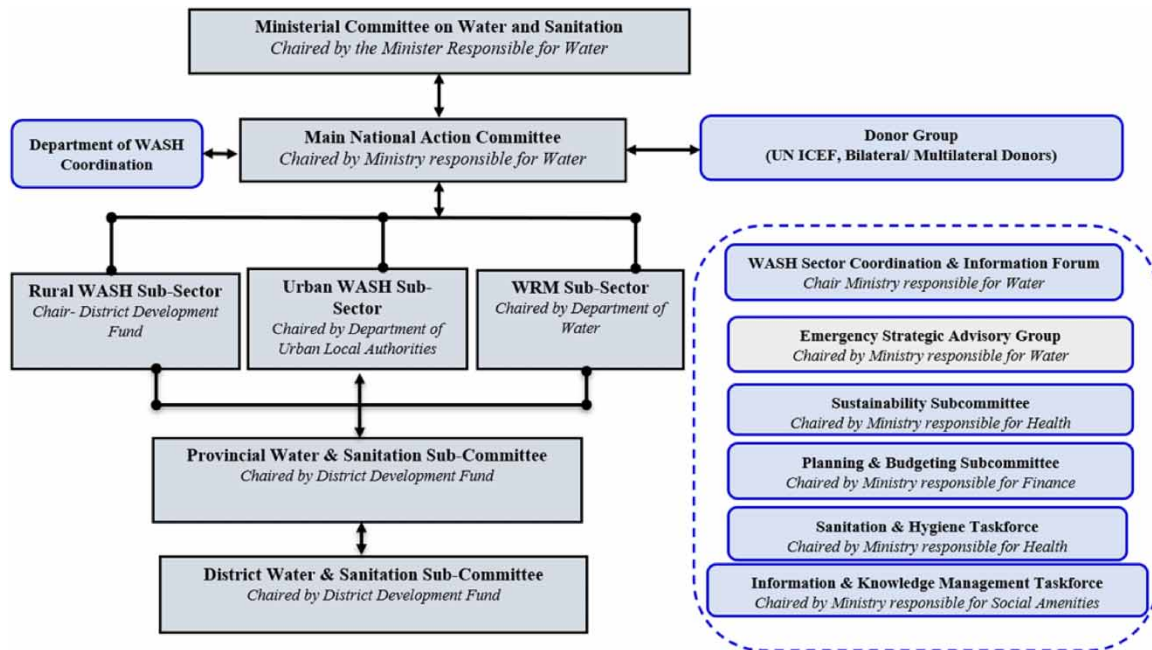
Zimbabwe lately adopted a new national blueprint, the National Development Strategy (NDS 1) meant to propel the country into an upper middle-income economy by 2030. However, with 21% of the national population still practicing open defaecation (ZIMSTAT & UNICEF 2019), this remains a pipe dream. While political commitment and leadership are key to redressing this, responsibility for implementation lies with the sector institutional coordination mechanism in place. The recurring WASH challenges including the slow pace at which the sector is reducing the population without access to safely managed services point to a weakened institutional arrangement. It is against this background that this paper commissioned a critical review of the structural set-up and operational modalities for Zimbabwe's WASH sector coordination mechanism with an objective to identify and recommend areas requiring further strengthening.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### WASH sector governance arrangement in Zimbabwe

Governance remains a contested concept despite years of academic debate (Glass & Newig 2019). According to the contemporary literature, governance involves a plurality of public and private stakeholders, hybrid practices and is considered to be multi-jurisdictional (Bevir 2011). Consequently, governance is theorized as a multi-dimensional concept covering different actors, processes and institutions involved in political decision-making (Driessen *et al.* 2012). Essentially good governance relies more on a diversity of participating actors.

Zimbabwe's WASH sector has a well-defined mutual accountability mechanism, the NAC. This inter-ministerial structure incorporating the three sub-sectors of urban WASH, rural WASH and water resource management was put in place by the government in 2010 (GoZ 2019). This was mooted as a direct response to contemporary challenges exacerbated by recurring WASH emergencies. Since then, the NAC has been undergoing regular reviews, adapting it to effectively support various transitions (UNGA 2015). Figure 2 gives a pictorial summary of the NAC's structure.



**Figure 2** | Sector's mutual accountability mechanisms (adapted from NAC 2010).

Perret *et al.* (2006) argued that providing people with access to essential services such as WASH demands a combination of solutions in the face of a wide range of problems. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) today view sector governance as a fundamental condition for establishing lasting access to WASH services (Kemp *et al.* 2005). Unfortunately, past studies have tended to concentrate on assessing the suitability of WASH infrastructure with the governance component receiving less attention from many scholars (Dube 2012). There is, therefore, a need to explore this field further to get an appreciation of the decision-making process in the sector (Harper *et al.* 2017). Improvement in institutional arrangements for WASH is bound to result in improved effectiveness of WASH assistance provided to people.

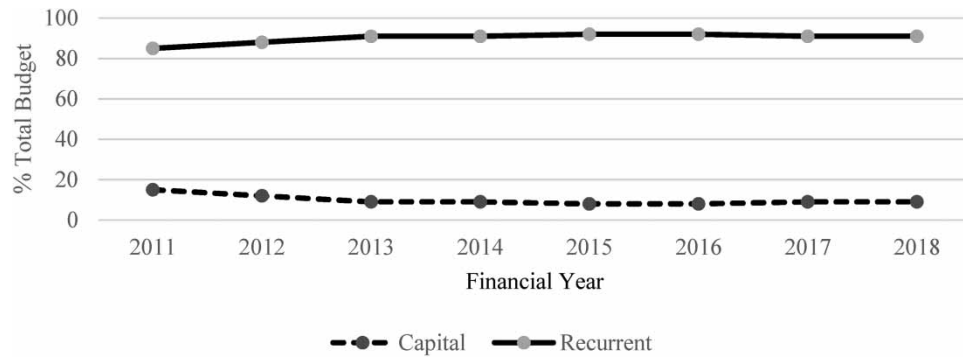
Zimbabwe's WASH sector has key policies and strategies providing sector direction and clarification of roles, namely National Water Policy (2013), Water Act (Chapter 20:24), ZINWA Act (Chapter 20:25), Rural District Act (Chapter 29:13), Urban Councils Act (Chapter 29:15), Public Health Act (Chapter 15:17) and the National Sanitation and Hygiene Strategy (2018–2022). The National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy and the National Water Resource Master Plan are still under development. The Water Act established seven catchment councils and set out ZINWA's responsibility for water resource management. The Water Act also established the water fund as a common pool of funds that the minister responsible for water can use in areas of greatest need. However, WASH services in Zimbabwe have been deteriorating despite this enabling environment. The level of service is not being expanded to boost reach. Existing investments are not being effectively maintained over time, resulting in performance slippage. Fewer people have access to basic water services than 20 years ago. According to JMP (2021), the population accessing at least basic services has declined from 72% in 2000 to 63% in 2021. Essentially, more people are being pushed into reliance on unsafe sources. On sanitation, access to safely-managed sanitation declined from 30% in 2000 to 26% in 2020.

The literature also reveals that recurrent expenditure continues to dominate the central government budget. Public outlay growth has been skewed towards recurrent expenditure, making up more than 90% of total public spending between 2011 and 2018 thus leaving less than 10% of the public budget for capital expenditure (Figure 3). The role of wage expenditure in the public budget limits the government's fiscal policy options.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

Research design is the overall plan for answering the main research question which often includes how, where and when data for a research study are to be collected and analyzed. Teddlie & Yu (2007) cited cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental and case study as the commonly used types of research designs in governance-related



**Figure 3** | Government total budget (2011–2018) (adapted from Government Blue Books).

studies. The design that any researcher ultimately settles on is determined by the research questions, the focus of the study and the ability of the design to control behavioural events (Yin 1993).

The current study utilized the case study research design. Although a case is often at a fairly small scale, this study used a larger scale which is the case of Zimbabwe's NAC and its structures running from national right down to the community level. The literature has shown that where multiple case studies are used, they are combined with cross-sectional design elements (Whittington *et al.* 2009). The power of a cross-sectional design lies in its ability to give a snapshot of a situation at a given point in time, a critical element in governance studies (Sedgwick 2014).

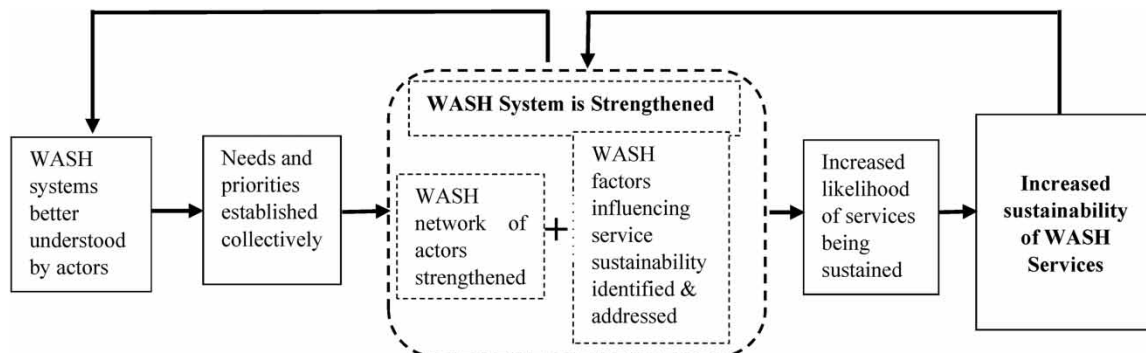
### Conceptual framework for analysing Zimbabwe's WASH sector institutional arrangements

The conceptual approach to this study (Figure 4) is largely informed by Hollander's system approach. This theory provides guidance on effective perspectives through which local systems can be understood and strengthened to sustain outcomes. Differing rubrics exist around how to segment and understand systems and how to engage with and seek to change them (Hollander 2020).

The strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analytical framework is also going to be evoked to help understand underlying issues and how to further strengthen the system. In assessing multi-stakeholder partnerships' performance, building blocks and governance functions are also going to be used to enable an evidence-based assessment of performance and effectiveness (Pattberg & Widerberg 2014). Building blocks outline key aspects of successful governance through a multi-stakeholder partnership. Governance functions help to identify in more detail how partnerships ought to be designed and later implemented. For WASH, besides structural and institutional factors, Jiménez *et al.* (2016) and SWA (2019) identified several building blocks and governance functions that are key in defining the performance of any system. These include sector policy/strategy, institutional arrangements, sector financing, monitoring, review, and capacity development (Figure 5).

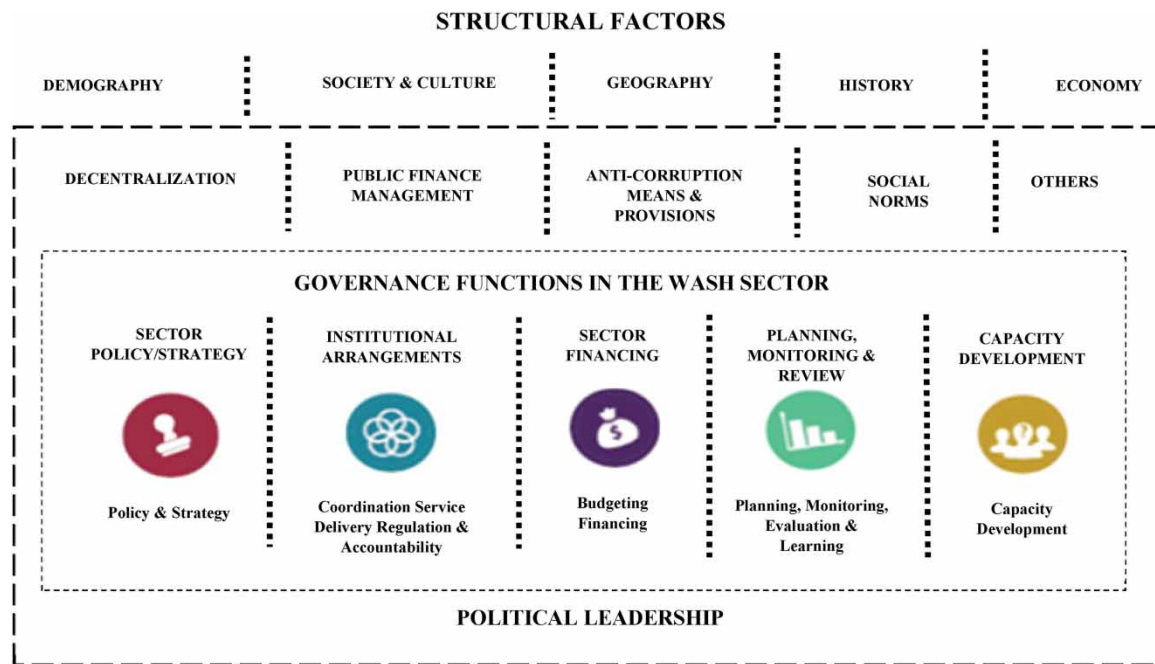
### Study population

The study population was pooled from the sector's six key constituencies, namely government, development partners, civil society organizations, private sector players, utilities, and research and learning institutions. These six



**Figure 4** | System approach (adapted from Hollander 2020).





**Figure 5** | WASH enabling environment framework (adapted from UNICEF 2016).

constituencies together constitute the WASH sector's mutual accountability mechanism which according to [SWA \(2020\)](#) provides a platform for all partners to tender commitments and hold each other accountable.

### Study sample

The study sample was pooled from the sector's WASH Sector Coordination and Information Forum, a multi-stakeholder platform that brings together sector players from all the six sector constituencies constituting the WASH sector's mutual accountability mechanism. In total, 43 key sector organizations were reached out to through the forum's mailing list. Due to limited time and resources, convenience sampling was employed in selecting a study sample from the population.

### Data collection tools

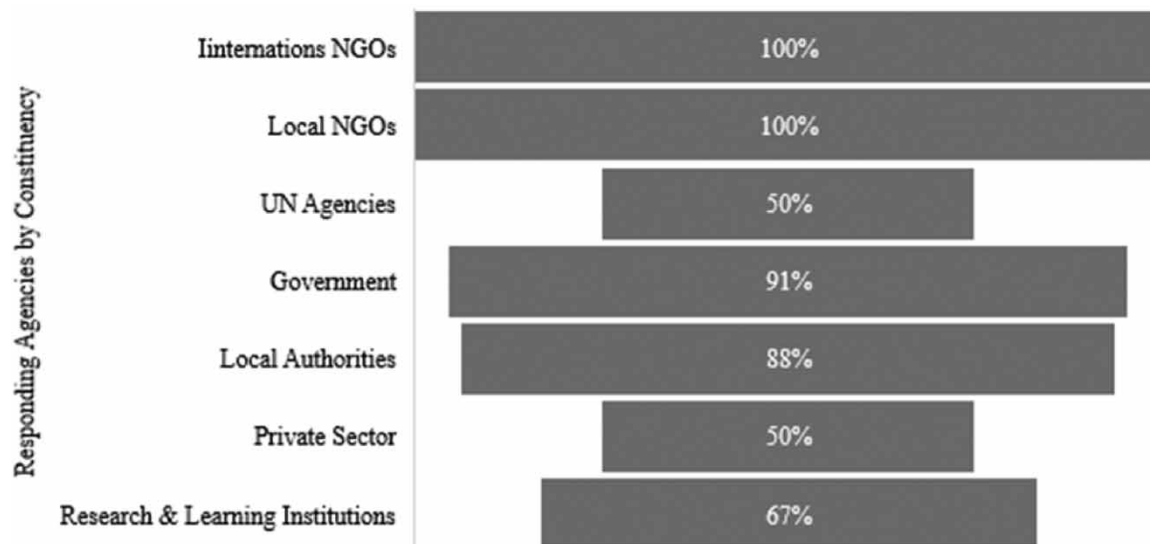
In this study, a structured questionnaire was designed as the main data collection tool circulated through an online survey to members of the WASH Sector Coordination and Information Forum (WSCIF). This helped gather data on existing capacities of the sector's coordination mechanism to deliver. Responses were made available for analysis as soon as the respondents clicked the submit button at the end of the survey questionnaire.

A follow-up key informant interview was conducted with the NAC secretariat followed by two focus group discussions, one with chairs of the various committees of the NAC and the other one with Provincial Focal Agencies responsible for the 10 administrative provinces. A mini desk-study analysis was also conducted with an objective to get primary data on the sector coordination mechanism, its policies, strategies and financing models.

## STUDY FINDINGS

There was an overwhelming response to the questionnaire circulated virtually to sector partners through an online survey as the main study tool. The study reached out to 43 active organizations under the WSCIF out of which a total of 40 agencies responded and 37 ultimately managed to fully complete the questionnaire giving an overall questionnaire response rate of 86% as summarized in [Figure 6](#).

Respondents were pooled from across all the six constituencies constituting the sector's mutual accountability mechanism, namely government, private sector, utilities, research and learning institutions, civil society and development partners. The mailing list for the study sample was made available by the NAC Secretariat, a designated institution with the responsibility to coordinate all players in the sector.



**Figure 6** | Questionnaire response rate by constituency.

### Institutional issues and their bearing on sector coordination

WASH sector governance is guided by the 2013 National Water Policy. However, the bulk of the provisions of this sector guiding document is still to be fully implemented 9 years after its promulgation. The policy recommended the setting up of a National Water Supply Services Utility expected to take over the provision of water supply from the ZINWA.

*‘However, this next phase of ZINWA’s evolution has not happened, and there appears to be limited appetite within central government to effect such a change which means ZINWA has a long way to go to help recover costs and adopt a modern customer focus.’* (Focus Group Discussion, female respondent)

In the same manner, the National Water Policy proposed the creation of a Water and Wastewater Services Regulatory Unit to monitor all water supply and sanitation services, receive and assess tariff applications in collaboration with relevant ministries and oversee the licensing of water service providers by water services authorities.

*‘While progress has been made towards the creation of this strategic institution, the more general reluctance by Government to establish additional new institutions has overall slowed the pace leading to the setting up of the Water and Waste Water Regulatory Unit.’* (Key Informant Interview, male respondent)

Respondents indicated that delay in the operationalization of the National Water Policy has seen the ZINWA continuing to play regulator and service provider roles, local authorities not able to freely choose service providers, rampant and uncontrolled groundwater mining, and total disregard for WASH service delivery standards. It was also cited that continued delay in the approval of the 2016 draft National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy has resulted in a lack of direction in the implementation of life-saving sanitation and hygiene-related interventions.

### Outline of roles for committees constituting the coordination architecture

The NAC for WASH operates at four levels, namely national, provincial, district and community level. From the questionnaire survey, 65% of responding organizations confirmed that the roles and responsibilities of the NAC and its standing committees are clear to comprehend. The coordination mechanism document was cited by 80% of the respondents as a key reference document for clarity on roles and responsibilities including membership of the various committees. Regarding effectiveness of the structure in discharging its mandate, 75% of the responding organizations indicated that the various committees of the NAC still remain very weak as more than 80% of the committees struggle to convene coordination meetings as per their set terms of reference. In the past 8 months (July 2020–February 2021), the urban WASH sub-committee only meet once with the other two

committees of rural WASH and water resource management all reporting nil meetings. The research established that many of the officers constituting various committees of the NAC lack the motivation to work.

*'We are dealing with civil servants already demoralized by the current remuneration package. Most members are either incapacitated to come to work or when they do come, they are seized with personal businesses meant to subsidize their meager salaries.'* (Focus Group Discussion, female respondent)

Participation of committee members in the NAC business is motivated by incentives and envisaged personal benefits.

*'Members avail themselves to WASH business only if there is a monetary incentive attached to the activity. More often than not, monthly coordination meetings at sub-national level are delayed or totally called off due to poor attendance by members.'* (Focus Group Discussion, female respondent)

All these highlighted developments cripple NAC's sector leadership and coordination capacity.

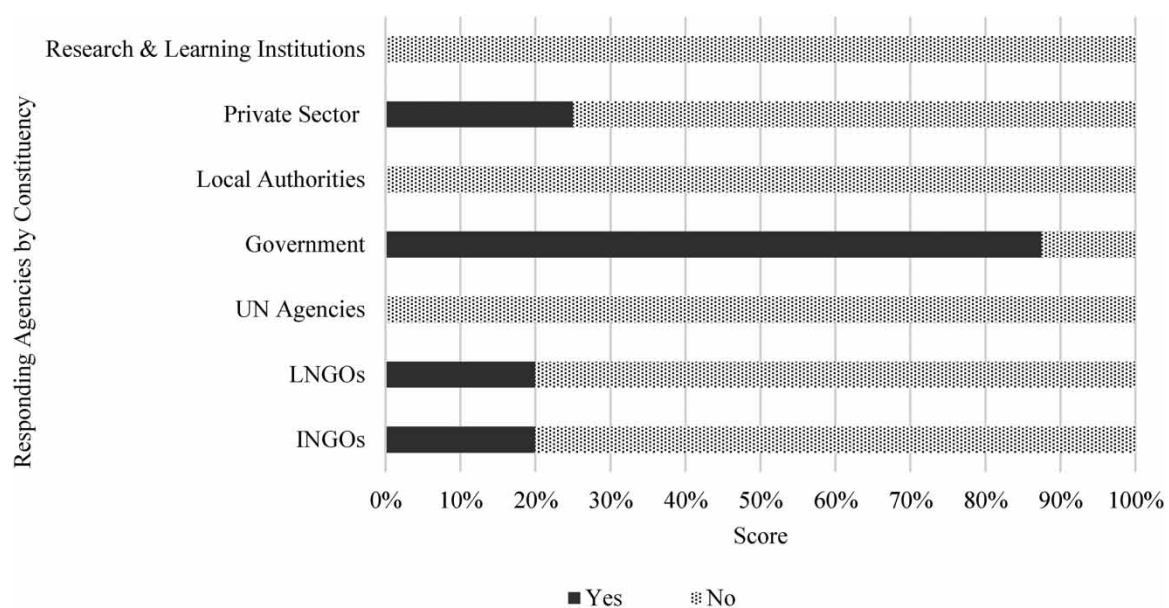
### Clarity of roles and responsibilities for individual NAC member institutions

When asked about the clarity of roles and responsibilities of individual agencies constituting NAC, 88% of stakeholders from line ministries responded with a 'Yes', meaning that the mandates were clear. However, the rest of the other six constituencies reported that the roles and responsibilities were indistinct (Figure 7). The District Development Fund, for example, was mentioned as misplaced to chair the rural WASH sub-committee and its sub-national level structures.

*'...the District Development Fund is a technical arm in terms of water supply and chairmanship of the coordination structure at various levels ought to be left to Ministry responsible for Local Government which is better placed to play the coordination role through its Provincial and District Development Coordinators' offices.'* (Focus Group Discussion, female respondent)

The study also confirmed that:

*'In the context of devolution, Local Government has convening powers crucial when calling for coordination meetings'* (Key Informant Interview-male respondent)



**Figure 7** | Are roles and responsibilities of individual NAC members clear?



Conflict of constitutional mandates was also mentioned in one of the Focus Group Discussions.

*'Conflict exists between government agencies like the Department of Water, Local Authorities, ZINWA and District Development Fund when it comes to water supply; Department of WASH Coordination and the Ministry of Health when it comes to implementation of the sanitation and hygiene component; government agencies and civil society partners when it comes to programme implementation at community level.'* (Focus Group Discussion-male respondent)

Part of the reasons why institutions continue to perform overlapping functions arose from the reality of non-implementation of some of the National Water Policy (2013) proposals. Full implementation would have helped realignment of institutional roles and responsibilities. All these conflicting roles derail programme implementation often resulting in targets missing timelines and certain planned works getting suspended. The study also revealed weakened WASH sector coordination arrangement for members. Participation in WASH business by line ministries remains voluntary and with limited consequences for non-cooperation and performance.

### Legitimacy of the institutional arrangement

When asked about the legitimacy of the NAC and its sub-national level structures, questionnaire respondents expressed mixed feelings (Figure 8).

One key informant reported the need for government to legalize the institution of the NAC, thus giving it legal authority and obligation to lead and direct the sector.

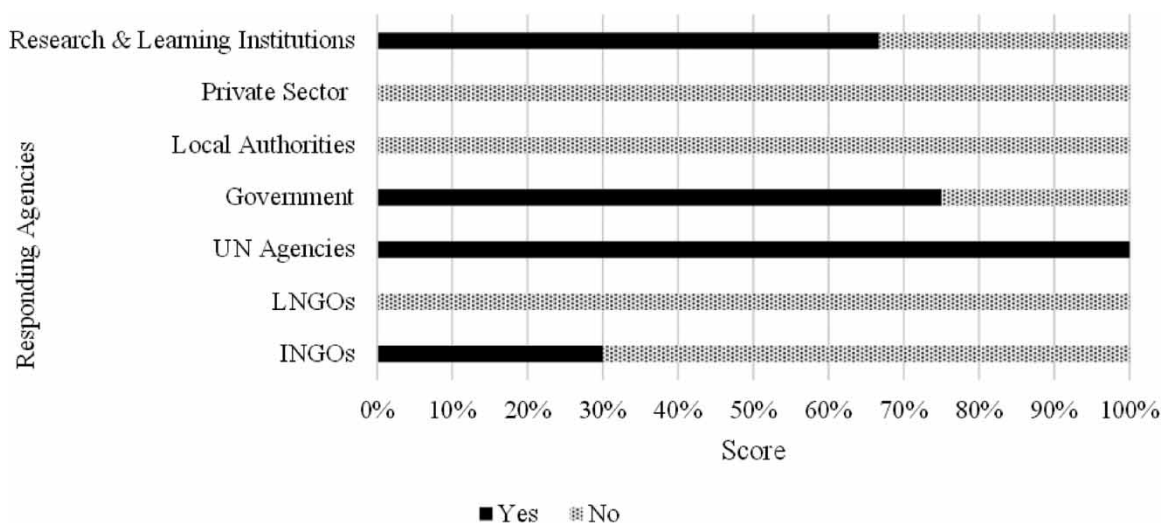
*'No matter how good the arrangement is, the fact that NAC was not established through an act of parliament leaves the whole coordination structure as a club whose membership remains voluntary.'* (Key Informant Interview, male respondent)

*'This accounts for the reason why committees of NAC have not been able to meet over time, and why sub-sectors operate without annual work plans and budgets.'* (Focus Group Discussion, male respondent)

The fact that both national and sub-national level structures of the NAC are not recognized at law is a drawback on their level of sector authority, thus affecting their effectiveness when discharging set mandates.

### Planning capacity

The questionnaire survey revealed that the NAC has a dedicated taskforce responsible for sector planning and budgeting and chaired by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. Its key mandate lies in guiding the development of sector strategic and operational plans including resource mobilization for operationalization



**Figure 8** | In your own view is the institution of the national action committee legitimate?

of the same. One Focus Group Discussion held, however, revealed that this taskforce has not been meeting since 2010.

*'The Ministry of Finance which is supposed to chair this Taskforce is not bothered whether members meet or not. The desk officer responsible for WASH always moans of being overwhelmed.'* (Focus Group Discussion, female respondent)

The planning function has therefore been wholly relegated to the Department of WASH Coordination which develops annual sector plans and budgets that it exclusively presents to various donors including treasury.

*'This status quo has killed the multi-sectoral approach that the WASH sector is proud of, thus stifling issues of mutual accountability.'* (Focus Group Discussion, male female respondent)

The study also established that strategic planning is only happening under the WASH emergency arm with the Emergency Strategic Advisory Group spearheading the initiative. From the questionnaire administered, 64% of the respondents felt that there is a good level of multi-stakeholder strategic planning under the emergency preparedness and response wing with facilitation from UNICEF. Two WASH contingency plans, the Zimbabwe WASH Cholera Contingency plan (November 2019–July 2021) and the Zimbabwe WASH Sector COVID-19 Contingency Plan (March 2020–December 2021), were mentioned.

### Decision-making and inter-sectoral coordination

Study findings revealed that the institution of the NAC has a very weak decision-making system. This is partly because of the passiveness of its committees many of which have not been meeting for some time now. In that regard, many issues of a policy nature requiring government position and leadership remain unresolved.

*'The sanitation and hygiene policy remains a draft document since its development in 2016; the water policy is still to be fully operationalized since 2013 and research in the sector remains under funded regardless of the existence of a committee dedicated to research and development.'* (Key Informant Interview, male respondent)

Government constituency acknowledged that the appointment of the institution of the Provincial Focal Agency has helped re-activate WASH sector coordination at a sub-national level.

*'...weekly provincial update reports and meeting minutes with very clear action points are now being compiled and shared both horizontally and vertically to influence policy.'* (Focus Group Discussion, male respondent)

This alone has helped strengthen emergency response, and coordination at the sub-national level although this is limited to the WASH emergency wing.

When it comes to inter-sectoral coordination, 80% of responding organisations felt that intersectoral coordination is rather weak requiring urgent attention at all levels. From the responses to questions on the WASH sector tools and guideline documents that sector agencies indicated were familiar with, not even a single tool or guideline with a thrust on intersectoral coordination, assessment, planning or programming was mentioned.

### Sector information and knowledge management

90% of the questionnaire respondents answered 'yes' to the question on whether an enabling environment exists for data generation and knowledge management to inform evidence-based sector programming. Some of the enablers reported with high frequencies of above 60% include the existence of the Information and Knowledge Management Taskforce and the existence of sub-sector information management systems including a platform for knowledge management. On assessing the robustness of this enabling environment through Focus Group Discussions, the respondents however indicated that the Information and Knowledge Management Taskforce is poorly resourced and comprised of individuals with very little if any background and qualifications in information management (human resource capacity gap). These two key issues have great implications for the success of any initiative developed under this Taskforce. In one of the Focus Group Discussions, it emerged that:

*'Regardless of how incredible the Rural WASH Information Management System (RWIMS) is and the demand that it commands sector-wide, its sustainability across districts still remains uncertain. The WASH Connector regardless of how strategic it was in documenting and sharing sector knowledge prematurely succumbed to poor resourcing.'* (Focus Group Discussion, male respondent)

Overall, it emerged that Rural Local Authorities are benefitting a lot from planning data from the Rural WASH Information Management System (RWIMS), although many have been struggling to keep the system afloat. For Service Level Benchmarking, Urban Local Authorities also continue to finance annual peer review meetings to update their reports although the best arrangement would have been to convert the process into a system for ease of access by the sector, including management and updating of performance data moving forward.

### Financing of the institutional arrangement

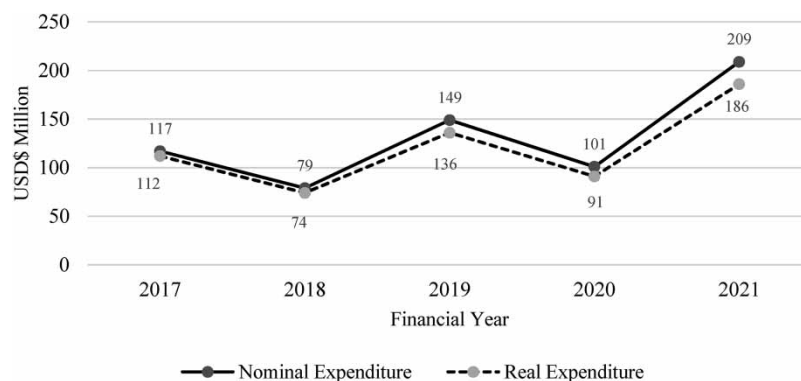
Focus Group Discussions held with stakeholders at both national and sub-national levels on sector funding revealed that government spending in WASH has been on an increase over the past 5 years, although with some notable yearly fluctuations. For the financial year 2021, 'real WASH' expenditure totaled US\$186 million; a rise by 4% from the 3.6% (US\$91 million) reported in 2020 (Figure 9).

From the Focus Group discussions held, it emerged that,

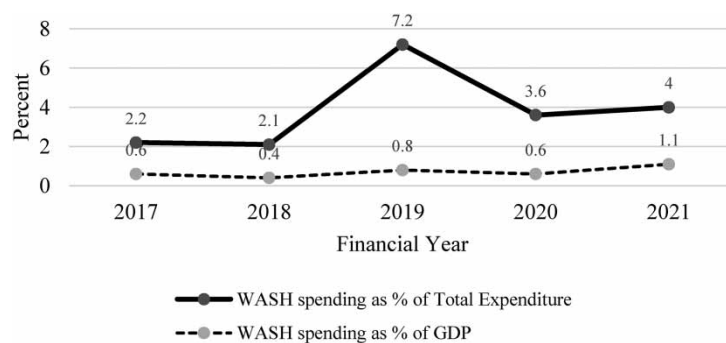
*'As a percentage of the national budget, WASH expenditure has averaged 3.3% over the last four years; well below the SWA commitment of 7% per financial year.'* (Key Information Interview, male respondent)

Using data gathered through the national fiscus, WASH spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) averages 0.6% between 2017 and 2020, and 0.5 percentage points from 0.6% in 2020 to 1.1% in 2021 (see Figure 10).

One of the key informants revealed that this is mainly due to increased planned outlays for 'big WASH' (dam construction) and improved allocation for environmental health sub-programmes that are critical for promoting



**Figure 9** | Nominal and real WASH sector (Spending Trends, 2017–2021).



**Figure 10** | WASH spending (as percentage of total spending and percentage of gross domestic product).

hygiene and monitoring of water quality standards in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic. It was also further claimed that the national fiscus budget for the sector remains principally a ‘big WASH-focused budget’ which tends to swallow ‘real WASH’ issues.

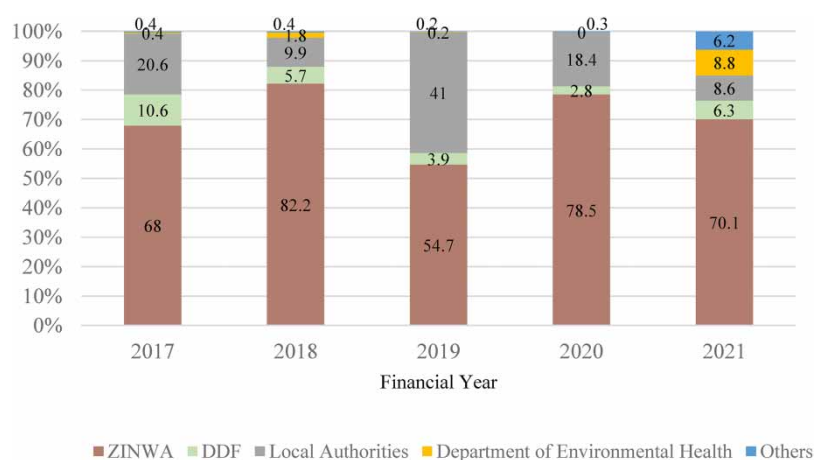
Follow-up Focus Group Discussions revealed that, institutionally, the ZINWA administers the largest proportion of the WASH sector budget, with an average of 70% for the period 2017–2021. This is mainly due to the so-called ‘big WASH’ implemented by the water authority. The Departments of Environmental Health and Local Authorities account for the second and third largest shares at 8.8 and 8.6% of total WASH spending in 2021 (Figure 11).

## DISCUSSION

Findings from the current study established that WASH services constitute basic human rights that the Zimbabwean government is obligated to deliver and the NAC provides a whole-of-government framework for fulfilling this obligation. However, even though this coordination structure has evolved over time, absence of a clear guiding framework on how this structure is expected to link with other sectors to leverage from the comparative advantage poses a very big limiting factor. In his study of the Ugandan WASH sector, Handley (2009) argued that limited sectoral coordination and dialogue across sectors, national sector actors and development partners have resulted in duplication, high transaction costs and fragmented monitoring and reporting. In support of Handley’s argument, UNICEF (2021) contended that with emerging developments propelled by COVID-19 and climate change, multi-sectoral coordination is one of the ways in which some progressive countries are able to better develop, finance, and sustain sector interventions for results and impact. These inter- and across-linkages will help explain how WASH can best align with and feeds into broader national health and climate rationale.

The core committees of the NAC are manned by line ministries with an interest in WASH. Members constituting these various committees have their mandates in the NAC business derived from respective acts and statutes establishing them. However, the reported conflict of roles and responsibilities and in some cases misplaced roles accorded to some agencies all affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the coordination machinery. This also affects issues of social capital among members, accountability, and transparency, all of which are critical governance success factors. Pswarayi-Riddihough (2018) echoed that good governance requires credible and trustworthy institutions built on principles of transparency and accountability.

Beyond the issue of membership, roles and responsibilities, the NAC ought to be accorded legal rights through an act of parliament for it to attract necessary authority and command to coordinate the sector. This according to Kativhu *et al.* (2021) is in line with the recommendations of the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade which dictated the need to make sure that beyond the formation of National Action Committees for WASH, parties go ahead and regularize this institution through linking it to an act of parliament. Zimbabwe had such an opportunity in 2013 when it developed its National Water Policy. A policy statement on the formation of the NAC was going to help regularize, legalize and give power to the structure. Unfortunately, the policy went ahead to propose new institutions, one such institution being the Water and Wastewater Regulatory Unit (GoZ 2013).



**Figure 11** | WASH sector spending by institution, financial year 2017–2021.

Regarding sector planning and financing, the significant capacity challenges noted through this study affect the performance of the NAC in its WASH service delivery role. This same argument was put forward by [Dahlstrom et al. \(2010\)](#) that lack of resources which is an indicator of poor planning hinders smooth coordination of WASH structures and interventions. The fact that the resource mobilization machinery of the NAC, the planning and budgeting sub-committee is struggling with elementary things like convening coordination meetings makes the challenge insurmountable. [Muyambo & Klaassen \(2015\)](#) noted that due to weakened planning capacity, many towns and utilities in Zimbabwe are operating without current and validated master plans. According to [AMCOW \(2011\)](#), resource constraints have also grossly undermined the NAC's short- to medium-term efforts to rejuvenate the sector and make it responsive to the pressing rural and urban WASH service demands. Performance of the whole institutional structure thus always remains sub-optimal. Current sector financing falls far short of what national governments committed at the 2014 SWA investment conference. At this conference, governments committed to allocate 7% of their individual annual budgets to WASH. The current allocation is also below the ideal funding for WASH proposed under the [Foster & Briceno-Garmendia \(2010\)](#) requiring Sub-Saharan African countries to allocate 0.9% of GDP to achieve improved WASH outcomes.

Strengthened sector information and knowledge management remain key in ensuring the existence of an effective coordination mechanism. [Steyn & Van Belle \(2015\)](#) argued that this element is a core component of development strategies employed by governments, multilateral agencies, NGOs and academia yelling for success. [Schaub-Jones \(2013\)](#) argued that harnessing information and communication technologies brings about radical improvements in the way that health, education and other sectors function. The RWIMS developed for the rural WASH sub-sector in Zimbabwe always stands out as a reference point. This system has been useful in directing evidence-based sector planning, monitoring reporting, and resource mobilization. A lot however still needs to be done to perfect the system and ensure that it operates efficiently. Currently, the institution of the Rural District Council is seized with a huge budget required to operate, maintain and sustain the system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

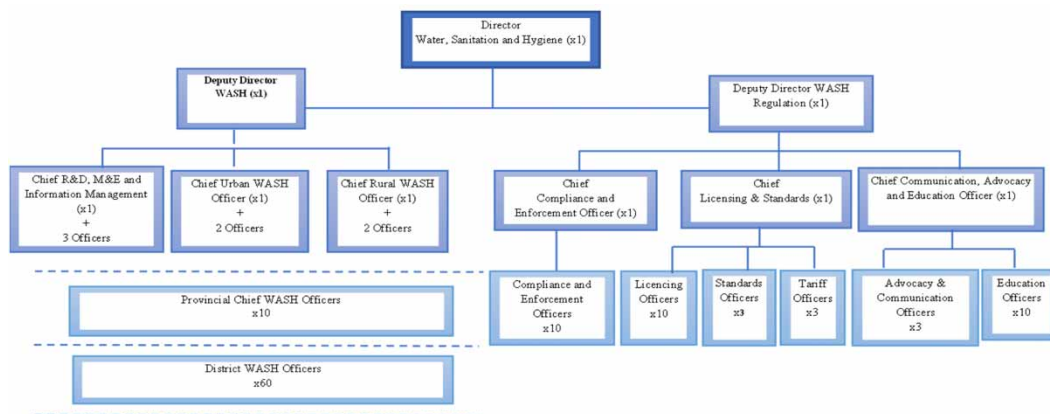
Based on the above study findings, closer integration of the sector's WASH components is needed, further reinforced by streamlining of agency responsibilities particularly for state institutions based on constitutionally aligned competences. This will also help frame role clarity for WASH functions between central and local government institutions, state agencies and external development partners, and between state and non-state actors. This will help provide an appropriate basis for the development of a national WASH sector investment strategy, and Local Authority level WASH investment plans thus making WASH financing easier to frame in terms of public-private sector and civil society resources.

Government through the ministry responsible for water also ought to urgently commission a review of the current WASH sector coordination mechanism which was last rejuvenated in 2010. This ought to be done with a view to further strengthen the coordination mechanism in line with the tenets of the 2013 national water policy and the 2013 national constitution. The policy in one of its clauses recommending the setting up of additional WASH management institutions, key among which is the water and wastewater regulatory authority. To strengthen and make effective operations of the NAC Secretariat, the Department of National WASH Coordination (DWASHC), there is an urgent need to expand and decentralize DWASHC. This expansion will be in terms of functions where sector regulation and standards are anticipated additions to the current focus on just coordination as per the proposed structure in [Figure 12](#).

The proposed DWASHC structure is subject to further sector discussions to better refine it. In refining the structure some of the focus may be on addressing the tensions between 'big-WASH/dams' and 'small/real-WASH'. The lead ministry remains principally a 'big-WASH focused institution' and on budgets 'real-WASH' issues tend to be swallowed.

There is also urgent need to review terms of reference and membership for all existing committees and task-forces of the NAC with an objective to strengthen the structure. This will see new terms of reference developed where they don't exist. The many political and development structures coming in with devolution are all key enablers for a strengthened sector coordination mechanism to back this review. This move will thus be one attempt to re-align the current coordination mechanism to changes in the political landscape. The 'new-look structure' ought to be multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral allowing all standing sector constituencies





**Figure 12** | Proposed structure for a strengthened department of national WASH coordination.

to fully subscribe to the coordination mechanism and mandated with clear responsibilities. Additionally, a strategic operational framework also ought to be mooted to anchor the coordination structure.

Along with the above, the lead ministry also ought to capitalize on the review of the sector coordination mechanism to make sure that the ‘new-look structure’ is regularized before the law. This will allow the NAC structure to emerge as a legal establishment thus giving it more power, recognition and authority required for effective sector coordination, decision-making and leadership. The enabling statutes are already there through the 2013 National Water Policy and the Water Act (Chapter 20:24) to cause that to happen, especially now when the Water Act is undergoing review to incorporate the water and wastewater regulatory functions previously held under the ZINWA Act (Chapter 20:25).

## CONCLUSION

The slow pace at which the country continues to reduce the number of people without access to safely managed WASH services is evidence of a weakened coordination mechanism. Sustainable WASH services require a delivery structure and process where central government, local authorities, civil society organizations, research and learning institutions, private sector and rights holders fully engage each other, have mutual trust and effectively deliver on their roles. This local compact ought to fully own its service delivery challenges and be committed to work together to solve them with public sector support through a robust financing mechanism. A more enabling public sector system (governance and leadership) such as this one creates an appropriate environment within which the capacities of different stakeholders can be deployed effectively, at higher levels of value for money and in ways that are not overly ‘projectized’. The institution of the National Action Committee fittingly reviewed and capacitated as guided by the above recommendations is a potential and strategic game changer with great potential to revolutionize WASH service delivery and enhance the attainment of SDG6 on clean water and sanitation by 2030.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All relevant data are included in the paper or its Supplementary Information.

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