

Effective Government Leadership for Essential Services: Core Competencies and Necessary Actions

Position Paper



Executive Summary

Effective government leadership is essential to improving water supply and sanitation (WSS) services. There has been considerable attention in flagship programmes, high-level declarations, and many conferences on the importance of ‘political will’ and leadership in redressing the sector’s chronic weaknesses. As countries such as India, Rwanda, and Peru highlight, where effective government leadership is displayed and sustained in the political and technocratic domains, transformational progress in accelerating access to safe, reliable and equitable WSS services is possible.

The WSS sector needs to develop a collective understanding of what constitutes effective government leadership. While the importance of effective leadership is widely accepted, sector stakeholders often concentrate on a small set of top-level components of government leadership, including political rhetoric, setting headline targets and policy objectives, and resource commitments. By focusing on these aspects, the sector tends to neglect the wider government leadership competencies and actions critical to successfully operationalising reforms and accelerating progress towards national targets.

This paper aims to trigger a focused dialogue on what constitutes effective government leadership and the actions different stakeholders should undertake. It details effective leadership competencies and outlines the headline actions required to tackle some of the sector’s key challenges: inadequate sector funding and financing, weak regulation, and under resourced institutions. It is informed by over 80 consultations, a desk review of academic and grey literature on effective government leadership in the WSS sector and beyond, and a detailed analysis of targeted initiatives and reforms to improve WSS services in India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Nepal, Peru, Rwanda, and Zambia.

Five effective government leadership competencies of particular importance are detailed.



Vision-Setting and Communication

WSS is positioned as central to national development, with a compelling vision and rationale and priority actions effectively communicated in speeches and policy and strategy documents



Devolution of Decision-Making and Resources

Sub-national actors are given sufficient decision-making autonomy and resources to enable successful implementation and adaptation to local specificities



Cross-Governmental Coordination

Multiple actors are engaged in collective problem-solving, and formal and informal coalitions are built and leveraged to advance shared goals



Accountability and Incentives

Organisational mandates are defined and institutionalised, accountability mechanisms foster responsiveness to citizens' needs, and powerful incentives reward good performance



Diagnostics and Course Corrections

Implementation is systematically monitored and a culture of learning and adaptation is fostered to track progress, identify and tackle bottlenecks, and replicate good practices

Enabling effective government leadership requires a shift in approaches. Effective government leadership on WSS — and indeed any equivalent essential service sector — is difficult to achieve and sustain, with broader contextual factors and deep-rooted structural weaknesses frequently acting as key barriers. Nevertheless, effective government leadership is foundational for improving services and is a topic that requires far greater collective attention. This paper does not have all the answers or offer a definitive framework for fostering effective government leadership. Nonetheless, as a starting point, political leaders, senior technocrats, and wider sector stakeholders looking to support effective government leadership should:



Account for the Full Range of Effective Government Leadership Competencies

Focusing on a single competency in isolation or strengthening one or two individual elements (when other competencies remain weak) is rarely sufficient



Bring Political and Technocratic Leaders Together

For truly transformational impact, the leadership competencies need to be effectively exercised in the political and technocratic domains, with political and technocratic leaders operating in unison



Look Beyond the WSS Sector

Effective leadership necessitates 'integrated approaches', working across sectors and engaging cross- and supra-sectoral bodies that control the 'ligatures' of government



Foster Many Individual Leaders

A single senior leader can start a reform but cannot sustain it alone; a mission-driven bureaucracy must be fostered in which government institutions incentivise and empower many individual leaders to function as collective agents of change



Strengthen Financial Capabilities

Headline commitments to mobilise additional finance are only as credible as the technical capability behind them; they require teams to focus on structuring financing instruments, negotiating with development finance institutions, and designing sustainable tariff and subsidy regimes



Invest Resources in a Continuing Reform Agenda

Reforms are not a one-off decision or process of updating or enacting legislation; efforts to support government leadership must account for long-term time horizons, avoid focusing on individual milestones

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Cover photo: @Sanitation and Water of All

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Introduction

Effective government leadership is foundational to addressing the deep-rooted challenges impeding universal access to safe and reliable water supply and sanitation (WSS) services.

Despite progress in expanding access to WSS services, wide-ranging systemic weaknesses severely impede the achievement of ambitious sector targets. These include (IRC WASH, 2026):

Weak Political Prioritisation

The WSS sector is rarely viewed as a vital economic enabler; it frequently receives inconsistent attention from political leadership and is often underprioritised in national development agendas.

No Long-Term Vision

Many countries lack a sufficiently clear long-term vision for professional WSS service provision, with clearly defined mandates for policymakers, service providers, regulators, and users.

Underpowered Regulatory Frameworks

Regulatory authorities often lack legally backed mandates, independence, or capacity to oversee performance, protect consumers, and ensure fair tariff-setting.

Under-Resourced Institutions

Service providers, municipalities, and national authorities frequently do not have the required technical, managerial, and financial capabilities to fulfil their mandates.

Weak Data Systems

National and sub-national actors frequently lack the reliable, timely data needed to plan investments, track performance, and heighten accountability.

Chronic Sector Underfunding

Countries and service providers are unable to generate necessary resources, with capital investment well below required levels and tariff frameworks outdated and unable to generate sufficient revenues for sustainable O&M.

There has been considerable attention on the importance of 'political will' and leadership in redressing the sector's chronic weaknesses. They are the focus of flagship programmes (e.g., [Heads of State Initiatives](#), [Water Forward](#)), consistently cited in high-level strategies, declarations, and guidelines (e.g., the [African Sanitation Policy Guidelines](#), Agenda 2063), and are central to many convenings (e.g., the Sanitation and Water for All [Finance and Sector Ministers' Meetings](#)). These events, declarations and initiatives have elicited commitments to improve services, mobilise resources, and strengthen various elements of the

system. However, they are rarely accompanied by substantive attempts to identify and adopt the leadership competencies and actions required to translate on-paper commitments into concrete progress. Consequently, in most instances, insufficient actions are subsequently taken to incentivise and drive the improvements necessary to properly address systemic challenges and accelerate progress towards headline sector targets.

The WSS sector needs to develop a collective understanding of what constitutes effective government leadership. While

effective government leadership's importance is widely accepted, sector stakeholders often concentrate on a small set of top-level components of leadership, including political prioritisation, setting headline targets and policy objectives, and resource mobilisation commitments. Each of these elements is vital and high-level political commitments can play a crucial role in '*opening the door*' for required reforms. However, by focusing on these totemic aspects, the sector often pays insufficient attention to the wider government leadership competencies and actions critical to successfully operationalising reforms and accelerating progress towards sector targets.

This paper details five effective government leadership competencies and outlines the actions required to support effective leadership. Effective government leadership on WSS – and indeed any equivalent essential service sector – is difficult to achieve and sustain. This paper does not claim to offer a definitive framework. It offers generalised lessons from countries that have made noteworthy progress and ultimately aims to trigger a focused dialogue on what constitutes effective government leadership and the actions different constituent groups could take to support sustained leadership. In doing so, it hopes to ensure these elements achieve greater collective attention and prioritisation in the wide-ranging efforts to address the WSS sector's persistent challenges.

A desk review of academic and grey literature on effective leadership in the WSS sector (and beyond) and a detailed analysis, including over 80 consultations, of targeted initiatives and reforms to improve services in India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Nepal, Peru, Rwanda, and Zambia (see Figure 1) informed this paper.¹ This paper comprises three further parts: Section Two presents the **impact** of sustained effective government leadership. Section Three outlines **five core competencies** of effective government leadership. Section Four concludes by proposing **priority actions** to support effective leadership.



Substantive Sector Reforms, Peru

Passing and operationalising several legal instruments that marked major revisions to the sector (2013 onwards), including establishing service delivery standards, promoting service provider efficiency and professionalisation, establishing regulatory mechanisms (e.g. tariff frameworks), and deconcentration of key agencies (technical support, regulation) so they have a presence at the regional level.



Reforms to Achieve Universal Access to at least a Basic Pit Latrine in Rural Areas, Rwanda

Progressive reforms related to rural sanitation, including decentralisation and the Imihigo performance contracts, establishing and strengthening the national utility, forming district sanitation centres, and implementing the Community-Based Environmental Health Promotion Programme.

¹ These eight case studies were chosen from a long list of 23 and primarily selected based on a rapid investigation of the extent to which an initial set of key government leadership competencies were displayed. Case study selection was also informed by a desire for geographic and thematic diversity, as well as evidence of impact on WSS services.



Clean Nigeria Campaign, Kaduna State

From 2019 onwards, the revision of institutional and policy frameworks to align with the Clean Nigeria Campaign that aims to achieve an ODF Nigeria by 2030, the development of an ODF roadmap for Kaduna State, restoring WASH departments in each of the State's Local Government Assemblies, and the declaration of a State of Emergency on WASH.



Institutional and Governance Reforms for Water and Sanitation, Odisha State, India

Widespread reforms, including establishing the Water Corporation of Odisha as a corporate entity (2019), launching several dedicated WASH missions (2019 onwards), establishing state and divisional-level laboratories, and declaring the legal "Right to Water".



Management information System Development and Progressive Evolution and Application, Nepal

The development and institutionalisation of N-WASH, a national management and information system for data-driven planning and monitoring and accountability in Nepal's WASH sector. N-WASH grew from a rural M&E system into a sector-wide tool used to inform WASH planning at all levels of the federal government system.



Expansion of Regulatory Activities to include Urban Onsite Sanitation and Rural Water and Sanitation, Zambia

Development of strategy documents for the provision and regulation of urban onsite sanitation and rural water and sanitation (2018) and their subsequent implementation (2018 onwards). This has included updating legal instruments, developing regulatory mechanisms, training service providers, revising indicators, and expanding the regulator's capacity.



Institutional and Governance Reforms at Lilongwe Water Board, Malawi.

Internal reforms to Lilongwe Water Board (utility), including formulating a strategic plan that placed institutional reform and operational efficiency at the heart of the organisation (2015), formalising zonal offices as cost/business centres (2017), interventions to improve customer centricity and responsiveness (2018), transfer of sewerage functions from Lilongwe City Council to Lilongwe Water Board (2023), and expansion to provide bottled water (2023).



Scaling of a Delegated Management Model, Kenya

Piloting of a delegated management model in 2004 and its subsequent scaling, including Pro-Poor Guidelines promoting the model (2009), several utilities' integration of the model into their core approach (2010s), the revision of legal instruments at the county-level (late 2010s), integration of the model into further guidance documents (2019 and 2020), and the further promotion of the approach by the sector regulator (and others) (2020s).

Figure 1:
Case-Study Overview

2

The Impact of Effective Government Leadership

Where effective government leadership is displayed and sustained, critical improvements in WSS services typically occur.

Figure 3 (next page) provides a top-level overview of the identified impact of government leadership on strengthening key elements of the WSS system and, more importantly, services for each case study. The impact on services was especially significant when:

- The leadership competencies were effectively exercised across political and technocratic domains.
- A range of different effective government leadership competencies are displayed (see following section) and a couple of competencies function very effectively.

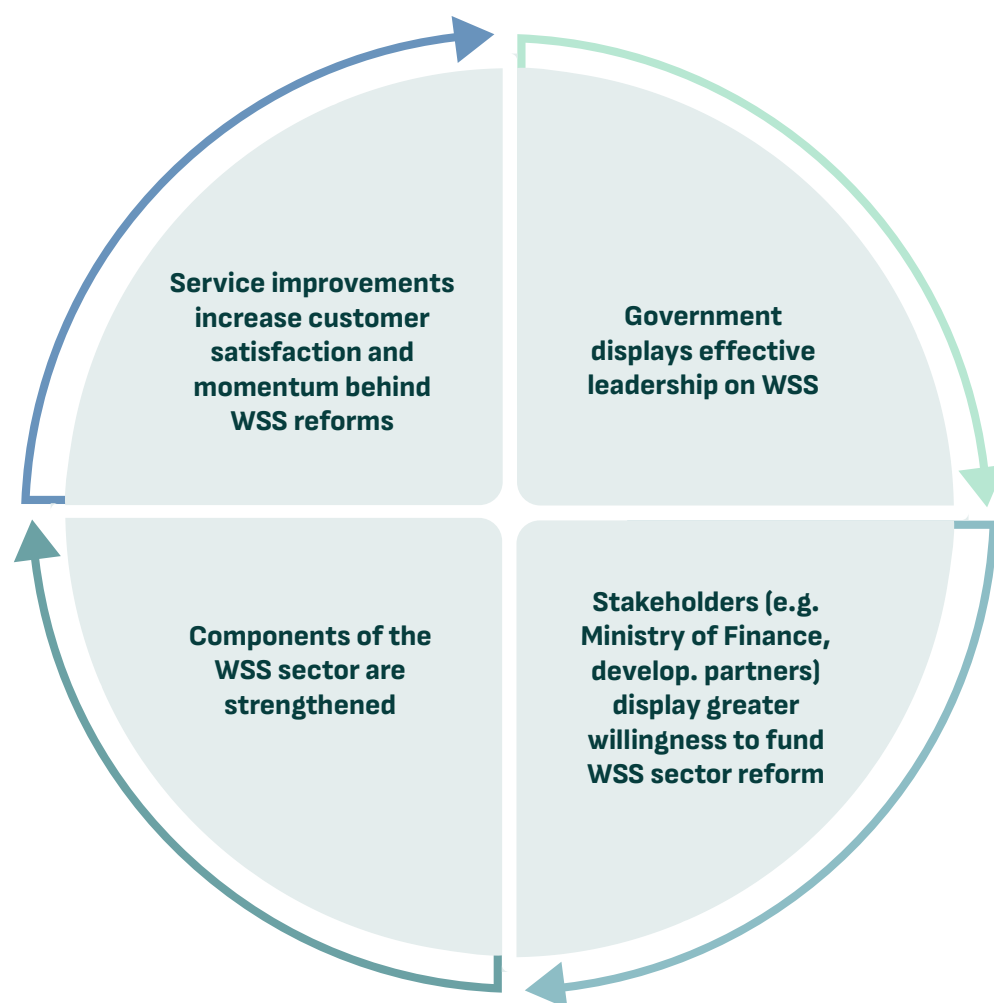
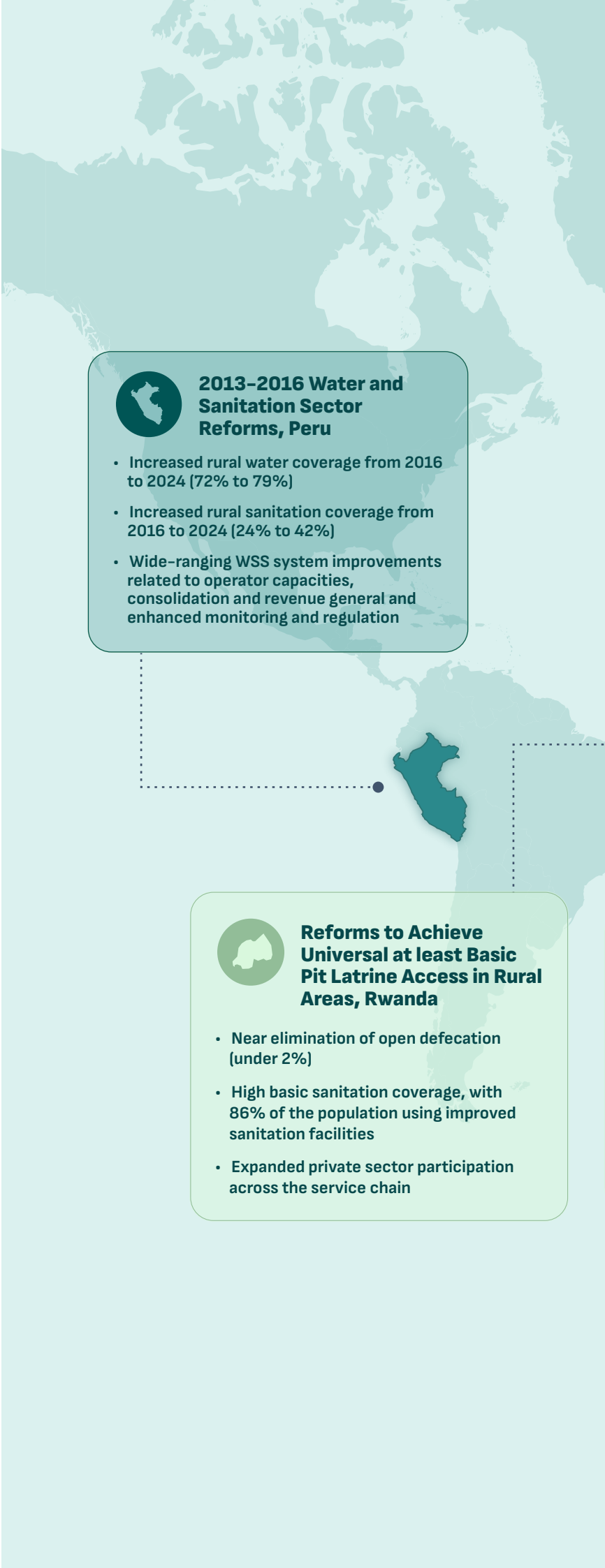


Figure 2:
Effective Government Leadership and Virtuous Cycles

The case studies from India, Rwanda, and Peru perform best across both these elements, achieving impact at the greatest scale.

Effective government leadership often sparks a virtuous cycle with cumulative positive impacts. As Figure 2 highlights, early demonstrations of leadership – such as setting and effectively communicating a clear sector vision – build stakeholder confidence and unlock additional resources, including public financing and inward investments. These resources enable targeted strengthening of WSS systems, improving service delivery and generating further momentum for reform. Improved outcomes can reinforce incentives for the government to deepen and broaden its leadership competencies, sustaining a virtuous cycle of progress. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that broader contextual factors and deep-rooted structural weaknesses such as domestic resource availability and wider political-economy barriers frequently limit the impact of the five leadership competencies.



2013–2016 Water and Sanitation Sector Reforms, Peru

- Increased rural water coverage from 2016 to 2024 (72% to 79%)
- Increased rural sanitation coverage from 2016 to 2024 (24% to 42%)
- Wide-ranging WSS system improvements related to operator capacities, consolidation and revenue general and enhanced monitoring and regulation



Reforms to Achieve Universal at least Basic Pit Latrine Access in Rural Areas, Rwanda

- Near elimination of open defecation (under 2%)
- High basic sanitation coverage, with 86% of the population using improved sanitation facilities
- Expanded private sector participation across the service chain



Clean Nigeria Campaign, Kaduna State

- 10 of Kaduna State's 23 Local Government Assemblies have declared ODF, rising from just one in 2020
- Improved toilet coverage at 85% in ODF-certified Local Government Assemblies



Institutional and Governance Reforms for Water and Sanitation, Odisha State, India

- Provision of 24/7 continuous, pressurised and potable water supply to all 32,017 households in Puri, including comprehensive coverage of 64 slum areas, serving 66,000 slum dwellers
- Reduction of non-revenue water from 54% to 15% and increased revenue collection efficiency



Management Information System Development and Progressive Evolution and Application, Nepal

- The NWASH-MIS is now nationally institutionalised, guiding policy, monitoring, and resource allocation across Nepal's WSS sector
- Over 300 local government WASH plans have been developed using NWASH-MIS to support evidence-based planning
- Standardised data has improved service gap identification, investment targeting, and transparency



Expansion of Regulatory Activities to include Urban Onsite Sanitation and Rural Water and Sanitation, Zambia

- Improved sector-wide understanding of institutional responsibilities for service provision and regulation
- Utility integration of faecal sludge management service delivery into their services
- Increased budget allocations by central government
- Enhanced private sector involvement service provision, with one private operator serving +/- 100,000 rural consumers



Scaling of a delegated management model, Kenya

- Expanded service coverage, with delegated operators in Kisumu going from formally managing zero household connections to over 7,000
- Improved regulatory framework for the model, including the development of tailored standards and guidelines
- Reduced non-revenue water from 37% to 13%
- Increased revenue efficiency to routinely exceed 95% in delegated zones



Institutional and Governance Reforms at Lilongwe Water Board, Malawi

- The doubling of domestic water connections
- Increased revenue collection efficiency from 84% to 91%
- Quadrupled customer satisfaction rate (19% to 76%)
- Rising to be ranked the second-best performing utility in the region by ESAWAS for 2023/24

Figure 3:

The Impact of Effective Government Leadership

3

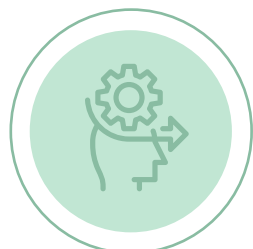
Effective
Government
Leadership
Competencies

Five effective government leadership competencies are critical to accelerating progress to universal access to high-quality, sustainable and inclusive services. The following sub-sections elaborate on the main elements of each competency, which are summarised as:



● **Vision-Setting and Communication.**

WSS is positioned as central to national development, with the vision, priority actions and a compelling rationale articulated in speeches and policy and strategy documents and effectively communicated to the public and implementing bureaucrats.



● **Devolution of Decision-Making and Resources.**

Sub-national actors are given sufficient decision-making autonomy and resources to enable successful implementation and adaptation to local specificities.



● **Cross-Governmental Coordination.**

Multiple actors are engaged in collective problem-solving, and formal and informal coalitions are built and leveraged to advance shared goals.



● **Accountability and Incentives.**

Organisational mandates are defined and institutionalised, accountability mechanisms foster responsiveness to citizens' needs and a focus on collective improvement, and powerful incentives reward good performance.



● **Diagnostics and Course Corrections.**

Implementation is systematically monitored and a culture of learning and adaptation exists to track progress, identify and tackle bottlenecks, and replicate good practices.

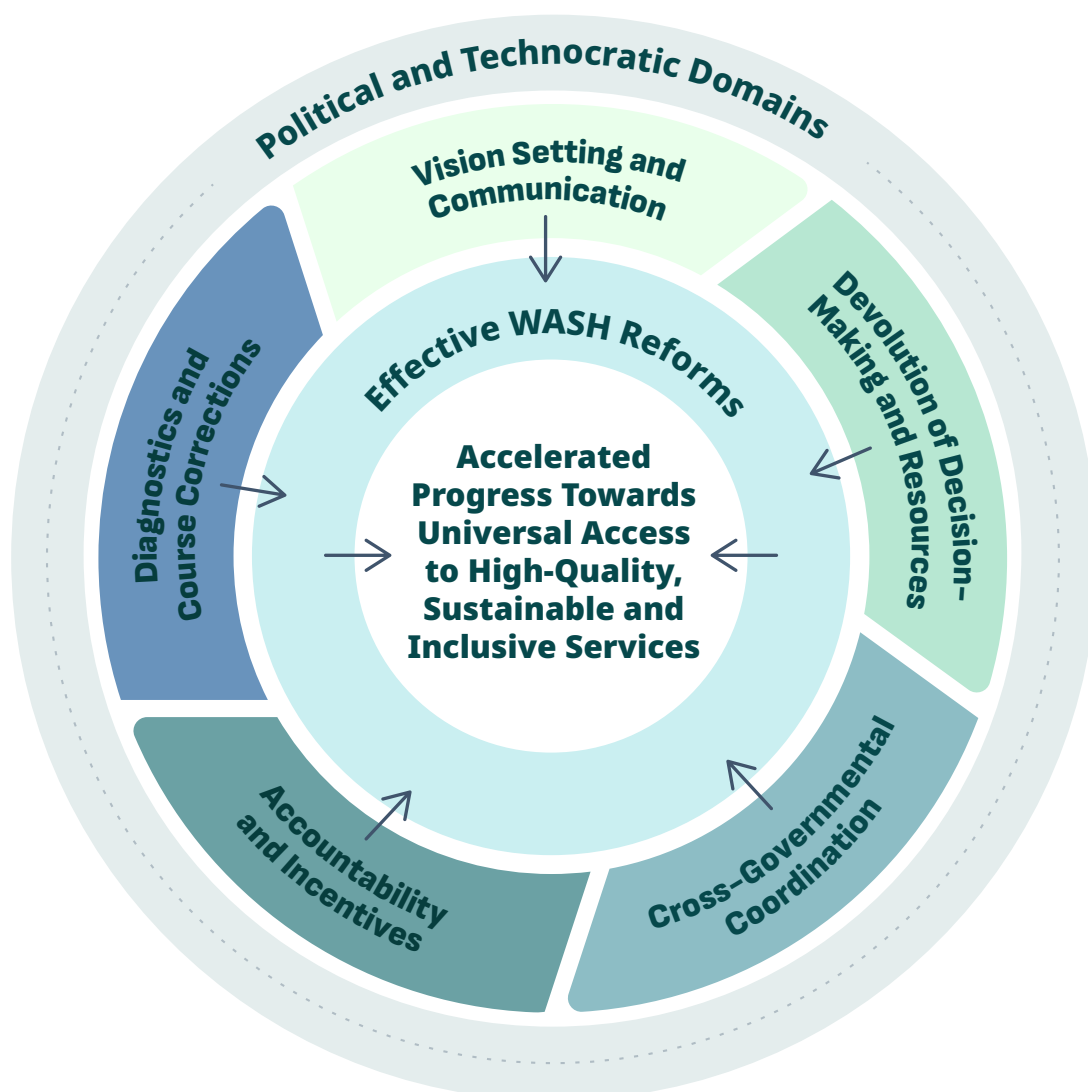


Figure 4:
Government Leader-
ship Competencies

These **leadership competencies** encompass a wide-ranging set of actions and require a comprehensive mixture of skills and behaviours to be effectively exercised. Displaying these competencies requires looking beyond the WSS sector and the gifts of a single charismatic leader, recognising that the sector exists within – and is heavily influenced by – a much wider system comprising many other sectors and actors, and engaging and working with cross- and supra-sectoral bodies.

A base level of at least moderate or good performance for each competency, along with at least a couple of competencies functioning very effectively, is required to deliver significant improvements at scale. Focusing on a single competency in isolation or strengthening only one or two individual

elements (when the other competencies remain weak) is rarely sufficient to deliver necessary improvements. There are, for example, many instances of stakeholders successfully strengthening the vision-setting and communication competency in isolation (e.g., by producing a [Ministerial WSS Compact](#) or formulating a headline strategy) without following through with the wider set of required leadership actions, resulting in only modest gains.

Effective government leadership requires exercising the competencies in both the political and technocratic domains. For truly transformational government leadership to occur, the leadership competencies need to be effectively exercised in the political and technocratic domains with political and te-

chnocratic actors and institutions operating in unison towards a common aim (see Figure 5). This requires effective collaboration across government institutions and often involves working with or through institutions with a

cross- or supra-sectoral mandate (e.g., a National Planning or Inter-Ministerial Committee, the Ministry of Local Government or Public Administration, or a Presidential Delivery Unit).

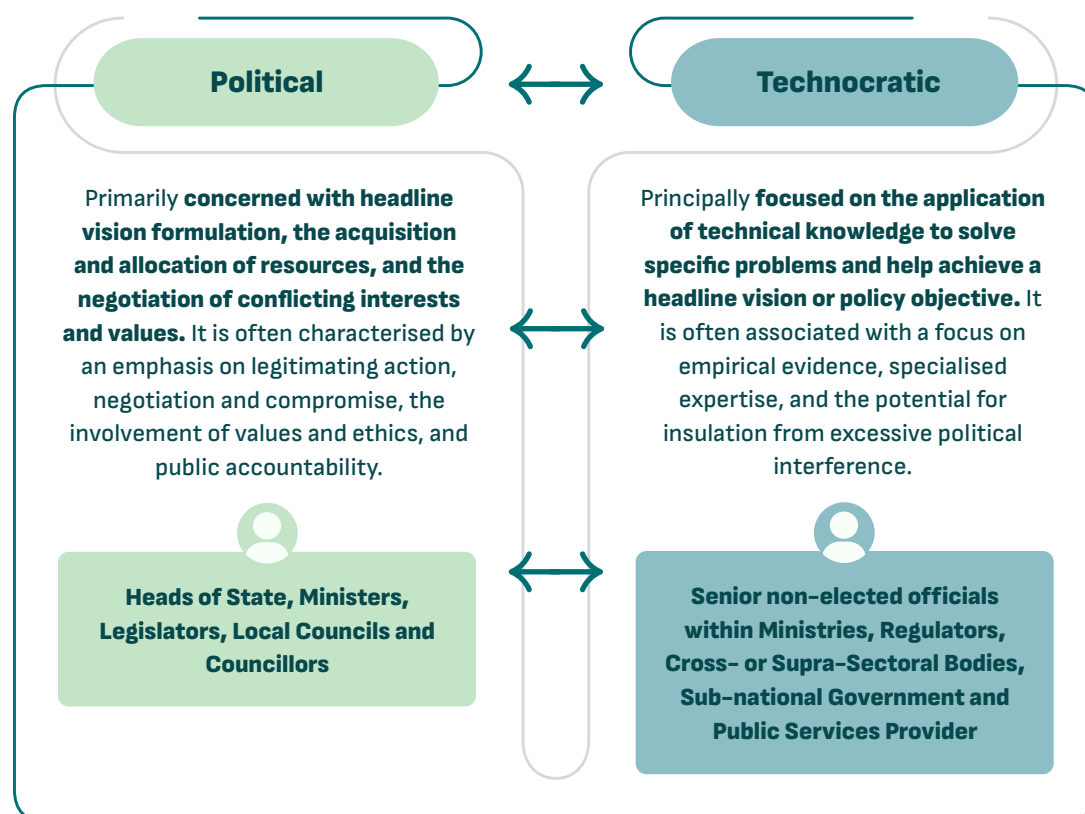


Figure 5:
The Political and Technocratic Domains

Effective government leadership necessitates strong institutions and the dispersal of leadership functions beyond key individuals.

In the earlier stages of initiatives and reforms, individual leaders who tenaciously drive forward purposeful change, display a breadth of inter-personal skills, and cultivate and draw on the expertise of those around them, play a crucial role. However, the breadth of skills, behaviours and actions encompassed within the five government leadership competencies ultimately requires strong institutions and the nurturing of a [mission-driven bureaucracy](#) comprising many individual leaders and change agents, rather than the activities of a single transformative leader.

Effective government leadership must be sustained over time.

Accelerating progress towards universal sustainable services typically requires system-wide changes and

reforms; it does not happen overnight as a result of a one-off decision or one-time process, for example, updating or enacting legislation. Such changes and reforms require sustained inputs and adaptations, often spanning decades, to be fully implemented and ambitious sector targets achieved. Indeed, as the example of rural sanitation in Rwanda highlights, even when initiatives are highly successful in rapidly improving services, progressive reforms and adaptations are required over multiple decades to underpin evolving targets (e.g., eliminating open defecation to universal access to safely managed services) and address emerging challenges.



3.1 Vision-Setting and Communication

Vision-setting is essential for creating a political imperative to prioritise improving WSS services and positioning WSS as central to broader developmental goals and widely resonant public themes. For technocrats, the vision is consolidated with evidence and a bureaucratic rationale. Effective communication and dissemination are also critical; when senior government figures consistently deliver the vision, it builds legitimacy, raises awareness, and structures the hierarchy of initiatives and reforms. The vision-setting and communication competency has three headline elements:

- **WSS is embedded within a broader development narrative.** WSS is embedded within a broader national development vision, mission, or agenda placing improved WSS services and sector reforms as central to achieving broader national aspirations such as the drive for modernity or even consolidating a wider national identity. This necessitates engaging the public as well as cross- or supra-sectoral bodies and supports the political and technocratic prioritisation required to mobilise multiple levers (i.e., financial resources, performance-based incentives) to drive progress. For example, in Rwanda, sanitation is embedded in the national transformation agenda, and political leaders consistently frame it as a civic duty tied to dignity, self-reliance, and health.
- **Policy and strategy documents ground an evidence-based vision.** The vision should go beyond setting objectives to detailing the actions required to achieve targets; justifying the distribution of responsibilities and resources, and rationalising the pace, timelines

and monitoring mechanisms. It benefits from being referenced in sufficient detail within supporting policy and strategy documents, providing a firm basis for the wide-ranging set of coordinated actions required. In Zambia, beyond articulating headline objectives and a clear rationale for reform, strategy documents for onsite sanitation and rural water supply and sanitation present specific targets, responsibilities, and activities, in general and in relation to individual organisations.

- **The vision is disseminated and effectively communicated by senior officials.** The vision is actively and repeatedly disseminated, evoked and effectively communicated by relevant government institutions and individuals, including from outside the WSS sector. By communicating the vision themselves, senior officials demonstrate that WSS and sector reforms are a strategic priority, lending authority and encouraging others to align behind the vision.

Box One: Vision-Setting and Communication in Odisha State, India



Odisha's breakthrough achievements in urban water services were rooted in a compelling and consistently communicated vision. The Chief Minister framed water as central to a modern, outward-looking Odisha. This high-level aspiration provided bureaucrats with the political cover to pursue ambitious reforms at an accelerated pace, challenging entrenched bureaucratic and political norms and rigidities.

The translation of the state's vision into reality was driven by the Additional Chief Secretary, who positioned 24/7 potable water as the 'golden indicator'. His communication style, close engagement with implementers and representatives from marginalised community groups linked technical delivery to shared values (urgency, ambitions for state-level development, and service to citizens), lifting aspirations of technocrats, politicians, and community partners alike. By repeatedly framing piped, potable household water as a symbol of dignity and modernity, expectations were reshaped; water became not an incremental improvement but a transformative promise, empowering and motivating officials to deliver. This contributed to achieving 24x7 water supply and major reductions in non-revenue water dropping from 54% to 15%.



Liberia



Malawi



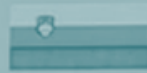
Maldives



Niger



Sierra Leone



Slovenia



Solomon Islands



Somalia



Sri Lanka



Tanzania



The Gambia



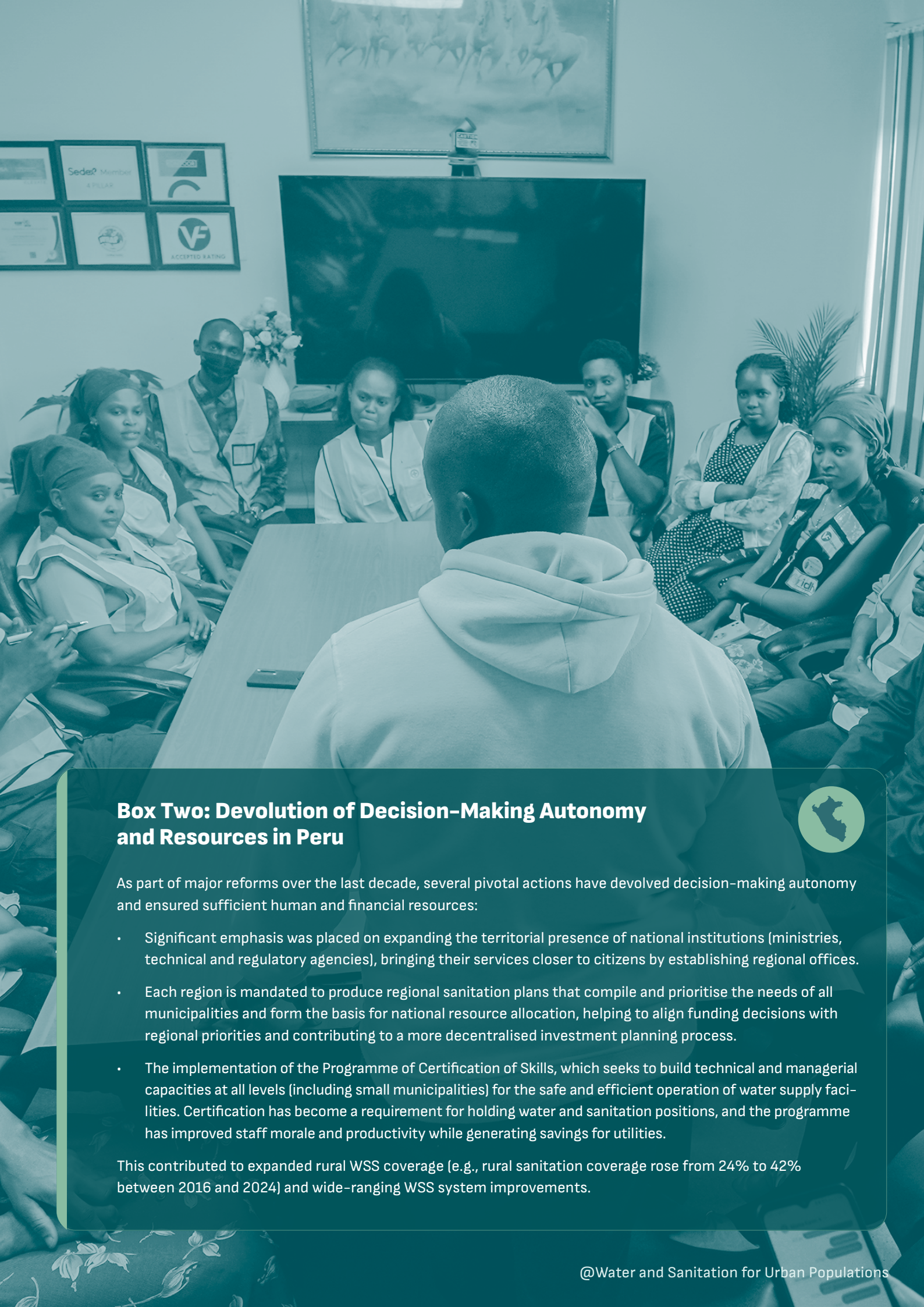


3.2 Devolution of Decision-making and Resources

Decentralising decision-making is crucial to build ownership and facilitate the adoption of innovative approaches to overcome implementation challenges and account for local particularities and constraints. Devolution is the most extensive form of decentralisation and must be accompanied by sufficient human and financial resources and adequate levels of discretion in their utilisation. Effecting change – and improving devolution – is rooted in deep public administration processes and rules, including models for fiscal allocations, headcount and operational resources at the local government level, and the degree of flexibility in sector guidelines. These are each especially difficult to influence and require a whole-of-government approach. The devolution of decision-making and resources competency has two core elements:

- **A sufficient and appropriate degree of decision-making autonomy.** Decision-making autonomy is necessary to build ownership and cultivate functional discretion at the sub-national level to enable local-level problem-solving, innovation and policy adaptation to reflect contextual specificities and local consumer needs. At Lilongwe Water Board, for example, the devolution of leadership functions is substantial, with Zonal managers empowered to act as 'mini-CEOs' and performance contracts implemented that facilitate rapid, informed, local decision-making.
- **Adequate devolved human and financial resources.** Operationalisation requires devolving adequate human and financial resources to enable stakeholders to fulfil their mandates and implement new approaches and functions. This

includes establishing dedicated budget lines, leveraging previously untapped financial sources, and ring-fencing resources for specific initiatives and activities. More fundamentally, it necessitates building teams with genuine technical financial skills, including structuring blended finance agreements, negotiating with development finance institutions and commercial lenders, and designing and defending cost-reflective tariffs. This requires recruiting, investing in, and developing staff with these skills, which are often scarce and difficult to retain in the public sector, alongside ensuring promotions and other staffing decisions are made on merit.



Box Two: Devolution of Decision-Making Autonomy and Resources in Peru



As part of major reforms over the last decade, several pivotal actions have devolved decision-making autonomy and ensured sufficient human and financial resources:

- Significant emphasis was placed on expanding the territorial presence of national institutions (ministries, technical and regulatory agencies), bringing their services closer to citizens by establishing regional offices.
- Each region is mandated to produce regional sanitation plans that compile and prioritise the needs of all municipalities and form the basis for national resource allocation, helping to align funding decisions with regional priorities and contributing to a more decentralised investment planning process.
- The implementation of the Programme of Certification of Skills, which seeks to build technical and managerial capacities at all levels (including small municipalities) for the safe and efficient operation of water supply facilities. Certification has become a requirement for holding water and sanitation positions, and the programme has improved staff morale and productivity while generating savings for utilities.

This contributed to expanded rural WSS coverage (e.g., rural sanitation coverage rose from 24% to 42% between 2016 and 2024) and wide-ranging WSS system improvements.



3.3 Cross-Governmental Coordination

The complexities of the multi-layered initiatives and systemic reforms required to improve WSS services at scale require working collaboratively with various actors (e.g., policymakers, service providers, regulators) and across the tiers of government. It also necessitates strategically leveraging development partners, the private sector and other external stakeholders such as non-governmental, civil society, and community-based organisations. The cross-governmental coordination competency comprises two main elements:

- **Many stakeholders are engaged to collectively solve problems.** There is a shift in focus from individual authority to fostering collective problem-solving, with many stakeholders implementing and taking forward different initiatives or elements of the reform agenda. Authority is shared, and there is a willingness to work across institutions to resolve conflicts, surface hidden assumptions, and practise collaborative decision-making. This usually requires engaging stakeholders from other sectors and working with cross- or supra-sectoral bodies (e.g., a National Planning or Inter-Ministerial Committee, a Multi-Sectoral Coordinating Unit, or a Presidential Delivery Unit).
- **(In)formal coalitions, relationships and networks are leveraged to build support and maximise efficiencies.** Coalitions, relationships and networks are built to broaden ownership of the initiatives or reforms to improve WSS services and enjoin allies to support the reforms' successful implementation. This is pivotal within and across government institutions (horizontally and vertically) as well as with the le-

gislative and executive branches and external stakeholders (e.g., the private sector, civil society organisations, development partners, and non-governmental organisations). In Peru, for example, several structured forums (Association of Public Water and Sanitation Utilities, Coalition Against Poverty) have fostered dialogue, surfaced tensions, and ultimately aligned diverse stakeholder groups behind the reforms.

Box Three: Cross-Governmental Coordination in Zambia



In Zambia, strong institutional synergies have been essential to the ambitious reform process that sought to professionalise the provision and regulation of rural water supply and sanitation services and urban on-site services. The sector regulator, the National Water Supply and Sanitation Council, has embraced collective problem-solving, working collaboratively with various actors and across different tiers and sectors of government. This has included:

- Adopting a participatory approach to the development of the vision for the sector, which enabled a broad set of government institutions and sector stakeholders to provide input from the outset, helping to increase buy-in.
- Sharing authority between relevant institutions and using strategy documents for [onsite sanitation](#) and [rural water supply and sanitation](#) to establish organisation-specific priority actions and responsibilities.
- Forming joint implementation teams comprising local authorities, other regulators (e.g., those for water resources and environmental protection), several ministries, the statistics bureau, and service providers, to advance reforms at the national and sub-national levels.
- Building a mutually beneficial coalition with service providers, especially with the Lusaka Water and Sanitation Company on the implementation of the Urban Onsite Sanitation and Faecal Sludge Management Framework.





3.4 Accountability and Incentives

Accountability mechanisms and incentives are crucial in mobilising a mission-driven bureaucracy where mandates and functions are fulfilled and success rewarded. By outlining who is responsible for what, fostering collective accountability and applying incentives, and encouraging responsiveness to community concerns and service delivery outcomes, leaders cultivate an environment that values performance, innovation and public trust. The accountability and incentives competency comprises three central elements:

- **Responsibilities are institutionalised within mandates and planning processes.** Institutional mandates and functions are clearly defined and, where necessary, updated and legally enforceable, with all stakeholders displaying a strong understanding and acceptance of these. Organisation-specific activities are also embedded within annual and multi-year planning processes and reflect any changes in institutional mandates and functions.

- **Vertical and horizontal lines of accountability and transparency are strong and extend beyond compliance monitoring.** Lines of accountability are established, strengthened and utilised to follow up on the implementation of agreed-upon activities and the performance of organisational and individual mandates. This extends beyond compliance monitoring, reducing the possibilities for corrupt behaviours while fostering responsiveness to citizens' needs and a focus on collective improvement. A culture of accountability is strengthened not only through internal lines of accountability (vertical and horizontal) but also via public engagement and transparency. Cross- and supra-sectoral

bodies such as supreme audit institutions can play a key role here.

- **Good performance is meaningfully incentivised.** Powerful mechanisms to incentivise good performance and leverage intrinsic motivations at the individual and organisational levels are fairly and transparently implemented. Examples of incentives include financial and reputational rewards such as increased budgets, awards or public recognition, and results-based career progression. In Peru, for example, incentives are closely linked to accountability mechanisms, with the budget allocations for local government tied to local governments' achievement of sector performance targets.



Box Four: Accountability Mechanisms and Incentives in Rwanda



Imihigo are annual performance contracts that bind government leaders to specific development targets. Rooted in a pre-colonial tradition of public pledges (where a leader's failure would invite public shame), modern *Imihigo* link these cultural practices with rigorous planning, monitoring, and oversight. Each year, district mayors publicly commit to measurable goals, from building schools to improving sanitation, and are held to account by central government evaluations and rankings.

Under *Imihigo*, districts are ranked annually, and results are widely publicised. High-performing mayors and districts are celebrated at national events, while poor performers face reputational damage and, in some cases, sanctions or dismissal. This competitive environment creates strong incentives for leaders to treat sanitation as a political priority. The reputational dimension extends beyond leaders themselves: entire districts gain prestige when they perform well and become models for others.

Ultimately, by embedding sanitation in *Imihigo*, Rwanda has ensured that sanitation is not simply a 'nice-to-have' service but a binding obligation for leaders at all levels. This has contributed to the near elimination of open defecation (under 2%), high basic sanitation coverage (86% of the population using improved sanitation facilities), and expanded private sector participation across the service chain.



3.5 Diagnostics and Course Correction

Robust diagnostics are essential to tracking and enabling government institutions and sector stakeholders to build on emerging successes and good practices and address bottlenecks or adapt implementation. They also play an important role in anticipating risks and avoiding complacency. To be effective, diagnostics should utilise internal and external feedback and reporting systems, and must be accompanied by a willingness to learn, iterate and course correct. The diagnostics and course corrections competency has three headline elements:

- **Current operational inefficiencies and implementation status are systematically diagnosed.** An evidence-based process is employed to diagnose the status of operations and identify necessary improvements that respond to citizens' needs. Once initiatives and reforms are underway, a well-defined and reliable process is established to systematically diagnose their implementation. This places particular importance on identifying the rate of progress, emerging good practices, and determining the constraints to successful implementation, especially underlying factors and structural weaknesses preventing progress.
- **Internal and external feedback systems are utilised.** Feedback systems are established to gather inputs from internal (government institutions and employees) and external (citizens, customers, delivery partners) stakeholders and share findings. These feedback loops continuously identify and share good practices, and systemic bottlenecks and failures, requiring a culture where weaknesses are openly discussed and

progress disseminated internally and externally (even when negative). External feedback systems also involve citizens in shaping the next phase of delivery, while internal feedback systems connect employees to the results of their work.

- A culture of iteration, learning and course corrections is established. A bureaucratic culture of learn-by-doing, iteration, and course corrections is fostered where solutions can evolve through continuous experimentation, feedback, and adaptation rather than rigid planning. Piloting and experimentation are used to discover what works, with effective activities and innovations promoted and supported for replication, with necessary adaptations made to the original approach. Likewise, when fundamental bottlenecks are identified, they are fed upwards (rather than suppressed), and senior government officials are open to generating remedial actions. In Odisha State, India, the development of a culture and mechanisms for continual problem-solving was pivotal, with monitoring focused on diagnosing bottlenecks and enabling quick trial-and-error adaptations rather than rigidly assessing compliance. Of note, senior technocrats participated in implementers' WhatsApp groups to understand real-time implementation obstacles and progress-chase adaptive reforms.

Box Five: Diagnostics and Course Corrections in Nepal



The evolution of Nepal's WASH Management Information System (N-WASH) demonstrates a diagnostic and learning-oriented system, which displays a clear willingness to acknowledge weaknesses, iterate and adapt. Since its origins in 2014, N-WASH's design and purpose have been repeatedly revised in response to implementation experience and emerging technological opportunities. N-WASH has also responded to key shifts, including federalisation (2015), the rural M&E framework (2016), the approval of national standards (2019), and a push to integrate enabling environment and system parameters.

Over the last decade, key technological enhancements include refining indicators, altering sampling approaches, and strengthening data-feeding mechanisms, as well as piloting the use of AI-assisted data quality checks, illustrating a culture of problem-solving and course correction. More fundamentally, N-WASH's design has been altered to help ensure the use of data to inform sub-national and national WASH planning and investments.



4

Enabling
Government
Leadership

4.1 Headline Approaches

Enabling effective government leadership requires a shift in approaches. To be successful, initiatives and reforms to address systemic challenges and accelerate progress towards sector targets must be effectively led by government, with national and sub-national government institutions defining and spearheading activities and fostering a mission-driven bureaucracy. Stakeholders working to support effective government leadership should:

- 1. Account for the full range of effective government leadership competencies.** Focusing on a single competency in isolation or strengthening one or two individual elements (when the other competencies remain weak) is rarely sufficient. While no single actor can effectively strengthen all five competencies at once, they can be addressed by diagnosing the degree of government leadership and collaborating with other stakeholders to design and implement a holistic set of interventions as part of collective action approaches.
- 2. Bring political and technocratic leaders together.** For truly transformational impacts at scale, the leadership competencies need to be effectively exercised in the political and technocratic domains, with political and technocratic leaders operating in unison. This requires:
 - Learning to mitigate and leverage political processes and involving political leaders in the diagnosis and design of initiatives and reforms.
 - Updating and elevating the narrative around WSS reforms to ensure their relevance to politically salient or aspirational topics (e.g., linking WSS to a country's wider developmental narratives and mission, demonstrating health, economic, and educational benefits).
 - Sequencing initiatives and reforms to generate quick wins and minimise opposition.
- 3. Look beyond the WSS sector.** Effective government leadership necessitates working across sectoral boundaries and engaging cross- and supra-sectoral bodies. This includes national planning commissions, supreme audit institutions, inter-ministerial coordination platforms, presidential service delivery units, and the ministries (e.g., finance, public administration, and local government) that control the 'nuts and bolts' of government. Initiatives should foster tight coordination and mechanisms that strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration.
- 4. Account for the long-term nature of reforms.** WSS reforms are not a one-off decision or process of updating or enacting legislation; they also involve the much more challenging process of follow-through, implementation, learning and iteration. Meaningful reforms take time, often requiring multiple decades to be fully implemented. Efforts to support effective government leadership must account for the long-term time horizons required, avoiding a sole focus on individual activities or milestones.
- 5. Avoid solely focusing on individual senior government leaders.** An individual senior leader can play a crucial role in defining and pushing forward reforms. However, the breadth of skills, behaviours and actions required ultimately necessitates strong institutions and a mission-driven bureaucracy spanning many individual leaders. Efforts to strengthen government leadership should

avoid solely focusing on an individual leader. Instead, focus on supporting the conditions that foster a mission-driven bureaucracy in which government institutions comprise many bureaucrats who function as agents of change, are incentivised to serve the public good, and are empowered and trusted to do so.

6. **Build genuine financial capabilities.**

Headline commitments to mobilise additional finance are only as credible as the technical capability behind them. Effective government leadership requires teams within ministries, regulators, and utilities who can structure financing instruments, negotiate with development finance institutions, and design sustainable tariff and subsidy regimes. Without this capability, resource mobilisation targets risk becoming another totemic commitment that is announced but not operationalised.

7. **Tailor actions to the country and local contexts and the political economy.**

Actions to strengthen effective government leadership must account for the local context and respond to structural constraints and political-economy factors. Stakeholders seeking to support effective government leadership should ensure they have an in-depth understanding of the context and wider political economy. In turn, objectives and interventions should be designed to adapt to and mitigate wider political-economy challenges.



4.2 Priority Actions

Political leaders, senior technocrats and wider sector stakeholders each have distinct roles in enabling effective government leadership. Figure 6 presents headline responsibilities and priority actions for political leaders, senior technocrats, and wider sector stakeholders to support effective government leadership. Of this proposed set of actions, the immediate steps required will vary depending on the context and the stage a given topic is at in the policy-making and reform process (problem identification and agenda setting, policy formulation, legitimisation and adoption, implementation, and evaluation and iteration).

Political Leaders



**Heads of State, Ministers,
Legislators and Parliamentarians,
Local Councils and Councillors**

- **Articulate and consistently and effectively disseminate a compelling vision for WSS that resonates with public aspirations for nation-building and development**
- **Repeatedly communicate to the public and bureaucrats the behavioural, performance and implementation standards required to achieve the vision**
- **Establish strong cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms that align the whole of government behind priority actions**
- **Provide the top-level prioritisation required for powerful accountability mechanisms and incentives to be applied**
- **Promote, advocate for, and support devolved leadership by granting relative fiscal and functional autonomy to local government and service providers**
- **Oversee implementation and foster an environment where structural bottlenecks and good practices are identified and fed upwards**
- **Be willing to revisit and adapt the means of implementation**

Senior Technocrats



High-ranking bureaucrats and technocrats, including Permanent / Principal Secretaries, Directors, Heads of Department, and Chief Engineers or Chief Technical Officers within Ministries, Regulators, Cross- or Supra-Sectoral Bodies, Sub-National Government, and Public Service Providers

- Diagnose the current situation and provide an evidence-based justification for the vision
- Clearly ground the vision within policy, strategy and planning processing, providing the necessary detail
- Sustain the vision and related activities over electoral cycles by (re)engaging senior political figures
- Institutionalise responsibilities into mandates, job descriptions, and planning documents
- Foster a mission-driven bureaucratic culture that empowers employees and values innovation, action and learning-by-doing, and recognises breakthroughs and achievements
- Ensure development partners align behind government-led implementation processes
- Institutionalise cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms at all administrative levels
- Develop incentives to promote and reward good performance
- Recruit and invest in staff with genuine technical financial skills
- Establish effective internal and external feedback loops and monitoring systems to capture the status of implementation and identify structural bottlenecks, and good practices
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for iterating and adapting the means of implementation

Wider Sector Stakeholders



Bi- and multi-lateral organisations, NGOs and CSOs, private sector, and CBOs

- Pilot innovative approaches and document good practices
- Build broad-based coalitions to hold government accountable on targets, ensuring the priorities and perspectives of marginalised groups are incorporated and practical recommendations offered
- Avoid creating parallel structures by aligning behind (and encouraging and supporting other stakeholders to align behind) and support government-led implementation processes
- Diagnose the extent of government leadership and identify and implement actions to strengthen government leadership across the five competencies

Figure 6:
Headline Responsibilities and Priority Actions

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