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Do donor restrictions affect sustainability of water and sanitation interventions? Results from a Pilot Survey

Background

The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector has had its challenges. Reasons for failure usually focus on technology, water users, community management committees, local government, national government policies and implementers (NGOs). Rarely are the implications of funding mechanisms and restrictions discussed ([Moriarty, 2015](#)).

Improve International seeks to end the unacceptably high failure rates of water and sanitation interventions in developing countries. With a focus on accountability, learning, and innovation, we help improve the work and coordination of international development organizations and donors focused on addressing the worldwide water and sanitation crisis. In support of Improve International's mission, a pilot survey was conducted to investigate the effect that grants and donations have on the sustainability of water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions in developing countries. Improve International also sought to understand parallels between funding expectations and the [WASH Sustainability Charter](#), a document endorsed by more than 100 organizations in 2011. The intent is to bring about understanding between donors and implementing organizations, furthering the conversation about sustainable WASH services.

Design & Methodology

During August-September 2015, Improve International prepared and distributed a survey via Survey Monkey. Out of 14 questions, five allowed open-ended responses, six were multiple-choice and three were yes/no. Three multiple-choice questions allowed for more than one response and seven questions contained comments sections.

The survey was intended for international development organizations (for-profit or not-for profit), civic groups, universities, volunteer groups, or community-based organizations that raise funds from US-based donors to implement or fund water, sanitation, and hygiene interventions. The survey was distributed to a list of 643 WASH NGOs from various countries; it was shared on Twitter and LinkedIn; and we distributed a link to it to a few representatives during Stockholm World Water Week.

All responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using descriptive statistics.



Study Limitations

This study is limited by its size (40 qualified responses) and by the varying frequency of responses to individual questions (28-40). The survey was only available in English, but since we were looking for WASH NGOs that had received US funding, it was probably not a strong limiting factor for this survey. It is likely that these organizations receive funds from a variety of donors, including US government institutions, large foundations, family foundations, corporations, corporate foundations, and individuals. Thus, general questions about donor restrictions are complicated to answer in a simple online survey. It is possible that organizations who do not feel that donor restrictions affect sustainability did not respond to the survey, or skipped those questions. In this case, the survey would be biased towards those who did feel donor restrictions affect sustainability.

Findings

We received 48 responses from organizations. Eight surveys were disqualified for the following reasons:

Disqualified 1 – not a WASH NGO

Disqualified 2 – only answered the question about being anonymous.

Disqualified 3 – a WASH NGO based in Europe, has not received US funds in past 5 years

Disqualified 4 – a WASH NGO based in Africa, has not received US funds in past 5 years

Disqualified 5, 6, 7 – WASH NGOs based in US, has received US funds in past 5 years, but did not answer any of the questions about the donor restrictions

Disqualified 8 – US-based organization, did not answer questions about being a WASH NGO or receiving US funds.

We decided to keep answers from a WASH NGO based in India: while they said they had not received US funds in past 5 years, they did receive funds through a US-based platform.

This left 40 survey respondents whose information we used for the remainder of this summary. The number of respondents for each question refers to qualified respondents. Organizations were not required to answer each question; therefore, the number of responses will be noted for each question below.

Information about the respondents' organizations

Q1. What is your organization's name?

(40 qualified responses; 0 skipped)

Two organizations had two respondents each, meaning we had responses from 38 unique organizations.



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Q2. Would you like your organization to remain anonymous?

(40 qualified responses; 0 skipped)

60% of the respondents wanted to remain anonymous. Because of the small number of respondents, we have decided to keep all of them anonymous.

Q3. In what country is the organization's headquarters?

(39 qualified responses; 1 skipped)

The respondents are diverse geographically, with organization headquarters located in 13 countries on six continents. Most (62%) respondents' headquarters are located in the United States of America.

Q4. We are looking for responses from organizations that raise money to implement or fund interventions / projects related to water, sanitation, and/or hygiene (WASH). How much of your investments or programs are WASH-related? Please select the response below that is most applicable to your organization.

(39 qualified responses; 1 skipped)

A little over half of them (56%) replied that most of their investments or programs are WASH-related; 44% replied that some of their investments or programs are WASH-related.

Q5. How would you describe your organization?

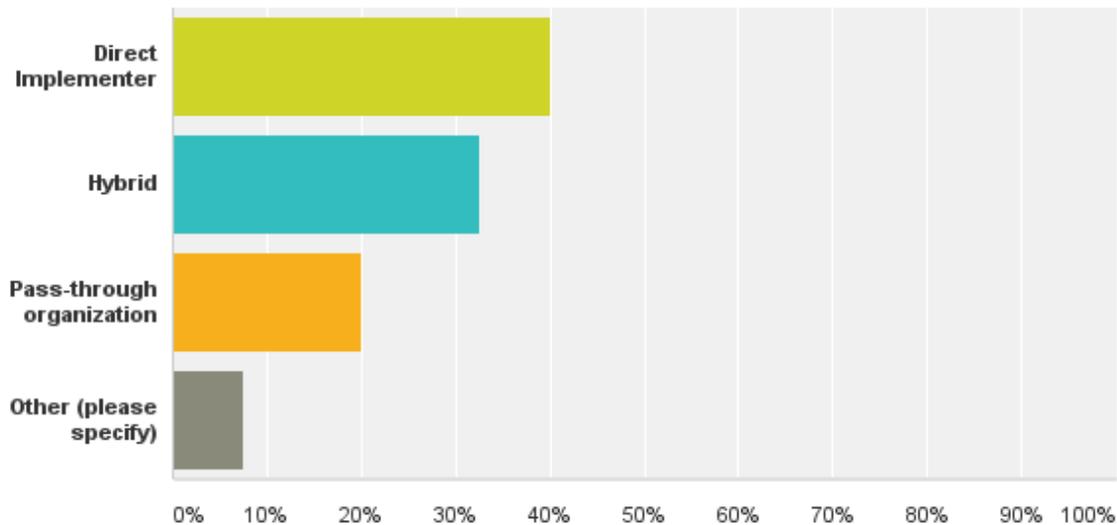
(40 qualified responses; 0 skipped)

40% of the respondents said their organization directly conducts water, sanitation and hygiene interventions; 32.5% of respondents work for organizations that are a hybrid between direct implementation of programs, fundraising, and grants distribution; and 20% of respondents work at "pass-through" organizations, which raise money and issue grants to implementers. The remaining 7.5% of respondents work for organizations work on water integrity, community participation in water management decisions, and advocacy; and supporting donors to effectively program their funds.



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Q5. How would you describe your organization?



Q6. About how many employees work at your organization?

(38 qualified responses; 2 skipped)

The numbers of employees range from zero (organization is entirely volunteer-based) to 45,000. 26 respondents work at organizations with fewer than 100 employees; seven have between 100-500 employees; and five respondents work for organizations that have 1000 or more employees.

Q7. What was your organization's total income last fiscal year? (please specify currency)

(34 qualified responses; 6 skipped)

Three respondents said they did not know. Responses in non-USD currencies were converted to USD using OANDA.com. Reported annual incomes ranged from 7,564 USD to 2.5 billion USD, with the majority of respondents (20 of 31) reporting annual incomes of 1 to 60 million USD.

Information on donor restrictions

Q9. What restrictions have your donors placed on their donations for WASH programs? Select all that apply.

(35 qualified responses; 5 skipped)

The two most commonly reported restrictions were that donors' measurements of success are primarily number of water points, toilets, or number of direct beneficiaries (74%) and donors do not provide funding for long-term post-project monitoring (63%). The remaining responses, in descending order of importance, are

- Donor wants to fund a specific community (51%)



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- Donor requires signage in community or a plaque on the water point with their name (46%)
- Limited project time frame (43%), including a short reporting time frame after completion of project
- Matching donation requirements (43%)
- No or limited funding for “overhead” costs (40%)
- Proposal requirements or formats are complicated or require too much time (37%)
- Arbitrary cost per person restriction or push for lowest cost per person (29%)
- Lack of consideration for rainy seasons or school terms (17%)

In the “other” category, respondents commented that restrictions include:

- There is “limited funding for advocacy work”
- “Donor only supports or prioritizes water supply” and not sanitation or hygiene
- Donors are less interested in “funding high tech water supply due to high cost,” even if this is the only option in water scarce areas.
- “Lack of follow-up and change of priorities from initial multi-year agreements after the first year, request to change geographical location & country of intervention”
- “Revision of reports and data to interpret results”
- “Limiting emergency response to natural disasters, rejecting conflict-related displacements or projects in unstable security environment”

An organization that provides grants says: “As donors, we feel we often have to chase down success and sustainability reports.”

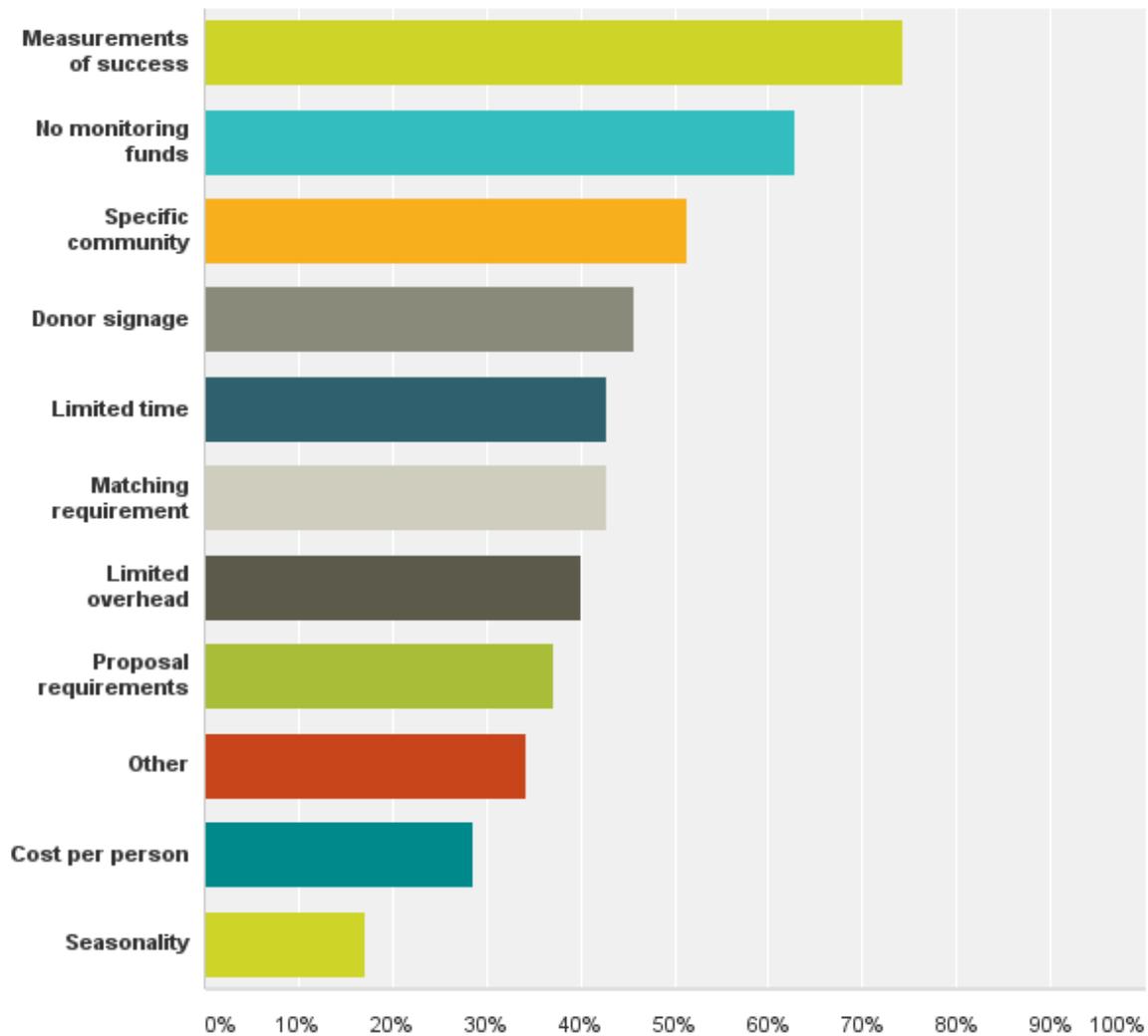
One respondent explained, after 20 years of implementing water and sanitation projects in Central America that “it is very apparent that the main reason for failure of these projects in the long term” is the lack of funding for training and a maintenance program.

One respondent said that no restrictions have been placed on contributions.



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Q9. What restrictions have your donors placed on their donations for WASH programs? Select all that apply.



Q10. Of these restrictions selected above – which hinder your ability to contribute to sustainable water and sanitation services?

(32 qualified responses; 8 skipped)

Most respondents replied that the following donor restrictions seriously or somewhat hindered sustainability of water and sanitation services: lack of funding for long-term monitoring (96%), limited funding for overhead (95%), limited time frame (89%), and an arbitrary cost per person or push for lowest cost per person (89%). Other factors that seriously or somewhat hinder sustainability, in descending order, include: donors’ measurements of success are primarily number of water points, toilets, or number of direct beneficiaries, matching requirements,



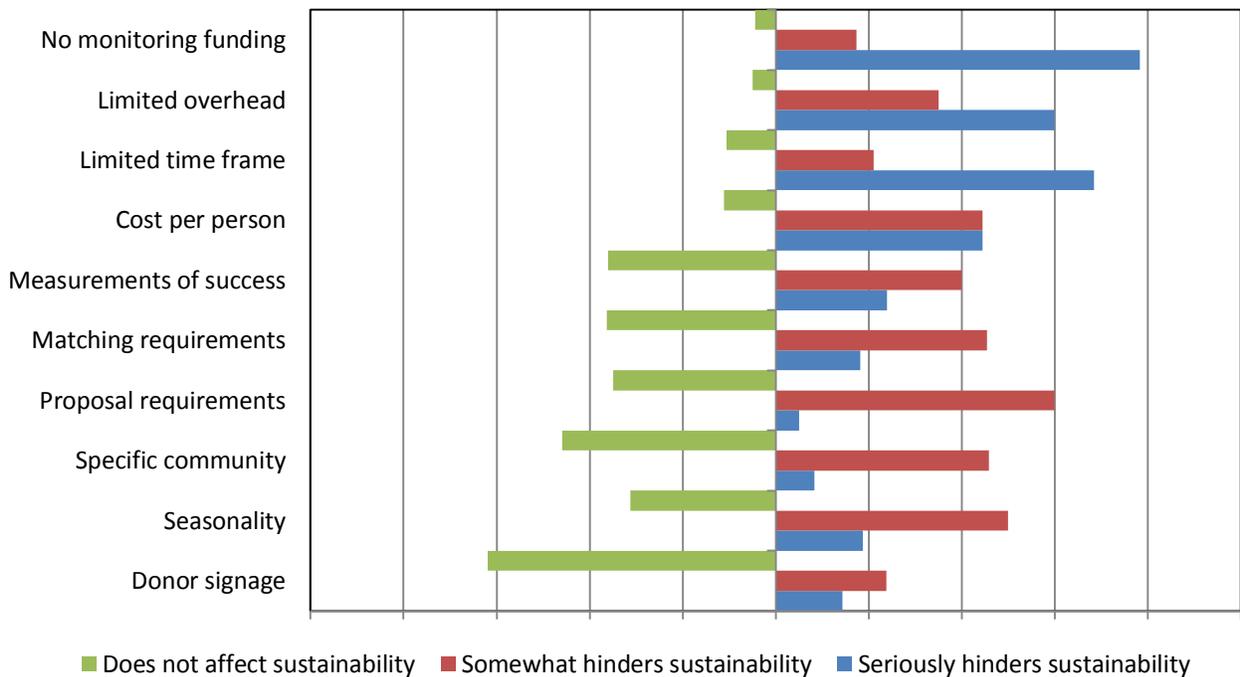
proposal requirements/formats are complicated or require too much time, and lack of consideration for rainy seasons or school terms.

Related to the limited time frame, one respondent commented that a minimum of three years of intervention are needed to support sustainable water and sanitation. Another respondent said that “communities require to be assisted for a long time in terms of operations and maintenance, monitoring and general capacity building to leave it at a level of self-sustenance.”

While one respondent commented that “too much donor expectation to deliver hinders good and sustainable development practice” another commented that “All the restrictions are important for regulating certain factors and their effect or impact on sustainability of water and sanitation and hygiene project will vary with communities and capacities of the implementing partner and government stakeholders to fulfil their roles in the process.”

Matching donations, partnering, and headquarters requirements by one respondent’s organization were given as examples of a process that seriously affects their ability to work in rural areas.

Q10. Which donor restrictions affect sustainability? (% of responses)





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Q11. If grants were awarded in line with the WASH Sustainability Charter¹, how would that affect the sustainability of your WASH programs?

(33 qualified responses; 7 skipped)

67% responded that sustainability would improve if grants were awarded in line with the WASH Sustainability Charter. 12% responded that sustainability would not improve; 9% did not know; and 12% were unfamiliar with the Charter. Two respondents commented that their work is already in line with the Charter.

One respondent commented that funding in line with the Charter would improve sustainability of WASH programs because it addresses often neglected topics such as development of good strategies; improving governance and accountability structures in institutions and communities; financial management support; reporting; knowledge management; and service delivery support to current systems.

One respondent commented “The charter has great goals; [but I’m] not sure if implementing partners are able to meet all items.” Another agreed: “It can't do harm, but it won't bring huge changes either.”

Q12. Which activities are generally under-funded for your organization? Select all that apply.

(35 qualified responses; 5 skipped)

Answers in descending order were: Monitoring and/or evaluation after program (63%), knowledge management and learning (57%), resolution of problems identified after the project (57%), software (training, community engagement, government engagement, etc.) (51%), research (49%), overhead (46%), monitoring and/or evaluation during program (29%), drinking water supply and basic sanitation hardware (infrastructure) (23%). Two respondents commented that all activities are underfunded.

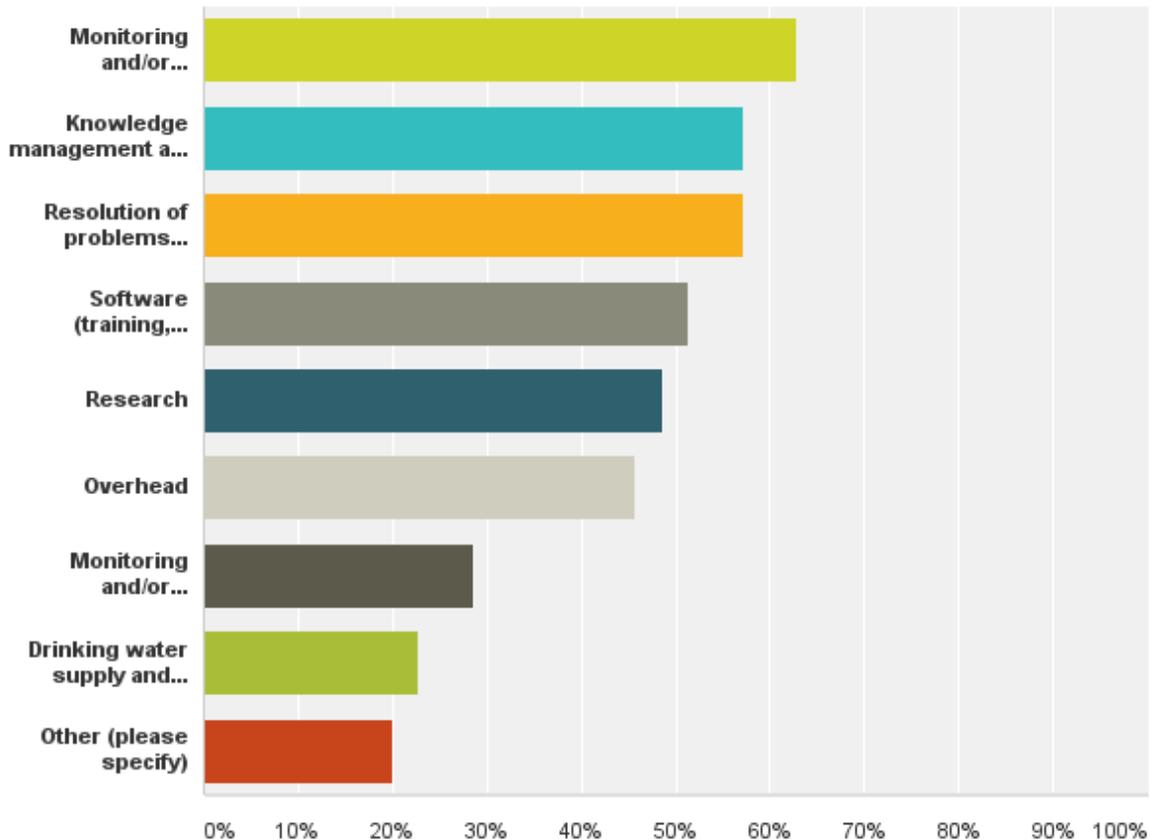
Other areas respondents mentioned as underfunded included advocacy, support costs; staffing; activities before implementation such as participatory assessment and determination of technical feasibility; post-implementation activities like a system of technicians to monitor, train villagers, and maintain water systems.

¹ The WASH Sustainability Charter, launched in 2011, has been endorsed by more than 100 organizations. It is available at <https://washcharter.wordpress.com/charter/>



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Q12. Which activities are generally under-funded for your organization? Select all that apply



Q13. What is the biggest obstacle for your organization to contribute to lasting water or sanitation services?

(28 qualified responses; 12 skipped)

This question allowed open responses, and some respondents mentioned more than one topic. Seven respondents mentioned overall inadequate funding as their biggest obstacle. Six respondents pointed to short-term funding cycles as their biggest obstacle. Six respondents identified as their biggest obstacle the lack of focus and funding on post-implementation activities, such as “long-term community and government engagement”, “long-term monitoring”, operations and maintenance, and “long-term changes in financial mechanisms, local institutions”. Three respondents noted that limited funding for overhead or staff time is their biggest obstacle.

Four respondents mentioned other obstacles, such as “lack of in-country connection and information” to share with their donors; lack of sufficient and consistent water and electric supply to operate filtration systems; individual and governmental “unwillingness to pay for the full cost of WASH services”; and “lack of willingness to collaborate and cooperate”.



Q14. Do any of your donors ask to receive feedback from the beneficiaries?

(33 qualified responses; 7 skipped)

64% of respondents answered that donors asked to receive feedback from beneficiaries. Beneficiary feedback was provided in stories, reports, status updates, quotes, case studies, videos, and monitoring and evaluation reports. Three respondents reported that donors visit project sites: “They like to hear specifically from communities themselves.” One comment was “[donors] like stories from the field to better understand how their contributions are helping people. At the same time, monitoring and evaluation is considered more reliable than anecdotal evidence.”

One respondent commented that several family foundations requested beneficiary feedback while larger donors do not. Two respondents said all donors get this feedback during the project cycle, and another commented “Most of our donors would require success and impact stories from beneficiaries.” A respondent with a pass-through organization commented that they request feedback from their implementing partners.

One comment on the form of the question was “Yes/no is not an adequate question. It is who is talked to as a portion of total beneficiaries and if it is done at multiple levels of beneficiary or not.”

Relevance, Impact, and Importance

This pilot study represents the first step that we know of to determine the impact of the WASH Sustainability Charter and funding mechanisms on sustainability. Analysis of data from 40 qualified respondents clearly reveals a lack of alignment between the needs of implementing organizations and the contributions of donors.

In order to promote sustainable service delivery in the WASH sector and alignment with [Sustainable Development Goal 6](#), donors might need to change funding methods to better align with the goals of their implementing partners and the developing country governments. Improvement could come about if donors paid attention to the WASH Sustainability Charter and re-constituted their goals to match those of NGOs and governmental partners. Further research is necessary to inform the conversation, and could involve the implications of providing adequate funds for costly WASH programs, funding projects for longer durations (5 plus years), and contributing additional financial support towards post-construction monitoring and evaluation. It would be helpful to understand which restrictions are associated with which types of donors.

Once the needs are better defined and recognized by donors and NGOs, they can design creative ways to leverage human and financial resources (e.g., from local governments, financial institutions, and the private sector) for the appropriate activities and time frames. Collaboration, communication compromise and creativity across the sector are necessary to ensure long-term sustainable services and associated health improvements for people in developing countries.



Next steps

We have partnered with an academic institution to conduct additional research. Particular areas of further investigation include:

- Interviewing donors to identify their perceptions of restrictions associated with funds to WASH NGOs, and whether these have impacted sustainability of interventions.
- Can we link evidence of post-implementation success or challenges to donor restrictions?
- Better characterization of beneficiary feedback solicited by implementers and donors and whether and how it is used by implementers and donors for resolution and future programming.
- Better characterization of “limited time frame” or perhaps determining organizations’ opinions of an ideal time frame.
- Are there connections between the size/income of WASH organizations and how influenced they are by donor restrictions?

Please let us know your thoughts on this pilot study, the area of research in general, and any other questions you think we should include in our research by emailing info@improveinternational.org.

About Improve International

Improve International plays a unique role in the sector. We are part think-tank, part do-tank. We don’t do water projects, we don’t fund water projects, we just try to make them last forever. We seek to end the unacceptably high failure rates of water and sanitation interventions in developing countries. With a focus on accountability, learning, and innovation, we help improve the work and coordination of international development organizations and donors focused on addressing the worldwide water and sanitation crisis. To accomplish our mission, Improve International will redefine the problem, make evidence un-ignorable, and engage decision-makers. Learn more at improveinternational.org.