

A photograph of a group of people in a meeting or conference. In the foreground, a man with glasses and a headset is smiling and looking towards a woman with long dark hair who is wearing a patterned top. The man is holding a smartphone. Other people are visible in the background, some wearing traditional headwear. The background shows large windows.

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

Learning Brief

Headline Messages:

- Political will, displayed through a presidential compact, a new headline sector target, or a financial commitment, is important; however, on their own, such actions rarely translate into improved services.
- As examples such as India, Peru, and Rwanda highlight, transformational progress depends on government leaders consistently exercising five distinct competencies: (i) vision-setting and communication, (ii) devolution of decision-making and resources, (iii) cross-governmental coordination, (iv) accountability and incentives, and (v) diagnostics and course corrections.
- Sustained impact requires political and technocratic leaders operating in unison, not in parallel.
- For senior technocratic and political leaders looking to successfully implement sector reforms and address the systemic challenges facing the sector, five actions matter most: (i) avoid a narrow focus on strengthening one or two competencies in isolation, (ii) bring political and technocratic leaders together, (iii) extend engagement beyond the WSS sector, (iv) foster a cadre of many individual leaders, and (v) invest in the financial capabilities that underpin headline commitments.

Common markers of political prioritisation – a presidential compact, a new headline sector target, or a commitment to mobilise additional resources – are, by themselves, weak indicators of effective leadership. There has been considerable attention to the importance of ‘political will’ and leadership in redressing the water supply and sanitation (WSS) sector’s chronic systemic weaknesses. The sector is now rich in declarations: presidential compacts, sector strategies, and financing pledges. These high-level political commitments can help ‘open the door’ to the reforms needed to accelerate progress towards sector targets. However, they often fail to deliver required improvements. This is not for a lack of ambition or good intention; they fail because addressing the systemic challenges affecting the sector requires a much more comprehensive and transformational form of leadership.

Effective government leadership involves consistently demonstrating five distinct competencies. Analysis from eight countries – India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Rwanda, and Zambia – established five effective government leadership competencies required to address systemic challenges and

accelerate progress towards national targets. These competencies are vision-setting and communication, devolution of decision-making and resources, cross-governmental coordination, accountability and incentives, and diagnostics and course corrections, see Table 1: Effective Government Leadership Competencies.

Effective government leadership delivers tangible results. Where the five government leadership competencies are acted on and sustained, and political and technocratic leaders operate in unison, transformational progress follows:



In **Odisha, India**, Puri City achieved 24x7 continuous, pressurised, and potable water supply to all 32,017 households, along with a reduction in non-revenue water from 54% to 15%.



In **Peru**, rural water and sanitation coverage rose from 72% to 79% and from 24% to 42% between 2016 and 2024, respectively.



In **Rwanda**, progressive reforms resulted in the near-total elimination of open defecation and high basic sanitation coverage, with 86% of the population using improved sanitation facilities.

Competency

What is Required

Practical Example

Vision-Setting and Communication



- WSS is positioned as central to national development, including economic growth
- Policy and strategy documents ground the vision, providing a basis for implementation
- Senior officials consistently and effectively communicate the vision

In **Odisha, India**, breakthrough achievements in urban water services were rooted in a compelling vision that framed water as central to a modern, outward-looking State. This vision was consistently communicated by senior officials, giving technocrats political cover to pursue accelerated reform.

Devolution of Decision-Making and Resources



- Sub-national actors have a sufficient and appropriate degree of decision-making autonomy, promoting ownership
- Decision-making autonomy is paired with adequate resources and genuine technical financial skills

In **Peru**, sub-national decision-making autonomy was paired with required capabilities by establishing regional offices for key national institutions, utilising regional plans as the basis for sub-national fiscal transfers, and implementing the Programme of Certification of Skills to build technical and managerial capacities.

Cross-Governmental Coordination



- Many stakeholders, including institutions beyond the WSS sector, are engaged to collectively solve problems
- Formal and informal coalitions, relationships, and networks are leveraged to build support and maximise efficiencies

In **Zambia**, the sector regulator embraced collective problem-solving. This included adopting a participatory approach when developing the vision for enhanced sector regulation, sharing authority among relevant institutions, sectors, and tiers of government, forming joint implementation teams, and building coalitions.

Accountability and Incentives



- Responsibilities are clearly defined and institutionalised within mandates and planning processes
- Accountability mechanisms foster responsiveness to citizens’ needs and a focus on collective improvement
- Powerful incentives reward good performance

In **Rwanda**, Imihigo are annual performance contracts that commit district mayors to measurable goals, including for WSS. Districts and, in turn, their leaders are ranked annually. Results are widely publicised, with high performers celebrated and poor performers facing reputational damage and, occasionally, sanctions or dismissal.

Diagnostics and Course Corrections



- Operational inefficiencies and implementation status are systematically diagnosed
- Internal and external feedback systems track progress and identify bottlenecks and good practices
- A culture of iteration, learning, and course corrections is established, enabling adaptation

In **Nepal**, the WASH Management Information System has been repeatedly revised in response to implementation experience, technological opportunities, and major shifts, including federalisation (2015), the approval of new national standards (2019), and a push to integrate enabling environment and system parameters.

For senior technocratic and political leaders looking to successfully implement sector reforms and address the systemic challenges facing the sector, five actions matter most:

1. **Account for the full range of effective leadership competencies.** Strengthening one or two competencies in isolation (while the others remain weak) rarely works. No single actor can build all five at once, so design a deliberate, sequenced effort across institutions rather than concentrating reform energy on a small set of competencies that are easier to act on.
2. **Bring political and technocratic leaders together.** Leadership needs to be exercised across both political and technocratic domains, with political and technocratic leaders operating in tight coordination. Involve political leaders from the outset in diagnosing and designing reforms, elevate the narrative to ensure reforms are relevant to politically salient topics, and sequence initiatives to deliver early, visible wins.
3. **Extend engagement beyond the WSS sector.** Critical levers that determine whether reforms succeed – fiscal allocations, staffing rules, powerful incentives – sit with national planning commissions, supreme audit institutions, presidential service delivery units, and the ministries of finance, public administration, and local government. Working solely with WSS institutions cannot move these levers.
4. **Foster a cadre of many individual leaders.** A single senior leader can start a reform but cannot sustain it alone; the breadth of skills, behaviours, and actions required ultimately necessitates strong institutions spanning many individual leaders. Resources must be allocated to foster a mission-driven bureaucracy in which government institutions and political allies incentivise and empower many individual leaders to function as collective agents of change.

5. **Invest in the financial capabilities that underpin headline commitments.** Pledges to mobilise additional finance are only as credible as the institutions behind them. Develop teams within ministries, regulators, and utilities who can structure financing instruments, negotiate with development finance institutions, and design sustainable tariff and subsidy regimes to help ensure headline financial commitments are met.



The full **position paper 'Effective Government Leadership for Essential Services: Core Competencies and Necessary Actions'** provides greater detail, including a more comprehensive overview of the five leadership competencies and priority actions to support effective leadership.

This learning brief and the wider position paper were developed based on a desk review of effective government leadership in the WSS sector (and beyond) and a detailed analysis of targeted initiatives and reforms in India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Rwanda, and Zambia. It was informed by consultations with over 80 sector stakeholders from ministries, regulatory bodies, service providers, local government, development partners, non-governmental organisations, and civil society organisations in these countries. The analysis was enriched by critical insights from an Advisory Group comprising individuals from Sanitation and Water for All, the Overseas Development Institute, Agenda for Change, the African Leadership Centre, and the World Bank.

This learning brief was authored by Bill Twyman (Aguaconsult) and Henry Northover (Aguaconsult) and made possible thanks to core funding from the Osprey Foundation and the Waterloo Foundation.

Cover: @Sanitation and Water of All



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