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Governance and Sector Outcomes: Making the Connections

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Key Policy Implications

- There is ample evidence that improved governance has positively contributed to sector-specific outcomes. But macro-level analyses, broad conceptualizations, and decontextualized interventions offer few guideposts for practical and effective governance integration.
- Project designs range along a continuum, from ring-fenced sector-specific programming to fully integrated governance and sector activities. A large middle ground includes projects that incorporate governance activities during implementation, adjusting approaches to the demands of the operating environments, and scale-up of interventions.
- Barriers to integration include urgent sector priorities that overshadow governance concerns, requirements to demonstrate progress toward ambitious sector targets, and complex measurement.
- Sustainability and self-reliance are major drivers for integration and are facilitated by the flexibility and adaptation that governance integration enables.

Introduction

International development officials, practitioners, and researchers increasingly recognize governance as an essential contributor to outcomes in health, education, water, and other sectors. Projects focused solely on sector-specific interventions often fall short of objectives or sustained gains due to a lack of attention to government systems, citizen engagement, or accountability mechanisms.[1] However, the pathways connecting governance to sectoral outcomes are contingent on a range of contextual factors and are inconsistently documented. Debates continue over the definition of governance; the availability and quality of evidence documenting effects and impacts; and effective design, implementation, and measurement of governance interventions.

This brief explores evidence from the literature—as well as from projects implemented by RTI—indicating that governance interventions do contribute to achieving sector-specific results. We discuss how that evidence has influenced international development practice, presenting a stylized continuum of how governance elements relate to sector interventions and expected outcomes. We then discuss factors that impede or impel governance

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integration as a means of improving international development practice. Throughout, we foreground the perspective and experiences of sector experts and projects, rather than governance specialists and programs, to better understand sector-centered approaches to integrating governance.

Definitions of Governance

Definitions of governance vary in substance and scope. Operational definitions can be loosely grouped in three broad categories: structures and processes, policy and management, and state-society relations. Table 1 lists illustrative topics for analysis and intervention in each category.

Governance definitions tend to group several elements in Table 1 under a single conceptual umbrella, leading to confusion and overburdened reform agendas. Sector specialists' conceptions of governance are often broad and high level; a "big picture" that includes the enabling environment, rule of law, policy dialogue and reform, and development of government buy-in. Confusion derives from the highly abstract nature of many general definitions, such as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development."[2]

Macro-level conceptualizations have been criticized for offering few guideposts for practitioners. Translated into intervention packages, general definitions often overload weak-capacity governments with public-sector reforms modeled on institutional structures and processes in mature democracies that may not fulfil their intended functions.[3,4] General definitions can also lead to oversimplified theories of change. For example, the accepted transparency narrative assumes that improved transparency leads to increased disclosure, expanded public scrutiny, stronger accountability, and—eventually—better governance.[5] All links in this causal chain involve simplifying assumptions that rarely hold in practice.

Narrowed definitions of governance can enable clearer theories of change, tailor interventions and reform agendas, isolate effects of a given intervention, and assign attribution. However, the complexity of governance interventions, their potential inclusion in a cluster of reforms, and contextual influences on success make it especially complicated to attribute results and develop credible indicators.[6]

Table 1. Governance definitions

Governance defined as…	Analysis and interventions focus on…
Structures and processes	• Constitution, laws, and regulations • Separation of powers • Accountability, checks and balances • Decentralization • Institutional design
Policy and management	• Civil service systems • Policy-making and implementation • Regulation, certification, and oversight • Revenue-raising, budgeting, and spending • Service delivery
State-society relations	• Regime type • Political competition and elections • Social pacts • Social contract • Media • Civil society • Social accountability

Evidence for Links Between Governance Interventions and Sector Outcomes

There is long-standing evidence suggesting that all three categories of governance (Table 1) contribute positively to sector-specific outcomes.[7] However, debates continue over:

- which structures and processes perform best, which policy and management approaches are most effective, and which state-society constellations are conducive to enhancing sectoral outcomes, and
- how to convincingly demonstrate what should be done to improve governance to achieve the anticipated sectoral benefits.

Established patterns suggest that investments in governance can have important sectoral payoffs. For example:

- Democracies provide better access to education than autocratic regimes[8] and have demonstrated improvements in reading and science achievement at certain levels.[9]
- Health outcomes improve once a country reaches a certain democratic threshold and adopts accountability mechanisms.[10]
- Higher levels of corruption are linked to lower life expectancy,[11] higher infant and child mortality,[12] and greater HIV/AIDS prevalence.[13]
- Increased government expenditure on health services substantially reduces mortality rates.[14]

However, many of these analyses are essentially "black box" assessments pointing to macro-level associations between governance and sector outcomes. They lack operationally relevant details on what governance interventions might

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make sense. For example, Wise and Darmstadt, studying impacts of weak governance and political instability on neonatal mortality, aim "not to isolate the specific statistical contribution of any given governance variable…or to single out any particular country; rather, the [results] are intended to emphasize the presence of the strong general relationships that exist."[15] Given such findings, sector specialists may reasonably be skeptical that governance should be considered a target for direct intervention rather than a contextual feature to be maneuvered around.

At the micro level, randomized control trials (RCTs) have demonstrated the effectiveness of particular governance interventions in specific contexts. For example:

- Community-monitored service agreements led to significant improvements in primary health-care center utilization and reductions in under-five mortality rates.[16]
- A review of RCTs revealed that interventions to improve corruption, teacher absenteeism, and accountability had statistically significant positive impacts on student learning.[17]

RCTs are often interpreted as identifying tools that "work," independent of the basic principles underlying their successful application. Their results have been used to support replication of governance interventions across different settings and sectors. This practice decouples interventions from context, treating them as "widgets" expected to achieve similar results across distinctive operating environments.[18,19]

A qualitative research stream has also yielded insights through case studies and meta-analyses of published research.[20] These studies have captured contextual factors and their influence on governance and/or sectoral interventions, underscoring the well-recognized challenge of generalizing findings to other settings. For example, a case study documented the effects of mistrustful post-conflict state-society relations and of incomplete decentralization on the Guinea Faisons Ensemble project's results.[21] The study indicated positive and credible links between governance interventions to increase transparency and civic participation and service delivery outcomes in health, education, agriculture, and natural resources management.

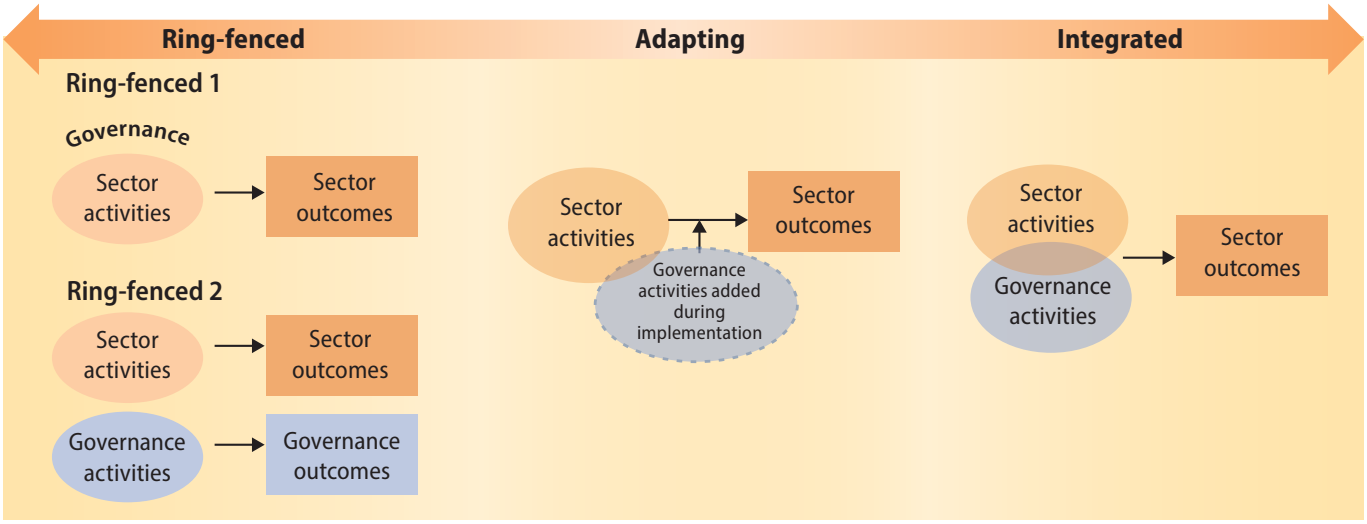
A Governance-Integration Continuum

Has evidence of governance interventions' contributions to sector outcomes influenced sector project designs and implementation? We propose a stylized continuum that captures how governance is conceptualized in sector project designs and operationalized in implementation (Figure 1). It is based on an exploration of experiences from past and current projects implemented by RTI International, as well as interviews with sector specialists and review of project documents. Sectoral colleagues helped identify project examples to represent a range of sectors and to ensure data were readily available. Examples are not representative of the universe of sector projects.

Ring-Fencing Sectoral Outcomes from Governance

Projects in this category have theories of change that solely focus on sectoral outcomes. Governance factors are not considered relevant to project objectives and are therefore outside the realm of project intervention (Figure 1; Ring-fenced 1). The project team manages implementation without significant reliance on host-country policies, structures, or systems. Attention to governance is at best perceived as secondary to the project's core goals. At worst, addressing

Figure 1. Continuum of governance and sector project integration



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governance is seen as diverting effort and resources, jeopardizing project impact on key sectoral goals.

Box 1. Expanding Maternal and Neonatal Survival, Indonesia (EMAS, 2011–2017)

USAID/Indonesia designed EMAS to address high rates of maternal and neonatal deaths in district hospitals. EMAS aimed to contribute to a 25% national reduction in maternal and neonatal mortality, improve quality of emergency maternal and neonatal care in 150 hospitals, and improve clinical interventions and referrals in at least 300 health centers. Objectives 1 and 2 focused on strengthening clinical governance in health facilities and establishing an emergency referral system. Objective 3 targeted accountability, advocacy, and citizen engagement (state-society relations in Table 1), which included activities to hold local governments accountable for their actions, build sustained commitment to improving quality at multiple levels, and improve facilities' use of use performance data.

The midterm evaluation noted, however, that some districts' improvements lagged, challenging expectations of how quickly results could be achieved and EMAS interventions could be rolled out to other districts. Project management chose to focus on activities perceived as quickly affecting mortality rates, such as clinical performance standards, provider skill-building, and formalizing referrals. Citizen engagement in advocacy and accountability actions and district-level working groups to coordinate services continued but were less directly linked to emergency maternal and neonatal services and, by extension, to reductions in maternal and neonatal mortality.[23, 24]

Well-recognized projects at the ring-fenced end of the continuum address specific-sector targets through campaign-style designs, mobilizing considerable external resources to achieve quick results. Examples include USAID's malaria eradication projects that orchestrated countrywide spraying and distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets, and the Agency's neglected tropical disease control and eradication projects (NTD control, 2006–2012; ENVISION, 2011–2019). These projects have supported capacity development for surveillance and control, but they primarily emphasize activities that directly impact health. Other examples include designs that introduce and test effectiveness of educational interventions bypassing local systems to preserve the integrity of the interventions.[22]

A subset of ring-fenced designs incorporates governance activities but isolates them from sector-specific interventions (Figure 1, "Ring-fenced 2"). Although these designs include some governance issues, integrated implementation proves challenging, resulting in an effectively ring-fenced project as sectoral and governance activities proceed in parallel. Box 1 describes the Expanding Maternal and Neonatal Survival (EMAS) project in Indonesia, where achieving ambitious maternal and neonatal mortality targets through clinical activities was the primary focus and governance interventions rarely linked effectively to clinical activities and goals.

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Adapting to Address Governance

The broad middle area of our continuum encompasses projects designed with an exclusive sector focus whose implementers realize that sector results are at risk without some attention to governance factors. Some of these projects take adequate governance for granted as an input to causal chains, often because they rely on government systems for project success, but do not identify specific elements of governance that facilitate or hamper objectives. When obstacles to project goals emerge, project teams realize they need to understand and address how governance structures, policies, and relations influence progress. For example, do government actors have capacity and/or motivation to take up project innovations? Can existing policies and management practices sustain new technical tools? Can citizens voice support for project-introduced innovations? Project teams adjust causal chains and implementation plans to address such questions, often using "pause and reflect" sessions and other adaptive management tools.[20] Box 2 provides an example.

Box 2. Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Project, Jordan (RAMP, 2015–2020)

USAID's RAMP supports Jordan's Ministry of Education to improve learning outcomes for reading in Arabic and math in public schools. RAMP aims to ensure that 400,000 students in grades K2–G3 will receive improved instruction, and 14,000 teachers will be trained (see https://www.usaid.gov/jordan/fact-sheets/early-grade-reading-and-mathematics-project-ramp). RAMP started with an evidence-based early grade reading assessment to identify shortcomings of existing instruction. The assessment oriented the project's major support activities toward technical, training, and supervisory interventions to improve instructional material and teacher capacities.

RAMP's design included some governance components related to instructional policies and citizen engagement in school-level accountability. As RAMP began to scale up, however, it became apparent that more was needed to address the government's ability to institutionalize and sustain the improvements in reading and math instruction. USAID/Jordan awarded RAMP additional funds to address these governance constraints.

Integrating Governance Interventions as a Priority

In integrated projects, designers treat governance as central by including specific activities to address governance barriers to project objectives, often in the policy and management realm of governance. For example, the USAID-funded Jordan Institutional Support and Strengthening Program (ISSP, Box 3) started with an institutional assessment to identify water policy and management challenges and to build buy-in for reforms. Only after the assessment was complete and agreed-upon

Box 3. Institutional Support and Strengthening Program, Jordan (ISSP, 2010–2015)

ISSP aimed to identify and address significant institutional weaknesses and key constraints for water-sector management in Jordan through policy reform and capacity-building. ISSP followed decades of USAID projects focused on improving water operations in Jordan that had been ineffective in bettering the country's management of scarce water resources. ISSP's fundamental assumption was that technical solutions alone were insufficient to solve Jordan's water shortages. When ISSP began, overlapping institutional mandates, roles, and responsibilities; conflicts of interest; hidden and distorting subsidies; partially implemented prior reforms; and flawed accountability and incentive systems plagued the water sector.

ISSP's starting point was an assessment that identified institutional issues, governance constraints, and opportunities for building buy-in for a collaborative agenda of water-sector reforms and restructuring. After the study, ISSP organized 3 months of consultations with country stakeholders to agree on final reform priorities, anchored in the national water strategy. Technical activities related to service delivery became a focus only after initial governance reforms had taken place.

The ISSP team identified a balance between addressing governance and service provision issues as critical to the project's achievements. ISSP took a "governance-first" approach to technical interventions, by shifting focus away from operations to management and planning. ISSP demonstrated that low-cost management improvements increased effectiveness of infrastructure investments. ISSP's collaborative identification of causes and contributing factors to operational problems led to fundamental changes in the groundwater management cycle, which became more systems-driven, effective, and transparent.

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reforms were under way did the project shift focus toward improving service delivery.

While ISSP concentrated on policy changes, other projects emphasize governance elements related to service delivery. For example, USAID/Nepal designed the Health for Life project (H4L, Box 4) to engage local communities in managing health facilities and programs, in addition to national-level reforms and capacity development for health facility staff. H4L's design incorporated policy and management elements of governance, as well as state-society relations (Table 1).

Box 4. Health for Life, Nepal (H4L, 2013–2018)

H4L's primary goal was to strengthen the government of Nepal's capacity to plan, manage, and deliver high-quality and equitable family planning, maternal and neonatal care, and child health services. H4L activities addressed key health system constraints: local governance, data for decision-making and evidence-based policy development, human resources management, quality improvement systems, and behavior change.

H4L provided technical support to enhance national ministries' capacities for collecting and analyzing data for strategic decision-making and development of evidence-based policy. Subnationally, H4L trained district and village officials to collect data to identify health priorities, plan solutions, and mobilize resources. Project staff helped health committees—including community representatives and health and education officials—to collaborate with health facilities on solving priority problems, planning interventions, improving service quality, and mobilizing resources. Committees leveraged local government funds for identified priorities, raising over USD 7 million in FY17 alone.[25]

H4L also strengthened clinical practices in local facilities and worked with district officials to respond to committee-identified priorities. H4L raised local communities' knowledge of health-promoting practices and awareness of services among marginalized and underserved groups.

Integrated designs for both ISSP and H4L grew out of long histories with ring-fenced projects. The USAID/Jordan water technical team argued that decades of programming had focused on providing infrastructure that had not been successfully maintained, making the case for shifting to water management and governance. Similarly, 20 years of USAID/Nepal's funding had directly supported gap-filling service delivery, without operationalizing systems for funding, quality assurance, and information-sharing. H4L represented a shift toward an integrated approach, supporting government policy and systems at different levels to deliver and fund health services and enhance prospects for sustainability.

Why and How to Integrate? Barriers and Boosts Along the Continuum

Our exploration of projects along the continuum reveals both impediments and enablers facing sector specialists and their governance colleagues when deciding why and how to integrate governance into project design and implementation. We provide a field-based, practical perspective on these factors; such a perspective is often missing or muted in policy and/or academic exchanges.

Barriers to Integration

Sector Priorities Overshadow Governance

Technical specialists often see the world through their sector lenses. Like the positive space in visual images, sector-specific interventions appear as the primary and immediate concern, leaving governance to recede into the background as part of the negative space or "big picture." Funding streams and bureaucratic procedures reinforce these sector-driven perceptions.

A variant on overshadowing occurs when sector specialists consider particular policy and management issues (Table 1) as core to their sectors. Related interventions are absorbed into sector interventions as "invisible" governance integration. For example, school management is seen by many education specialists as a technical arena integral to the sector and not necessarily connected to broader governance issues. Cooperatives in the agriculture sector are a similar example. In one sense, this tendency obscures progress made on integration. At the same time, however, it reinforces sector-governance boundaries by redefining them in ways that perpetuate ring-fenced designs that prioritize sector outcomes.

Interventions with direct impacts on sector indicators thus take priority in project designs and implementation. In our sampling of projects, technical experts faced urgent sectoral needs, such as teaching children to read, saving infants' and mothers' lives, and providing water to crops and communities.

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These sector interventions and associated metrics were the priority for USAID funders, RTI implementers, and country counterparts who deemed governance impediments to meeting these needs less urgent. Ring-fenced project implementers described governance as distracting from critical sectoral problems; integrated project teams were frequently asked why they were not more focused on direct service delivery. Further, required reporting against ambitious sector-specific indicators meant every dollar spent on governance interventions needed to be justified in terms of direct contributions to sectoral outcomes.

Trade-offs Between Short- and Long-Term Outcomes

Funding for development assistance requires constant demonstration of short-term results and impacts. Time frames for integrating governance (and seeing results) are often long. Ring-fenced designs aimed to demonstrate improvements in sectoral targets over the project's life whereas integrated projects sought improvements related to both sectoral and governance interventions that persisted beyond project completion. Integrated projects were often challenged to convincingly demonstrate governance interventions' contributions to sectoral outcomes within project timelines. For example, ISSP's original design allotted 3 years to achieve major water-sector reforms. When it became apparent that the targets were too ambitious, ISSP was extended for 2 years to capitalize on momentum built during the first 3 years.

Unpredictability Is Problematic

Besides longer time horizons, governance interventions often have unpredictable outcomes. In many situations, for example ISSP (Box 3), governance interventions make progress in fits and starts, with long pauses to build consensus and constituencies or to shift incentives. For sector projects whose success depends on country governance system changes, this unpredictability makes integrating governance problematic.

Integrated Projects Face Difficult Choices Related to Indicators and Measurement

Proceeding along the integration continuum can complicate projects' theories of change, choices of indicators, and measurement.

- **Crafting specific, rather than generic, theories of change**. To address governance, some sectoral projects added generic activities and indicators (e.g., training officials or citizens, unspecified policy reforms) without delineating their fit into the overall theory of change. Such designs avoid incorporating contextual conditions that enable or constrain how these governance activities affect desired results.[18] Adding easily measurable, generic governance activities is effectively ring-fencing; resulting theories of change fail to link governance to sector outcomes.
- **Linking governance process changes to sector results.** A substantial measurement challenge is convincingly demonstrating contributions of governance activities to specific sector indicators, such as maternal mortality or water production. Box 5 provides examples of how integrated projects demonstrated such contributions in key locations or among specific populations. A related challenge derives from the unpredictability of governance activities' results, as noted above. When sector projects must report on progress using percentage-of-total measures, governance integration complicates reporting.

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- **The double-bind of strengthening data collection.** Integrated projects are often charged with improving sectoral data collection (policy and management, Table 1). Data on salient indicators are rarely collected, and demonstrating rapid progress is seldom possible. Integrated projects often fall back on process indicators as proxies while working toward improved sectoral data collection. This strategy circumvents reporting on important sectoral indicators but risks undermining credibility with sectoral experts seeking these data. ISSP addressed this challenge by defining staged indicators that anticipated when targeted change would take place but did not report on it before that time.

Box 5. Collecting Data for Integrated Projects

The 2006 and 2011 Nepal Demographic and Health Surveys (NDHS) highlighted disparities in mortality between advantaged and marginalized groups. In response, the Health for Life (H4L) team focused on the most disadvantaged communities in districts with high concentrations of marginalized castes and ethnicities. Community Action Promoters/Researchers used mobile technology to conduct household tracking of pregnant women and increase use of antenatal care, institutional delivery, and postpartum family planning in selected communities. The 2016 NDHS confirmed reduced disparities between wealth quintiles for family planning and maternal and neonatal health indicators, which helped demonstrate connections between H4L's work with local governments and changes in service utilization by marginalized groups.

In Jordan, ISSP conducted the Tafileh pilot project to demonstrate tangible improvements in customer service, billing, energy efficiency, and water production resulting from improving management performance and minimal investments in infrastructure. The pilot became the model for scaling up improved operational and management performance in other administrative units.[26]

Boosts for Integration

Attention to integration has increased for several reasons. We identify the following drivers: concern for sustainability and self-reliance, links to implementation flexibility and adaptation, and recognition of governance-related tools and methodologies in project design and management.

Sustainability Concerns as a Driver for Integration

A strong recurring theme across the projects we explored is sustainability. For ring-fenced projects, sustainability was often ignored as projects mobilized to achieve short-term sector results in isolation from government systems and capacity deficits.

For projects in the middle of the continuum, sustainability often drove integration during implementation, as governance barriers arose and staff focused on whether successful sector-specific results could be maintained or replicated. Finally, integrated projects were often designed in response to the lack of sustainability of predecessor programs. A well-known example is changes in PEPFAR's 2008 reauthorizing legislation to include attention to health systems and sustainability.[27]

Within USAID, several sector offices have revised policy and strategy documents to integrate governance. The Office of Global Health was an early adopter of integration, recognizing governance as a core feature of health systems strengthening since the early 2000s. The Office of Food for Peace issued a new Food Assistance and Food Security Strategy for 2016–2025 that included attention to governance. The Office of Forestry and Biodiversity began to focus on links between governance and sustainability in 2016. USAID's most recent policy initiative push for integration is the Journey to Self-Reliance. It uses a set of indicators to assess country commitment and capacity for the transition to self-reliance and sustainable development, many of which link directly to governance. As Missions develop country strategies based on the framework and dialogue with government officials and members of civil society, we expect increased governance integration across sectors.

Governance Integration Facilitates Flexibility and Adaptation

Projects with well-integrated links between sectoral and governance components made progress toward stated objectives, even when confronting tumultuous changes in their operating contexts. There were at least two reasons for such success. First, mutually reinforcing sectoral and governance components meant that if an approach to a problem from one angle was not successful, the project already had structures and processes in place to try a different tack. For example, evaluators noted that ISSP's flexibility, adaptability, and broad-based approach enabled the project to cope with substantial political and social change in Jordan, including electoral and constitutional reforms. The Ministry of Water and Irrigation was led by five different ministers between 2011 and 2013. Workers at different water agencies staged strikes, sometimes simultaneously, and the contract for one of the three water utilities was dissolved. The evaluators concluded that "multiple activities across several stakeholders meant working on several fronts, allowing continuous progress" by providing technical assistance and capacity-building even when reforms were stalled.[28]

Second, governance activities provided understanding of and data on how change would impact sectoral programming, helping implementers to quickly adapt and continue with project activities. H4L faced almost continuous turmoil between 2012 to 2018, including political upheaval, a series of devastating earthquakes, a blockade limiting access to fuel and

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food, and a fundamental shift to decentralized government structures. In January 2018, USAID described H4L's successful response to decentralization:

> There has been significant change in Nepal's political and administrative structures this year . . . Not only did [H4L] reorganize its staffing as per the new governance structure but also promptly acted on government's call to orient newly elected local representatives. This has helped ensure the continuity of health services during the transition to a federal structure.[29]

H4L leadership attributed the project's ability to adapt technical assistance in communities and at health facilities to a combined focus on (1) local government planning, budgeting, and resource mobilization; (2) national-level policy engagement; and (3) monitoring of monthly data (Timmons R. H4L Chief of Party; Personal communication. May 21, 2018).

Expanded Adoption of Systems Thinking and Related Tools

Donor agencies and the international development community have experimented with analytic and management tools that have brought governance to the forefront of programming. Explicit attention to systems perspectives for understanding development problems and designing projects has raised the profile of governance interventions as key contributors to achieving sector service delivery and outcomes.[1,30] The health sector has been at the forefront of systems thinking and governance.[31] A recent USAID health-sector report, for example, states that health systems strengthening is projected to save 142,000 Tanzanian lives between 2016 and 2020; 13,000 of these are attributed to improvements in health information and accountability alone.[32]

Tools such as applied political economy analysis, USAID's local systems policy framework, and complexity-aware monitoring have helped to reduce the frequency of ring-fenced project designs and implementation in favor of more governance integration. USAID's Uganda Mission is illustrative.[33] Its use of Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting during implementation has gradually incorporated effects of governance structures and processes on sectoral outcomes. Similar tools are also operational components of Doing Development Differently (DDD), Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), and adaptive management, all of which prioritize governance among contextual factors that drive adaptation and iterative redesign over project lifespans.[34]

Conclusion

In closing, we offer a note of caution and a related note of optimism. The danger of oversimplification—of governance definitions, connections between governance and sector interventions, and outcomes—persists. Oversimplifying risks treating governance as "widgets" and decontextualized "best practices." For example, many donors promote decentralization as best practice for improving service delivery performance.[35] However, the label obscures particular policy, program, and fiscal choices that constitute decentralization, making it highly problematic to draw clear and plausible connections between decentralization and specific outcomes.

More optimistically, there is burgeoning interest in integrated governance and an emerging track record of results. Lively dialogs, webinars, and listservs on DDD, TWP, and adaptive management allow governance and sector specialists to discuss views, experiences, and evidence. Documenting and expanding that track record is important both to improve development programming and practice and to justify foreign assistance investments. This policy brief is a small effort in that direction.

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