

Collective Impact in Ethiopia 2004-2012

Independent Study of the Millennium
Water Alliance WASH Program

BY SUSAN DAVIS • IMPROVE INTERNATIONAL • DECEMBER 2013



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Rationale for the Collective Impact Study

In 2012, the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) sought to explore some key questions at the heart of the mission and focus of the organization: **What, if any, is the value added of working in coalition? Does working in partnership result in greater impacts than working independently?**

MWA engaged Improve International, an independent evaluation firm with expertise in the WASH sector, to undertake an 'impact study' into the MWA's largest and longest running joint implementation program, the Millennium Water Alliance – Ethiopia Program (MWA-EP). The resulting *Collective Impact Report* aimed to document MWA's effectiveness in the field and seek concrete evidence of the value-added of working in coalition, using the five conditions for collective success identified by Kania and Kramer (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

A collective impact initiative is defined by Kania and Kramer as a long-term commitment by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that lead to powerful results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.

While the evaluation focused on the MWA partnership overall, it is viewed through the lens of the Millennium Water Program in Ethiopia because it is MWA's longest-running program, has multiple and changing partners, and support from public and private donors. The methods used in the study were:

- A comprehensive review of internal programmatic documents and data and external evaluations;
- Interviews with 28 program stakeholders: 13 in the U.S. and 15 in Ethiopia; and
- Field visits in July 2012.

Background on MWA and its Ethiopia Program

MWA was founded in 2002 to offer sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) solutions through advocacy, shared knowledge, and collaborative programming. MWA was managed by its Board until 2008 when it transitioned to professional management.

The MWA Ethiopia program began in 2004. Current and past members are CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Food for the Hungry (FH), Hope 2020, Living Water International (LWI) and its local partner Kalehewot Church (EKHC), Ethiopian Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus (EECMY), Lifewater International (LI), Relief Society of Tigray (REST), Water Action, WaterAid, WaterPartners International (now water.org), and World Vision.

Results

The table below shows a 'score' for each of the five conditions that lead to collective impact. The analysis showed significant differences between two distinct phases of MWA-EP: the period when the MWA was managed by its Board of Directors (from 2002-2008) and when it began to be managed by an Executive Director (2008) supported by a small full-time staff (late 2010). Red indicates that the partnership did not meet the criteria for that condition. Yellow indicates meeting some but not all of the criteria for a condition and green indicates having met the criteria for the condition. These results demonstrate clearly that it takes *both time and dedicated staff* for partnerships to achieve impacts beyond what they could achieve alone.

Table 1. Summary of Collective Impact Analysis

Collective Impact Condition	Board Managed (2004-2008)	Professionally Managed (2008-2012)
Common Agenda	Yellow	Green
Shared Measurement Systems	Red	Yellow
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Yellow	Green
Continuous Communication	Yellow	Yellow
Backbone Support Organization	Red	Green

As can be seen in the table, in 2004-2008, MWA-EP did not fully meet any of the conditions shown to lead to collective impact. By 2008-2012, by contrast, the partnership met three of the five conditions fully and was yellow on the remaining two – a significant improvement that was also reflected in anonymous interviews with program stakeholders.

The sections below examine in each of the five conditions in more detail and provide qualitative evidence from the desk review of documents and personal interviews regarding the types of activities undertaken by the MWA-EP to achieve collective impact over the past several years.

Common Agenda

Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

In 2011, MWA-EP took a major step toward a common agenda with the development and adoption of a "Common Policies and Strategies" document. It is described in its introduction as "a living document, subject to debate and revision, based on input from the partners. The information in this document is designed to provide valuable guidance to MWA-EP partners, who are committed to applying the enclosed policies and strategies for all MWA-EP activities, including projects, support to national level efforts and other activities. It can also be used as a resource for other stakeholders as they seek to understand the goals, objectives and structure of the MWA-EP."

The development of the policies and strategies resulted in a commitment from all partners to seek 100% water coverage in prioritized geographic areas, implement sanitation promotion without subsidy, set a common target for reaching the poorest of the poor, and work together to positively influence sector policies, among other programmatic approaches.

One interviewee encourages the MWA to "figure out how to increase impact by collectively working on the ground rather than independently working under a funding umbrella. That's a theoretical quest. It's important" (US#5, 2012).

Another interviewee suggests a strategy: "We cannot really cover the whole country; there are more than 600 woredas. MWA is only operating in 48 woredas. But what we want to do or what we agreed to do is just to work in limited area or consolidate where we have a presence and the lessons that we generate out of it will be applied by other sector actors" (ET#2, 2012).

Shared Measurement Systems

Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact. Agreement on a common agenda is illusory without agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Until 2012, MWA-EP partners had used their own monitoring programs, and joint data collection was challenging. For example, only three partners (FHI, World Vision, and WaterAid) submitted the baseline data in 2006, and even that was either incomplete or not in the correct format (MWP Ethiopia, 2007). "There were various challenges because we didn't all have the same monitoring indicators. And that's something I know that Rafael has really worked hard to ensure in this subsequent phase so that at the minimum, when disparate organizations report, they're reporting on the same indicators. So you can collate the impact in an easier fashion when you all are measuring the same things" (US#10, 2012).

In the current phase of the program (2011-2014), MWA responded to this challenge by collaborating with the Center for Global Safe Water at Emory University to develop a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework that is now used by all MWA-EP partners for data collection and analysis purposes. As all partners collect the same data using the same indicators, they will contribute to a "trove of data that can be analyzed and interpreted for patterns to improve current and future programs" (Siseraw Consultancy, 2012). One interviewee commended MWA for bringing in the Center for Global Safe Water to support the baseline evaluation and development of MEL platform: "...especially the baseline, is very impressive to

me. The way they track water, sanitation, hygiene, and also the information they brought us was very good" (ET#1, 2012).

This MEL platform should help to better inform partners – both in Ethiopia and in the US – about each other's progress. Nine interviewees responded yes to the question about seeing progress of other partners -- primarily at Program Management Group (PMG) meetings. US participants were much less likely to have seen this information, unless they happened to attend a PMG meeting.

**Many organizations
are copying what MWA
members have learned or
achieved in the past.
- Ethiopian Stakeholder**

Another challenge the MWA will continue to face is that "measures of success are different depending on the donor. Foundations don't use the same indicators. . . . [But] the more information you collect, the more complex questions you ask, the more it costs. Most donors don't want to support monitoring and evaluation. They want to support tangible things. [That] doesn't make the projects more sustainable, just more reportable" (US#1, 2012).

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The MWP Ethiopia Strategies and Implementation document includes as a specific objective to operate a learning and policy influence alliance to improve the implementation activities of partners; contribute towards the harmonization and greater effectiveness of programs; and to raise awareness for the WASH sector in the Ethiopia and internationally (MWP Ethiopia, 2011).

The assessment and field visits confirmed that a positive environment for learning has been created among MWA-EP implementing partners over the past seven years and is one of the key added values of working in partnership. Many interviewees applauded the MWA's emphasis on learning. Through bi- or tri-annual PMG meetings and in other forums as well, partners have shared best practices with each other and adopted pertinent ones in their own WASH programs (Siseraw Consultancy, 2012).

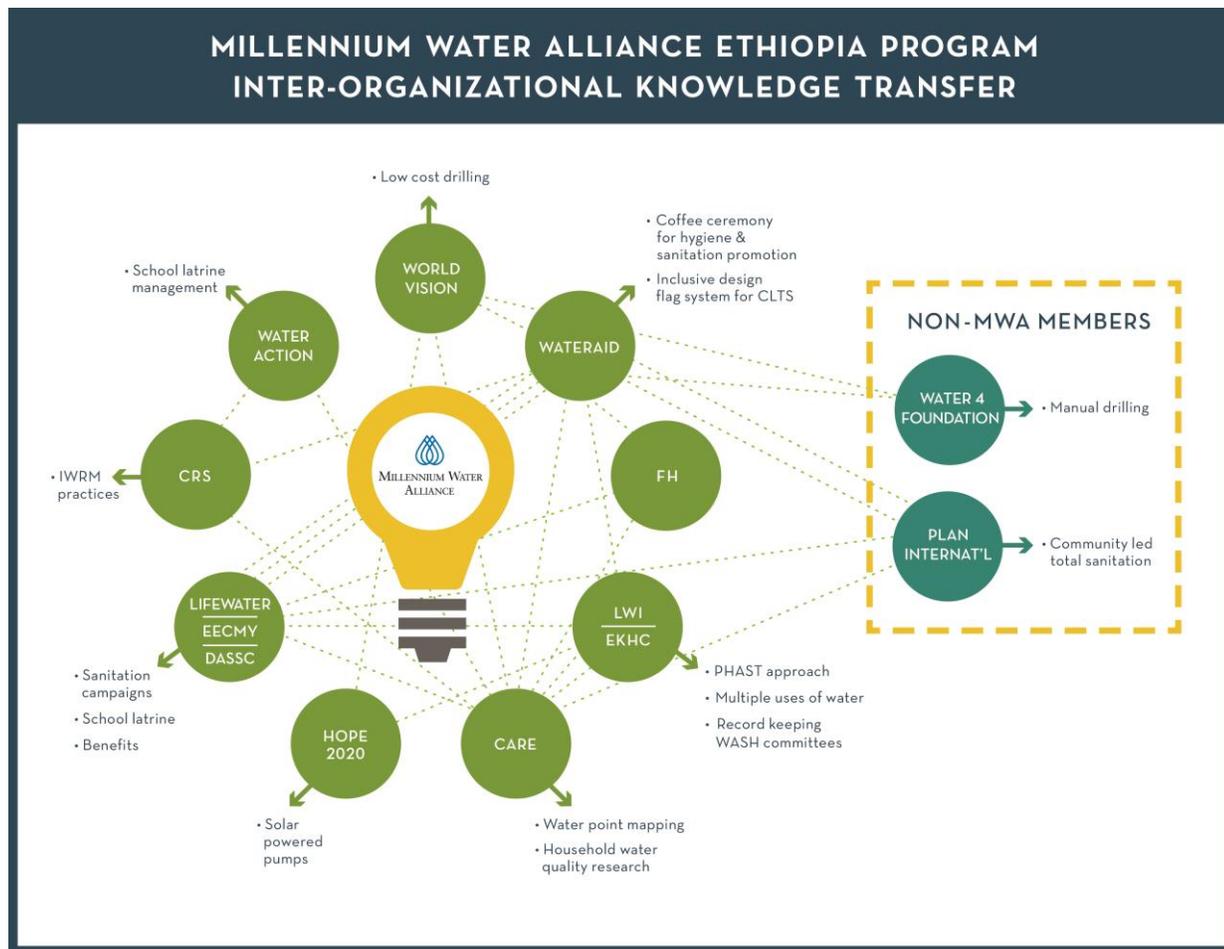
PMG meetings are the most common opportunities for learning from peers and other sector experts. "The very good thing is that MWA is unique in establishing and coordinating the PMG. The PMG is a special thing [because] we learn from other stakeholders" (ET#3, 2012). Participants also appreciate the free evaluation from peer experts: "all the partners in the MWP come to our project and they judge, as third eye - If there is a failure, technical, if my engineering or designing or whatever it is, there is something going wrong, I'll get easily feedback *without any payment*" (ET#3, 2012). Another interviewee gave the example that if an MWA-EP partner asked him for help with groundwater exploration, they would save consultancy fees of more than 200,000 birr (ET#1, 2012). Another organization has found it valuable for the MWA-EP to work with Emory University on research (ET#6, 2012).

In addition to learning from peers, MWA provides trainings and workshops on monitoring, national policies and standards, and technical issues. In May 2012, MWA coordinated a Life Cycle Costing Training for 26 MWA-EP partners and three other stakeholders, led by IRC. In addition, non-MWA members including Plan International, local universities, World Impact, UNICEF, Save the Children, CCRITA, the Dutch Water Alliance have participated in PMG meetings (ET#2, 2012).

One partner said that the initiative for peer-to-peer site visits outside of the PMG meetings needs to come from the hosting organization: "the MWA partners are not in position to individually travel from one organization to the other to learn what that individual organization has done differently" (ET#3, 2012). Another urged the MWP Secretariat to ensure in-country partners who have not received funding for the current phase continue to be actively engaged to ensure ongoing learning (ET#6, 2012). The MWP Secretariat should encourage various levels of partner staff, especially the field staff, to participate in learning (ET#1, 2012).

*I want to learn . . .
not only from my success.
I want to learn
from my failures.
- Ethiopian Stakeholder*

The figure below illustrates specific examples of the transfer of knowledge and application of strategies among partners that have resulted from participation in the MWA-EP.



Continuous Communication

Developing trust among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Communications was found to be the weakest area of the partnership: only six interviewees said the communications were sufficient, while 10 responded that communication was insufficient.

Another interesting conclusion from the interviews was the differences in responses to some questions between Ethiopian and US-based program stakeholders.¹ For example, 88% of Ethiopian interviewees had “seen information about the progress of other program partners” while only 27% of US interviewees had. 67% of Ethiopian interviewees agreed that communications were sufficient “to understand the purpose, activities successes and challenges of the program” while only 27% of US interviewees agreed with this statement. Finally, 100% of Ethiopian respondents reported having used practices/technologies learned in the MWA-EP in a non-MWA program while only 50% of US respondents reported the same.

These responses highlight an opportunity to better communicate what happens in the field to member organization headquarters, as well as the broader WASH sector. Several interviewees suggested that the MWA staff and the MWP secretariat lead the way to share lessons regularly within and outside the partnership, using monthly or quarterly blogs, for example (ET#8, 2012). “Having participants in the alliance talking about [learning], sharing research, writing articles, and implementing organization changes to accomplish [long term water delivery], would be extremely beneficial” (US#5, 2012).

Backbone Support Organization

Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The MWA US Secretariat serves as a backbone support organization for the partnership overall by designing joint programming, soliciting resources, and consolidating reports, among other roles. Most interviewees agreed that the MWA US Staff added value to the partnership (13 yes; 1 no; 1 don't know) and supported the vision and goals of the organization (9 yes; 7 no; 1 don't know).

The MWA-EP Secretariat serves as a backbone support organization for the program, by representing the partners at national forums, coordinating PMG meetings and consolidating reports. Several interviewees mentioned their concerns with the resources for the MWA-EP Secretariat (staff and funding). The method of using the Secretariat host organization for hiring has caused some difficulties, including at least one incident where the host organization has hired staff away from the MWP Secretariat. In other cases, the host organization did not follow MWA's guidelines for staff selection. Recently the MWA has developed an agreement that the host organization must sign (MWA, 2012).

¹ Not all interviewees were asked all of the questions due to time constraints.

Earlier evaluators found that the MWA-EP is in an excellent position to play a prominent role to support the national WASH program: “MWA is therefore encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities, both through service delivery and advocacy” (The Mitchell Group, 2008). The MWP Secretariat needs more or different types of staff to be most effective, and less or more efficient reporting systems (ET#2, 2012). That funding brought in by the MWA was the main benefit, making it unique among other partnerships and attracting participation. Funding continuity helps organizations follow through on their commitments and keep strong relationships with local stakeholders (ET#7, 2012).

The tables below summarize the key successes and challenges identified within each of the five conditions that lead to collective impact:

Examples of Successes in the MWP Ethiopia

COLLECTIVE IMPACT CONDITION	EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSES
Common agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MWA-EP partners adopted a common policies and strategy document (MWP Ethiopia, 2011)
Shared measurement systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A common monitoring, evaluation and learning platform implemented in 2012
Mutually reinforcing activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing PMG meetings; most partners find them valuable and there is good participation • Peer evaluations and shared learning through PMG meetings • Partnership peer evaluations were conducted 2006, 2007, 2011 • Some partners have been able to access new sources of funding through the MWA (US#5, 2012) • Good integration and representation among various sector offices (health, water, education woreda offices/bureaus) (MWP Ethiopia, 2011)
Continuous communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who attend PMG meetings feel in the loop.
Backbone support organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The MWA-EP Secretariat office participated in different national forums like WASH Movement, Christian Relief and Development Association, and Multi Stakeholder Forums to contribute towards the effort being made in water and sanitation development activities around the country.

Key Challenges in the MWP Ethiopia

COLLECTIVE IMPACT CONDITION	KEY CHALLENGES
Common Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visions of organizations, national governments, donors, and programs vary
Shared Measurement Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of end-of-project evaluations that can be matched to baseline evaluations • Varied capacity of partners to collect data (including budgets, skills, equipment) • Measures of success are different depending on the donor. • Most donors don't want to support monitoring and evaluation. • Need resources for local monitoring (permanent institutions)
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program coordinator coordinates work of the MWA partner organizations but doesn't have executive power over them. • Individual member organizations need to make greater commitment to MWA coming together over official solicitations.
Continuous Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US representatives don't see information on MWP progress • Partners don't see information on each other's work unless they attend PMGs
Backbone Support Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different opinions on MWA / MWP secretariat roles • Complex financial operations require partner staff education • MWP secretariat is under-resourced • Need to diversify funding sources

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is brave and vital to take time to evaluate a partnership. Most of those interviewed thought the partnership had improved over time. And while many interviewees had recommendations for improvement, no one suggested the partnership be dismantled. Importantly, all field staff had specific examples of having used practices and technologies they had been exposed to through the MWA-EP. The most obvious tangible benefit to partners identified by this study is learning and peer support.

Because end-of-implementation and ex-post evaluations did not use the same indicators or the same locations prior to this study, it is difficult to quantitatively assess the impact of working in partnership. MWA-EP partners have now begun to collect in-depth data under a common monitoring platform which should facilitate more quantitative analysis of impact in future evaluations of collective impact

Some of the specific recommendations that emerge from this analysis are:

- **Advocate to the Sector**

MWA should collaborate with other sector conveners to engage major WASH donors in the conversation about next practices. As the methods and outcomes of learning are better documented, MWA should purposefully share this powerful evidence to advocate for the power of partnership.

- **Expand Collaboration with Members**

Interviewees see the MWA as a generator of resources, a leader of advocacy, and as a facilitator of learning, rather than simply coordinating implementation and reporting. Because there are so many strong opinions on the ideal roles of the MWA overall and the program secretariats, it is strongly recommended that a facilitated global summit be held to determine the most useful roles moving forward.

*If you want to go fast,
go alone.
If you want to go far,
go together.
- African Proverb*

- **Systematize and Prioritize Learning**

The MWA is particularly well positioned to make a comparison of alternative approaches, their costs and benefits over time, and the scalability of their methods, which would be useful to the sector. Each MWP Secretariat should coordinate the selection of priority learning themes to discuss at the Program Management Group meetings and ensure systematic follow-up.

- **Seek Diversified and Flexible Resources**

The MWA should seek to diversify funding sources and encourage donors to be more flexible (i.e., with matching, schedules, cost escalation). MWA should lead the sector in working with donors on creative funding arrangements that stagger funding for hygiene and sanitation promotion for a few years beyond water supply activities.

- **Monitor and Evaluate Rigorously to Prove Impact**

Follow up each phase of the program with end-of-project and post-project evaluations that can be compared to baseline evaluations. This is the only real way to document impact and to understand what is working and what needs improvement. In turn, those reports should be finalized and shared publicly: results and information can be used in advocacy efforts. Also, it is strongly recommended that all partners to commit to measuring at least a small set of indicators the same way, in the same places, over at least 3 years to be able to determine true progress.

The MWA has great potential in developing a robust evidence base for best practices, and this would certainly be of service to a sector where information on what works and why is fragmented and insufficient. Yet there is a much more ambitious role for which the MWA is well suited: to lead the sector in considering *next practices* (which are forward looking). It is recommended that the MWA use methods such as appreciative inquiry to engage its partners, donors and other stakeholders in developing, implementing, and sharing next practices.

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On cover page: A MWA-EP water point in Chillanko Kibele, Ethiopia (Photo by Susan Davis)