

# Fostering WaSH marketing exchange systems in informal Melanesian communities:

## Using participatory processes to engage informal settlements and enabling actors in improving WaSH

**Who is this brief for?** WaSH programmers and practitioners designing and implementing programs where they will engage with residents of informal settlements.

**Purpose of this brief:** Development experts increasingly acknowledge the need for participatory approaches to development. This brief provides guidance on ways that programs and policies can encourage local ownership, self-reflection and analysis of WaSH situations and solutions, as well as encourage and support collaboration with local enabling actors to achieve positive change.

**Recommendation 1:** WaSH practitioners and programmers should build on existing social cohesion between residents in Melanesian informal settlements to achieve WaSH improvements (rather than seeking to engage with individuals or families). Where social cohesion within a target population is not strong, WaSH practitioners and programmers could invest resources in developing better working relationships between members of the target population; this should improve the effectiveness of WaSH programs.

**Recommendation 2:** WaSH practitioners and programmers should consider periodic face-to-face meetings between members of the informal settlements and enabling actors as this is an effective way to understand each other's roles, responsibilities and needs, and can support each other in progressing WaSH priorities and action plans.

**Recommendation 3:** WaSH practitioners and programmers should consider participatory processes as a tool to expand the opportunity of informal settlers to think and act for themselves in terms of improving their WaSH situation.

## Background

### *WaSH in urban and peri-urban Melanesia*

Urban migration for employment and education has substantially increased urban and peri-urban populations in Melanesian countries. The low affordability of urban housing, combined with the complex and often conflict-prone land tenure system in the region, has led to an increase in informal settlements<sup>1</sup>.

Informal settlements in Melanesia are often on urban fringes, are not planned by government, are on private, government or custom-owned land so that residents

have insecure land tenure, and lack basic infrastructure<sup>1</sup>. Residents generally earn little or no income. Some settlements are on the boundaries of city council and provincial administrations, and so, fall between urban and rural policies. Their rapid growth has exacerbated the challenge for WaSH service provision<sup>1</sup>. Most settlements lack connections to mains water and sewerage lines, due to the land tenure, and cannot access council solid waste collection programs. Water-related diseases are common, leading to compromised health and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

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## The participatory approach to development

A participatory approach to development entails a collaborative and democratic process by which local knowledge and preferences are central during planning and implementation, local ownership is valued, and target populations are empowered to enhance their wellbeing through self-reflection and action<sup>2</sup>. Many governments, funding agencies, and civil society actors acknowledge participatory approaches as important in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sustainable Development Goals Target 6b: *“Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management”*<sup>3</sup>

Participation can either emerge organically within communities, with only a little stimulation from external actors (e.g. community-managed sanitation), or be driven by governments and CSOs as part of a large-scale policy initiative (e.g. subsidised water supply). Although some level of external influence is often needed to scale-up the positive outcomes of organic participation, an entirely externally-driven participatory approach isn’t always conducive to building lasting social cohesion.

An **informal settlement** is a geographic space representing an area of human habitation. Informal settlements generally have illegal or insecure land tenure, are unplanned, and lack basic infrastructure. **Residents** live within informal settlements. A **community** is a socially-networked group of people, so within a settlement there can be many different types of communities (e.g., church groups), and some communities will extend beyond settlement boundaries (e.g., sporting clubs). The **target population** is the group of people being addressed through a WaSH program. Individuals within the target population normally share some common characteristic/s, such as living nearby, common church or sport group, common demographics such as young mothers. **Enabling actors** are people in civil society, external support agencies, community governance structures, utilities, governments, private sector and businesses, and academia, who design, implement or support WaSH policies and programs.

## Research approach

We used participatory action research (PAR), where the researchers, residents of informal settlements, businesses and enabling actors, work together to define a problem, design a solution, and implement change<sup>4</sup>. We worked with two informal settlements in each of Suva (Fiji), Port Vila (Vanuatu) and Honiara (Solomon Islands). An abbreviated research activity was undertaken in one settlement in Madang (Papua New Guinea). Residents of these settlements had expressed a desire to improve their WaSH situation. We also worked in partnership with WaSH enabling actors (e.g., private actors, civil society organisations (CSOs), multi-lateral organisations, government agencies, water and sanitation utilities, educational institutions).

The research describes WaSH marketing exchange systems operating in informal, urban Melanesia settlements and identifies ways they can be fostered and strengthened with the support of enabling actors (Figure 1).

We fostered WaSH marketing exchanges through a six phase participatory process (Figure 2). For more details on the activities involved in each phase, please refer to the guide for working on WaSH in informal settlements<sup>5</sup>.

**Key finding 1: Social cohesion enables residents in Melanesian informal settlements to engage in WaSH marketing exchanges and WaSH programs.**

We found evidence of residents engaging in a range of types of marketing exchanges to satisfy their WaSH needs. However, we also noticed that these exchanges tended to happen between familiar parties – neighbours, extended families, people who had migrated from the same villages, members of the same church group, etc. Where the exchanges went beyond the group of familiar individuals to others within the settlement, for example, local canteen shops, they were also characterised by a



**Figure 1: The WaSH marketing exchange system.** WaSH marketing exchange systems are comprised of functions, performed by actors using rules, which creates assets that enable all types of WaSH marketing exchanges, which should generate not only access to WaSH, but also wellbeing impacts. Note, Command-based and Culturally-determined exchanges are also non-market-based exchanges; for the purposes of this communication ‘non-market’ refers to other types of non-market exchanges, such as donations and charitable exchanges.

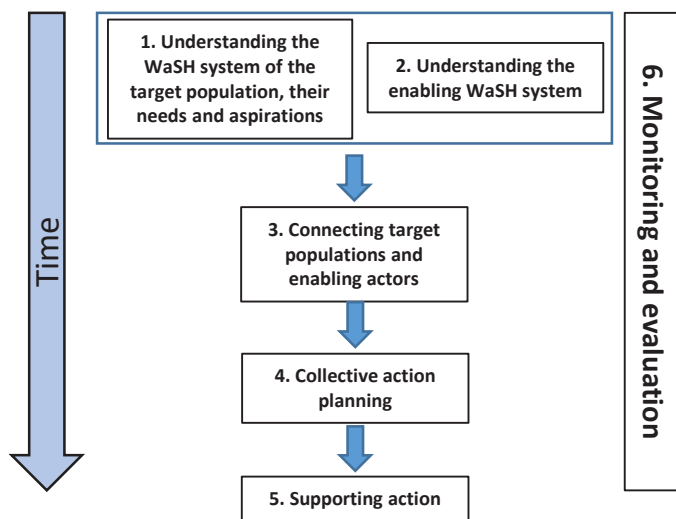


Figure 2: Participatory engagement process for fostering WaSH marketing exchanges.

high degree of social cohesion. This suggested that in order for marketing exchanges to happen effectively, a degree of social cohesion is an important component.

Social cohesion also affected the involvement of residents in this research (and expect similar observations would be made of WaSH programs). Although many individuals engaged with the research activities from early in the program, they were not representative of the settlement as a whole; participation was generally skewed towards a particular church group, ethnicity or geographic area, and who already had a high degree of social cohesion. They became involved in the program because it was seen as important to their community (within the informal settlement). After working with these participants on the benefits of working with other communities within the settlement to improve WaSH, they strived to include other communities and thus created new social cohesion across the settlement.

The strengthened and new social cohesion was a significant factor in encouraging a broad representation of residents in the WaSH planning activities, conducted either within their settlement, alongside other settlements, or with enabling actors. Seeing the value of diverse participation and therefore the importance of social cohesion, we recommend that to effectively foster WaSH marketing exchanges, WaSH programmers and practitioners should consider either working with target populations that already have strong social cohesion and assist them to leverage it to achieve WaSH outcomes, or investing resources in developing social cohesion in target populations where it is lacking.

**Key finding 2: A participatory process can empower members of the target population to plan and act in a self-determined manner to improve their WaSH situation.**

Past approaches to improving WaSH in informal settlements were typically driven by external actors,

such as governments and civil society and residents were not active participants in determining their local WaSH arrangements. This created a lack of responsibility and ownership of WaSH situations within settlements and a sense of disempowerment to improve the situation. The participatory approach, which needs active input of ideas and energy from local residents, was initially met with resistance in some informal settlements. Open and active discussions about the importance of locally-driven action, the failures of past approaches, and the scope of the research, including discussion of activities the research could not support such as the provision of infrastructure, was essential to building trust and transparency and to building a sense of ownership with the residents. The participatory activities rapidly empowered residents to think about and express their views on existing and desired WaSH situations, and identify and act upon ways to make improvements.

*"I just want to say that the WaSH team is really good because from your workshops, it has opened up our minds to carry out activities within the community. Our community needed help in so many ways but because we are under the city's authority, many times the Secretary would not manage to visit us and so after the workshop we have realised that it is very true and that it's compulsory to carry out activities concerning WaSH within the community... and whenever we seek for help, we did everything ourselves especially regarding letters, we just gave it to the chief for approval signature. Previously we have been dependant, but right now, we carry out activities which should be done."*

Member of target population, Vanuatu

*"I have also seen an improvement with the sanitation within the community and also the toilets and bathrooms with the households in our community and also the surroundings around the households. Unlike before, now we have listened to each other and actually work together as one community."*

Member of target population, Fiji

**Key finding 3: Opportunities for face-to-face discussions involving residents and enabling actors led to collaborative planning and action that was based on mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, opportunities, capabilities and aspirations.**

After working separately with informal settlements and enabling actors initially, we brought them together to collectively plan and carry out actions. Both enabling actors and informal settlement residents expressed the usefulness of connecting the groups in order to foster WaSH marketing exchanges because they gained an understanding of the capabilities of each other, the aspirations, needs and priorities of informal settlements, the roles and responsibilities of different enabling actors and the other (non-required) ways that enabling actors and local businesses could further support marketing exchanges (e.g. providing technical advice, skills training). Enabling actors and settlement residents both stated that independent facilitation (provided in this case by the research team) was useful in establishing rapport and processes for engagement.

Working together with the enabling actors led to actions such as water utilities installing extra connections to water mains after understanding how water connections are managed within settlements, informal residents writing grants for government-funded training, and settlement WaSH committees organising settlement-wide drain clean-ups with tools provided by municipal authorities. In Fiji, the enabling actors and representatives of the WaSH committees from the two informal settlements decided to form an informal WaSH Forum that meets every few months, to share progress, concerns and ideas to continue to improve their WaSH (and other environmental health) situations; these have continued successfully to date with minimal support in the form of some meeting facilitation by local researchers.

*"I think it is important that we continue to have this kind of group (enabling actors) work with the community like this. To help in their work or to guide them in what they should do, not actually doing things for them but helping them do things for themselves by providing assistance, by referring them to proper authority. If possible, in many cases, advocating for people who are able to come in to help, to see the situation that they are in."*

Enabling actor, Fiji

*"It makes things a lot easier when the link has been made from us to you and from there to the stakeholders directly. It's like the WaSH (project) made it easier by creating the link between us and the stakeholders."*

Member of the target population, Fiji

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## Research project and reports

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This research received ethics approval from Monash University, the University of North Carolina, the University of the South Pacific, Divine Word University and the relevant authorities in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.

## Want to know more?

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