Water Stewardship Malawi: Implementing the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard at Njereza Primary school

This report documents the lessons generated by the application of the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) Standard with Njereza Primary school in southern Malawi. Under the Scottish Government funded Water Stewardship Malawi initiative, Water Witness International began working with the school in 2018 to implement the AWS Standard, one of the first applications of the Standard in at a school globally. The objectives of the exercise were to:

1. Secure cost effective, and sustainable management of water risks at Njereza Primary School through adapted implementation of the AWS Standard as a framework for water management, risk mitigation and collective action.
2. Establish the benefits, challenges and value of the AWS Standard in a school setting and explore barriers to implementation.

The results, benefits and challenges are presented below, together with conclusions and recommendations for improving the AWS system and water stewardship practice in the education sector.

Njereza Primary school

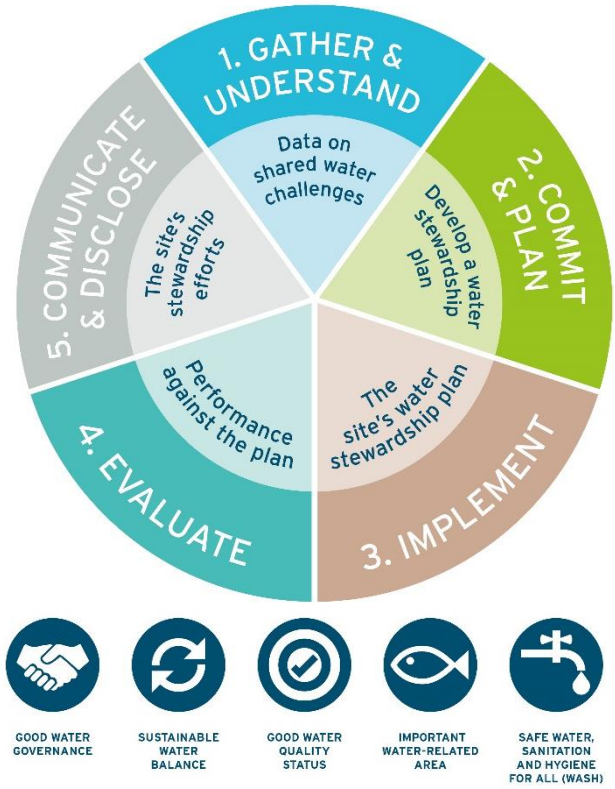
Background and methodology

Njereza Primary school serves 1,095 children between the ages of 9 -19 in the Chikwawa district of southern Malawi. Chikwawa lies along the Lower Shire River and faces severe water problems because of highly saline groundwater, and regular cycles of severe flooding and drought. Given the school's vulnerability to water and climate shocks, the Water Witness International team began working with the District office and school management to implement the AWS Standard as a framework for understanding and mitigating water-related challenges.

What is the Alliance for Water Stewardship Standard?

The AWS Standard offers a credible, globally applicable framework for major water users to understand their own water use and impacts, and to work collaboratively and transparently with others for sustainable water management within the wider water catchment context. Implementers follow the steps and guidance in the AWS Standard to achieve good water stewardship practices that improve site water performance and contribute to wider sustainability goals.

The AWS Standard is built around five steps, which each contain a series of criteria and indicators. Following the steps and criteria will lead to improved performance in five areas: water balance, water quality, healthy status of important water-related areas, good water governance and safe water, sanitation and hygiene for all. Sites making claims to good water stewardship are audited and certified by credible, third party auditors.



Implementation methodology

1. **Inception and planning**
2. **Water security scan and household survey**
3. **Water stewardship plan**
4. **Support and mentoring for implementation**
5. **Documentation - inputs, outputs, outcomes, challenges and recommendations**

WWI carried out an initial desk-based review of the site and catchment water security context for Njereza Primary and conducted a household survey to identify water risks and opportunities. Then, using the AWS Standard as a framework, WWI worked with the District office and school management to develop a water stewardship plan to address key water risks. District and school staff received support throughout implementation of the water stewardship plan in the form of site visits, calls, and material review.

Water security: Site and catchment context

Njereza Primary School is located in Chikwawa district, within the Wamkulumadzi sub-basin of the Shire River Basin. The school is in close proximity to the Shire river, as well as the Majete Game Reserve.

Rivers and streams in Chikwawa are degraded by invasive species, deforestation, unsustainable cultivation practices and agricultural run-off – surface water is considered unfit for domestic use. Groundwater is highly saline in the district, and common sources of contamination include pit latrines and solid waste.

Drought and flood events have increased in frequency, intensity and magnitude over the past two decades in the Wamkulumadzi sub-basin as a result of climate change. Chikwawa district has been particularly hard hit by dry spells and floods. The district suffered widespread destruction of property and loss of life during floods in 2015 and 2019.

The school's sole water source is a borehole constructed by Catholic Relief Services, which is shared with the surrounding community. For sanitation, the school relies on 16 gender-segregated pit latrines to serve pupils and staff. The facilities are well maintained and cleaned by pupils. However, people from surrounding villages use the toilets at the school without permission and do not contribute cleaning or maintenance.

A Water Risks and Opportunities survey of the households surrounding Njereza Primary identified the following priority water risks:

- Low levels of access to improved sanitation facilities at households.
- Property destruction and displacement caused by flooding
- Low awareness of laws, rights and responsibilities in relation to water resources and waste management.

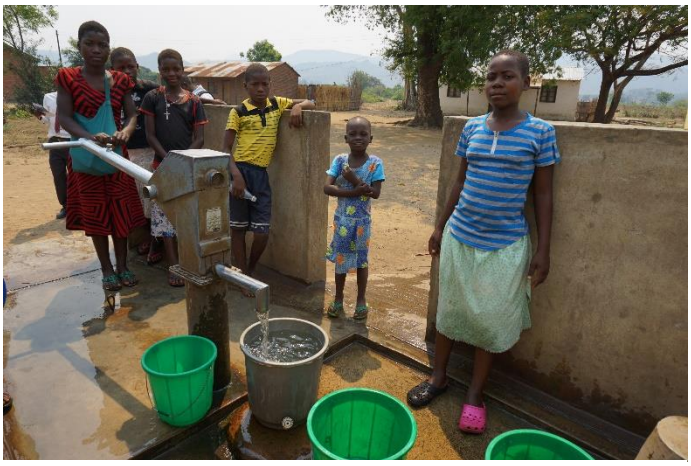
Changes driven by AWS Standard implementation

Borehole management

> ***"Access to water is for everyone, not just us".***
>
> **Christopher Enock - Borehole Management Committee Chairman**

The school shares its borehole with the surrounding community. With over 1,200 people reliant on the source, queuing for water and arguments were common, and responsibilities for operation and maintenance unclear. While a Borehole Management Committee was previously established, there were no by-laws to govern use of the borehole. Furthermore, representatives of Njereza Primary were not included on the Committee. As a result, the school was unable to participate in decision making regarding the borehole, and the access of students was not treated as a priority.

As part of AWS Standard implementation, the school reviewed the water governance arrangements of the borehole. Two teachers from Njereza Primary are now included on the Borehole Management Committee, and by-laws have been established which clearly set out the role of the Committee, and responsibilities of users. The by-laws prohibit activities in the immediate vicinity of the borehole which could cause contamination (such as washing or the grazing of animals), prioritise access for students, and set limits on abstraction during busy periods.



Borehole at Njereza Primary school

Benefits of AWS Standard implementation

Improved relationship with the community

Addressing the shared management of the borehole has improved the relationship between the school and the surrounding community. Students are now better able to access the borehole, and the community has an appreciation the for the role of the Borehole Management Committee.

Improved hygiene practices

The development of by-laws for use the borehole have helped students and community members to understand and practice good hygiene practices when using the borehole, which reduces the chances for contamination.

Challenges of AWS Standard implementation

Interest and incentives

The Borehole Management Committee has difficulty motivating members to participate and attend meetings. Members feel that they should be paid an allowance or be provided with some other incentives to participate in the voluntary committee. This is reflective of the broader 'allowance culture' fostered by the donor community in Malawi, which has normalised the payment of allowances to civil servants and community members to participate in development projects. This mindset runs counter to the notion of stewardship and presents a barrier to uptake of the AWS Standard amongst communities who see themselves as beneficiaries, rather than stewards.

Conclusions

This exercise shows that while the AWS Standard holds some potential to be used as a framework for identifying and addressing water risks in a school setting, outcomes are highly dependent upon the interest and capacity of the parties involved. In the case of Njereza Primary, the District and school staff involved in the project struggled to grasp the intent and logic of the Standard, and rather viewed the work as a standard school WASH project. Furthermore, the exercise raised doubts about the applicability of the Standard in traditional development context, where the people involved tend to see themselves as beneficiaries rather than implementers. The AWS Standard in its current form is geared towards sites seeking to demonstrate the sustainability of their operations. It appears that in the context of Njereza Primary, achieving a basic level of water security takes priority over demonstrating sustainability credentials. This is an important less regarding the viability of AWS Standard implementation in similar socio-economic contexts.

Recommendations

1. **AWS Self-Verification for public institutions:** AWS currently operates a self-verification system which allows sites to do an internal assessment of their compliance with the Standard and make a claim about performance. However, it largely functions as a temporary measure for sites pursuing certification, as it can only be renewed twice. For public institutions such as a school, who largely utilise the Standard as a framework for water and sanitation management, yet lack the resources to become certified, self-verification offers the opportunity be recognised and rewarded for their water stewardship efforts.