



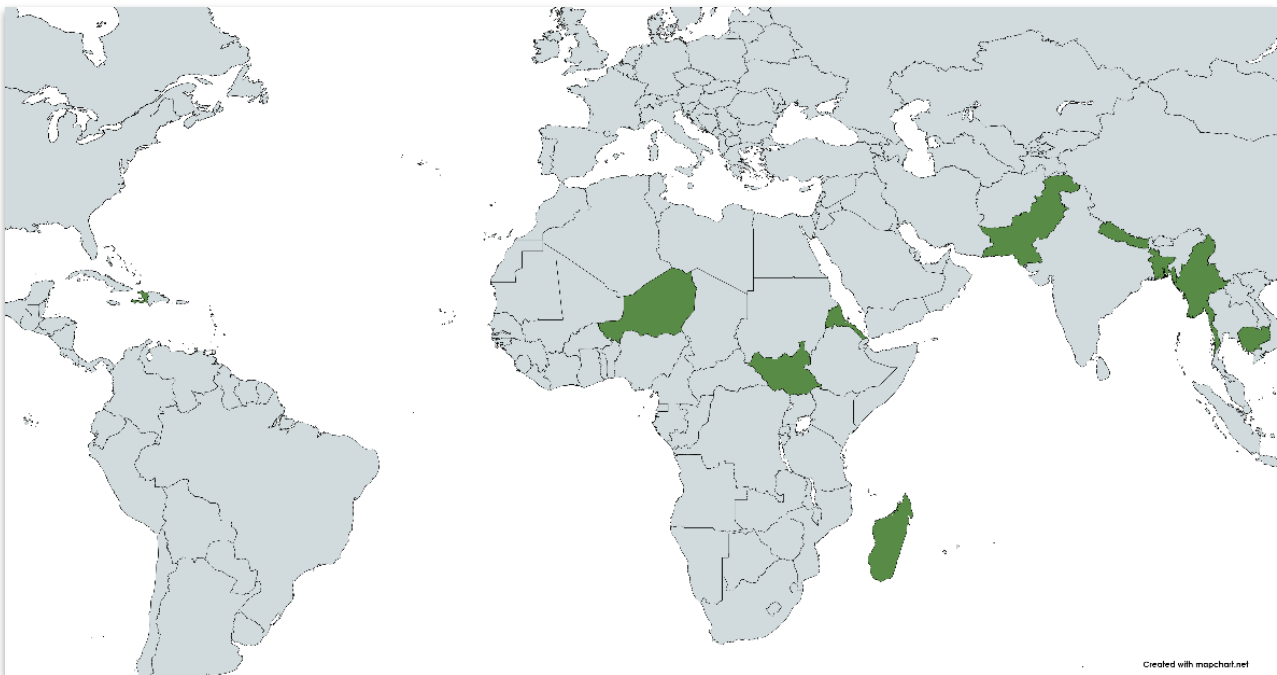
## Independent Monitoring and Verification: Twelve lessons from ASWA II

Accelerating Hygiene, Sanitation and Water for All II (ASWA II) was a £56 million programme financed by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and implemented via UNICEF in ten countries. A continuation of ASWA I, the programme began in October 2017, operating in Haiti, Niger, Eritrea, South Sudan, Madagascar, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar. It is due to close in March 2022.

The intended outcome of the programme was sustained use of safe water supplies and sanitation services, and sustained adoption of hygiene practices, by poor and vulnerable people in targeted areas, especially by women and girls. In pursuit of this, the programme aimed to provide:

- Access to basic sanitation for people in targeted rural districts
- Access to basic, safe, locally managed water supplies for people in targeted rural districts
- Schools and health care facilities with appropriate, effectively managed water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, with hygiene also being promoted
- Strengthened national systems and capacity for rural WASH in prioritised areas

In parallel with the grant to UNICEF, FCDO appointed a consortium of three consulting firms (Itad, IWEL and Aguaconsult) as the supplier of Independent Monitoring and Verification (IMV) services. This Learning Brief provides an overview of the IMV team's approach to the assignment, summarises the impact of IMV services, and highlights lessons from the experience with some thoughts on what should be done differently next time.



ASWA II Countries - Haiti, Niger, Eritrea, South Sudan, Madagascar, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar

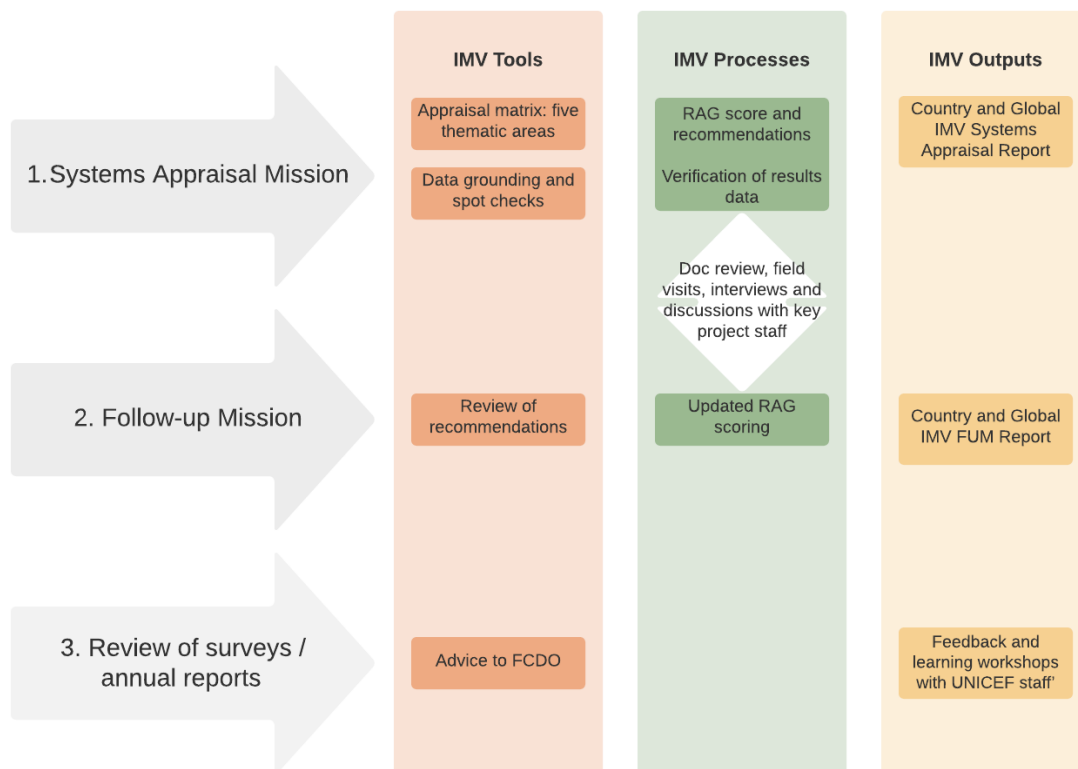
## Overview of the IMV assignment

IMV's primary role was not to track progress towards targets but to quality assure programme monitoring systems so that results data submitted to FCDO were likely to be reliable and that associated surveys and special studies (for example, baseline and progress reports) used sound methodology and analysis.

IMV deployed a team comprising a Project Manager and Team Leader at the global level; four Regional Team Leaders (RTLs), each overseeing work in two or three countries; and ten Country Monitors and Verifiers (CMVs), most of whom were nationals of the countries concerned.

IMV's approach comprised three key elements as depicted in the diagram below:

1. Annual monitoring systems appraisal in each country, using a common methodology
2. Follow-up missions six months later to check on progress against earlier recommendations and update the appraisal score
3. Reviews of survey and annual progress reports submitted by UNICEF to FCDO



Snapshot of IMV key activities, tools, processes, and outputs

The first mission each year was known as the annual **monitoring systems appraisal** and involved a detailed assessment addressing 17 questions across five thematic areas:

1. Capability of the reporting structures
2. Clarity and robustness of monitoring processes
3. Soundness of data management processes
4. Attention to vulnerable groups
5. Attention to conditional performance incentive indicators

Answering these questions involved a review of project reports and results data, interviews and discussions with UNICEF WASH team members and implementing partner(s) at the national level, and field visits to selected project offices and communities to assess how results data were generated and collated at the operational level. Many appraisal missions were conducted jointly by RTLs and CMVs, but in some cases (especially where there were security constraints), the CMV conducted the mission alone with remote support from the RTL.<sup>1</sup>

The questions were structured into a matrix, an extract of which is shown below.

Areas of enquiry	Lead questions	Good	Satisfactory	Limited
<b>1. Capability of the reporting structures</b>				
1.1 Staffing levels and time allocation	Is there clarity on roles and responsibilities for data collection, aggregation, quality control and reporting?	Responsibilities are clearly assigned at all levels for monitoring and staff can describe their role.	Not all responsibilities for monitoring are clearly assigned or staff are not all able to explain their role.	There is a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities and monitoring functions are not clearly assigned.
	Is staffing sufficient?	Monitors are available at all levels, focused on their job with clear time allocated.	Monitoring activities are constrained by inadequate time allocation.	Staff are not dedicated to monitoring for lack of time.
1.2 Staff training	Have staff been oriented to fulfil its monitoring functions?	Staff at all levels are fully trained and task-oriented to fulfil their monitoring function.	Staff receive initial orientation only on monitoring.	Little evidence of staff training on monitoring.
<b>2. Clarity and robustness of monitoring processes</b>				
2.1 Clarity on	Do staff have a clear	Staff at all levels	Staff at all levels have	Overall, staff are not clear

Extract from Monitoring Systems Appraisal Matrix (SM1) [Simplified version]

The findings from the appraisal questions were scored using red/amber/green (RAG) ratings depending on whether they were considered good, satisfactory, or limited. Detailed scoring criteria were provided for each question.

In year one, IMV assessments focussed on the establishment of monitoring and reporting systems by UNICEF and their implementing partners (IPs). From year two onwards, when results data were flowing through the systems, a second exercise known as **data grounding** was added to the appraisal missions. Data grounding was designed to check data collection and aggregation accuracy and consistency as results passed up the reporting chain from household to national level.

Roughly six months after each appraisal mission, the CMV would conduct a **follow-up mission** (FUM). During the FUM, they would check whether appraisal recommendations had been implemented and update the appraisal score with a focus on assessment areas that were scored amber or red last time (or left grey because they could not be assessed). Some missions also took a 'deeper dive' into specific thematic areas, such as how country offices (COs) monitored the number of people living with a disability (PLWD) among programme beneficiaries.

<sup>1</sup> With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IMV team adapted their approach to include remote assessments with in-person activities where possible and safe.

## Impact of IMV services

### Impact on programme monitoring

The impact of IMV activities was evident in the upward trend in appraisal RAG scores (per country and overall) as the programme progressed and the focus of assessments shifted from the development of monitoring systems to their implementation.

In the initial round of appraisals (Q2 2018), there were 21 red scores out of a total of 150 across all ten country programmes. By Q4 2019, there were none, confirming that monitoring systems had improved significantly. This gave FCDO increasing confidence in the reported results. However, there remained some specific issues to be addressed in several countries – for example, how to monitor access to handwashing facilities in one and how to monitor open defecation free (ODF) retention in another.

UNICEF CO personnel confirmed that the IMV assignment had helped to improve the quality of programme monitoring. For example, it had encouraged them to keep the focus of their monitoring on the logframe and indicators, enhanced a sense of accountability for results, and motivated them to devote more effort to validating their IPs' progress reports. In some countries, it also helped accelerate or consolidate the adoption of real-time, mobile-to-web monitoring by government agencies as envisaged in the programme logframe.

*"IMV kept us on our toes. IPs, too; they also learned from the missions and took on board recommendations for good practice, e.g., 'data grounding' [was a] new term in the vocab for the team, data grounding [was] taken up in the Pakistan MEL team."*

- Pakistan UNICEF staff

### Vulnerability monitoring

Annual systems appraisals and follow-up missions included assessing how the programme design addressed vulnerability and how the programme monitored the extent of benefits to vulnerable groups. This work included a specific focus on people living with disabilities (PLWD). IMV worked with UNICEF at the global and country level to identify a standard methodology for counting the number of PLWD within target populations and among beneficiaries to improve the reporting of results data disaggregated for both gender and disability.

*"... [the opportunity to] discuss with IMV complex issues like counting beneficiaries with a disability – was very useful to have an opportunity at the global level."*

- UNICEF headquarters WASH team

### Impact on government systems

The primary objective of the IMV assignment was to ensure the reliability of programme results data, and there was no FCDO requirement for IMV to strengthen sector monitoring systems at a national or regional level. In practice, IMV appraisals took in government monitoring and reporting systems where government agencies implemented some programme components to ensure that reliable ASWA results data could be extracted from them. WASH in schools and health care facilities

is an example, but in some countries – Eritrea, Nepal, and Pakistan – government agencies were the lead IPs for ASWA II overall. Here, IMV could potentially influence the operation of government systems quite significantly, at least at the local level. Although it is difficult to generalise on the impact of IMV on government systems, some notable examples of achievements in this area are described in Box 1 and 2 and illustrated by the following quote

*"Capacity building of the partner especially at sub-national level as UNICEF mandate is focused on governmental partner support. Through [the] ASWA II programme and Itad support, UNICEF had been able to furnish support to government agencies in improving data quality."*

- Madagascar UNICEF staff

In future, the IMV approach could potentially be adapted to focus on strengthening sector level WASH monitoring systems. Such an approach would align with the global system strengthening agenda, whereby WASH programming is government-led and aligned with sector aims and priorities. Possible adaptations to the third-party monitor's role might include more emphasis on partnerships with relevant ministries, departments and other stakeholder institutions whereby annual appraisals are conducted together, with co-creation of recommendations.

#### **Box 1. Improvements in government WASH monitoring systems in Panjab, Pakistan**

As part of their support to government under ASWA II, UNICEF Pakistan helped the Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) in Panjab Province to introduce a state-wide management information system (MIS) for WASH which included real-time monitoring using mobile phones. Within two years of the programme starting, PHED had deployed field-based monitoring staff with mobile phones and internet connections and the skills for accurate online data entry.

At field level, ASWA II focussed on one district in Punjab. Over the course of the programme, IMV made recommendations on improving the effectiveness of the MIS, for example by introducing a unique identification code for each household in villages where results were reported. This helped to ensure that monitoring staff visited the correct household when verifying results, bearing in mind that there were often multiple households with the same family name.

#### **Box 2. IMV's local impact on government M&E systems in Nepal**

In Nepal, UNICEF's principal implementing partners for ASWA II were local governments (palikas). UNICEF developed a comprehensive 'seven step' M&E system which included detailed monitoring and verification roles for palika staff at community and ward level (in partnership with ward level monitoring committees) and for UNICEF field staff at a higher institutional level. As part of this initiative, UNICEF helped to strengthen the capacity of palika M&E staff to use excel-based software for data management and reporting.

In the early stages of the programme, monitoring and reporting processes were not followed systematically by palika personnel, particularly record-keeping on action taken by ward level committees to resolve any deficiencies identified in the monitoring system. Following recommendations from the IMV team, palika and ward level personnel improved their record keeping so that action taken against earlier recommendations could be tracked; some palikas even did this in wards beyond those targeted by ASWA II. In addition, ward level committees began keeping accurate records of monthly progress in 'triggering' communities as part of the Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS) intervention.

## Lessons learned on independent monitoring and verification

### Scope of IMV's role

**1. Focussing on the quality of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems rather than progress towards implementation targets proved effective and helped the IMV-UNICEF relationship.**

- IMV was not deployed to facilitate donor accountability directly but to help ensure that monitoring systems were up to standard. This helped the working relationship with UNICEF and encouraged openness in sharing data.
- The independence of the IMV team was helpful as RTLs and CMVs could ask some monitoring-related questions of government partners that might have been awkward for UNICEF staff to ask directly.

**2. Restricting the IMV role to quality assurance, with no technical assistance component, helped maintain IMV's independence. It underlined FCDO's view that technical support to country offices should be provided internally, drawing on UNICEF's global resources.**

- It was important for IMV to work within their remit and not offer technical advice on programme implementation during missions, as this would have compromised the team's neutrality. Given that many of the IMV personnel were experienced WASH professionals, this required some self-discipline.
- There was a general impression from UNICEF programme staff felt that IMV set the bar quite high when assessing the quality of monitoring systems, and that technical assistance from IMV would have been useful at times. Particular concerns at the global level were linked to IMV's quality assurance checks on baseline survey reports. Some COs found the feedback too technically complex, especially on statistical analysis and struggled to respond to it. In addition, the QA was only done on completed survey reports when it was too late to resolve some of the methodological issues identified. Learning from this experience, IMV later designed a QA process for sustainability checks that included a review of the proposed methodology and workplan so that COs and their contractors could address any concerns at the planning stage.
- IMV could have played a role in facilitating the sharing of lessons between country offices without providing TA directly, for example, via online or in-person meetings.

**Next time:** Include a role for the third-party monitor to share lessons on good monitoring practices that emerge from programme experience. The priority here should be cross-country sharing within the programme, but the role could also include producing knowledge products for a wider audience.

**3. Careful attention was needed to formulate IMV recommendations that were relevant and actionable but not too prescriptive.**

- Occasionally, COs would ask IMV what FCDO wanted them to do in relation to a monitoring-related component of the programme logframe. There was, for example, an output indicator on the introduction or scaling up of real-time, mobile-to-web monitoring. IMV resisted giving specific instructions, partly because FCDO did not wish to be too directive and because there was no single 'right answer' to achieve the output.
- Some UNICEF colleagues felt that the scope of IMV recommendations was too broad, ranging from very operational actions at the local level to more strategic interventions with a long-term vision.

- A related concern was that some recommendations concerned government reporting systems over which UNICEF had little control.
- UNICEF appreciated IMV field visits as they enabled some issues to be resolved on the spot rather than waiting for a formal report and recommendations.

**Next time:** At the programme level, IMV should avoid making time-bound recommendations that require government system changes unless government actors have been involved in creating these recommendations. The need for changes should nevertheless be flagged in mission reports where the issues significantly affect programme monitoring.

## Approach, methodology and tools

### 4. A common interpretation of the programme logframe and associated indicators was essential at all levels for the effective implementation of the IMV contract.

- Establishing and maintaining a collective understanding of the global logframe was challenging in a multi-country programme with global and regional level involvement and, inevitably, some staff turnover.
- UNICEF headquarters provided technical guidance notes on some programme components and indicator definitions to help ensure consistency. However, being a highly decentralised organisation, the guidance was not regarded as binding at the country level.
- FDCO accepted some flexibility around indicator definitions so that country programmes could align with national standards, such as what constituted an ODF community.

### 5. The appraisal matrix, based on five thematic areas of investigation, was found to be appropriate, and both UNICEF and IMV personnel considered it a useful tool. However, criteria and methods to address mobile-to-web monitoring systems will need to be included to remain relevant.

- RAG ratings based on transparent criteria were particularly useful, making it possible to easily track positive or negative trends in the quality of programme M&E systems at the country level or across the whole programme.
- RAG ratings also had a motivational effect on COs and provided a rational basis for recommendations and discussion on how systems needed to improve.
- The matrix and appraisal process warrant further use in future, though they may need some modification to align with specific programme designs. In particular:
  - The use of mobile-to-web monitoring in WASH is increasing globally and may need to be covered – not only data flows and management but also the team's skills using the technology. In ASWA II, some country programmes used paper-based and mobile-to-web monitoring systems in parallel, which was a complication for IMV assessments in some locations.
  - Where programmes are implemented by government agencies, established monitoring and reporting systems can be more difficult to assess than ones developed specifically for a project, and access to information is not always straightforward. This could have implications both for the assessment process and for the time needed to complete the task.

**Next time:** Accommodate the use of mobile-to-web monitoring in any future appraisal matrix.



## 6. Data grounding was more challenging than the appraisal process. The methodology may need further piloting and adaptation before it is used in future programmes.

- Data grounding (checking the accuracy and consistency of data collection and aggregation) was an important component of the IMV toolbox. It helped to reveal some challenges in the operation of programme monitoring systems. However, it was more complicated than most other appraisal activities and not easy to apply. Remote working during the pandemic also meant that the field-based element could not be conducted in several countries.
- In several cases, the unavailability of results data hampered data grounding during IMV missions, complicating checks on data flows from community to national level. This was nevertheless instructive, highlighting an area where programme monitoring and reporting needed strengthening
- Data grounding was particularly challenging when applied to monitoring results for WASH in schools and health care facilities. In some countries, progress with this output had not reached very far at the time of the exercise, so there were few reported results to assess. That aside, these were public institutions, and in some cases, programme staff struggled to show how they extracted data from government records to report ASWA results.

**Next time:** If data grounding is to be used in future, further piloting may be needed first to ensure its viability and usefulness.

## 7. Transparency and consistency in implementing IMV processes were important for securing and maintaining UNICEF's positive engagement with the IMV team. Sharing IMV operational guidance notes, assessment matrices, and scoring criteria were central to this effort.

- IMV shared their documented methodology and tools with UNICEF and encouraged the participation of CO staff in field visits during appraisal and follow-up missions, though there were times when it was appropriate to talk to IPs without UNICEF staff present. All appraisal and follow-up mission reports were submitted to country offices but copied to regional offices and UNICEF headquarters.
- Most country programmes had multiple IPs working in different locations and/or responsible for different aspects of programme implementation (for example, water supply, sanitation or institutional WASH), and IMV aimed to visit all partners by the end of the assignment. This meant that it was not always possible during a mission to verify whether recommendations from the previous one had been addressed, as the locations and partners visited changed from one mission to the next.
- The quality of monitoring systems at the local level could vary between locations and IPs, with implications for RAG scores. One way of maintaining a consistent approach to scoring was to distinguish between minor shortcomings relating to specific local circumstances, such as the presence of a new and inexperienced data collector, and more systemic issues such as a widespread misunderstanding of how an indicator should be measured.
- Consistency was further enabled by adopting a rule that, when a mission involved assessments of both UNICEF and IPs, the lowest scores for each parameter would determine the overall score reported for the country programme. Scored matrices for each partner were also kept on file and made available to UNICEF.



**8. The frequency of IMV missions (every six months) was about right. Had missions taken place less often, it would have been challenging to get the depth of insight needed or provide timely recommendations.**

- IMV proposed broad timings within which each mission should occur (normally March to April and September to October) and tried to be flexible to accommodate staff availability, seasonal factors (particularly rains) and festivals. This no doubt helped the IMV-UNICEF relationship.
- Whether or not missions took place within IMV's proposed timeframe, they often happened a few months after the CO had produced its last technical update and before the next one was due. This meant that updated results data were rarely available during the mission.
- UNICEF appreciated detailed mission planning. It ensured that COs understood the purpose and scope of each visit and enabled them to make necessary preparations. CO staff were very helpful in scheduling meetings and site visits and, in many countries, provided transport for IMV personnel. However, they also felt that the missions demanded a lot of their time when preparation and follow-up were taken into account.

**Next time:** The timing of third-party monitoring system assessments should be aligned with implementing agency reporting schedules to make updated results data available during missions.

**9. The focus on monitoring systems more than the quantity of results meant that unannounced spot checks to project offices and communities were rarely necessary.**

- When visiting beneficiary communities or project offices, the IMV team needed to know that data collectors and project managers would be available for interviews, so appointments were usually made in advance. Although this gave implementing partners time to prepare, it was not a problem since overall M&E systems were unlikely to be changed by small actions taken at the local level.
- Data grounding was a little different in that some random household visits were envisaged. This did not always go as planned when the implementing agency pre-selected both communities and households.

**10. It would not have been possible to carry out the entire IMV assignment remotely since some monitoring practices could only be assessed in the field.**

- The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that for the last three rounds of IMV missions, most assessments were done remotely or at least without field visits. It proved possible to do some useful work remotely, but only because the team had first-hand knowledge of the programmes and their M&E arrangements from previous visits. Moreover, these remote missions generated waiting lists of reported actions that could only be validated once in-person missions resumed – for example, improvements in monitoring practices at the village level.

## **Team composition and roles**

**11. IMV's global - regional - country team structure was a good fit for the programme.**

- Appointing the right CMVs was particularly important since they engaged closely with UNICEF staff and country level IPs. IMV sought to appoint CMVs who were nationals of the countries concerned, but this was not possible in South Sudan and Niger, so consultants were sourced from nearby countries.

- CMVs needed to be technically competent with an understanding of the local sector and cultural context. It was also important that they were recognised by UNICEF COs as independent and free of 'baggage' from previous assignments with UNICEF or their IPs.
- Including a regional tier ensured that CMVs had easy access to support and guidance. Regional Team Leaders participated in many missions in-person before COVID-19 and provided remote assistance during the pandemic.

## 12. Programme management at the global level had an important enabling role for IMV.

- Ongoing informal dialogue between IMV management and UNICEF headquarters at the global level was helpful for both parties. They could discuss and potentially resolve technical or operational challenges affecting multiple countries, such as planning sustainability checks or the appropriate methodology for counting the number of disabled beneficiaries. FCDO was happy to let UNICEF/IMV work things out between them and reach an agreement on a way forward, though there were also regular tripartite meetings.
- A challenge arose from time to time when changes to the logframe were agreed between UNICEF and FCDO at the global level (for example, on the basis for calculating the ODF conversion rate<sup>2</sup>) but not adopted by some COs until much later. These delays were a hindrance to consistency in IMV assessments.

**Next time:** Ensure that, where management decisions are made at the global level which have implications for programme monitoring, these are communicated effectively to country offices with a specified implementation date. Examples would include changes to the global logframe or to donor expectations around how specific outputs should be measured and reported.

## Conclusion

Bilateral donors increasingly require third-party monitoring as a component of large implementation programmes. In this case, IMV achieved its objective of increasing donor confidence in reported results. It also demonstrated that IMV services can strengthen government systems over time, at least at the local level.

Recent years have seen an increasing focus on system strengthening in the WASH sector to create sustainable services for all. This is complementary to the established principle that international donors should support and align with government-led strategies and programmes in the sector. Sector monitoring is an essential building block for strong WASH systems. Against this backdrop, future third-party monitoring may need to encompass national WASH systems while becoming more additive than auditive. In this scenario, monitoring assessments would cover the multiple institutional levels and actors making up the system and consider the (sometimes complex) relationships between them. This would also require a vision for progress over a longer time frame than typical donor-funded programmes. While IMV had a programme focus, the experience has nevertheless provided useful insights to inform future initiatives with sector level goals.

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<sup>2</sup> The percentage of sanitation intervention communities that eventually attain 'open defecation free' (ODF) status.