Approximately 1.8 billion people lack access to safe drinking-water and more than 800,000 deaths occur from unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene. Sustainable development goal (SDG) target 6.1 is to “achieve universal access to safe” water by 2030. It is believed that achieving this will require an enabling environment. The term “enabling environment” is increasingly being used in the drinking-water field; however, its meaning is vague and its influence on drinking-water programs has not been determined.

The purpose of this dissertation is to clarify the meaning of the enabling environment and investigate its influence on drinking-water programs. I use the institutional analysis and development framework to explain the enabling environment. Key informant interviews are carried out to determine the influence of the enabling environment on drinking-water programs, specifically household-water treatment and safe storage (HWTS) programs and climate change adaptation of drinking-water systems. Multiple regression analyses are conducted to determine the significance of enabling environment variables on expenditures on drinking-water systems, a proxy for decision-making about providing access to drinking-water.

I find that the enabling environment is the blend of formal rules, informal rules, and the physical environment that impact on the capacity of individuals and organizations to achieve their objectives. All of these enabling environment elements were found to influence the drinking-water programs analyzed; however, the degree of influence varied. Informal rules such as culture, were found to determine adoption of HWTS practices more than formal rules. Formal rules like policies had a greater impact on decisions to adapt drinking-water systems to climate change than informal rules. Policies on collaboration were found to have a significant effect on expenditures on drinking-water systems more frequently than other variables. Collaboration was also a recurrent theme across the HWTS and climate change adaptation studies. This highlights the importance of partnerships in efforts to achieve universal access to safe drinking-water.

Actors involved in drinking-water programs will benefit from shaping a collaborative enabling environment that facilitates access to drinking-water. This kind of environment will increase shared knowledge of effective and ineffective drinking-water activities, thereby increasing the effectiveness of resource use for program planning and implementation.