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triple-s

Sector learning and adaptive management

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POINTS FOR ACTION

➔ **For Governments (local and national)**

- Develop a national learning framework and dedicate ongoing funding to implement
- Build learning and adaptive practices into the annual planning cycle
- Establish and support platforms for structured learning
- Mandate a dedicated body – a hub – to facilitate sector learning and support informed policy development

➔ **For NGOs**

- Support the establishment of resource centres and learning platforms
- Participate in learning platforms and facilitate linkages across platforms at different institutional levels
- Help build capacity for facilitation of learning processes and critical reflection

➔ **Donors and other Development Partners**

- Support establishment of robust sector learning platforms; i.e. ones not dependent on donor funding for continued operation
- Encourage recipients of funding to adopt learning and reflective practices that enhance sector adaptive capacity

Supporting water sanitation and hygiene services for life

Complex water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) service delivery challenges transcend single organisations, projects or geographical areas; addressing them therefore requires learning that goes beyond individuals or organisations to encompass multiple actors working at multiple levels.

Sector learning refers to the processes and mechanisms in place at sector level to ensure that actors are capable of jointly reflecting on current service delivery and identifying problems, developing solutions, and spreading successes. Sector learning goes hand in hand with adaptive management, a structured process of translating learning into action.

Mole conference, Ghana. Photo: IRC

WHAT IS SECTOR LEARNING?

There is a tendency to think about learning as an individual activity – growing individual knowledge and skills. Sector learning on the other hand is very much about collective processes.

Learning processes can improve WASH service delivery by assisting stakeholders to:

- Generate **evidence** for better decision-making on policies, strategies and technologies, and to facilitate the **use of knowledge** from all stakeholders.
- Develop and validate **harmonised** approaches, methodologies, technologies and financing mechanisms.
- Develop **stakeholders' capacities** for taking innovations to scale and strengthen the link between research, policies and practice.
- **Assess progress** towards sustainable service delivery and refine interventions.

Learning is necessary for adaptive management. Adaptive management can be defined as a systematic process for improving policies and practices by learning from practical experience, innovations or from the outcomes of policies and practices that have already been implemented (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). As explained by Bormann et al. (1993), 'Adaptive management is learning to manage by managing to learn.'

Learning is not an end in and of itself. A key feature in the adaptive management cycle is iterative decision-making: evaluating results and taking corrective actions on the basis of what has been learned through a given action or experience.

However, sector learning and adaptive management are weak in the WASH sector. The result is resources wasted on 'reinventing the wheel', innovations that remain isolated islands of success, and ultimately slower progress and limited ability of actors to work effectively together and adapt to new challenges.

Investments in learning within the sector have tended to be focused on multi-stakeholder processes geared towards supporting a particular project or organisation with little impact on the wider sector; conferences and meetings with no mechanisms to provide continuity or to link learning to action; and donor-supported platforms or dialogues, which stop when the funding does.

In spite of the limitations to promoting sector learning, there are positive examples. This briefing note provides an overview of learning and adaptive mechanisms and

BOX 1 SPREADING GOOD IDEAS: AN EXAMPLE FROM UGANDA

Yehora Yeguza (YY Strategy) is a savings and loan initiative that started with a single water source committee in Rukooko village, Kamwenge district in 2006. Experience with the initiative was shared at the Rwenzori regional learning forum in October 2010. The Kamwenge district local government, impressed with what they heard, scaled up the innovation to 112 water points. The innovation also spread to local governments of neighbouring districts Kabarole, Kasese, Kyegegwa and Kyenjojo. The government technical support unit for the region has now included the approach in its training programme for water source committees (Bey et al., 2014).

platforms that can be put in place in the WASH sector to support learning and adaptation, illustrated by experiences from the Triple-S project in Ghana and Uganda and elsewhere.

FUNDAMENTALS FOR CREATING A LEARNING SECTOR

The fundamentals for creating a learning sector (Da Silva-Wells et al., 2012) are:

(Government) leadership. Sector-wide change begins with a government-led vision for how the sector should be performing. Sector learning is aligned with national policy, financing and service delivery processes with support of the national government, which is ideally also in the lead.

Collaboration. Sector learning relies upon actors and organisations doing things in a connected and aligned manner as they work towards the shared sector vision. Each actor brings knowledge and expertise and in turn can learn from others' experience and insights. Collaborative platforms such as strategic partnerships and sector learning platforms, ideally led by government, engage the whole landscape of sector stakeholders in joint planning, monitoring, reflection and adaptation. Such platforms foster broad commitment to the vision, increase alignment of capacity and resources, and contribute to scaling up innovations and good operational practices.

Process documentation and sharing. Chronicling sector change processes is crucial for reflection and learning. Many organisations in the WASH sector fail to record and document their experiences – good and bad – which means lessons learnt are lost. Process documentation looks at factors that hamper or

accelerate change, by considering context and history as well as how an intervention evolves as it is rolled out (Schouten et al., 2007). In EMPOWERS, a project aimed at changing local governance of IWRM and WASH in the MENA region, process documentation served as a tool to describe why and how existing approaches to decision-making hindered or enabled changes towards more shared and transparent governance of water resources and services. Documenting and sharing experiences within the project increased learning and debate around key issues.

PLATFORMS AND MECHANISMS FOR CREATING A LEARNING SECTOR

A learning platform is a structured body organised to facilitate learning processes that brings together those with a common interest to share experiences, reflect on problems and agree on possible solutions. In the WASH sector, learning platforms and learning mechanisms take different forms in different countries and can be facilitated by government or by civil society. Examples include:

- Government-led national level **sector working groups** (Uganda) and **coordination platforms** (Zimbabwe) enable different actors to work together to address particular challenges or aspects of WASH service delivery.
- **Joint sector performance reviews** (for example in Uganda and Ethiopia) aim to systematically assess progress in the sector.

- Multi-stakeholder platforms, such as **learning alliances** (Ghana and Uganda), are used to improve collaboration, uptake of research, and scaling-up of successful innovations.
- **WASH resource centres** facilitate learning and networking among sector stakeholders while providing support for process documentation and sector information sharing.

LEARNING ALLIANCES FOR INNOVATION AND CHANGE

Learning alliances are linked learning platforms at different institutional levels that bring people together to address problems, face challenges and find innovative solutions (Smits et al., 2007). To contribute to sector progress, facilitated learning platforms at each relevant level (local, district and national) must be linked so that solutions and innovations found at local or district level can move up the institutional chain and become part of sector knowledge, and policy initiatives can spread downwards and be discussed, implemented and adapted to contextual realities.

The learning alliance creates a 'safe' space for dialogue, trust building, joint activities and negotiation. While learning alliances often start with a core group of actors, if they are to attract the interest and commitment of other key stakeholders, they need to articulate a clear idea of what they want to achieve and how they intend to do so. Finances are required for establishment and

BOX 2 LEARNING ALLIANCE APPROACH IN GHANA

An assessment of the learning alliance approach in Ghana indicated that learning platforms have been instrumental in: shaping sector agendas including policy, strategy and programme formulation and reviews; development of service delivery approaches and governance architecture and processes; development of guidelines, standards, and regulatory framework; sector financing; and choice of technology issues (CWSA and IRC Ghana, 2014). The approach was further found to contribute to shaping joint action, encouraging the incorporation of agreed delivery approaches and standards into the design of new programmes, and critiquing non-conforming, unapproved approaches and technologies.

Factors with the potential to hinder stakeholder participation in learning platforms included:
- lack of enforcement mechanisms for non-compliance with sector guidelines and standards seem to discourage participation in learning alliances;
- many key stakeholder organisations send different representatives at different times to different platforms, making knowledge aggregation and follow-up difficult; and
- some stakeholders (primarily at the regional and district levels) are unable to obtain funding to participate regularly in the learning alliance platforms.

The report recommended several steps to strengthen learning and adaptive capacity:
- adopt an agreed learning framework to guide the facilitation and management of learning;
- establish an institutional structure to promote systematic learning in the sector; and
- develop a business case for knowledge management as a basis to justify the financial and economic returns on learning, and use these insights to promote and market learning as a worthwhile undertaking in the sector.

operations of an alliance, including a process facilitator, communication and information products and their dissemination, process documentation and networking with stakeholders and networks outside of the alliance (action research, workshops, demonstration sites) (Butterworth et al., 2011). Learning alliance membership may change and evolve over time as the nature of issues, challenges and expertise with which the alliance engages progresses.

Learning alliances that meet regularly with agendas that are connected over time, and which have consistent information flows to and from members are the most effective at engaging broad representation and active involvement of key sector stakeholders.

WASH resource centres and their networks

Stakeholders in the sector need to know where to find key information and knowledge in order to be able to learn from others' experiences. Resource centres and their associated networks offer information products (including newsletters and 'blue pages' listing the main agencies in a national WASH sector) and services (helpdesks and facilitation of sector events or learning processes) and promote knowledge sharing and information management (Parker, 2004).

In Gujarat, India, public sector resource centres at block level[1] (sub-district) support 'Gram Panchayats' (local government at village/small town level) in all aspects of system management (including capacity building) and act as a focal point for knowledge and contacts for implementation of the National Drinking Water Programme and Total Sanitation Campaign. CINARA[2] based at the University of Valle in Colombia and the Water Information Network - South Africa[3] (WIN-SA) are also good examples of public sector resource centres. The Uganda Resource Centre[4] hosted by NETWAS Uganda documents discussions and lessons learned from the annual national learning forum, organised by several government and non-government stakeholders. It produces a detailed report as well as a short daily news update.

In Ghana, the Resource Centre Network (RCN) is an institutional partnership among several sector organisations to promote and provide knowledge management services for the rural and urban WASH sector. The RCN Secretariat provides services ranging from organisation of key sector learning events to

RCN stand at Ghana Water Forum. Photo: IRC

facilitation and documentation of monthly national and regional learning alliance platforms. Acting as a sector knowledge hub, RCN generates information and knowledge products in a range of soft and hard copy formats and ensures information is provided to key actors at critical moments. Technical advice, training and question-and-answer (Q&A) services are included in the RCN's remit.

In each of these examples, timely and short documentation products encourage follow-up and indicate where further information can be found.

Sector monitoring and performance review – tracking and reflecting on change

Sector monitoring and performance reviews provide government, service providers and users with the information necessary to set targets, monitor progress, regulate service performance, define corrective action and ensure accountability. To create more sustainable services at scale, three key aspects of sector performance to monitor are:

- services received by users – usually in terms of quantity, quality, accessibility and reliability over time;

- performance of service providers or operators – fulfilment of basic technical, financial, management and organisation functions necessary to deliver a sustainable service; and

- performance of the service authority (often local or district government) – fulfilment of planning, coordination, regulatory and support functions necessary to ensure the establishment and performance of service providers.

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1   See swsmup.org/guideline_brc_17_2.pdf for guidelines on block resource centres in India

2   More information on the Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo en Agua Potable, Saneamiento Básico y Conservación de Recursos Hídricos is available online: cinara.univalle.edu.co

3   More information on WIN-SA is available online: www.win-sa.org.za

4   More information on Uganda WASH Resource Centre is available online: www.washuganda.net
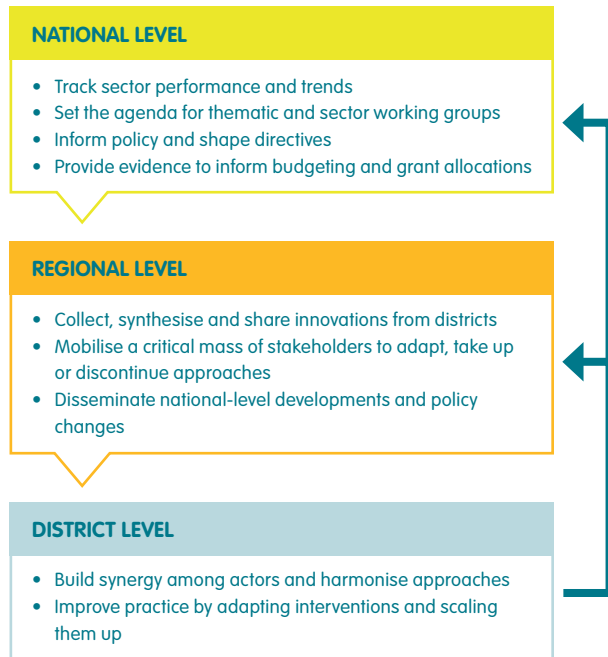
Data collection is worthwhile when data is analysed and used to inform key decision-making processes for improving performance. In an adaptive management approach, this is the point where efforts to learn from evidence can catalyse corrective action. Sector performance reviews provide a forum for actors to reflect on the significance of evidence in a given context and to determine whether to stay the course or to adapt or change prevailing practices, policies and resource allocations.

In Uganda, the Sector Performance Report guides the annual Joint Sector Review (JSR) – the key forum for performance assessment, joint analysis of monitoring data, priority setting for undertakings as well as provision of policy guidance for the water and environment sector. Over the past ten years, the Uganda water sector has shifted from monitoring and reporting on infrastructure and access towards a framework to track services provided. This shift started with 11 "golden indicators" differentiated for urban and rural services as well as for sanitation and water. Using this data and other evidence, the Directorate of Water Development carries out trend analysis over time to identify key issues and bottlenecks across different geographic areas in order to make decisions around course correction and allocation of funding. Similar sector performance review and coordination processes exist in other countries such as Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Niger. Sector authorities are able to share information, nationally, at district level and with development partners, including the links between sector expenditure and performance to prompt corrective actions.

Local-level learning in Koboko, Uganda. Photo: IRC

FIGURE 1 OBJECTIVES FOR LEARNING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

NATIONAL LEVEL
- Track sector performance and trends
- Set the agenda for thematic and sector working groups
- Inform policy and shape directives
- Provide evidence to inform budgeting and grant allocations

REGIONAL LEVEL
- Collect, synthesise and share innovations from districts
- Mobilise a critical mass of stakeholders to adapt, take up or discontinue approaches
- Disseminate national-level developments and policy changes

DISTRICT LEVEL
- Build synergy among actors and harmonise approaches
- Improve practice by adapting interventions and scaling them up

Source: Magara, 2014.

TAKING SECTOR LEARNING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

There is ample scope for existing sector mechanisms and platforms to be strengthened towards more effective learning, innovation and adaptation.

Defining the objectives of learning

A first step is to clarify the objectives of learning for the different sector platforms. The objective of learning varies according to the organisational, administrative or intervention level at which it takes place. In the context of Uganda rural water services, the Triple-S Uganda programme, together with the Ministry of Water and Environment, created a typology to define the objective of learning at different levels linked to the responsibility of the sector actors at that specific level (Figure 1).

Linking learning, policy and practice

A national framework for sector learning that links monitoring efforts and information to improve policy and practice is another crucial step in developing coordinated and effective learning processes. The framework should describe the shared vision, desired outcomes and major strategies for embedding continuous learning across the different levels in the sector as well as addressing key capacity gaps. Collaborating learning platform members may take up the lead, form partnerships or play supporting roles that correspond to their core competencies and experience as they implement activities towards achieving the outcomes identified in the framework.

FIGURE 2 FEEDBACK LOOPS IN SECTOR CHANGE PROCESS
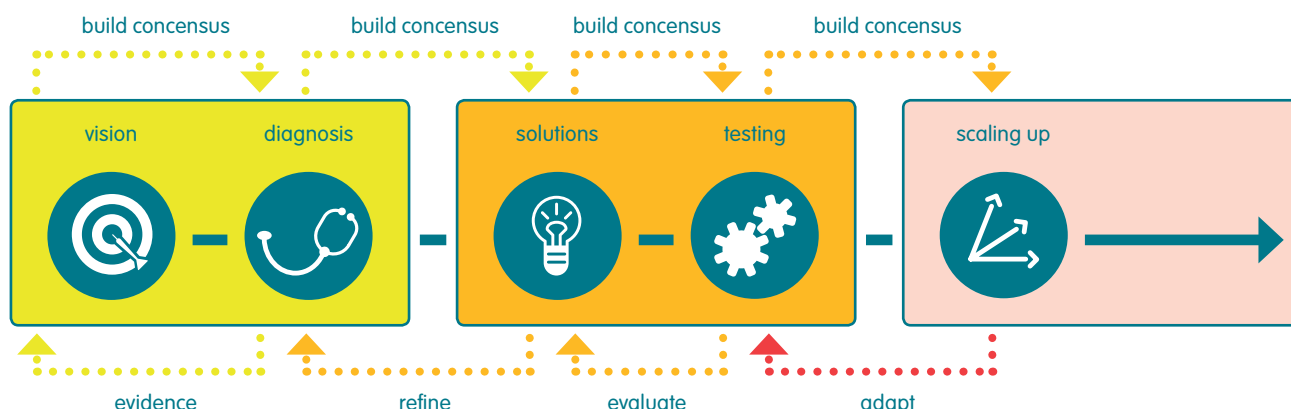
Linking vertically

Sharing among learning platforms at the same 'horizontal' level (for instance at district or regional level) is important, but so is the presence of mechanisms for connecting these platforms 'vertically' across administrative levels (see Figure 1). One key finding from an Engineers Without Borders systemic intervention in Malawi was that sector learning mechanisms can be invaluable for bringing district realities to the attention of policy makers, but only if sector policy forums are designed around learning from district experience (Kang and Campbell, 2013).

Feedback loops connecting learning platforms from sub-national through national levels serve as pathways through which information and knowledge about experiences, challenges and promising innovations can be exchanged and disseminated – enhancing the chance of uptake, upscaling and eventually wider impact.

Strengthening capacity for critical reflection

In addition to sector performance monitoring, evidence to support learning and corrective action can be generated through facilitated processes of testing promising innovations and analysing their relevance in different contexts. Critical, rigorous and evidence-based approaches to making sense of various sources and forms of information are necessary to enable corrective action and informed policy making that contribute to the sustainability and quality of rural water services.

TABLE 1 ESTIMATED COST OF ESTABLISHING AND OPERATING A WASH KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT HUB, UGANDA

Activities	Costs (UGX)*	US$	Assumptions
Office Equipment (set up costs)	5,000,000	1,887	An existing institution already supporting sector learning hosts, thus reducing set up costs; costs would go towards data processing equipment
National Learning Meetings (every two months)	5,400,000	2,038	Ongoing costs for hosting half-day working group meetings for 30 people
Support to Regional / Inter-district Learning Facilitation (8 Technical Support Units - TSUs)	34,400,000	12,981	Covers staff time, transport and accommodation in the regions (5 days for each region)
Case Study Development (1x8 TSUs)	13,200,000	4,981	Staff time (1 person)
Publications and Content Development	11,500,000	4,339	
Coordination and Management	5,500,000	1,245	Staff time (10 days)
Hosting Fees	7,7800,000	2,936	10% of the annual budget for the hub
Total Costs	**UGX 82,780,000**	**US$ 30,407**	

*Cost estimates are based upon Triple-S experience of facilitating regional learning forums in TSU 2 and 6 and projections for administrative costs.

Source: Magara, 2014.

SUPPORTING SECTOR CHANGE

Learning along with harmonisation are arguably the two most important building blocks for creating a functioning sector. Both are key to the process of moving towards sustainable services – of identifying the gaps and bottlenecks, identifying and testing possible solutions, and scaling up the ones that work. This process of sector change is not strictly linear. It involves constant reflection, evaluation and course correction to be successful, in other words learning (see Figure 2).

The role of a hub organisation

At the most basic level, a learning hub can act as a sector resource centre that chronicles and curates sector knowledge and information over time, ensuring that the right information reaches relevant actors. However, to drive sector change, the role of a learning hub must shift from documentation and information sharing to a broader function of generating impartial evidence, supporting collective sense making, and driving advocacy and policy-influencing efforts when evidence indicates the need for course corrections.

The hub requires consistent, significant resources to fulfil its role. For example, RCN's annual budget is around US$65,000. A rough cost estimate for establishing and operating a modest knowledge management hub in Uganda is shown in Table 1. Based on Triple-S experience in Ghana and Uganda, operating a hub dedicated to driving sector change – this includes performing functions such as evidence-based advocacy, bottleneck analysis with stakeholders, consensus building around potential solutions, testing through action research, and facilitating institutional change processes – costs in the neighbourhood of US$1 million per year.

Recommendations for creating a learning and adaptive WASH sector

Sector learning and adaptive management can be organised in varying forms and levels of intensity. National level stakeholders, in particular government, play an important role in creating and leading the enabling environment for learning, innovation and change. Creating a learning sector requires investments in:

- sector capacity to facilitate learning processes and engage in critical reflection;
- platforms at different administrative levels that bring stakeholders together to analyse what works and what doesn't, identify underlying causes, and agree on corrective action; and
- mechanisms to link learning across platforms and levels.

At a minimum, effective learning and adaptive management processes require information and knowledge management services and the existence of national level learning, or joint sector review platforms. A more intense level of sector learning entails 'joined up' agenda setting over time with consistent representation as well as facilitation, documentation and dissemination of information about the outcomes of interactions. The most evolved level of sector learning includes linked platforms across administrative levels and collaborative action research agendas to generate, synthesize and publish data and other evidence in order to feed decision-making processes.

Concrete requirements for sector learning and adaptive management include:

- At a minimum, **a joint sector review platform and process** to evaluate progress and achievements in terms of 'are we doing the right things?', and make informed investment decisions. Such a platform and corresponding process requires up-to-date and accurate monitoring data and other information on how the sector is performing and should link to annual adaptive management cycles of planning, implementing, monitoring and reporting.

- **Professionals with skills to facilitate learning processes and who will push actors to reflect and engage in deeper analysis.** These professionals are essential to take learning processes beyond simple sharing of information, which though valuable, is not enough to support adaptive management and improvements in sector performance.

- An **institutionalised learning hub** to ensure continuity in critical sector learning services, such as professional facilitation, action research, data synthesis, and process documentation.

- **Stable funding for learning** – i.e., decoupling funding for sector learning activities and hub functions from project-, programme- and donor-dependent budgets.

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About IRC

IRC is an international think-and-do tank that works with governments, NGOs, businesses and people around the world to find long-term solutions to the global crisis in water, sanitation and hygiene services. At the heart of its mission is the aim to move from short-term interventions to sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services.

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For more publications in this series, go to: www.ircwash.org/buildingblockbriefings

About this Brief

This brief is based on Triple-S experience in Ghana and Uganda as well as IRC's broader work on sector learning (see Smits et al., 2007). It was authored by Audrey van Soest, Deirdre Casella and Carmen da Silva Wells of IRC and Sarah Carriger of Water Writes. It was reviewed by Stef Smits of IRC.

For additional resources on sector learning, go to www.ircwash.org/tags/sector-learning

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