



The Process

of the “Improved WASH Governance in West Nile through Local Dialogue” Project, UGANDA

How we structured and organized multi-stakeholder learning and action research to support the Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) sector to account and perform better

1. Introduction to this document

In December 2008, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, Network for Water and Sanitation Uganda (NETWAS) and Community Empowerment for Rural Development (CEFORD) partnered to implement a project on improving governance in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector through local dialogues in the Uganda’s West Nile region. This initiative, which is referred to as “West Nile Project” in this document, was carried out until October 2010 with support from the 9th EDF Support to Decentralisation Programme (SDP). Its main goal was to improve health and productivity in communities as well as school attendance and educational results in three districts (Adjumani, Moyo and Nebbi) arising from more accountable and responsive WASH service provision through local dialogue.

The West Nile Project had four main elements: **multi-stakeholder dialogue sessions, capacity building, action research, documentation & advocacy**. All these elements were embedded in learning platforms at various levels. This document presents the process of the project, which was facilitated by IRC, NETWAS and CEFORD, and built on the interest of local individuals and organisations in learning for improved governance in the WASH sector. The purpose of this paper is to provide a reference document for replication of the West Nile Project and adaptation of the approach in other contexts. This presentation therefore combines a description of steps, principles and methods with key lessons on facilitation.



Photo 1: A facilitator from CEFORD during an inter-districts session, April 2010

2. Background and Objectives of the EDF West Nile Project

2.1 Why the EDF West Nile Project?

Many studies and documented evidence show that improved WASH services have a multi-dimensional effect on poverty reduction and are a basic condition for economic development. Good school sanitation and hygiene conditions have a strong cognitive effect in education and reduce the girls’ school absenteeism and drop-out rates. All are important conditions to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on water and sanitation, but also in terms of universal education, health and poverty reduction.

The broader sector context:

Uganda seems on track to reach the MDGs target for water: in 2007¹, 63% of the rural population had access to improved water supply within 1.5 km of their homes. The reported functionality rate of the water systems was good (82% of improved water sources in rural areas). At the time of designing the West Nile Project in 2007, the situation in the targeted districts of Adjumani, Moyo and Nebbi did not differ significantly from the general national trends². However, when taking a closer look at the water supply, several particular challenges related to service provision emerged. Reviews indicated that much was to be desired in terms of sustainability, service quality, community ownership, accountability and equitability.

The sanitation situation was less glowing than for water: for several years the coverage had been stagnant around 60%³, and with present trends Uganda will most likely not meet the sanitation MDG. School sanitation and hygiene conditions also have deteriorated due to both high enrolment after the introduction of universal primary education in 1996 and poor maintenance of facilities.

In Africa, Uganda is one of the frontrunners in the decentralization process and, particularly in the Water and Sanitation sector, the country has a good track record on innovative approaches and sector improvements. Transfer of operational responsibility to the local level, greater involvement of water users, involvement of the private sector along with improved donor coordination and basket-funding mechanisms contributed to improved efficiency and increased coverage and sustainability of WASH. However, as described above, some problems and challenges remain, and many are directly related to Effectiveness, Responsiveness and Accountability under decentralised WASH governance. Below are some of the issues identified by the project partners when designing the initiative:

- WASH is a complex sector that touches upon various sub-sectors, such as health, education, agriculture and natural resources management.
- Many stakeholders are involved in WASH, from the public sector, private sector and civil society. There are the elected council leaders and other informal and traditional leaders, the citizens in general, water user groups, health and school committees, along with public sector civil servants and local politicians. Various implementing Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are usually active in each district. Politicians, WASH and other sector professionals and researchers, NGOs, Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and community members each have their own role, agenda and specific interests.
- Interventions through NGOs, bilateral agencies and the local government are largely uncoordinated and take the form of stand-alone 'projects' that are not guided by a commonly agreed approach and/or financial mechanisms in one and the same district or sub-county. The lack of synergy, harmonisation and coordination, and institutionalized monitoring contributed towards growing disparities in service delivery, lack of quality services and ownership, lack of transparency in spending and unequal access.
- Local leaders and local staff are usually not encouraged to work as a team and make sure that services are harmonised and institutionalised. Instead they prefer to get involved in the more substantial but temporary interventions that give them some additional (secondary) benefits in terms of work, training and allowances for the project duration, which the local governments with their limited budgets cannot afford to provide.

¹ Min. of Water and Environment, 2008, Sector Performance Report 2007/2008, Uganda

² Water coverage was 49% in Moyo, 76% in Nebbi and 71% in Adjumani, while Nebbi and Moyo also registered declining trend in terms in water systems' functionality.

³ The latrine coverage in rural areas however significantly increased between 2008 and 2009, from 62% to 68% (Sector Performance Report, 2009).

- There is often a bias from elected leaders and district technical staff towards provision of water supply hardware without the integration of software and a dominant focus on community management of water supply systems without the creation of support structures to ensure community ownership and sustainability. This greatly contributed to stagnant or even declining functionality rates over the past years in the targeted districts, with, for example, Moyo decreasing from 95% in 2005 to 89% in 2007.
- Despite the demand-driven approach and decentralized planning cycle, community ownership of the services is often low. Users are not or only partly involved in selection of sites, technologies used and in decisions on water tariffs. Water Users Groups are rarely informed about the content of services contracts and quality control checks, and are not involved in contract management.
- Contracting arrangements for the private sector are not always very transparent and often require a “kick back” to access a job, which makes the profit margins of contractors smaller. It then becomes common to compromise on quality and because of the difficulty to audit software, those are the first activities to skip.
- Despite the fact that 80% of the preventable diseases in Uganda are avoidable through better hygiene and sanitation, communities lack awareness or are not well informed enough and involved or encouraged to monitor their health. On the other hand, traditional and elected leaders do not prioritise sanitation and hygiene awareness raising, they do not advocate for the development of approaches which promote improved hygiene behaviour or support innovative sanitation technology development nor demand budget for software activities.

The effects of these various problems had been noticed by sector stakeholders including the Ministry of Water and Environment, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education & Sports, as well as by multi- and bi-lateral agencies. Several projects⁴ had been developed and undertakings agreed to improve accountability, introduce monitoring systems and sanitation approaches. But these projects were scattered and did not include the targeted districts in the West Nile region. In many cases, stakeholders continued to work in isolation and blame each other.

Why learning platforms?

The approach adopted for the West Nile Project is building, among others, on the positive experience of the Learning for Practice and Policy on Household and Primary School Sanitation and Hygiene (LeaPPS)⁵ project, which was implemented in 2007-2009 in Uganda by IRC, NETWAS and SNV Uganda. Although LeaPPS was focusing on district-based learning and on hygiene and sanitation only, the opportunity of adapting the methodology to a multi-platform learning on accountability issues was seen as promising. The West Nile Project actually was the first time that learning platforms were introduced to address WASH governance and the provision of accountable and responsive WASH services in Uganda.



Photo 2: Accountability in WASH Café, August 2010

⁴ For instance EU Human Right and Good governance programme; DFID WaterAid pilot programme in Kampala and Rwenzori region; World Bank's programme on Improving Governance and Social Accountability in the Water sector with pilots in Kenya and Uganda; several civil society capacity-building activities initiated through EU programmes, Water Integrated Network (WIN), etc.

⁵ <http://www.irc.nl/page/38717>

It is believed that, rather than isolated interventions, **partnership building and creation of a dialogue between the various stakeholders** can help to overcome most of the above problems, and in particular sector fragmentation and lack of harmonization, because:

- The action encourages the stakeholders, service delivery authorities, regulators, providers and citizens to listen to each other and start a constructive dialogue. Dialogue is the starting point for these actors to stop blaming each other, to understand each other's role and contribution to the sector, and to start learning and searching for sustainable solutions.
- Some of the underlying assumptions towards learning are that:
 - Many of the problems around accountable and responsive WASH planning and service delivery cannot be resolved through simply one solution; there are different ways to overcome them and each stakeholder has a specific role to fulfil;
 - Many of the problems mentioned above also have to do with changes in behaviour and motivation, and the open dialogue is an important trigger towards willingness to change;
 - Some good practices in WASH governance already exist, but they are often not known beyond the areas or organisations where they take place. Some stakeholders experience the same challenges and problems, and could learn from each other to address them;
 - An important condition for reflection and learning is the environment in which it takes place. Regular follow up and planning meetings are in most cases not very conducive for learning as time is restricted, and control and hierarchical relations dominate, which prevents open dialogue and free flow of information;
 - Practical solutions are important to turn information into practical knowledge and skills; testing what works somewhere else, adapting best practices to the local situation, working out innovative local actions and going for exchange visits with a clear learning agenda are some of the examples of learning by doing.

The West Nile Project hence brought together stakeholders at district, sub-county (S/C), and community and school levels, to facilitate dialogue towards better governance and accountability to water consumers and sanitation and hygiene users in households and schools. At district level, participants included councillors and other leaders, district heads, technocrats, local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and NGOs, private sector and local media. For S/C, stakeholders involved comprised of councillors and other leaders, S/C chiefs, technocrats, CSOs, CBOs, associations and the private sector.

2.2 Objectives

The **overall objective** of the West Nile Project was to improve health and productivity in communities, as well as school attendance and educational results in three selected districts, arising from more accountability and responsive WASH service provision.

Specific objectives of the West Nile Project were:

1. Multi-stakeholder learning and knowledge management (KM) are taking place at district and S/C level
As described above, multi-stakeholders learning, sharing and documenting experiences can help to improve and harmonise practices and to find solutions to challenges and problems.

2. WASH decision-makers and service providers are more accountable
Increased accountability should in turn help to increase investment-effectiveness and sustainability of the water service provision and to improve planning, budgeting and implementation of household and school sanitation and hygiene promotion.
3. Local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are empowered to demand WASH services and become active
Empowering communities and schools to demand for more accountability from the stakeholders was also at the heart of the project.

The West Nile Project had a number of expected results:

1. Functioning and effective multi-stakeholder learning platforms in three districts and six S/Cs
2. Tools & methods tested and in use for transparent and responsive service provision in WASH
3. Improved harmonisation, coordination and monitoring
4. Best practices documented, shared and used
5. Capacity built for responsible consumers
6. Enhanced accountability and responsive planning
7. Knowledge management on WASH planning and service delivery
8. Action research results applied and scaled up in other districts and national level

The project was piloted in two sub-counties (S/Cs) in each district, a total of six pilot S/Cs. These were Ciforo and Dzaipi S/Cs in Adjumani district, Itula and Moyo S/Cs in Moyo District, Akworo and Paidha in Nebbi district. The ultimate aim of the initiative was that the measures for improvement in transparency and accountability be scaled up to the rest of the three selected districts.

3. Conceptual roots and principles of the EDF West Nile Project

The West Nile Project draws on multi-stakeholder processes called '*Learning Alliances*', which are interlinked multi-stakeholder platforms⁶. Learning Alliances aim at building relationships, sharing information and experiences, and planning for solutions to common problems that cannot be solved by a single stakeholder.

Each platform should bring together a range of stakeholders who capture diverse roles, interests, skills and experiences. If the alliance is representative of the institutional complexities and other realities of the system, then it is more likely that the actions and solutions agreed will be put into practice. The West Nile Project therefore involved a wide range of stakeholders at all levels: water, health, education, community development, planning and finance officials, local NGOs and private sector stakeholders at district and sub-county levels, Councillors, donor agencies and INGOs active in the districts and at national level.

Learning platforms help to create synergy between policy and practice, harmonize approaches, facilitate learning from the past mistakes and current successes. They often include context-

⁶ The Learning Alliance approach is derived from work on innovation systems and used as a way of putting innovations into practice (Verhagen *et al.*, 2008): Verhagen, J.; Butterworth, J.; Morris, M. (2007) *Learning alliances for integrated and sustainable innovations in urban water management*. Waterlines, Volume 27, Number 2, April 2008, Practical Action Publishing, pp. 116-124(9).

IRC has applied / is applying Learning Alliances in several projects, including EMPOWERS, WASPA, SWITCH, and, in Uganda, LeaPPS and PILS. More information is available on <http://www.irc.nl/page/14957>

specific capacity building, action-learning and piloting of innovative approaches, and provision of relevant and target group specific WASH information.

Ultimately, Learning Alliances aim at improving stakeholders working together so that their interventions have greater impact and are better coordinated. Improvement of performance is the core result of the learning. This also requires building linkages between different administrative levels: from community to national level.

Figure 1 illustrates how multi-stakeholder platforms at different administrative levels can help to break down barriers in communication and information sharing.

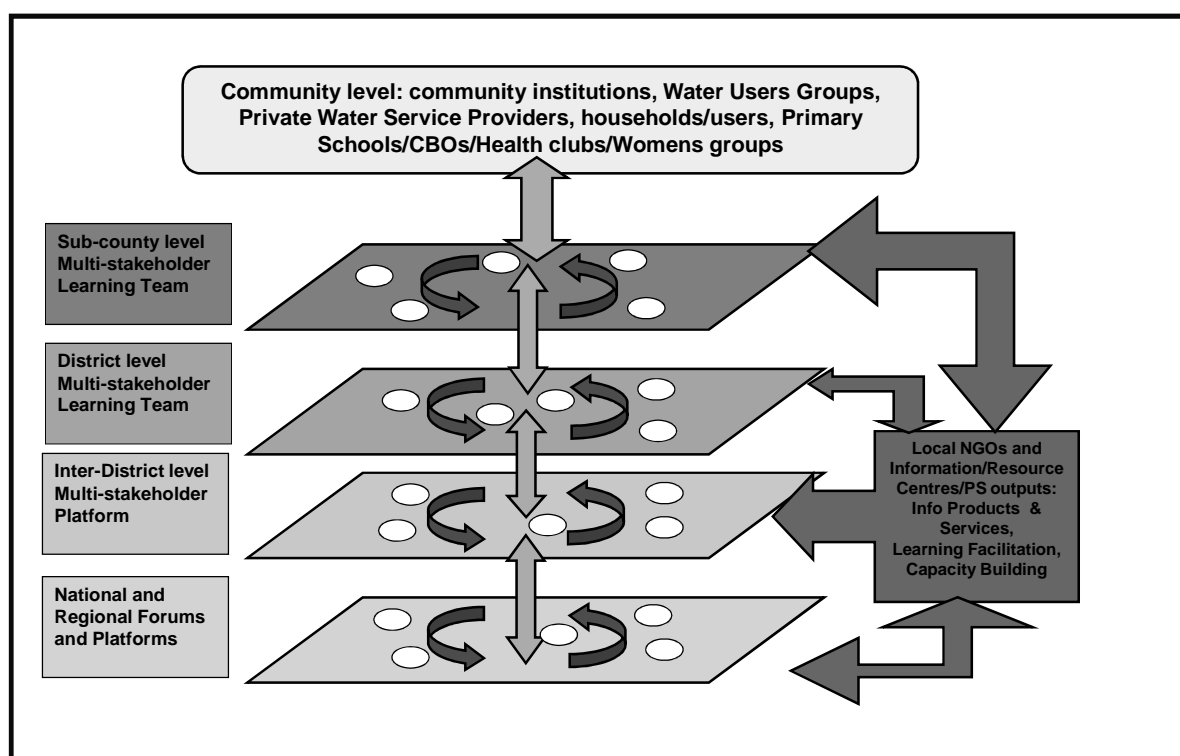


Figure 1: Effective learning structures for change in policy and practices

Source: IRC

The learning platform concept focuses very much on the willingness to change triggered through a learning cycle of information sharing, analysing problems from different perspectives, practical action and action research, and concerted action. After the end of the project, change will be more permanent, while existing platforms are enhanced and the best practices fed into guidelines and policies and scaled up.

4. Elements of the EDF West Nile Project learning process

Based on the general approach described above, the West Nile learning process was designed as comprising four main elements:

- multi-stakeholders dialogue (learning) sessions
- capacity building
- action research
- documentation & advocacy

These elements, which are described in the following sections, are not separate, but work together towards the achievements. For instance, capacity building takes place in the dialogue sessions as a result of sharing of experiences and concepts, analysis of challenges and action planning. The dialogue sessions provide an opportunity to present solutions from other districts or other countries as well as from participants' own experience. The focus of the action research also emerged from the various dialogue sessions.

In order to ensure sustainability and replication, direct links were established with the District Water and Sanitation Coordinating Committees (DWSCCs). This is an existing coordination mechanism established by the Ugandan WASH sector so that local government and NGOs active in a district meet and coordinate. Links were also created with S/C Water and Sanitation Coordinating Committee (S/C WSCC) when these were functioning (in some instances they were revived during the project). Upwards, the initiative also fed into the national level, sharing experiences and providing recommendations for policy-makers and implementers through a National Learning Event and links with the national Good Governance Working Group (GGWG).

4.1 The dialogue sessions

In 2009 and 2010, a number of dialogue sessions were held at three different levels:

- at sub-county (S/C level): six sessions in each of the six S/Cs
- at district level: six sessions in each of the three districts
- at inter-district level: three sessions

Each level was directly linked to the one(s) above and below, and so were the dialogue sessions at the various levels: for example, discussions and action decided upon in S/C sessions were fed into the following corresponding district session; during inter-district sessions experiences and progress made at district and S/C levels were shared.

The facilitation team developed the agenda for the next session with inputs from participants at the end of each learning session. A meeting with district staff was held before the session to ensure buy-in from the district and that the relevant people would attend.

In the sessions, participants' interests and capacity building needs were addressed through presentations, group work, discussions and field visits. The facilitation team divided tasks beforehand so that presentations and case material could be prepared.



Photo 3: A dialogue session in Nebbi district, July 2009

The team also ensured that new concepts or methods (innovation) were brought into the sessions. For example, possible tools and methodologies for action research were introduced during the dialogues. Different communication tools and platforms (including social media and Short Message Service – SMS), as well as their applicability in the context of learning and improving transparency and accountability in the WASH sector were also reviewed and tested out.

The learning sessions aimed to:

- **Develop and test** locally appropriate solutions and strategies to address the identified problems and incorporate various themes, such as budget cycle, promoting downwards accountability, communication channels, etc.
- **Present, analyse and discuss** relevant concepts and approaches (from within and outside the pilot districts) to address jointly identified problems
- **Stimulate hands-on learning** through field visits and action research in selected sub-counties
- **Follow-up and document** the various sessions and lessons learned
- **Identify key issues that need follow up by the District and S/C Water and Sanitation Coordinating Committees** (e.g. to scale up a successful approach, to improve transparency in drawing up annual work plans and budgets, etc.)

At district and S/C level, each learning session lasted 1 to 1 ½ days, and often included a field visit. An important part of the sessions was reporting on progress and activities since the previous session. This provided an opportunity for joint analysis of challenges and learning needs. It also provided a way to critically review challenges and link them with good practices or innovative approaches and concepts that had been applied successfully elsewhere. Action planning at the end of each session aimed to ensure that the learning session does not remain a talk-shop, but leads to results and further applying the learning and sharing experiences.

4.2 Capacity building and follow up

Traditional approaches to capacity building often confuse it with training. While training and education are important for increased capacity, it is not always guaranteed that people can put into practice what they have learnt. A Learning Alliance provides a framework for the involved people in the platforms to identify where their capacity gaps are, to acquire new knowledge and tools, and then to put the learning into practice, in a learning cycle of action and reflection. This process can be illustrated with the double-loop learning diagram:

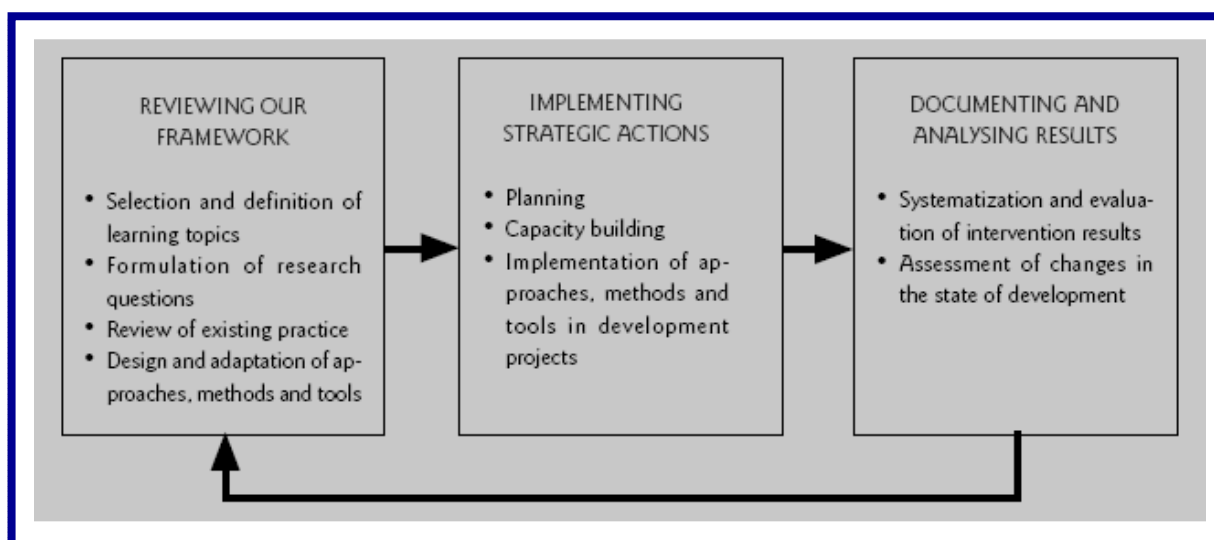


Figure 2: The double-loop learning cycle in a learning alliance
Source: International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)

An important lesson is that any learning initiative should link up with organisations that can provide information and communication materials, technical backstopping, funding and/or training programmes. In between the learning sessions, follow up was needed to address in more detail the identified learning needs and interests. This helped support stakeholders to put what they had learned into practice, and time was therefore allocated for this in the project, with a clear role for the two local partners, NETWAS and CEFORD. The dialogue sessions provided the forum for feedback and sharing of practical experiences.

The core of capacity building activities was on action research methodology and documentation activities; these are further detailed in the following paragraphs. Three one-day capacity building events were linked to the inter-district sharing and learning sessions. These capacity buildings focused on demanded and identified topics requiring additional attention to enable participants to fully understand the use and applicability of specific methodologies and tools. Topics included innovative facilitation techniques, effective communication techniques, and methodologies in documenting and sharing of action research experiences.

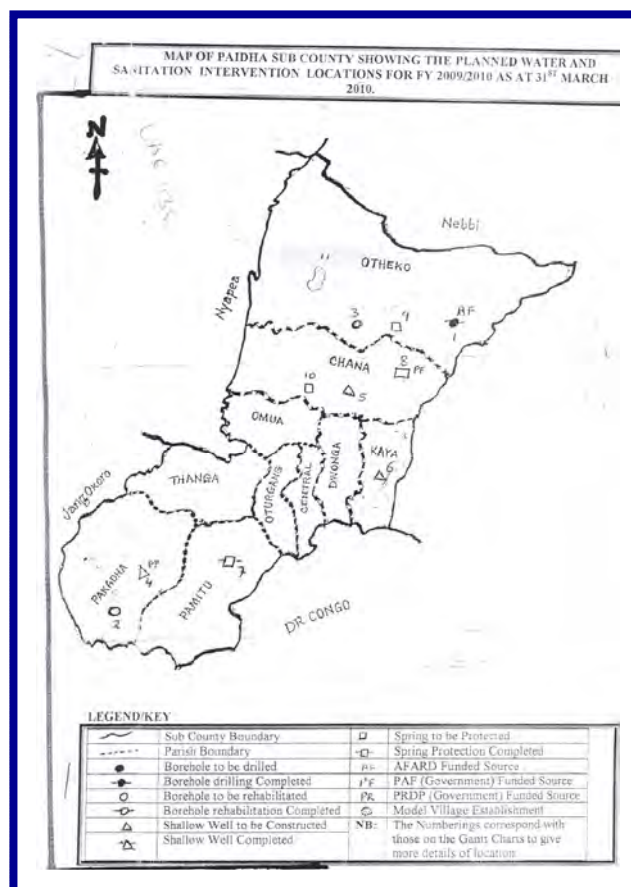
4.3 Action research

Participatory action research brings in innovation, testing and promoting of new approaches, reflection and action into the learning process. It also raises awareness and builds people’s capacities, using approaches designed to address a practical problem, in support of and with the active collaboration of the stakeholders. An important part of the action research is cycles of active experimentation followed by reflection. This is crucial to any system that wants to create adaptive, flexible and context specific knowledge and is key for Learning Alliances. It provides data and tangible results and can motivate stakeholders to take further action.

Action research requires specific skills of the local NGOs involved (as they are usually implementation oriented) and needs proper and intensive guidance, monitoring and documentation.

In the West Nile Project, action research at district level focused on improving communication between service providers and consumers, i.e. on promoting downward accountability and transparency by the districts and S/Cs as WASH service providers to consumers. Action research at S/C dialogues concentrated on improving accountability and transparency at community and school level, empowering users to demand for good services and fostering improved services by water and sanitation source committees (WSSC). A total of 4 focus areas of accountability were selected by the participants during the sessions and investigated: (i) water at district and S/C level; (ii) sanitation and hygiene promotion at district and S/C level; (iii) water at system level and (iv) sanitation and hygiene in primary schools.

Figure 3: Sample of a S/C water and sanitation planning and monitoring map



A number of tools were developed, experimented with and refined, forming part of a toolkit for promoting accountability and transparency in WASH⁷:

- **Water at district level**
 - District Water Supply Planning & Monitoring Map: This simple map visualises the current financial year's plans and achievements in water supply, based on the data provided by the District Water Officer and the District Planning Officer. It is displayed on notice boards of government institutions (at district and S/C level) for everyone to see. Copies can be requested by other organisations, such as churches, NGOs, CBOs, etc that may also wish to display them.
 - District Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Gantt Chart: The Gantt chart complements the map, informing citizens about the financial year's plans and actual achievements and showing monthly progress from planning to completion. It is also displayed on notice boards and copies can be requested.
- **Sanitation and hygiene at district level**
 - District Water Sanitation Planning & Monitoring Map: Same as the District Water Supply Planning & Monitoring Map, but for Sanitation and Hygiene. Some districts and S/Cs combined the two maps in one document.
 - District Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Gantt Chart: see above.
- **Water at system level**
 - Consumers' Score Card: This card is filled in during a community meeting to allow users of a water supply to share their experiences as consumers, identify priority areas for improvement as well as roles and contributions they can make towards improving good governance and accountability of their water and sanitation source committees (WSSC).
 - WSSC Self Assessment Card: It is filled in by WSSC members, to give them the opportunity to discuss and share their views on the quality of services and factors they think or know affect their effectiveness. They also propose activities they think can help improve service delivery, management, governance and accountability.
 - Joint Score Card and Action Plan: During a joint meeting, results of the consumers' and WSSC's meetings held previously are presented and put together in a joint score card. Based on these, users and WSSC develop a Joint Action Plan to improve water service provision in the community.
- **Sanitation and hygiene in primary schools**
 - School Children Perception Card: It is used to capture the perceptions and views of the school children in regards to water and sanitation issues in the school.
 - School Debate: Following the assessment of children perceptions, dialogue is facilitated between the school authorities, School Management Committee, Parents Teachers Association and the general parents' body. Actions for improvement are identified, and progress in addressing them monitored in follow-up meetings.

Area of improvement	Perception/mood
(a) Smell	☹️ Unhappy
(b) Flies	☹️ Unhappy
(c) Faeces on floor / wall	☹️ Unhappy
(d) Privacy for girls	😊 Happy
(e) Girls speaking freely with senior woman teacher.	😊 Happy

Figure 4: A School Children Perception Card

⁷ See for the Action Research methodologies and tools <http://www.irc.nl/page/52603>

The various stakeholders involved in action research appreciated these tools, as they are easy to use and promote transparency and dialogue, and they expressed a strong interest in continuing to use them after the end of the project. The toolkit was presented at national level during a National Learning Event where it also generated significant interest. Tools have been translated in some local languages on the request of dialogues' participants.

4.4 Documentation

Each learning session was documented and the reports and newsletters shared with participants. The facilitation team tried to have the reports/newsletters ready within two weeks of the learning session. This proved difficult, but it is very important to ensure that participants can report back to and share with their peers and superiors, and that they keep the momentum on agreed action points. The reports should not only provide an account of the agenda points, but also some of the discussions, and should capture challenges, achievements and agreements. Soon after the beginning of the project, the facilitation team started documenting the main elements and lessons learned in the dialogues in a newsletter format⁸ as it is more accessible and attractive to read, and can more easily be shared with superiors and peers. The newsletter also often included an interview with a participant or 'amplified' statements of participants on a key issue.

There has been a strong interest expressed by both NGOs and local governments to improve their documenting skills. This was an area for further capacity development. One way we tried to support this during the learning sessions was to have participants share good practices in small workgroups, and then document the headlines of one selected good practice using a simple format. Participants were also taken through the process of how to document good cases for the purpose of knowledge sharing. Guidelines for Case Documentation were developed and shared.

Both the good practices that were existing before the project started and that emerged from the action research or were put in place in the course of the intervention were documented as much as possible by participants with support from the facilitation team. The process and achievements on this multi-stakeholder learning initiative are also documented, in this paper and in a separate one on achievements of the project.

Besides circulating them at the three platform levels, the different outputs of documentation were shared at national levels through the SAWA resource centre⁹, the National Good Governance Working Groups (GGWG) and the National WASH Learning Event.

5. Phases in the learning process

The West Nile Project was facilitated from December 2008 to October 2010 by IRC, NETWAS and CEFORD. The initiative was implemented in a number of phases, which are presented in this section.

Phase 1: Inception phase

To understand the initial status, challenges and opportunities it was important to talk with knowledgeable people from government and non-government organisations. Relevant documents such as sector performance reports, publications of development programmes and workshop reports also provided valuable information. As the West Nile region had developed several good processes and tools to improve governance and accountability, some in the WASH sector and health sectors (e.g. by districts and CARE), the project built on these.

⁸ <http://www.irc.nl/page/53957>

⁹ <http://www.watsanuganda.watsan.net/page/107>

During the initial dialogue sessions the key objectives were to:

- a) Jointly identify commonalities and analyze the current situation – problems perceptions, roles and gaps – and collaboratively define what the various stakeholders wanted to change and what was needed to create this change. This included the following activities:
 - initial mapping of stakeholders at different levels;
 - assessment of actual WASH planning process and service delivery in project districts;
 - assessment of perspectives of key stakeholders on service provision and planning;
 - identification of good practices in improving governance, social accountability and transparency in the districts.
- b) Agree on a common vision – what various stakeholders wanted to achieve and then agree on process steps, opportunities and constraints for achieving the vision.

The initial dialogue sessions were therefore instrumental in developing the way forward, as well as slowly creating a safe and open learning environment (see section 6.1). The pilot sub-counties were selected during the first district sessions.

The documentation process started from the inception phase, with the production of sessions reports as well as the identification of first good practices that could be further investigated.

Phase 2: Establishing the learning process

In the next phases the learning process was given shape through **regular dialogue sessions** (on average 3 per year at district and at S/C levels) as well as follow-up capacity support. To ensure that the West Nile Project was linked to district coordinating and planning structures, the learning session outcomes were shared with platforms such as the District Water and Sanitation Coordination Committee (DWSCC). As already mentioned, an initiative like the West Nile Project should not stand on its own but be integrated into other structures and programmes and be linked to the national level (e.g. through the GGWG).

Separate to the dialogue sessions, but complementary to them, a baseline and two monitoring studies on stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and practices in terms of transparency and accountability were undertaken to assess changes in attitudes and behaviour as regards to WASH governance.

Phase 3: Implementation of local actions/practical learning

Once the learning process was well established and participants started being more conversant with action research methodology, the actual implementation and testing of local actions, tools and strategies in districts and sub-counties started.

Phase 4: Evaluation and lesson learning

During the two first inter-district learning and sharing sessions, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the project and its activities was undertaken by participants. Moreover, towards the end of the two-year pilot, the last dialogues at inter-district, district and S/C level were an opportunity to revisit the initial joint vision and plan, identify the most-significant-changes, and to discuss the achievements as well as the sustainability of such a learning process.

Phase 5: Ensuring sustainability: developing actions and strategies for replication and scaling up

Initially the process is externally facilitated, however the aim is ultimately for learning to be mainstreamed and budgeted for by local stakeholders. This requires and illustrates true

ownership and will ensure sustainability. Building on results and interest generated during the dialogues and action research activities, district and sub-county stakeholders were invited during the last sessions to think about how they would like to sustain and replicate the learning process and achievements of the initiative. Their sustainability plans outlined concrete activities, including their frequency and persons in charge, in the areas that had been targeted for action research:

- Districts and S/C implementation plans: planning and budgeting WASH activities, including for action research; preparation and updating of maps and Gantt charts; integrating WASH in other government programmes such as the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF) or the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS); having functioning DWSCCs and S/C-WSCCs; training of WSS Committees; carrying out joint monitoring; documenting best practices.
- Water users’ implementation plans: regular WSSC meetings; monthly users’ contribution to maintenance funds; regular use of community score cards, WSSC self-assessment cards and joint action planning; monitoring of water and sanitation facilities, etc.
- WASH in schools action plans: cleaning plans; hygiene education activities; continuous assessment using pupils’ perceptions cards; joint monitoring of facilities.

It is planned that these activities not only be continued in the pilot sub-counties, but also replicated in other S/Cs in each district supported by water and health staff from district and S/C level. Organising and financing similar dialogue sessions may be difficult; however, stakeholders proposed using existing platforms such as DWSCCs and S/C-WSCCs to continue the learning, review and documenting process.

Table 1 below presents a summary of the main activities of the West Nile Project, as well as the related outputs.

Table 1: Summary of the main activities and outputs of the West Nile Project:

Activity	Outputs
District Dialogue Sessions	6 series in each of the 3 project districts
Sub-county Dialogue Sessions	6 series in each of the 6 project sub-counties
Inter-district Learning Session and Capacity Building Event	3 Inter-district sharing, learning and capacity building events
Baseline and monitoring on perceptions, attitudes, practices	One baseline; two monitoring
Reporting and documentation	Project Brief Sessions reports & newsletters Briefing summaries for Programme Monitoring Publication on (existing and new) good practices Publications on process and achievements Report on action research guidelines and toolkit Reports on baseline and monitoring Project Quarterly and other Reporting Reports

6. Lessons on facilitation

In this section, some of the lessons on facilitating an initiative like the West Nile Project and reflections on how it could have been done better are presented.

The implementation team was involved in a continuous reflection process: holding regular meetings where staff from IRC, NETWAS and CEFORD would review the various activities, assess the progress made, try to optimise the learning and further adapt the intervention to the local context.

Important principles of the West Nile Project are first highlighted below, followed by more detailed lessons on facilitation.

Key principles of the West Nile Project were:

- involving stakeholders from different levels, including community members
- making use of multiple/ diverse perspectives
- being responsive to participants' wishes and requests
- building on existing structures
- carrying out participatory action research
- focusing on *learning for change*

6.1 Creating a safe and open learning environment

For people to learn, they need the confidence to acknowledge failures or mistakes and to tolerate ambiguities. An important task of the facilitators is therefore to **create a safe and friendly learning environment**, and to encourage participants to speak out confidently. Providing encouragement for people to learn, acknowledging shortcomings and sharing their insights are very important. This was all the more important as this learning initiative touched on sensitive issues on accountability and transparency in the provision of basic services. When confronted with some questions, participants, particularly district staff, could feel attacked and become defensive, with the risk of dropping out of the sessions. A great challenge for the facilitators was to keep the dialogues constructive and interesting for all. The tone of the learning sessions had to be collaborative, respectful of various perspectives and contributions and encourage listening. In addition to this facilitation mode, the continuity of the dialogues and their regular occurrence helped stakeholders in progressively gaining confidence and having open discussions. This was observed throughout the process, with participants moving from avoiding attitudes towards certain issues at the beginning to more and more openness as time passed.

One practical way to help create a safer learning environment (especially at the beginning, when trust may be low) is to organize subgroups for discussion or group work. Grouping together people who have similar levels of power or experience can help people to open up. It is also important to acknowledge and encourage different opinions and views. For this, we can use exercises in dialoguing or assigning particular people to certain roles in group discussions (e.g. being the critical observer, pathfinder, etc.), doing role plays in communication etc.

The learning platforms also opened up when participants, in particular at sub-county level, fully realised during the process the **necessity to involve communities and to have their voices heard**. It was agreed that without them no "real accountability" is possible.

As facilitators it is important to **encourage the exchange of different perspectives** and to reduce the load of information coming from the 'experts', be they facilitators or participants who have a certain level of authority within the group. Instead of a dialogue between one participant and the presenter, we should stimulate all participants to discuss, think for themselves, reflect on the applicability of what has been presented and encourage the use of the knowledge and experience readily available in the group.

6.2 Keeping focus in visionary and creative platforms

Any person facilitating such a learning process is confronted with an inherent paradox: trying to **create a good learning environment** while at the same time addressing needs to **foster mechanisms for change and action**. It was important that the learning sessions did not remain empty talks. The facilitation team had to regularly refocus discussions, as attendants tended to discuss general WASH issues rather than governance, transparency and accountability.

At the end of each session, **actions and review of progress** were planned for the following session. However, participants could feel threatened when they had not implemented the tasks agreed during the previous session, or could feel exposed, particularly when there were power differences within the group or conflicts. For example, Health Assistants and S/C Chiefs could feel unsure reporting in the presence of their superiors on what had been done or not. Facilitators had to ensure that the sessions did not get stuck on blaming and shaming, but rather stimulated dialogue and questioning on how things were done and how to improve through the use of more efficient and effective methodologies.

At the beginning, participants tended to shy away from reporting their progress on the recommendations of the last sessions, or from discussing controversial issues. Giving desired positive answers was another way of avoiding uncomfortable situations. This attitude can make the discussions and outcomes of sessions shallow and require a lot of attention and energy from the facilitators who try to get more learning out of the sessions. One way to **increase learning and honest reporting back** was to encourage reflection and analysis on the reasons behind a failure and to understand constraints for better sector performance instead of blaming participants personally. Starting with the successes and achievements before analyzing failures also was a good way of not discouraging participants.

This avoiding attitude illustrates the discomfort that some participants may have felt being part of a setting different and more demanding than usual workshops. During the first sessions, some stakeholders would actually revert to the more comfortable “workshop mode” and refocusing by facilitators was again necessary. Facilitators themselves also fell into the “workshop mode trap” at the beginning, for example by including a session element on making ‘action plans’ as dialogue outputs. This met resistance as all district workshops appear to demand action plans that actually have become empty activities shells, being mere paper outputs not followed up and for which no official reporting is required. The learning point here was that **action planning should not just be included as a standard agenda point but be realistic** and in line with the progress of the dialogue and learning from action research.

6.3 Whose platform, whose programme? The issue of ownership

As facilitators we often feel the need to be well prepared and organized and bring our own expertise in. At the same time, we need to be cautious that we do not fall into a didactic mode, acting as teachers in front of a classroom. Facilitators are often seen as the most knowledgeable, and the challenge is to overcome this perception both from the facilitators and the attendants’ side.

The West Nile Project aimed at having maximum ownership of the process and the outcomes of the learning sessions by the district and sub-county stakeholders. This implied that these local stakeholders become co-facilitators of the sessions, rather than mere recipients of knowledge. Building on local knowledge and reaching increased commitment by participants required facilitators to **‘hand over the talking stick’** and to **ask the right questions instead of giving the answers**.

A focal person was selected in each district and sub-county to ensure follow-up actions are implemented but also to ensure adequate reporting is done through feedback during the DWSCC and S/C WSCC meetings.

For promoting continuous participation in the dialogue sessions, attendants were invited through the Chief Administrative Officer's office, as this gave the invitations more weight and the participants the onus to attend and be held accountable. Ownership indeed also relates to people attending and really participating in the sessions. The continuity of participation however remained a challenge; not all invited people from Water, Health and Education departments, Technical Support Unit (TSU), water user groups, etc. would show up. While some individuals participated in each session, others were delegated without adequate briefing. This slowed down the progress in dialoguing, limited effective follow up, and often the purpose and methodology had to be explained again for new-comers influenced the continuity in learning and. **Timing of the sessions** so that they do not clash with important district meetings, other workshops, holidays and other events is important. Sessions on Friday tend to be problematic, while good timekeeping is essential to ensure that people who have to travel can still participate fully in the sessions.

Ways of supporting participants in taking ownership included:

- **Setting the agenda of the sessions together with the key stakeholders** in the platforms. As a consequence there could be different agendas in the different districts and sub-counties, which required more preparatory work by the facilitators.
- **Focusing on local knowledge as the starting point** for group and individual learning and stimulating participants to bring their own experiences into discussions (spontaneously, but also by invitation). Facilitators should help them just enough by giving clear instructions and guidelines for contributions.
- **Practicing participatory reflection and action behaviours**, which include flexibility, being supportive, sharing, abandoning preconceptions and being open to listen, watch and learn.

6.4 Tailoring the information to the participants

A constant concern for the facilitation team was to provide to the participants with information that is comprehensible and useful for their learning and reflection. Here are a few principles that were applied:

- **Avoiding the use of difficult jargon** or complicated presentation of information;
- **Combining a workshop setting hands on and practical learning** by showing/doing, experimenting and testing in the action research;
- **Following-up** on the list of fixed participants who received an invitation in order to have the same people every three months in the dialogue sessions;
- **Repeating information** in following sessions to provide a refresher and avoid giving an overdose of new information in one session;
- **Limiting the number of items** on the session agenda to ensure there was enough time for reflection, discussion and analysis;
- **Shifting from report to newsletters** for the documentation of sessions, in order to offer a format that is more accessible and attractive to read, as the reading culture is still very low among many participants.

Further reading and Links:

Reports and other documentation are available here:

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre: www.irc.nl/page/49682

Water and Sanitation Resource Centre, Uganda: www.watsanuganda.watsan.net/page/545

A toolkit on accountability is available here: <http://www.irc.nl/page/52603> or <http://goo.gl/Ch5Bg>