WASH sector learning
Continuous improvement for services that last

How can the sector improve water and sanitation sector outcomes?

How can successful innovations be scaled up?

How can one region's experience help planners and workers elsewhere?

Local governments, development agencies and communities in many parts of the world are working hard to develop sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. Sometimes the answers to common problems already exist but are not widely known; sometimes new knowledge is being created but the information is fragmented. Finding and then using experiences and lessons learnt locally and internationally are a major challenge to the WASH sector.

Most of the problems in providing WASH services cannot be solved unilaterally because they involve diverse stakeholders. Training and capacity development are not, on their own, enough to ensure that stakeholders can keep water flowing and latrines functioning. Commitment to on-going improvement and learning in the sector are essential for better use of resources and better service delivery.

The value of learning jointly

To provide **WASH services for all, forever**, sector stakeholders need to jointly monitor current practices and policies, analyse their own experience and that of other WASH interventions, reflect on the successes and failures, and design and implement adaptations that improve service delivery. This kind of learning is the key to better results and scaling up.
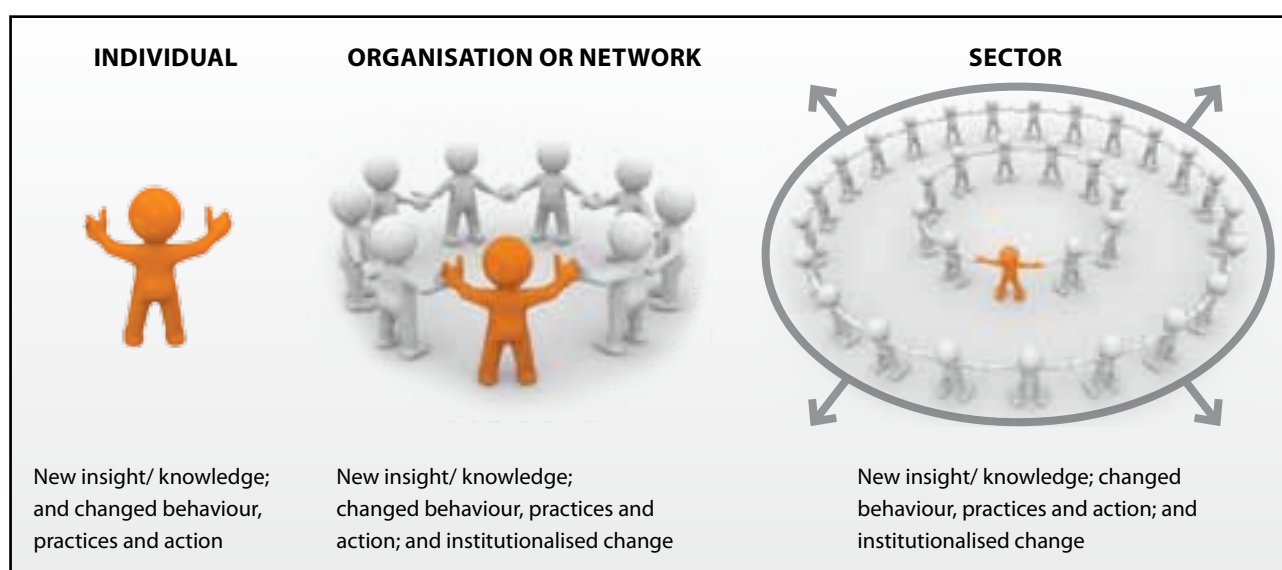
Learning will help the sector meet its challenges and find solutions so that universal WASH services are provided reliably and sustainably. A **learning sector** has the home-grown ability to investigate and solve problems: sector actors at all institutional levels have the necessary support to engage in critical inquiry, documentation, joint reflection and adaptation of practice and policy.

This pamphlet describes sector learning and its potential to improve WASH outcomes.

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre

Sector learning, defined

Learning starts when individuals acquire new insights or knowledge and change their behaviour. Sector learning goes beyond knowledge and action at the individual level. It involves all stakeholders, and emerges from an integrated approach to information management, monitoring, analysis and reflection on the factors that determine success or failure. The effects of learning at the individual level translate into concerted action and institutional change (Figure 1). Thus sector learning requires an effort to support learning at all levels – the individual, organisation, network and entire sector.

Figure 1 Learning effects: from individual learning to sector-level change

INDIVIDUAL	ORGANISATION OR NETWORK	SECTOR
New insight/ knowledge; and changed behaviour, practices and action	New insight/ knowledge; changed behaviour, practices and action; and institutionalised change	New insight/ knowledge; changed behaviour, practices and action; and institutionalised change

Source: Towards a framework for tracking sector learning. RMA Workshop, April 2011

Sector learning includes formal education like on-the-job training programmes and capacity support for service authorities. Equally important are on-going documentation and information management, monitoring, knowledge sharing, innovation and experimentation. These mechanisms may be led by various groups within the sector, but in the end, *all learning should feed into a sector-wide effort towards continuous performance improvement.*

Fundamentals for building a learning sector

Leadership. Change begins when an organisation or individual communicates a vision for continuous improvement of sector performance and the large-scale benefits that will result from it. The process of achieving the vision needs to be facilitated, and requires human and financial resources for documentation, data analysis, information management, meetings and follow-up.

Collaboration. Sector learning requires that people be willing and able to do things together, better and differently. It is not only experts who should have a say in the process: all stakeholders bring knowledge and can learn from one another. Strategic partnerships that truly engage the full range of stakeholders can inspire commitment to the goal and help institutionalise learning processes.

Government buy-in. Sector learning should be aligned with national processes, and the national government should support it and take the lead. The sector learning framework supports stakeholders in meeting WASH sector challenges and links monitoring efforts to improved policy and practice. The framework describes a joint vision, desired outcomes and major strategies for embedding continuous learning in the sector.

Documentation and sharing. Many organisations in the WASH sector fail to document their experiences, and the lessons they have learnt – good or bad – are lost. Documentation is therefore crucial for learning. Face-to-face opportunities for learning are a traditional approach; digital channels are becoming increasingly useful.

Sector learning approaches

People often share experiences, exchange information and coordinate their activities in working groups or conferences. Sector learning, in contrast, is a structured process of monitoring and analysis followed by action; another round of monitoring and analysis then occurs, and based on the findings, the stakeholders change their approach accordingly. It therefore requires learning 'platforms' that bring stakeholders together to learn and take action.

When learning platforms and mechanisms are linked through the different institutional levels (Table 1), lessons and information can flow between national and decentralised actors, contributing to overall sector performance improvement and scaling up of successful innovations.

Table 1 **Common learning platforms**

Level	Focus	Platform, mechanism
International	Review and analyse sector progress Build consensus and coordinate Develop (inter)national policy	Alliances and partnerships Communities of practice, working groups, thematic groups International events Resource centre networks
National	Develop national policy and institutional framework Identify strategies and norms Analyse sector progress Build consensus and coordinate	Alliances Communities of practice, working groups, thematic groups Joint sector performance reviews Coordination platforms Resource centre networks
Region, district, municipality	Find and adapt solutions to local problems Improve approaches Pilot and test technologies	Alliances Resource centre networks Coordination platforms

There are no quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions to sustainable service delivery. Instead, finding what works in each country requires a process of experimentation, reflection and adaptation.

In today's world […] solutions are often not immediately apparent and uncertainty abounds, moving forward requires a creative, responsive and adaptive outlook. The capacity for learning and innovation becomes paramount in these complex and dynamic processes. These are processes that often require a society-wide perspective on learning and change, hence the notion of societal learning.

Source: Woodhill, J., 2004. Facilitating complex multi-stakeholder processes: a social learning perspective. (Working Document) [online]. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/research/water-initiative/pdf/iwrm_scicom/a/a3_en.pdf> [Accessed 30 August 2012].

The iterative process of learning

Sector learning uses a range of methods. The mechanisms and platforms described in Table 1 can apply such approaches as studies, action research, seminars, workshops, learning retreats, exchange visits, peer-learning programmes, training and formal education. E-learning is increasingly used to complement face-to-face learning. Documenting both the outcomes (monitoring) and the change process itself (process documentation) can provide new insights for practice and learning.

Figure 2 illustrates a learning process in Uganda in which stakeholders collaborate in 'multi-stakeholder learning platforms' (MSLPs). At their regular meetings, they report on their research, conduct joint analysis and agree on further action to carry out before the next meeting.

Figure 2 Multi-Stakeholder Learning Platforms (MSLPs) and action research process
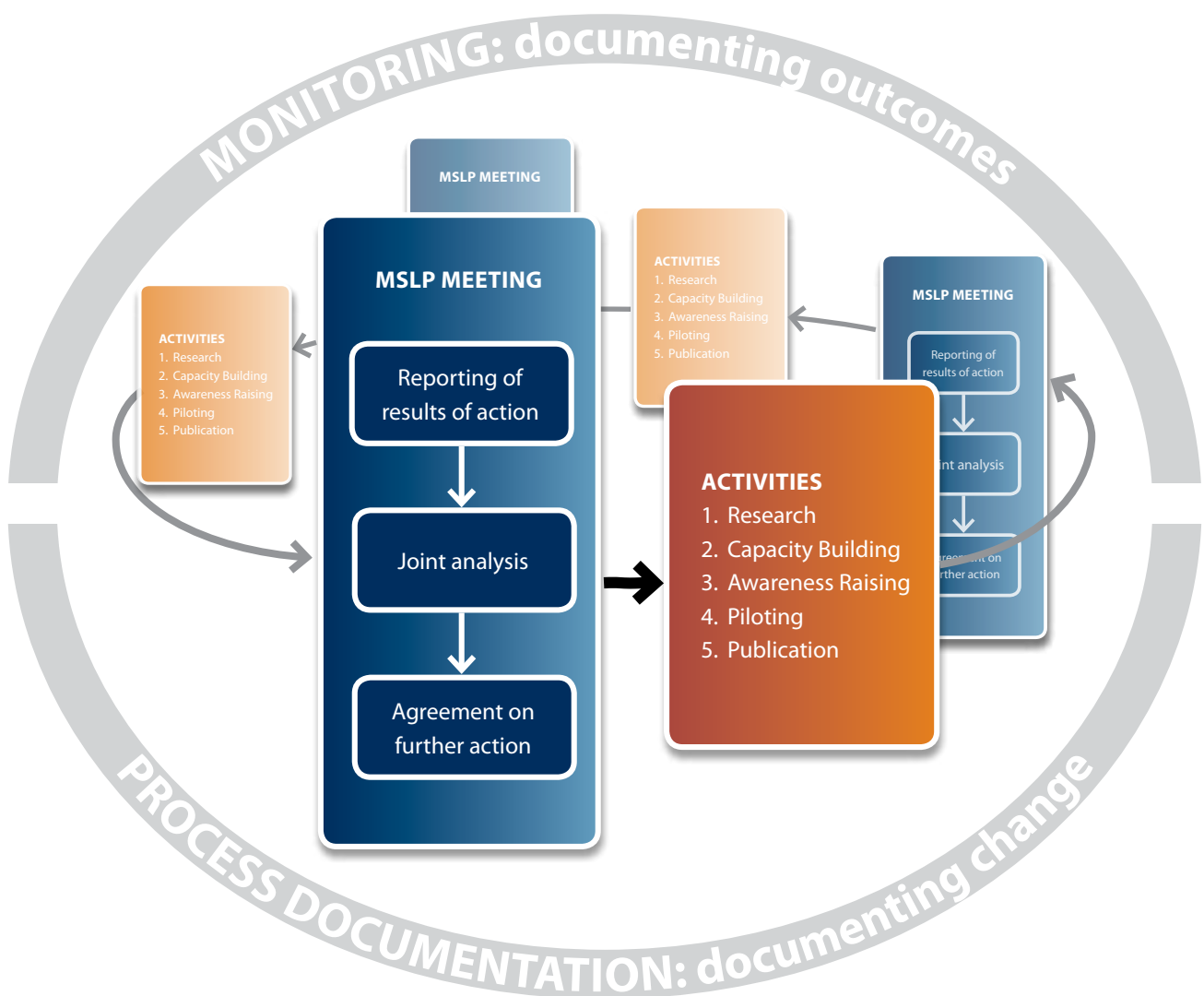
In several projects facilitated by IRC in partnership with local NGOs, meetings at district and sub-county levels involve Uganda's sanitation and hygiene stakeholders from government, civil society and the private sector. These meetings determine the issues for action research. Implementation of change follows. Results are monitored and analysed in subsequent meetings. Findings are reported to the government-led platforms, such as the District Water and Sanitation Coordinating Committees and National Sanitation Working Group. Inter-district meetings bring together selected participants in each district with national stakeholders.

The necessity of investment in sector learning

Learning and innovation are preconditions for better service delivery and more efficient use of funds. However, in practice, learning is often regarded as an add-on: under-funded, depending on ad hoc (often external) support even though it can help conserve scarce resources while improving service levels. Sector learning should be an integral part of sector capacity development and be properly financed at national and decentralised levels.

Resources will be allocated to learning when national policies and strategies explicitly mention monitoring, learning and capacity building as important areas for sector development. Sector learning must be specifically included in the national budget, with commensurate resources.

Adequately funded and embedded in a country's practice, sector learning can help in the following ways:
- improving service delivery
- scaling up successful innovations
- taking decision making closer to those who need services and stimulating demand-based services
- anticipating trends and responding to challenges, such as water scarcity, urban spread and hygiene behaviour change

Change achieved through sector learning: an example from Ghana

Every month, stakeholders of the WASH sector in Ghana convene in the National Level Learning Alliance Platform. In a 2010 meeting, GrassrootsAfrica Foundation gave a presentation on its budget tracking exercise, prompting a great deal of interest, discussion, and reflection among participants. A year later, GrassrootsAfrica described its improved version of budget tracking, which had taken into account the comments and ideas expressed during the 2010 meeting.

In this iterative way, WASH budget tracking by civil society in Ghana has improved significantly, and the National Level Learning Alliance Platform has contributed to the process of joint reflection and debate. The discussions in the meetings have also triggered debate about budgetary allocations to the sector and their cost-effectiveness.

The meetings are hosted by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network.

> **Knowledge management and knowledge networking can play a major role in achieving development goals. It is therefore an important topic for change agents and policymakers in the fields of development policy and policy effectiveness.**
>
> Source: Networks for Prosperity: Achieving Development Goals through Knowledge Sharing, 2011, by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization

IRC and its partners have been promoting learning as the basis for change through various programmes. Since 2003, IRC has been working with WASH Resource Centres and their networks in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Honduras, Nepal and Uganda on improving information management, documentation and knowledge sharing among sector stakeholders. Learning for change is also central to several large, multi-country initiatives like WASHCost *http://www.washcost.info/*, Triple-S *http://www.waterservicesthatlast.org/* and WA-WASH *http://ghana.globalwaters.net/*. IRC will continue documenting its experiences in supporting sector learning and the benefits of learning processes.

IRC and partners have been working on the following mechanisms for learning:

- multi-stakeholder processes, such as learning alliances
- action research at different institutional levels (e.g., LeaPPS-WASH in Uganda)
- thematic groups (Honduras)
- WASH Resource Centres and their networks (e.g., Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network)
- peer-learning through exchange visits and learning journeys (e.g., Uganda, Nepal)

Join us

Find out about our work on sector learning, *http://www.irc.nl/learningforchange*
Share your experiences and follow the weblog on learning for change, *http://learningforchange.wordpress.com/*

Work with us on upcoming proposals and build online repositories of resources on sector learning. Join our discussion group, *http://groups.google.com/group/washsectorlearning*

🐦 #wash4dev
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Photos
Front - IRC's WASHCost workshop on process documentation (Peter McIntyre/ IRC)
Back   - Ghana National Level Learning Alliance Platform Meeting (Ida Coleman/ RCN Ghana)