Resource centre networks:
Contributing to a learning and adaptive WASH sector

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December 2013

IRC

Acknowledgements

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Layout   Bingo! graphic design

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre based in The Hague, The Netherlands, is a global 'think-do' tank committed to the delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene services that last forever, for everyone. IRC is dedicated to achieving transformative change in the WASH sector, particularly in the developing countries where it works. In partnership with governments and a broad range of organisations, IRC's innovative work contributes in making services more sustainable, bridging the knowledge gap, and identifying solutions to WASH challenges.

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Acronyms

CHRECIAS	*El Centro Hondureño de Recursos de Conocimiento e Información en Agua y Saneamiento* (Honduran Resource Centre for Knowledge and Information in WASH)	RAS-HON	*Red de Agua y Sanemiento de Honduras* (Water and Sanitation Network of Honduras)
DGRE	*Direction Générale des Ressources en Eau* (General Directorate of Water Resources, Burkina Faso)	RC	Resource Centre
		RCN	Resource Centre Network
		RCN-BF	Resource Centre Network-Burkina Faso
		RMA	Reflexive Monitoring in Action
DWSS	Department of Water Supply and Sewerage (Nepal)	SAWA	Sanitation and Water Alliance (Uganda)
		SNV	Netherlands Development Organisation
IRC	IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre	URWA	Uganda Rain Water Association
NETWAS	Network for Water and Sanitation (Uganda)	UWASNET	Uganda Water and Sanitation Non-Governmental Organisation Network
NLLAP	National Level Learning Alliance Platform (Ghana)	WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
		WASH-RCNN	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene–Resource Centre Network Nepal
PSO	*PSO Capaciteitsopbouw in Ontwikkelingslanden* (a Dutch umbrella organisation of non-governmental organisations working on capacity development and had recently been subsumed under Partos—the Dutch association for development cooperation)	WSA	Water and Sanitation for Africa Burkina Faso (formerly *Crépa*)

Executive summary

A learning and adaptive sector engages in continual learning and reflection and is able to adapt to changing circumstances and demands. Building a learning sector with the capacity to continually innovate, evolve and adapt—based on evidence—is a must for delivering sustainable services. Learning and adaptive management require information and knowledge flows throughout the sector, including sound monitoring data and documentation of local innovations, mechanisms and opportunities for joint reflection, sharing of experience and generation of new knowledge and up-to-date and accessible information repositories.

WASH resource centre networks are groups of WASH organisations that act as knowledge brokers and learning facilitators. They improve the flow of information and knowledge in the sector by providing information products and services, organising, facilitating and documenting learning and networking activities that involve a broad range of sector actors. This paper presents lessons learnt on improving learning in the WASH sector though resource centre networks in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Honduras, Nepal and Uganda.

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) has been working with these networks as one mechanism to improve local WASH governance and service delivery. From 2009 to 2012, IRC designed and implemented an international learning programme to better understand and facilitate learning in the WASH sector through resource centre networks. The programme supported five networks to strengthen the flow of WASH information and knowledge, facilitate joint learning and coordination amongst sector stakeholders and, together with IRC, learn how to effectively support the shift towards a learning and adaptive WASH sector.

Each resource centre network advanced a theory of change —what the WASH sector would look like in ten years' time if it was to become a learning sector—and envisioned how it could contribute to that change. The networks engaged in reflection workshops and collected stories of change that illustrate steps in the process of moving towards this goal. In each country, progress towards a learning sector was achieved. Some networks saw an expansion of their membership base, and the availability of information and knowledge through the production of information products (manuals, bulletins, facilitation guides, case studies) improved. Networks and their members have received requests for facilitation and documentation, and became increasingly involved in designing and facilitating interactive learning events and processes: action research, national learning platforms, and thematic working groups.

Notwithstanding those advancements, the resource centre networks also face limitations in facilitating sector learning. These are inherent to the mandate of the network in the sector, its membership and roles of other sector players. Challenges internal to the networks include staff turnover, network governance and shared vision, financial sustainability and synergy with other sector programmes. There are signs that network activities are contributing to changes in practice and policy. But IRC also sees a need to collect more evidence on the links amongst sector learning, WASH sector governance and service delivery.

Introduction and background

To achieve water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services for every person, now and forever, sector actors need the capacity to analyse their situation and continually devise adaptive measures (IRC, 2010). IRC promotes "sector learning" to strengthen analytical capacity and promote adaptive management, with the aim of improving WASH governance and service delivery. IRC provides opportunities for collaboration and facilitates systematic and joint reflection on success, failure and lessons learnt.

IRC regards effective resource centres as one element of a learning and adaptive sector. Since the 1990s, IRC has built the capacities of resource centres to enhance their role as knowledge and information brokers[1] and as facilitators of change in the sector.

From 2009 until mid-2012, PSO, a Dutch network organisation of development NGOs, provided financial support to IRC to strengthen the capacity of resource centre networks (RCNs) in Burkina Faso, Honduras, Ghana, Nepal and Uganda. The programme aimed to facilitate change towards a learning WASH sector, contributing to a clearer conceptualisation of what WASH sector learning entails and how it can be supported by strong resource centre networks.

Within this programme, IRC undertook a range of activities to examine how RCNs contributed towards sector learning in the five countries, identify commonalities and differences in what sector learning means in each country, and document stories that illustrate RCNs contribution to change. IRC organised training and several international learning and sharing events—for example, at Stockholm Water Week and the World Water Forum in Istanbul—to learn from other knowledge and resource centres[2].

In-country, the five RCNs[3] used the PSO funds to develop products and services, build the capacity of network members, facilitate and document learning events, develop funding proposals, conduct research and advocate for learning.

This paper covers the experiences of IRC and RCNs in facilitating and catalysing sector learning as part of the PSO-supported programme. The first part explains IRC's understanding of the following: sector learning, resource centre networks and theory of change. This is followed by an overview of all five RCNs and a description of their main activities. The paper concludes with results to date, conclusions and recommendations.

> ... a learning sector has the home-grown ability to identify, learn about, and solve problems related to the provision of WASH services to all. Sector learning is the process ...

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1   For more information about IRC's Resource Centre Development programme (2002–2006), see http://www.irc.nl/page/393.
2   For information about the sector learning programme, see http://www.irc.nl/page/69717.
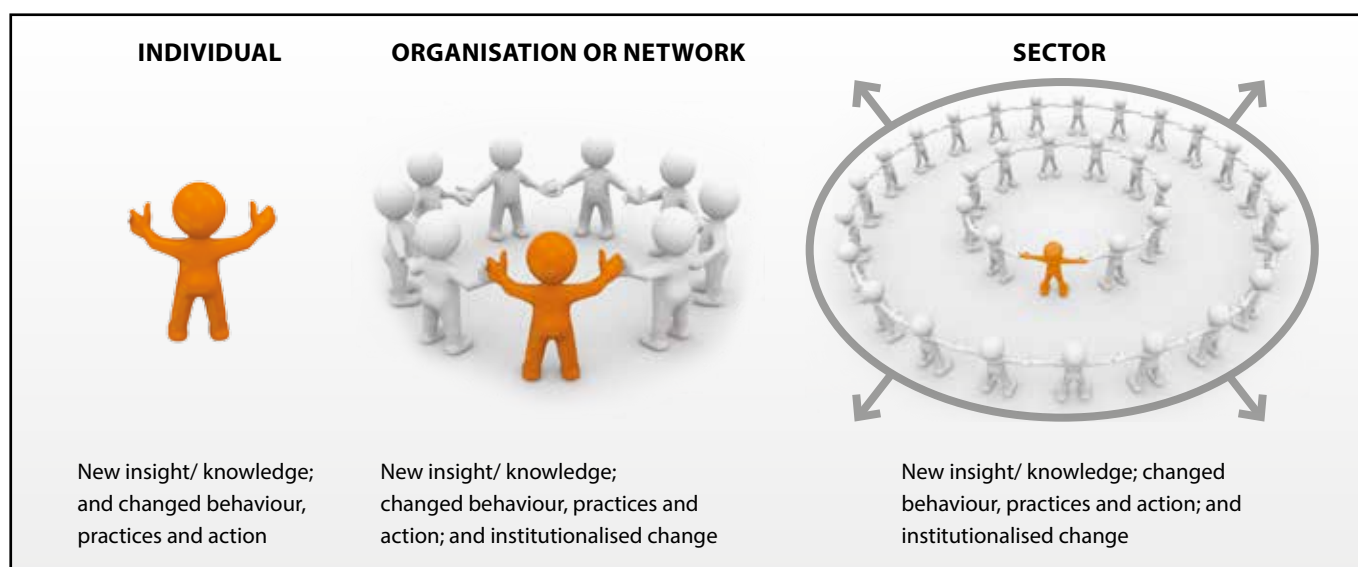3   For a description of the five RCNs, see Annex 1.

Conceptual framework

Sector learning

People are learning all the time. But what are the distinguishing features of sector learning? For WASH, a learning sector has the innate ability to identify, learn about, and solve problems related to the provision of sustainable WASH services to all. Sector learning is the process of moving towards a sector that is dynamic and adaptive and that has mechanisms, a learning culture, and allocated resources to ensure that players throughout the sector can share and learn together (IRC, 2012).

Sector learning occurs through social interactions and processes amongst actors within a social network and can be equated with social learning. It may lead to a change in understanding and in ways of working. It goes beyond change at the individual level and extends to change at organisation and intra-organisational levels—that is, at the sector level (IRC, 2009a, p. 6).

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: IRC, 2012.

Continual learning throughout the sector requires more than ad hoc efforts funded by typical projects. It is a long-term endeavour that requires multi-stakeholder learning mechanisms, a learning culture and appropriate resources. Multi-stakeholder learning processes in the five countries shared five common elements.

Platforms (mainly face-to-face meetings) bring together representatives of government, development partners, civil society and the private sector to discuss a particular issue, reach a shared understanding of challenges, analyse progress, distil lessons and identify follow-up actions.

Action research practitioners reflect systematically on their work, while implementing innovations.

Publication of case studies, good practices and lessons learnt captures and disseminates practical insights about effecting change. Sector monitoring or research results may then be repackaged to make it more accessible for different audiences.

Process documentation systematically records processes (not just the outcome) of change so that hindrances can be identified, analysed and addressed.

Peer learning and on-the-job capacity building occur through learning journeys and exchange visits that take people outside their usual environment to learn from others.

Resource centre networks

Resource centres and their associated networks are communities of WASH organisations that act as independent knowledge brokers, and provide information products and services for a wide set of audiences. Increasingly, they also facilitate knowledge sharing and learning amongst sector actors.

The WASH resource centre networks discussed in this paper are national networks of WASH sector agencies that have agreed to share and learn from each other, through various channels or events, at regular intervals. A network (mainly through its secretariat) and its members provide a range of products and services to facilitate development and use of information. It may be formalised as a professional association, with or without a formal secretariat. Table 1 provides an overview of the five RCNs involved in the sector learning programme.

Table 1 Structure and status of RCNs in the sector learning programme

Network	Composition	Stage of development
Resource Centre Network Burkina Faso (RCN-Burkina Faso; in French, RCR-BF)	More than 12 partners (NGOs, GO)	Working on mandate of network and commitment of members to collaborative activities
Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN Ghana)	Almost all sector actors, all types	Mandated by government agencies and other member organisations
Water and Sanitation Network of Honduras (RAS-HON)	All actors, all types	Mandated by government agencies and member organisations
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene–Resource Centre Network Nepal (WASH-RCNN)	Seven core partners (GO, NGOs), occasional MOUs with others	Working on mandate of network and recently formally registered as network
RCN Uganda and the Sanitation and Water Alliance (SAWA) Uganda	Coalition of five NGOs	Working on mandate and position in relation to other networks, especially UWASNET (umbrella organisation of NGOs)

NGO: non-governmental organisation
GO: governmental organisation

In the 1990s the role of resource centres was conceived of as a "collective memory bank" and knowledge base, capable of documenting information and sharing (IRC, 2004, p. 3). Over the yeras, IRC's focus has shifted towards building the collective ability of national networks to share, repackage and use information and knowledge by:
- advocating for quality information and evidence-based decision making;

- building the capacity of sector stakeholders in information and knowledge management; and
- exploring innovative funding mechanisms for resource centre functions, such as knowledge sharing and information management.
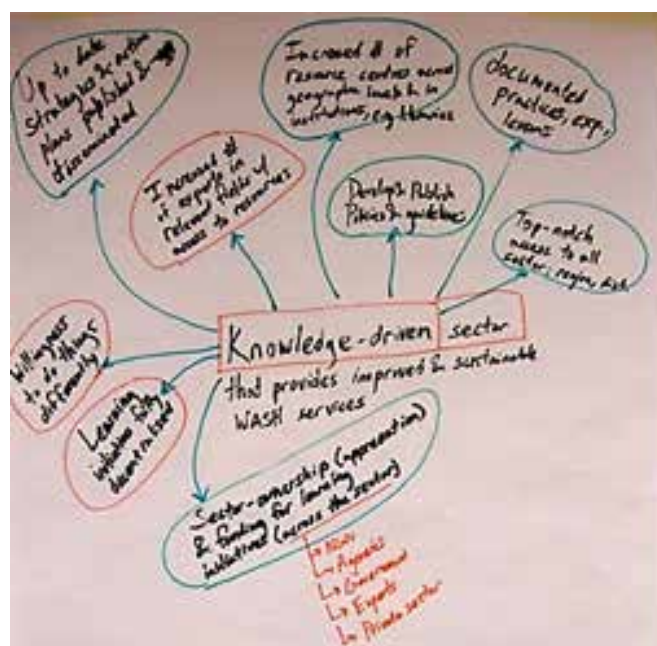
Theory of change: Towards a learning sector

To translate the concept of sector learning into practical actions, the RCN coordinators began by describing their vision of what a learning WASH sector in their country would look like by 2021, and their theory of change about how to realise this vision. A theory of change makes explicit the assumptions about how a given intervention will lead to change in a specific context (Anderson, 2005). Country-specific theory of change was illustrated in a "change map" depicting the envisioned results and preconditions, as well as actor roles, to achieve success. Figure 2 provides a sample from Ghana, which was further developed by the RCN facilitator with RCN in the country.

Ghana WASH RCN's vision and theory of change

A learning and adaptive WASH sector has the following elements:
- Information flows throughout the sector and is available in a format that can be used by those who need it.
- Stakeholders systematically capture and share experiences.
- There are opportunities for joint reflection on lessons learnt, success and failure.
- Stakeholders experiment and generate new knowledge together.
- Stakeholders develop the capacity to reflect and adapt in order to improve service delivery.
- Sector monitoring feeds into learning processes.
- Lead sector agencies are committed to improving knowledge sharing and learning in the sector. This is ideally formulated in a sector vision and strategy for learning.

All five RCN coordinators shared a similar vision of a learning and adaptive WASH sector: that is, a well-coordinated and harmonised sector that provides sustainable and lasting services, continually improves and adapts itself, with approaches and programmes that are aligned, documented and shared. The following section describes how each RCN sought to achieve the above and what they had achieved in-country.

Activities and achievements

In a learning and adaptive WASH sector, stakeholders systematically capture and share experiences, and develop the capacities to reflect together on lessons learnt to adapt and improve service delivery. RCNs in all five countries catalysed such joint learning in the following ways:

Providing relevant and timely information products. The five RCNs produced a range of outputs, including manuals, toolboxes, bulletins, case studies and facilitation guides. These products and services helped the RCNs gain recognition from sector stakeholders and established a niche for their further work. Both have been identified as critical issues for future sustainability of the RCN.

Helping sector actors document, repackage and disseminate their experience. Documentation—to share good practices, the lessons learnt and key conclusions or next steps—has served as a critical element in supporting learning interventions. The documentation of good practices contributed to changes in practice and policy, evidenced by experiences in Honduras (through its thematic working groups) and in Uganda (through its joint sector review)[4]. In Nepal, the WASH-RCNN's monthly electronic sector newsletter *PANEE ra SARSAFAI*, had more than 900 subscribers. WASH-RCNN also published papers on specific topics, such as good practices in sanitation. These services aimed to make information and knowledge accessible to a range of actors and support them as they address sector needs.

Facilitating learning processes. Network coordinators designed and facilitated a range of learning processes, engaged the media, and reached out to a wider audience. Activities included learning journeys (Uganda), media fellowships (Nepal), video production (Nepal), training for journalists on the use of social media (Nepal, Burkina Faso), radio talk shows (Ghana), and thematic working groups (Honduras).

RCN Nepal facilitator, Rabin Bastola, explains Nepal's theory of change and activities

Facilitating learning processes and events. Increasingly, RCNs have taken on the role of facilitator of learning platforms that enable people to share and make sense of information and experience[5]. RCN Ghana, for instance, now facilitates joint analysis, learning and the formulation of actions through monthly National Learning Alliance Platform meetings and sector fora.

Setting a joint agenda for learning and change. RCN's contribution in developing an agenda for learning and change had also increased. In Burkina Faso, the weblog Fas'Eau Nouvelles has become an important online channel for discussion.

Building capacity. As commitment and capacity of network members are important elements in sector learning, all five RCNs used PSO funds to build the capacity of network members including Young Professionals. For example, the RCNs in Ghana, Nepal and Burkina Faso organised training activities for journalists covering WASH. RCN Nepal also financially supported network member organisation attendance in workshops and international learning events.

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4 Visit the IRC website at: www.irc.nl/learningforchange to view change stories in-country.
5 Source: http://www.irc.nl/page/71332.

Making lessons and information flow from the national level to sub-national levels. RCN documentation of good practices and lessons learnt were shared in physical platforms (events, meetings, training, resource centre libraries) and virtual platforms (websites, polls, email groups). Learning and sharing was facilitated through exchange visits, inter-district learning events and the establishment of sub-national resource centres. Interviews about sector learning—captured on video—were also made available on YouTube.

Video documentation of sector learning (YouTube)

Box 1 From knowledge generation in thematic working groups to sector change

From knowledge generation in thematic working groups to sector change

In Honduras, the thematic working groups have played an effective role in organising collaborative learning. Several lessons from the experience of thematic working groups in RAS-HON include:

People, purpose and domain are all necessary for taking learning forward. A dedicated platform that regularly brings people together was found essential, in addition to having concrete products and goals to work on.

The informal status of most thematic working groups was found to have its advantages. The groups facilitated a democratic space where people openly explored and discussed issues. To move forward on decisions made, the uptake by a formal sector working group was recognised as the next step.

Having a culture of sharing, the resource centre secretariat played a vital role in enlarging this culture by facilitating joint systematic reflection, documenting and disseminating lessons learnt and results—in different versions for different audiences.

For uptake of lessons and knowledge products, government leadership over the work of thematic groups is crucial. Empowering government staff, specifically mid-level staff, and responding to clear demand for knowledge products were found to be effective.

Evidence of change

In Ghana, high-level stakeholders from the Water Directorate now mention the importance of learning and acknowledge contribution made by the RCN in their speeches. The RCN has consistently monitored the assessment of the national learning alliance platform meetings by the participants, and gathered evidence that their appreciation of the meetings has grown over the years, as has the number of participants.

In Honduras, members of the RCN have increased resource allocation for knowledge management, and the thematic working groups are now ensuring that member organisations acquire and apply new concepts like multiple-use systems, integrated resource management, transparency and accountability[6]. In Nepal, UNICEF, UN Habitat and the Dutch WASH alliance asked the network to develop a national sector-based knowledge management strategy and to facilitate sector learning processes.

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6   For more information, visit the country page *Generating knowledge throughout thematic groups* at http://www.irc.nl/page/65043.

Some signs of improved coordination as a result of RCN products and activities have also been evident. The sector calendar managed by RCN Ghana has provided sector players with a comprehensive overview of scheduled events. In Nepal, the regional resource centre in Surkhet supported a coordination committee to align actions of various players.

In 2011 and 2012, RCN coordinators and IRC staff collected evidence of sector learning and change. These stories of change were categorised based on an adaptation of the Reflexive Monitoring in Action "Learning Effect Framework" (table 2). In distinguishing who learns (e.g., person, organisation, network, sector) and what changes (e.g., knowledge, insights, policies, practices, institutions), the framework has helped illustrate the range of changes occurring—from individuals acquiring new insights or knowledge to institutional changes and new approaches that have become institutionalised across the sector.

Learning journey sanitation marketing in Uganda

The framework provided a rapid way of identifying and categorising change, which could then be further explored and documented. Table 2 illustrates a selection of stories, which are further detailed in the following section[7]. Although these changes are incipient and there are other contributing factors besides RCN activities, these accounts give insights into the possibilities.

Table 2 Stories of change, by country, categorised in learning effect framework

Effects	New insights, knowledge	Change in behaviour, practices, action	Institutional change
Person			
Organisation			
Network		Burkina Faso	
Sector		Honduras	Ghana
		Uganda	Nepal

Source: Adapted from Van Mierloo, et al., 2010.

The effect of joint learning on improved WASH service delivery is not yet evident, but some signs of change are apparent. For example, in Honduras, the training module on transparency and accountability developed by one of RAS-HON's thematic working groups has become part of the formal training curriculum for water technicians. Now, the water technicians train community water committees in the transparent and accountable management of water and sanitation services.

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7   The full versions of the stories of change are available at www.irc.nl/learningforchange.

Learning and institutional change: Examples

Burkina Faso: Knowledge-sharing assessment
In 2010, IRC, together with the Resource Centre Network Burkina Faso, conducted an assessment of knowledge sharing and information management in the sector[8]. A previous assessment had failed to induce change because it lacked recommendations and generated only limited commitment. This new assessment entailed interviews with sector actors, including the General Directorate of Water Resources (DGRE), and focus group discussions with information and communications staff from various WASH institutions to present different perspectives and ideas for improvement. The assessment was then shared to all interviewees, and the Directorate was invited to discuss the results. As part of this discussion, DGRE and the organisations involved committed themselves to work towards improving information sharing and learning in the sector. Additional recommendations were incorporated, one of which was to repeat the assessment in the future to stay on top of new developments.

The behavioural change observed was in sector actors' acceptance of the assessment's findings and their commitment to work on its recommendations. Several projects that address the assessment's priorities have been implemented—a genuine indicator of learning.

Ghana: National learning alliance discussions
Every other month, stakeholders of the WASH sector in Ghana convene in the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP), with the overall goal of improving sector learning. The meetings are hosted and facilitated by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network. The discussions are summarised and shared with the wider WASH community in the form of a post-meeting communiqué.

In 2010, for the 10th NLLAP, Grassroots Africa was invited to give a presentation on its budget tracking exercise. The discussions and subsequent reflections generated a great deal of interest amongst stakeholders. In May 2011,

Grassroots Africa was invited back to present its findings for 2010. That year's budget tracking was an improved version that took into account the comments and ideas from the 10th NLLAP. Since 2010 WASH budget tracking by civil society in Ghana has improved significantly, and RCN Ghana contributed to that through the NLLAP.

Honduras: Learning in thematic working groups
In 2007, the Water and Sanitation Network of Honduras (RAS-HON) initiated thematic working groups. Over the years this mechanism has helped WASH actors move from words to deeds in priority areas (Pineda, 2012). Now there are nine groups that pool knowledge, investigate existing experiences and provide products for the WASH sector.

Whenever members of RAS-HON identified a need to probe deeper into a topic, a thematic working group was formed. Groups typically started by identifying existing practices, gaps and cases, which were then used to inform and induce changes in practices in the WASH sector. Government and national/ international NGOs work side by side and discuss their experiences regarding a specific issue. A coordinator leads each group and supports in planning, implementation and monitoring members' activities. Depending on the theme and objectives, some groups received dedicated funding from partner organisations and were made directly responsible for implementing activities under cooperative agreements between RAS-HON and other organisations. These groups had often been regarded as temporary mechanisms to deal with hot topics. Once an issue is addressed, the groups are often dissolved.

Over the years the groups have documented good practices, conducted joint research, developed guidelines (e.g., design guidelines for multiple-use services), contributed to policy and plans (e.g., national sanitation plan) and helped build capacity (e.g., training module on transparency and accountability for water technicians)[9].

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8   For more information, see Le Borgne, 2011. Full citation is available in reference list.
9   Read : *Manual de Transparencia, Rendición de Cuentas y Acceso a la Información para Juntas de Agua.*
    http://www.rashon.org/ManueldeTransparenciaULTIMA VERSIONJunio 2011.pdf.

Nepal: Regional resource centres

In 2011 the Department of Water Supply and Sewerage (DWSS) in Nepal allocated funds for a regional WASH resource centre in Surkhet. It was also decided to establish regional WASH resource centres in other administrative regions of the country—a development partly due to the experiences of RCN Nepal in Surkhet.

In 2009 WASH-RCNN started discussions with regional and national government on establishing a regional WASH resource centre in Surkhet. Although the senior DWSS officials in Surkhet were in favour, others were not convinced of the need. Soon after, a cholera epidemic occurred in the mid-west region. National-level actors were unable to guide and coordinate actions at local level because they lacked information and access to the area, and local actors needed better coordination and information exchange mechanisms—both to control the outbreak and prevent future epidemics. National government, together with development partners, therefore took steps towards establishing the regional resource centres. Experiences in Surkhet have also contributed to the Sanitation and Hygiene Master Plan 2011 of Nepal. The master plan requires coordination committee at all administrative levels. Experience in Surkhet showed that regional RCs can help various committees function effectively. Today, WASH-RCNN is well placed to build capacity of regional RCs.

Uganda: Learning from local innovations

In 2009, IRC, together with the RC Uganda, hosted by NETWAS Uganda, assessed information flows in the Ugandan WASH sector[10]. A disconnect of information between district and national level was found by the team. Much of the learning in the districts, including innovative and low-cost solutions, did not extend beyond district borders to reach policy makers at national level.

In response, IRC developed a concept note on national learning[11] and mobilised support for a national learning forum.

In October 2009, NETWAS, UWASNET the umbrella network of NGOs, Uganda Rain Water Association, Water Aid-Uganda, and the Ministry of Water and Environment organised the first National WASH learning forum in 2009, with support from international development partners (NETWAS, 2009). The emergence of regional learning platforms—in addition to the national learning platforms—has been among the many achievements of the 2009 event. Through regional learning platforms, people working in different districts began structurally learning from each other. Commitment to take action and use good practices from other districts has also increased.

The case studies describing good practices were important for creating interest and helping stakeholders contextualise and adapt these good practices. One practice that was picked up and replicated elsewhere was the so-called *Yehora Yeguza* (YY, "Save and Borrow") strategy. During the regional learning session, this approach to saving and borrowing for operation and maintenance of a shared water source was discussed. Now the government is considering how to scale up this initiative in the country.

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10 See Verhaegh, 2009. Full citation is available in reference list.
11 See IRC, 2009b. Full citation is available in reference list.

Conclusions and recommendations

The capacities of the RCNs and their secretariat have grown and networks have expanded. The role and ambition of the RCNs have shifted from providing and sharing information to facilitating processes for sharing and making sense of information. RCN activities have contributed to increased awareness amongst sector stakeholders of the importance of knowledge sharing and learning for improving services. Although each country faces different challenges, the programme has shown that networks and coordinators can learn a lot from others' experience.

RCNs can catalyse joint learning by providing relevant and timely information products that document innovations and the outcomes of sector discussions. They may play an active role in learning and information exchange through facilitation of sector events, supporting action research processes or thematic working groups. Advocacy for knowledge sharing, knowledge management and learning is also often taken up by RCNs.

The ability of the RCNs to stimulate sector learning depends on a range of factors, including the composition of the network, outreach, stage of development and enabling conditions in the sector. Some enabling conditions include:
- Network members feel ownership over the learning process or initiative.
- The network and its contribution to sector learning are recognised by other key players.
- Governmental entity, with a mandate for learning, is on board or has mandated the network.
- The coordinator and secretariat have the capacity to fulfil their roles.
- Financing is stable and reliable.

RCs and their networks have established an added value as providers of information products and services that have helped improve service delivery, as described by these findings:
- Resource centres or networks can deliver tangible products and services that will make a difference in the WASH sector.

- Opportunities to share experience, especially through face-to-face exchanges, are highly appreciated by participants.
- Advocacy, team-building and facilitation skills are essential for maintaining an effective network.
- RCNs have to promote sharing, trust and empowerment to become learning organisations.
- Joint action learning projects, participatory assessments and evaluations, and interactive training courses are effective ways to strengthen capacities with and within RCNs.
- Because donors do not readily allocate funds for RCN development, staff have to develop fund-raising skills and combine their resources to obtain sufficient funding for the long term.

RCNs also have inherent limitations as facilitators of sector learning. Internal challenges aside, they can contribute only so much to sector learning and fill gaps of lacking institutional commitment from sector organisations.

Changes seen in the five participating countries cannot be solely attributed to RCN activities.

The programme highlighted several lessons relating to sector change:
- Change takes time. Evidence of a causal relationship between learning and improved service may appear only after some years.
- Effecting change requires a critical mass of activities, contacts and relationship building.
- Strengthening the capacity of an organisation or network is not a "project" but a long-term institutional mission that requires commitment, skills in knowledge management, dedicated resources in time and money, and individual, organisational and institutional development.
- A window of opportunity can open suddenly and create demand for coordination and learning not previously desired by sector stakeholders. RCNs need to be strategic and seize opportunities when they arise.

Challenges in implementation

Any given context has incentives and disincentives to share and learn, and often constraints on putting the lessons to use. An understanding of the hidden dynamics, power and emotions at work and what triggers the commitment to learning is needed. For example, perceptions that the agenda is being pushed by external players—in this case, IRC—can rob participants of ownership. Several other challenges emerged as well:

- Competition and conflicts of mandate between network host and network members.
- Contested mandate of the network as the facilitator of knowledge management and learning.
- Lack of institutional ownership for learning.
- Lack of institutional commitment to a vision of a learning sector.
- Resource limitations (both human and financial) that make it difficult to link learning activities and processes at different levels of governance.
- Insufficiency of on-going efforts and dedicated resources.
- Uncertainty about continued financial support, which jeopardises continuity of learning.
- Staff turnover in RCN hosts and secretariats.

Recommendations

Learning and innovation are preconditions for better service delivery and more efficient use of funds. In practice, however, learning is often regarded as an add-on and dependent on ad hoc (often external) support. It is important that IRC and the RCNs find collaborators to advocate for sector learning to become an integral part of sector capacity development, and be properly financed at national and decentralised levels.
When national policies and strategies explicitly mention monitoring, learning and capacity building as important areas for sector development, commensurate resources can be allocated.

Government involvement and commitment to learning is critical for moving towards a learning sector. RCNs need to establish partnerships with government at national and decentralised levels. They need to explain the value of learning in a way that is appealing and clear to government staff. Learning interventions that link to or strengthen existing processes and platforms will need to be designed. Learning must be demystified and its link with sector aims clearly articulated, so that it becomes widely recognised as a pivotal concern for all sector stakeholders.

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

An important lesson from this programme is that synergies with other action-learning programmes and an in-country presence are needed to effectively support RCNs in initiating and sustaining sector learning efforts. Facilitators and partners of such networks require some face-to-face contact and knowledge of sector dynamics.

To increase the chances that RCNs achieve their purpose, it is useful to probe deeper into examples of better governance and service delivery, and build a body of evidence on its link with sector learning. Future "impact harvesting" should be planned and budgeted for, to enable added insight into IRC's and RCNs' contributions to capacity building, learning and, ultimately, improved WASH services.

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Other resources

Sector learning and RCNs

IRC webpages dedicated to sector learning: <www.irc.nl/learningforchange>

Weblog: <http://learningforchange.wordpress.com/category/sector-learning/>

Webinar and PowerPoint presentation about contribution of RCNs to sector learning: <http://www.irc.nl/page/73915>

Twitter: #rcn4sl/#RMAWASH/#wash4dev.

Videos and images

RCN coordinators interview in 2011 and 2012 about sector learning in their country:

<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL893F938E027D9EF9>.

Photos related to sector learning with RCNs are on Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/learning4change/>.

The Resource Centre Networks of the PSO Programme

Resource Centre Network Burkina Faso

Le Réseau National des Centres de Ressources du Burkina Faso is the WASH resource centre network in Burkina Faso. It comprises governmental and non-governmental institutions (including research institutes) that are keen to improve knowledge sharing and capitalisation, and systematic learning from experience, with special emphasis on communal management of sanitation services. The RCN made little progress until after 2008, when the network was formally reconstituted with a clear institutional structure and secretariat hosted by Crépa *(Centre Regional pour l´Eau Potable)* Burkina Faso (now called Water and Sanitation for Africa-WSA). IRC supported the RCN between 2008 and 2011 to develop various products and services: a sector website, an inventory of institutional actors, an assessment of information needs of various WASH sector actors and learning about communal management of sanitation services.

www.faseaunouvelles.wordpress.com

Resource Centre Network Ghana

Resource Centre Network Ghana consists of institutions and projects dedicated to improving knowledge management and sector learning in the WASH sector in Ghana. After an advocacy workshop in 2004, it was widely agreed that knowledge management in the WASH sector in Ghana had to be improved. This led to the establishment of a knowledge management task force, with the objective of establishing a network of resource centres in the Ghana WASH sector, which could provide products and services to improve learning and sharing in the sector. In 2008, IRC decided to support this initiative by providing financial resources for the recruitment of a national knowledge management coordinator for the Resource Centre Network secretariat. Since then, Resource Centre Network has been stimulating sector learning through the publication of a sector newsletter, a website, a series of monthly thematic learning and sharing meetings (e.g., with National Level Learning Alliance Platform).

www.washghana.net

Water and Sanitation Network of Honduras

RAS-HON is a network organisation for water and sanitation, and includes representatives of government organisations, funding organisations and civil society. RAS-HON is member of the regional network for water and sanitation in Central America. RAS-HON is committed to promote and facilitate knowledge management, particularly through its resource centre, CHRECIAS. It carries out activities such as research on innovative concepts and themes, advocacy and policy influencing, development and dissemination of information products, provision of information services and training.

RAS-HON was legally established in 2004 and has had a partnership with IRC since 2006. In 2007, IRC started to strengthen the network and its resource centre CHRECIAS. In 2012, RAS-HON and IRC produced a review of activities and lessons learnt. The network has had nine thematic working groups, each focusing on generating knowledge on a specific topic.

www.rashon.org

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene–Resource Centre Network Nepal (WASH-RCNN)

The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene–Resource Centre Network Nepal (WASH-RCNN) was established in 2003 as an informal network and has been transformed into a semi-formal network of national NGOs and international NGOs involved in water and sanitation sector. The network brings together information and knowledge, and has created regular learning and sharing platforms at national and regional levels. With others, such as the Department of Water Supply and Sewerage, UNICEF, WHO, SNV Nepal, the network is working to establish regional WASH resource centres.

WASH-RCNN consolidates information and knowledge and has created regular learning and sharing platforms for sector stakeholders at both centralised and decentralised levels. Through partnerships with media professionals and media fellowships, the network has drawn public and political attention to gaps and challenges in the sector, reaching a wider audience.

IRC has been collaborating with the WASH-RCNN since 2002, building on a partnership with the NGO NEWAH (Nepal Water for Health) which started in 1994. NEWAH initially hosted the secretariat of RCNN. The secretariat has been hosted by the Environmental and Public Health Organisation (ENPHO) since 2009.

www.wash-rcnn.net.np

Uganda WASH Resource Centre

Uganda WASH Resource Centre is a consortium of organisations that have a vested interest in improving information and knowledge generation, facilitating sector learning, documenting change processes and disseminating these to all water and sanitation sector players. Network for Water and Sanitation (NETWAS) Uganda hosts the secretariat. Other members include Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (UWASNET), WaterAid Uganda, the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) and Uganda Rain Water Association (URWA).

The resource centre aims at promoting learning, knowledge management and generating lessons from WASH practices that can inform decision-making processes at different levels. It also promotes the replication and adoption of these practices by other actors in the sector. IRC and SNV have provided guidance and financial support since 2002.

Since 2009, the Uganda WASH RC has organised and facilitated annual National Learning Forums for WASH and Learning Journeys for the National Sanitation Working Group. Uganda WASH Resource Center also produced information materials on marketing sanitation in rural areas and has staged national events with the consortium members, disseminating information throughout Uganda.

www.washuganda.net