

# SECTOR LEARNING

*Anticipating and adapting to change  
for better WASH service delivery*



International Water and Sanitation Centre

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Sector learning seeks to systemise the capture and sharing of experiences in the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) sector and to develop the sector's capacity to reflect on the lessons. It provides a framework at the national level to create, transfer and mobilise knowledge for better service delivery, by enabling the sector to anticipate, respond actively to and influence a rapidly changing environment.

Sector learning implies the desire and capacity to do things together, better and differently, based on an understanding that all stakeholders are knowledge providers and users. Sector learning will increase the capacity of the sector to take ownership of challenges and problems and the process of seeking solutions.

The water, sanitation and hygiene development sector is complex and in a state of change. Actors from national to community level play significant roles and interact in multiple, often unplanned ways. The need to share experiences and knowledge is underlined by two trends – one towards decentralisation, taking greater responsibility at more local levels; the other for greater integration and coordination in the sector.

While actors need to take responsibility for learning, to develop knowledge and capacities within organisations and for inter-institutional cooperation, sector learning goes beyond individual commitment to establish a framework for shared learning and for putting knowledge to use.

'It is necessary to build a warehouse of information and knowledge at the State and district levels which can constantly contribute to bringing the 'hardware' of technologies – conventional/ unconventional/ innovative systems of water supply – and link the same to the "software" of skills, knowledge, enthusiasm and desire for ownership of the water supply projects by the communities and Panchayati Raj Institutions themselves'.

Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission. (2009). National Rural Drinking Water Programme: Movement Towards Ensuring People's Drinking Water Security in Rural India, Framework for Implementation 2008-2012. Government of India.



photo: Peter McIntyre

# WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF SECTOR LEARNING?

Sector learning aims to create a structure to support stakeholders to meet challenges and to adapt to change. In particular, to:

- Improve service delivery by learning from successes and mistakes, making better use of information and knowledge,
- Spread successful innovations and bring them into the mainstream,
- Encourage approaches that respond to felt needs,
- Support sector reforms and decentralisation processes that bring decision making closer to those who need services and stimulate demand-based services,
- Provide a framework to anticipate trends and respond to challenges, such as climate change, urban spread and water scarcity.

Sector learning contributes to better performance by:

- Providing evidence-based learning for policy change,
- Developing and validating harmonised approaches, methodologies and technologies,
- Facilitating the use of knowledge from all stakeholders, including traditional and/or marginalised groups,
- Organising time and space for reflection to draw out lessons from experience,
- Developing capacities for taking innovations (technologies, approaches and practices) to scale, ensuring that research influences practice.

## Community learning can encourage scaling up

Pilot projects are often criticised for never moving beyond the pilot phase. When designed and implemented by external agencies, this is often the case. But if they are planned within city-wide processes involving urban poor organisations, they become centres of experiment and learning that also serve as precedents and catalysts for action elsewhere. Observing the first pilot projects can encourage other urban poor groups to start a savings group, to develop their own survey, to undertake a project – because they see “people like them” designing and implementing them. For instance, in India, both the large-scale government support for the community sanitation blocks in Pune and Mumbai and the community-managed relocation programmes were catalysed by pilot projects developed by urban poor groups showing how this could be done.

From d’Cruz and Satterthwaite (2005). Building homes, changing official approaches. Available at <http://www.sparcindia.org/docs/cddssdipaper.pdf>



*Double loop sector learning for doing things better and differently.*

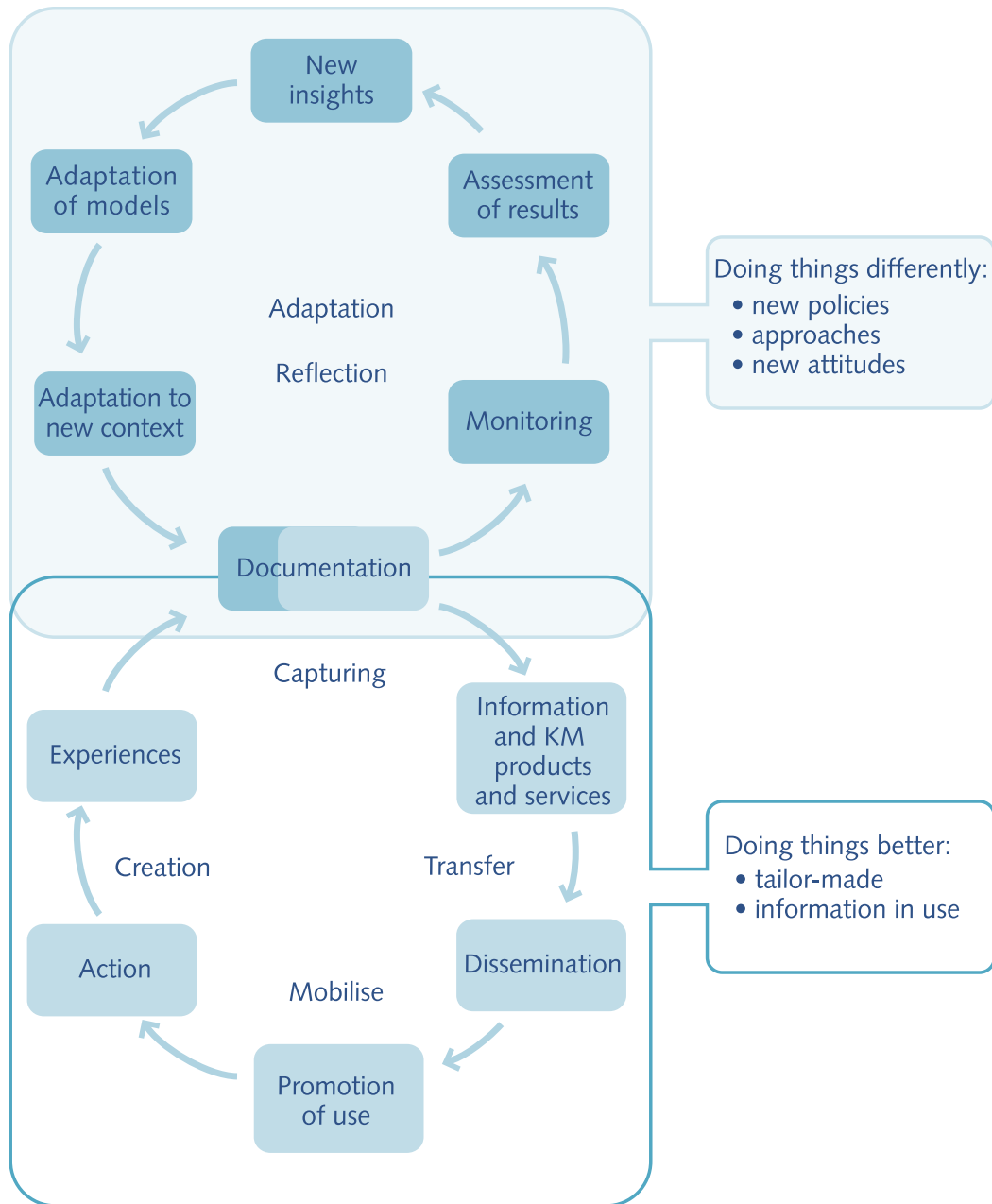


Diagram developed by Erma Uytewaal for the Sector Learning workshop at IRC, 18 November 2008.  
Based on work by Patrick Boel, Netherlands, January 2005

# HOW CAN SECTOR LEARNING BE ORGANISED?

Sector learning encourages sector actors to learn new things and to learn how to do things better. The diagram shows an (idealised) version of this double loop. The top loop may take place in action research, where documentation, monitoring and reflection lead to new insights, technologies or methods of working. The double loop can be used as a guide to organise sector learning; to identify what needs to be done, who takes responsibility and where gaps hinder the process.

- At the junction between the loops, documentation is a critical step in spreading information and broadening the knowledge base.
- In the bottom loop, lessons are disseminated leading to action on a wider scale. These experiences are documented in their turn leading to a new cycle of monitoring and reflection.

Sector learning may start with a number of institutions and organisations with a vision of a sector where:

- A learning framework crosses institutional borders and involves all sector stakeholders, including community-based organisations, local service providers, NGOs, policy makers and regulators,
- Learning takes place at scale with a long-term perspective,
- Learning is owned by the sector, based on a sector vision, using multi-stakeholder platforms.

Ownership by the sector means that learning becomes part of the sector culture, so that:

- There is a strategy for learning that is jointly developed and agreed, and e.g. a national steering group to lead the process,
- The leading governmental sector entity acknowledges the relevance of sector learning and supports its development,
- A facilitator guides the processes of sector learning towards a joint vision,
- Resources are committed by the sector to learning processes,
- Other sector stakeholders acknowledge and respond to this initiative and commit themselves to contribute and participate.

## Integrating learning and knowledge management in Honduras

The Honduran WASH Resource Centre CHRECIAS integrates learning and knowledge management for better WASH sector performance, strengthening capacities and setting up learning alliances where needed. CHRECIAS fills a knowledge gap, sharing insights on the quality and coverage of WASH services with government and civil society partners. Currently, CHRECIAS is focusing on sanitation governance, transparency and the multiple use of water.

This approach is changing outlooks. Operation and Maintenance Technicians (TOMs) had previously been unable to support productive uses of rural water, as water systems did not officially recognise multiple uses (MUS). Then CHRECIAS research showed that small peasant farmers gained high economic benefits when MUS was well regulated. TOMs began to help water committees draft regulations. One TOM commented: “We would see someone irrigating tomatoes, and say he is wasting water. Now, we see the same situation from the perspective of the user, and say he is making good economic use of water.”

IRC (August 2008) <http://www.irc.nl/page/42920>

# HOW DOES SECTOR LEARNING STRENGTHEN THE SECTOR?

Sector learning seeks solutions to problems, weaknesses and challenges, to turn weaknesses into strengths.

- *If information is not relevant to what is needed...*  
Through sector learning, policy makers, professionals, and community groups will agree what information is needed and the means to obtain and present it.
- *If good practice becomes an isolated island of success...*  
Good practice will be documented, and synthesised for its relevance in other settings. Sector learning ensures there is a process for reflecting on lessons and implementing change.
- *If monitoring is formal, too late or underused...*  
Monitoring will become an integrated part of sector development, with timely inputs for policies and practice.
- *If learning has a low status...*  
In a learning environment, sector leaders are dedicated to increasing their knowledge and understanding.
- *If information and knowledge are seen as sources of power which should not be shared...*  
Sector learning helps professionals and organisations understand that sharing information and knowledge strengthens and does not diminish them.
- *If learning is an add-on at organisational or project level...*  
Learning can become embedded in institutions, as a core activity to unite research, policy development, and training.
- *If academic training fails to produce the human resources needed for the sector because it ignores the social components of water and sanitation services...*  
Sector learning helps professionals to learn to work with communities, as well as achieving high technical standards.
- *If capacity development is haphazard or piecemeal...*  
Sector learning promotes capacity development as a process by which individuals, groups, organisations, institutions and societies increase their abilities to perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives.
- *If knowledge is lost when individuals or organisations move on...*  
Sector learning provides a strategic framework for sharing and managing knowledge to accumulate value.

## Reshaping the problem – flood management in Bihar, India

Giving equal weight to the knowledge of the community and the government has allowed the problem of annual flooding in Bihar State, northern India, to be reshaped. The approach adopted by the government to build more and higher embankments was challenged by indigenous NGOs with questions such as how does the flooding affect the community and what strengths exist within the community that can be used to withstand the flooding? As a result, rather than embankments, measures such as boats, raised handpumps, escape roads and Village Development Committees have been adopted. This shift in focus away from knowledge (engineering) products has led to attitude changes; community ownership of the mitigation plan; strengthened local capacities and improved links with government.

Adapted from Crossfire: 'Knowledge sharing should focus on learning culture, rather than the generation of knowledge' by James Webster and Geoff Pearce – Waterlines Volume 27, Number 2, April 2008

# SECTOR DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES REQUIRE A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The effectiveness of WASH interventions requires significant improvement to impact on livelihoods, incomes and health. Failures in water and sanitation are limiting factors on the global agenda to eradicate hunger, reduce child mortality and tackle gender imbalance.

A sector-wide approach (SWAp) is one response to improve the effectiveness of development aid, seeking a shared vision, co-ordinated working and national ownership. However, lessons from these processes need to be learnt and fed into cycles of policy setting, planning, implementation and monitoring. Yet learning is rarely a strategic objective or linked to planning and funding; specialised research centres, universities and think-tanks are usually left out. A sector learning framework will address these gaps to make the SWAp more effective.

The emergence of the SWAp is part of a growing awareness of the complexity of development cooperation. As countries decentralise responsibility for water, sanitation and hygiene to local authorities, a wider range of actors from different sectors play a role in legislation, regulation, service provision, management, operation and maintenance, capacity development and research. They need better communication and information flows to align technical and social systems and to identify needs, allocate resources, set tariffs and monitor services. Sector learning provides the framework to address long-standing challenges such as corruption as well as newer challenges from competition for water and climate change.

Investment is needed, but existing resources are often wasted. The International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) estimates that failure to keep boreholes working in sub-Saharan Africa represents a lost investment of US\$ 215-360 million. Up to 50,000 wells and water points are broken and in some areas 80% of wells are dysfunctional. IIED says that communities need better knowledge sharing about technology, costs and suppliers.

The South African SWAp allocated funding for learning and sharing through the Water Information Network (WIN-SA), the District Water Services Managers Forum, a Water Services Provider Network, and the City Water Managers Forum. Municipalities found these networks among the most useful for lesson learning and for accessing knowledge and information related to the practical challenges of water services delivery.

Adapted from Nils Boesen, Jean de la Harpe and Erma Uytewaal. (August, 2008).  
Water SWAps in Motion: Meeting the Challenges in a Complex Sector. IRC.

# THE WAY FORWARD

*Come and share your knowledge and experiences*

Sector learning is catching the attention of major sector actors at international and national level. An increasing number of governmental and non-government institutions and individuals are using Knowledge Management tools and develop and support resource centres. However, the concept is still not mature and a stronger 'evidence base' of experiences and successful examples of how sector learning can be used is needed. The sector learning workshop in Delft, the Netherlands, hosted by IRC in November 2008 generated momentum and encouraged IRC to:

- Work with existing local partner organisations (networks) in a number of focus countries to collect and assess an evidence base to better understand existing capacity development and sector learning initiatives.
- Provide a platform to document and share good practices and start to build an evidence base for the benefits of sector learning.

**We call on all interested organisations or sector professionals to join this initiative to advocate sector learning.**

For more information please visit [www.irc.nl/sectorlearning](http://www.irc.nl/sectorlearning)

Join us and apply for a membership on <http://groups.google.com/group/washsectorlearning>

or send an e-mail to [sector\\_learning@irc.nl](mailto:sector_learning@irc.nl)



**Rabin Bastola**

RCNN (Resource Centre Network Nepal)

email: [rcnn@wlink.com.np](mailto:rcnn@wlink.com.np)

[www.nepal.watsan.net](http://www.nepal.watsan.net)



**Vanessa Pinto**

CHRECIAS (Centro Hondureño de Recursos de Conocimiento e Información en Agua y Saneamiento)

email: [chrecias@rashon.org](mailto:chrecias@rashon.org)

[www.rashon.org/chrecias.html](http://www.rashon.org/chrecias.html)



**Solomon Kyeyune**

NETWAS Uganda (Network for Water and Sanitation Uganda)

email: [netwasuganda@gmail.com](mailto:netwasuganda@gmail.com)

[www.watsanuganda.watsan.net](http://www.watsanuganda.watsan.net)



**Jules Auguste Sow**

CREPA Burkina (Centre Régional pour l'Eau Potable et l'Assainissement à faible coût)

email: [crepa@fasonet.bf](mailto:crepa@fasonet.bf)

[www.reseaucrepa.org](http://www.reseaucrepa.org)



**Abu Wumbei**

RCN Ghana (Resource Centre Network Ghana)

email: [rcnghana@gmail.com](mailto:rcnghana@gmail.com)

[www.ghana.watsan.net](http://www.ghana.watsan.net)

Published 2010 by IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre,

PO Box 82327, 2508 EH The Hague, the Netherlands.

Tel: +31 (0)70 3044000 | Fax: +31 (0)70 3044044

E-mail: [general@irc.nl](mailto:general@irc.nl) | Website: [www.irc.nl](http://www.irc.nl)

Produced for the IRC by Peter McIntyre, Oxford, UK