

Global Scaling Up Handwashing Project

Emergent Learning About Learning

March 2010

INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include benchmarks related to children's health and sanitation. Government and non-governmental organizations working to meet these goals by 2015 continue to face many challenges. Learning about effective approaches that result in sustainable behavior change in sanitation and hygiene—in particular handwashing with soap—could strengthen efforts and have a positive impact on the well-being of millions of people, especially the poor. In December 2006, the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) launched the Global Scaling Up Handwashing Project to apply innovative promotional approaches to behavior change to generate widespread and sustained improvements in handwashing with soap at scale. Intentional learning is a core activity and lessons learned are a result in and of themselves. Since 2006 we have learned—and continue to learn—about learning.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Intentional learning takes place through iterative cycles of

- Doing
- Reflecting
- Making meaning
- Generating hypotheses of what to do differently
- Planning for the next round of doing

As people reflect together they share different perspectives, experiences, and learning styles. New insights, data, and knowledge can emerge as a result. However, pausing to reflect, capture, and share knowledge is difficult in a fast-paced, implementation-oriented environment (See Box 1).

Another challenge, especially for projects that are being implemented *at scale* and in multiple countries, has been to capture and disseminate learning in a way that is systematic, timely, and of benefit to country teams, clients, partners, and programmers.

Key findings

- Intentional learning requires a culture of learning and a learning strategy.
- Learning should be integrated into the Results Framework, program management, and monitoring systems.
- Effective learning is forward looking. The application of lessons learned and insights gained should be practiced with clear intention.
- Learning is continuous. It happens before, during, and after doing.
- Learning tools such as a Team Charter, Learning Strategy, Learning Action Plan, Emergent Learning Maps, and After-Action Reviews can be used to support emergent learning.

BOX 1: HOW REFLECTION ACTUALLY HAPPENS IN BUSY TEAMS

Finding time to pause to reflect is a challenge. Supportive conditions include:

- A project that has been planned, with preliminary implementation underway
- A catalyst from the outside
- Managers put learning first
- Team members have had exposure to facilitation, participatory approaches, and learning
- Organizational support to develop learning and reflection skills
- A person designated to facilitate reflection, capturing, and sharing—and team members willing to listen
- Learning is an integral part of implementation – of processes put in place, of meeting agendas, of technical assistance, and of collaborative work.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that, while each project is aligned around global learning goals and a global Results Framework, each country has additional, local learning goals, and country-specific Results Frameworks.

ACTION

To foster intentional learning, the project has implemented two strategies: while lessons learned at the end of the program are important and will provide the evidence for success through ongoing studies and an impact evaluation, emergent learning will allow a continuous testing of key assumptions that are underlying the program design and activities. It will also allow other partners to benefit from initial insights, questions, and failures, and allows them to become active learning partners as well as start replication at an early stage.

To coordinate and share learning across multiple countries requires clear roles and responsibilities among the global

team members in terms of contributions to learning in their own country as well as to each other's global learning.

The headquarters team based in Washington, DC (“DC team”) nurtures a learning culture and encourages country-to-country exchanges. Learning is integrated into interactions at appropriate times. For example, technical assistance can include the use of learning tools (such as a Team Charter, Learning Strategy, Emergent Learning Maps, After-Action Reviews), identification of opportunities for learning with partners, revisiting a country's Learning Action Plan, and periodic reflections with local teams on how the learning process is working. The DC team pays attention to gaps in learning and supports country teams as they identify learning actions to bridge these gaps.

Country teams engage in reflection on the learning processes and try new approaches. They undertake learning

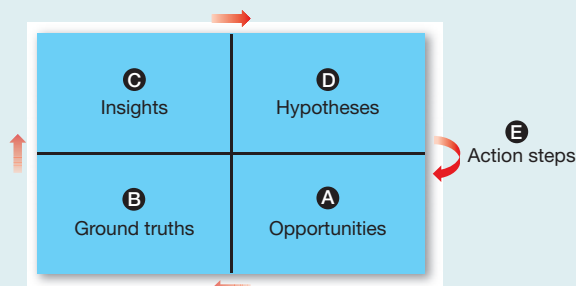
reviews with stakeholders and request and receive technical support to enhance learning and capturing learning. They are responsive to initiatives from DC and global meetings.

To produce timely and effective knowledge products, the DC team continuously tracks learning from country teams to tell a global story and advises country teams on knowledge products. The DC team harvests knowledge, identifies opportunities for knowledge sharing, and develops and disseminates knowledge products. Country teams implement and generate in-country learning and share within their country and with DC. They use learning tools with partners and include stakeholders and partners in their learning. In addition to supporting the goal of learning, these actions support two other project goals: sustainability and replication.

KEY LEARNINGS

Alignment is key. Global team meetings have played a critical role in building relationships and gaining alignment around global results and learning goals. It is important for the team to recognize that all countries and teams need to work together to achieve shared project goals. Learning must be integrated into the results framework, program management, and monitoring and evaluation systems.

Emergent learning is a useful framework. The framework of emergent learning is useful for reflection within teams and as an overall concept to monitor evidence, track learning, and plan new learning activities and opportunities (See Box 2).

BOX 2: EMERGENT LEARNING MAP PROCESS**Key:**

- A** Focus on one or more concrete events that will take place in the near future related to a framing question (*Opportunities*)
- B** Look back at similar, past events (*Ground Truths*)
- C** Reflect on insights gained from past events such as results and reasons for results (*Insights*)
- D** Formulate hypotheses (a shared theory of success) about what can be done to ensure that upcoming events are successful (*Hypotheses*)
- E** Match hypotheses with upcoming events to create robust and testable actions (*Action Steps*).

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Tracking learning is critical. Learning needs to be tracked at both global and country levels. The DC team has divided responsibility for distinct learning goals and tracks progress on these goals to identify gaps, additional study, and new questions.

Systematic knowledge capturing is challenging and happens more readily upon request. Since learning is continuous, it is always taking place, both within the team and with stakeholders. However, it often happens in informal conversations or in meetings where the focus is often on implementation. This learning is not routinely captured. Templates or tracking tools

designed to record evidence and learning can serve as reminders to reflect and capture.

Systematic knowledge sharing is challenging and happens more readily upon request. There are natural ebbs and flows in sharing of learning depending on project activities and the stage a team is in. Capturing and sharing across teams has happened most successfully in response to a concrete event such as a report, conference, presentation, or request from a manager, and there is a direct correlation: when more opportunities to share knowledge are generated, more knowledge sharing can take place.

Accountability and feedback are needed to encourage and sustain efforts.

Collecting, capturing, and sharing stories can be outsourced. While reflection and learning cannot be outsourced, capturing what has been learned and sharing learning in various ways can be outsourced to a consultant. Several teams have taken steps to hire consultants who have the requisite skills and time to help develop knowledge products that can be disseminated.

Capturing and sharing is personality driven. Capturing learning seems to happen more easily through interviewing and in conversations within teams and stakeholders than through individual reflections and writing. Select individuals have a natural tendency to write down their learning and share it. Personality drives capturing and sharing. Some individuals are more comfortable using communication tools such as Web-based virtual platforms, facilitating learning conversations, or maximizing opportunities to partner with others.

Keep at it. Persistence and modeling are keys to focusing attention on learning and making it important. It can be frustrating when there is little up-take of suggestions for learning activities, of sharing across countries, or of posting on the website. And yet, meetings, phone calls, country visits, coaching in learning activities and use of tools, acknowledgement of learners, and opportunities for joint presentations have paid off. When fast-action is the norm, taking time to pause, reflect, capture, and share truly amounts to behavior change, and this takes time.

Gather evidence and stories. Reflecting on the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders and team members is critical for replication. At the same time, learning to implement, sustain, and replicate behavior-change programs at scale requires rigorous research and evidence-based analysis.

WHAT ELSE DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

In the first three years, the Global Scaling Up Handwashing Project has successfully created a culture of learning. Significant learning has taken place at both country and global levels. However, team members find it difficult to take time out and reflect. Activities related to learning such as capturing and documenting learning, developing knowledge products based on learning, and disseminating knowledge products continue to be a challenge.

Reflection, capturing, and sharing needs to take place on a more regular basis

and the question then is: What can be done to facilitate this process? One approach is to build capacity through the dedication of new resources, including consultants and technical assistance, and through new and improved tools. For example, a Web-based virtual learning platform is used more by the DC team than country teams. Moving forward, we need to understand how to improve this platform to increase use so that this is a viable and robust workspace. Currently, each country team and the DC team are working on a global knowledge product roadmap to identify 3-, 6-, and 9-month knowledge product goals. This process will also identify areas of collaboration. In another effort to increase capacity, editorial and design templates for two knowledge products have been developed and disseminated—and more are planned. These templates will streamline the production of knowledge products and create a standard look-and-feel for published works.

—By Christiane Frischmuth

WSP is a multi-donor partnership created in 1978 and administered by the World Bank to support poor people in obtaining affordable, safe, and sustainable access to water and sanitation services. WSP's donors include Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, and the World Bank.

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Related reading

The ideas shared in this Learning Note are explored in greater detail in the Global Scaling Up Handwashing Project's *Global Learning Strategy Working Paper*, available on the project Web site.

About the project

Global Scaling Up Handwashing is a WSP project focused on learning how to apply innovative promotional approaches to behavior change to generate widespread and sustained improvements in handwashing with soap at scale among women of reproductive age (ages 15–49) and primary school-aged children (ages 5–9). The project is being implemented by local and national governments with technical support from WSP. For more information, please visit www.wsp.org/scalinguphandwashing.

Contact us

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