INTRODUCTION

Despite the best efforts of many governments and non-governmental organizations, it will be a challenge to achieve the Millennium Development Goals for sanitation and hygiene by 2015. What else can be done to provide basic sanitation to the estimated 2.5 billion people who live without? Learning about effective approaches that result in sustainable behavior change could strengthen efforts and have a positive impact on the well-being and survival of millions of people. However, even with the best intentions, learning is not a given. It takes courage to admit mistakes, learn from them, improve, and move forward. And to actively learn, it is necessary to create a supportive environment where people are willing to learn and improve.

In December 2006, the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) launched Global Scaling Up Rural Sanitation to learn how to combine the promising approaches of Community-Led Total Sanitation, behavior change communications, and sanitation marketing to generate sanitation demand and strengthen the supply of sanitation products and services at large scale, leading to improved health for people in rural areas. 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, and planning for the next round of doing.

As people reflect together they share different perspectives, experiences, and learning styles. New 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.

This challenge is compounded by the fact that, while each project is aligned around 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
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 and capture learning. They are responsive to initiatives from DC and global meetings. Intentional learning approaches have also been used to support ‘learning exchanges’ with sector partners (see Box 2).

To produce timely and effective knowledge products, the DC team tracks learning 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 three other project goals: sustainability, replication, and turning knowledge into action.

KEY LEARNINGS

Alignment is key. Global team meetings help build relationships and alignment around global results and learning goals. All countries and teams must work together to achieve shared 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 and as an overall concept to monitor evidence, track learning, and plan new learning opportunities (see Box 3).

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

Systematic knowledge capturing is challenging and happens more readily upon request. Learning is continuous within the team and with stakeholders. However, it often happens in informal conversations or in meetings where the focus is often on implementation and learning is not captured. Tracking tools designed to record evidence and learning can facilitate this process.

Systematic knowledge sharing is challenging and happens more readily upon request. There are natural ebbs and flows in project activities. Capturing and sharing across teams has happened most successfully in response to a concrete event such as a report 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 produce knowledge products that can be disseminated.

Capturing and sharing is personality driven. Personality drives capturing and sharing. Some people have a natural tendency to write down their learning and share it; others are more comfortable using Web-based platforms, facilitating learning conversations, or fostering partnerships.

Keep at it. Persistence and modeling are keys to focusing attention on learning and making it important. Meetings, phone calls, country visits, coaching in learning activities and tools, acknowledgement of learners, and opportunities for joint presentations have paid off. When fast action is the norm, taking time to 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 project has successfully created a culture of learning. However, reflection, capturing, and sharing needs to take place on a more regular basis. 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, technical assistance, and improved tools. For example, a Web-based learning platform is used more by the DC team than country teams. 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 three-, six-, and nine-month knowledge product goals and areas of collaboration. To increase capacity, editorial and design templates for knowledge product types have been developed and implemented. These have streamlined production and created a standard look and feel for published works.

BOX 2: LEARNING TO DO MORE AND DO BETTER IN TANZANIA
In July 2010, thirty participants from six organizations met in Tanzania for a learning exchange on scaling up access to sanitation. The format for the exchange included field visits followed by a two-day workshop. To set the stage for intentional learning, the team identified learning goals in advance and embraced a willingness to learn together, share, and build upon findings. These included questions such as, What government policies are most effective for scaling up sanitation? What are the most cost effective approaches to increasing access to sanitation? What are the perceptions of householders with regard to products, motivations, and reasons for building latrines or handwashing with soap? What is the most effective use of subsidies to enable poor families to gain access to a level of sanitation that provides significant health benefits?

Lessons from the field visits and past experience were used to identify six areas where intensive, systematic work is needed to scale up sanitation, along with principles and recommended actions to strengthen each area. Group members identified three topics for and a working group for each topic agreed to do intensive work, with an emphasis on operational outcomes; to bring in wider expertise and resources; and to review progress after six months in order to consider whether further learning and advocacy opportunities were needed, including links to experience in West Africa, and regional sanitation events.

Recognizing that “collectively we can do more and better,” but that more information is needed to align roles to current strengths, the team assessed the strengths and weaknesses of each organization and developed a rationale for working in partnership.

Emergent Learning About Learning

Global Scaling Up Rural Sanitation

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


About the program

Global Scaling Up Rural Sanitation is a WSP program focused on learning how to combine the promising approaches of Community-Led Total Sanitation, behavior change communications, and Sanitation Marketing to generate sanitation demand and strengthen the supply of sanitation products and services at scale, leading to improved health for people in rural areas. It is a large-scale effort to meet the basic sanitation needs of the rural poor who do not currently have access to safe and hygienic sanitation. The project is being implemented by local and national governments with technical support from WSP. For more information, please visit wsp.org/scalingupsanitation.

Contact us

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BOX 3: EMERGENT LEARNING MAP PROCESS

Key:
- **A** Focus on one or more upcoming events 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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