

## INTERVIEW

### **From project-based to institutionalised multi-stakeholder learning in the water sanitation and hygiene sector: experience from Uganda**

*Carmen da Silva Wells and Peter Magara*

Since 2007, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) has worked with Ugandan and international non-governmental organisations and, national and district governments to facilitate multi-stakeholder learning for improved Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Uganda. Action-learning and knowledge sharing processes have been initiated through several projects. In this interview, Carmen da Silva Wells (IRC) and Peter Magara (Triple-S Uganda) discuss challenges around shifting from learning within a project context towards institutional embedding of learning in day-to-day local planning and management of WASH activities.

**Keywords:** water, sanitation and hygiene; multi-stakeholder processes; learning; development projects; Uganda

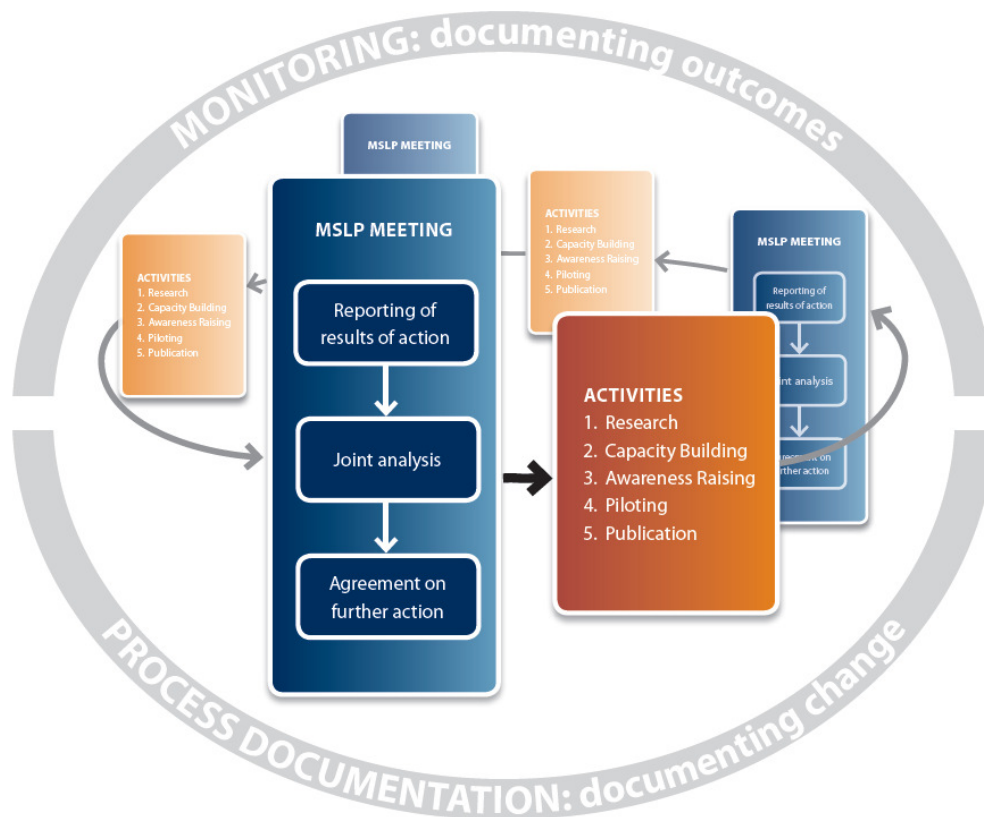
Since 2007, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), Network for Water and Sanitation (NETWAS) Uganda, a Ugandan non-governmental organisation (NGO) and International NGO SNV have collaborated with district local governments to facilitate multi-stakeholder learning for improved Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Uganda. Action-learning and knowledge sharing processes have been initiated mainly at decentralised levels (region, district and sub-county) through several projects. In this article, Carmen da Silva Wells from IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre ([www.irc.nl](http://www.irc.nl)) interviews Peter Magara, coordinator of multi-stakeholder learning for Triple-S (Sustainable Services at Scale, [www.waterservicesthatlast.org/](http://www.waterservicesthatlast.org/)) in Uganda. Triple S is a six-year, multi-country learning initiative to improve water supply to the rural poor. The initiative is placing learning high on the sector agenda as a precondition for sustainable water service delivery.

They discuss the challenge of catalysing a shift from facilitation of learning within a project context towards institutional embedding of learning in day-to-day local planning and management of WASH activities.

*Carmen: IRC and its partners have been working on multi-stakeholder learning in Uganda and advocating for learning in the WASH sector for some time. How has learning been defined in the WASH sector in Uganda?*

**Peter:** We define learning as a process of joint reflection and analysis of systemic problems or promising solutions in order to understand why things are the way they are and to support identification of appropriate solutions to improve policy and practice. We appreciate that systemic problems cannot be addressed by a single actor but require concerted efforts of several actors interacting at different levels in the sector.

The multi-stakeholder learning approach taken in various IRC projects centres around recurrent multi-stakeholder platforms and sector events aimed to strengthen knowledge and information flows between government departments, civil society organizations and communities. These are supported by documentation of good practices relating to different aspects of water and sanitation management in households and schools and of the learning process itself. Collaborative action is supported by action research, capacity building and follow up by facilitators or the project teams in between learning sessions and dedicated learning events support.



**Figure 1: Multi-stakeholder learning platforms (MSLP) and action research process in Uganda**  
 (source: IRC 2012)

**Carmen:** *IRC and Triple S have conceptualised a ‘learning and adaptive sector’ as one of the pillars for providing lasting water services. What are the different functions of facilitation in the multi-stakeholder learning processes?*

**Peter:** The facilitator/ team plays an important role in signalling and documenting good practices, facilitating dialogue, critical reflection and analysis as well as the formulation of action points. Then the learning processes and its events need to be communicated in a timely and simple way. And finally there is follow up between the learning sessions in order to address identified learning needs and interests. Monitoring and capacity building needs to be done to ensure that members of the learning platforms are able to implement planned activities.

**Carmen:** *The Ministry of Water and Environment has requested the Triple-S project to provide evidence for the added value of multi-stakeholder learning and practical suggestions of how learning can be embedded in existing sector platforms and processes. You have started by mapping existing multi-stakeholder platforms, information flows, strengths and weaknesses. What are some of the key findings?*

**Peter:** Various multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) exist at different levels with different objectives. At national level they inform the annual joint Water and Environment sector review. This process is spearheaded by the Ministry of Water and Environment and results in action points, so-called *undertakings* that define priority interventions or issues to address in the financial year. Sector working groups and thematic groups influence policy and provide a space for information sharing and dialogue on specific issues (such as Transparency and Accountability), as well as for sector coordination and resource allocation. Civil society organizations through the Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (UWASNET) also deliberate, share good practices and provide inputs in the joint sector review process.

Inter-district meetings are mainly for providing an interface between the ministry and district local governments for dialogue on policy. Regional learning forums provide an opportunity for knowledge and information sharing among districts with the aim of scaling up successful interventions.

District level MSPs take the form of coordination committee and advocacy meetings. These seek to harmonize and coordinate interventions and provide an interface between technical and political staff in the districts and between government, NGOs and the private sector.

The coordination of multi-stakeholder platforms is strongest at national level. However, most local knowledge and innovations do not feed back into the national level platforms. This is attributed to the weak documentation and information management capacity at the regional level.

**Carmen:** *Embedding learning in the sector would entail strengthening the knowledge and information flows and feedback loops between groups working in the districts and those*

*at national level. That way sector data, innovations and lessons learned can be shared throughout the sector and lead to change in practice and policy. Your research identifies the need for champions, enthusiastic, influential, respected and committed people within the sector institutions, who can advocate for learning and better information flows. Who should champion learning in the sector?*

**Peter:** A champion is a person or institution mandated to coordinate other actors or one with the power to influence the way other actors work using resources they have mobilized themselves. At regional and district level we need champions who show others how multi-stakeholder learning can work and who can support learning processes.

We are trying to reach the District Water Officers (DWO), staff from the Technical Support Units of the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE), UWASNET and other organizations with a knowledge management focus in the sector. We will need several champions working at different levels in the sector.

**Carmen:** *What can be done to bring elements of critical reflection, joint learning into existing platforms?*

**Peter:** We can strengthen what is already there by equipping local champions with appropriate skills on how to organize and facilitate multi-stakeholder interaction and learning, and how to follow up and communicate the results. IRC/Triple-S has developed a set of indicators on how multi-stakeholder platforms should function and is now testing them at district and regional level.

**Carmen:** *Institutionalising joint learning throughout the sector requires strong leadership commitment and financial resources at national and decentralized levels. You argue that a 'Backbone organization'<sup>1</sup> is needed to embed learning institutionally and ensure continuity of human and financial resources. Many people say "the government should take up this role". Is that the case in Uganda? Maybe you can't have only one 'Backbone organization'?*

**Peter:** Yes, this is a challenge; there are so many different processes and groups with a specific focus. Maybe there is not one organization that can do this, but this can be achieved through a coalition of institutions working at district, regional and national level to ensure that all the platforms in the sector are better connected.

**Carmen:** *Learning and action processes take on-going facilitation. But one of the challenges you mentioned is that facilitation isn't very visible; a lot of work is done behind the scenes.*

**Peter:** Yes, this is work that goes into preparation, mobilization, and engagement with actors. It can go unnoticed by the members of the MSPs, but we need to show that it's essential for an effective learning process.

**Carmen:** *What are the signs that sector stakeholders recognize the importance of fostering the capacity of sector professionals to learn, innovate and adapt?*

**Peter:** In many districts handpumps break down or don't function optimally. By 2010, Hand Pump Mechanic associations were been established in five districts with positive results. For example, in Kaabong district the association in partnership with local government had increased the percentage of functional hand pumps from 20% in 2006 to 90% in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Experiences of these associations were shared in multi-stakeholder platforms from district to national level. The Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) now recognizes the associations as support structure for operation and maintenance of water sources and has issued an *undertaking* to improve functionality of rural water sources through the establishment of Hand Pump Mechanic Associations in all districts.

In the Rwenzori region, District Water Officers in five districts have put resources aside to participate in the regional learning forum and district government staff documented innovations that were shared during the forum.

**Carmen:** *These are encouraging steps. Is there also resistance to learning? Where does that come from?*

**Peter:** People see learning more as formal education. Especially at national level, we are asked for evidence about how multi-stakeholder learning adds value, and for practical recommendations how it can fit into existing sector planning and monitoring processes. At district level and regional level, participants in the learning platforms have been positive about the effects of participating in learning platforms and action research.

**Carmen:** *The multi-stakeholder platforms provide an environment for systematic reflection and analysis of opportunities to scale up proven practices. But it's not just about acquiring new knowledge. It's also about changing mindsets and how people work. How has multi-stakeholder learning led to improvements in the sector?*

In Kamwenge district in Western Uganda, there was a savings and credit initiative called *Yehora Yeguza* or 'YY strategy' used to collect fees from water users. The water fees are kept in a credit circle and can be borrowed by users while a proportion is retained for maintenance and repairs of the water source. The initiative started in one village and has been replicated in 30 villages and in two neighbouring districts as well. According to unpublished research by IRC conducted in 2012, water systems with the YY strategy are more reliable than those without and breakdowns were more quickly addressed. This was partly attributed to availability funds that the savings and credit initiative saved for operation and maintenance. In Kabarole, the District Water Officer learned about the savings and credit initiative and plans to include it in the training for water committees.

**Carmen:** *In an initiative called Learning for Practice and Policy in Sanitation and Hygiene (LeaPPS) we found that bringing together a diverse group of people- for example, community mobilisers, engineers, teacher trainers and headmasters- and systematically discussing progress and obstacles can be extremely useful. However,*

*facilitating learning and change requires a well-designed learning process and a skilled facilitator who can create a safe learning environment. Is there a need for capacity building on facilitation of multi-stakeholder learning processes?*

**Peter:** Some capacity has already been built for local NGOs and District Water officers through on job mentoring as a result of the work we have done with local NGOs and district local governments in projects such as LeaPPS and through Triple S. But capacity building is still needed. And we are working on a facilitation toolkit that describes multi-stakeholder learning, proposes indicators on how multi-stakeholder platforms function, and a guide on how to plan for learning processes, facilitate them, follow up and communicate their outputs.

**Carmen:** *In short you propose a combination of capacity building, strengthening feedback loops between various platforms and groups and budgeting and planning for learning. How can we support districts in using the resources that they already have?*

**Peter:** The district coordination platforms bring together actors to share plans, progress reports, and to harmonize implementation. But the key challenge is to get these platforms to encourage learning from practice. We can support districts by mentoring the staff on facilitation using tools and methods that trigger joint reflection, action review and learning. We also plan to produce a guide on how to use the facilitation tools and guidance to help Technical Support Units monitor learning outputs and outcomes of the district platforms.

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## Links

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, <http://www.irc.nl/>

Learning alliances, <http://www.irc.nl/page/14957>

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Learning at decentralized levels in Uganda, <http://www.irc.nl/page/72470>

Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S), <http://www.waterservicesthatlast.org/>

### **About the authors**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/understanding\\_the\\_value\\_of\\_backbone\\_organizations\\_in\\_collective\\_impact\\_1](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/understanding_the_value_of_backbone_organizations_in_collective_impact_1)

<sup>2</sup> MWE 2010 Water and Environment Sector Performance report.