

The Learning Alliance and Resource Centres: a win-win?

René van Lieshout

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, Delft, the Netherlands; Lieshout@irc.nl

Abstract

The objectives of this paper are to explore: (1) what opportunities provide the Learning Alliance (LA) approach for resource centres (RCs) to fulfill more effectively their mission? and, (2) are RCs the right institutions to promote and facilitate LAs, and what capacities do RCs need to be able to play such roles in the LA? This paper will look into how the two concepts and practices can strengthen each other, what opportunities the synergies offer and what may be needed from RCs in terms of capacities and position in the sector to play an active role in the promotion and facilitation of LAs. At the end some questions to be explored further will be raised.

It is assumed that by bringing together the two concepts added value for both can be created. The resource centre can provide an institutional place for the Learning Alliance in the sector, so the experiences and outputs will become part of the sector memory. The RC in turn can strengthen its position by facilitating and/or providing typical information – and knowledge management services for the LA.

Introduction

IRC has started to promote a new approach for bringing innovations in the WATSAN sector to scale: the Learning Alliance. In a broader sense the approach intends to contribute to more effective implementation of national policies by ensuring applicability, flexibility and differentiation by taking into account specific circumstances (physical, social, technical, etc...). Two important elements of this approach: (1) learning and (2) sharing of knowledge, are also key elements of the concept of resource centres since IRC in 1994 started the promotion of these centres in the South. The centres can have many functions and play different roles in the sector, but they have all in common the challenge to contribute to more sustainability in the sector by improving *access* to the right information and knowledge to all and especially to those people who have the responsibility to provide WATSAN services to the poor, even in the most isolated corners of the globe.

The experiences of IRC's ongoing Resource Centre Development (RCD) programme show an emphasis by the RC-initiatives on the following aspects:

- building strong sector partnerships, looking for synergies between the different stakeholders for better sector performance;
- providing access to existing knowledge and information to the different stakeholders;
- advocacy (e.g.: WASH, SSHE, Capacity Development).

These aspects are also important in the concept of the Learning Alliance. An important difference between LAs and RCs, however is that LAs are formed around specific sector issues (often, but not necessarily, structured around projects), whereas RCs are institutions (either single organisations or networks) with a role and responsibility in the sector. A second important difference is that the core (or leading) group of the network of the RC consists mainly of organisations which have in common their role in information and knowledge. LAs per definition are networks of different types of stakeholders, including facilitators, policy makers, implementers and those responsible for governance of water.

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Common ground for RCs and LAs

Resource Centres

Over the past couple of decades, a vast amount has been learned about how to implement effective water and sanitation projects – and how not to. Yet many successful small innovative initiatives are never taken up by the mainstream, and many high-profile schemes continue to be a source of disappointment - grabbing the headlines when new, but soon falling into neglect and disrepair. This is because the lessons we have learned, and new knowledge and experience that is developing all the time, are useless until it is in the hands of the people who carry out the work.

The focus in the RCD programme is on ensuring that all those involved in researching, planning, building, maintaining and using the water and sanitation systems of tomorrow can benefit from the lessons of yesterday and the experiences of those involved in similar projects today. This should lead to systems designed to be functional by the target of 2015 can be relied upon to still be serving their communities in 2035 and beyond. This programme works in long-term partnerships with Southern Resource Centres. This collaboration seeks to develop a network of local organisations at the national or sub-national level that absorb information and experience about water and sanitation and then put it to use.

These resource centres need to:

- connect with professionals and institutions in the sector, from academic environmental research and engineering departments to government ministries, international organisations, technical training colleges, and local government and community organisations;
- understand their programmes - not just their activities, but also their lessons and strategies, which are often invaluable, but rarely documented;
- repackage this information for specific groups of users;
- know what work is needed and what is being done or planned relating to water and sanitation in the locality;
- anticipate the information needs of everyone involved, from the researchers and planners to the end users;
- direct people to where they can find relevant information, support and advice when they need it and in a format they can readily use.

An important assumption underlying the concept of a RC as in use by IRC is that better access to - and the use of information and knowledge by the WATSAN service providers (WATSAN committees, schools for sanitation and hygiene on schools, water companies) will make their interventions more sustainable. This information and knowledge can be found with individuals and organisations that operate on different levels or spheres in the sector. There are support organisations in the fields of capacity building and research. But also government organisations responsible for sector policies, and institutions as media and schools which are working in the cultural sphere. All these organisations are part of the enabling environment of the service providers. The resource centre is also part of this enabling environment but may reckon as its special place and task to improve the connectivity and synergies between these organisations.

From the experiences with resource centres we can roughly describe the mission of a resource centre as:

- to facilitate the *access* to the services of these support levels in the sector for the WATSAN service providers;
- to improve the *performance* of the support levels by facilitating knowledge development and sharing among the stakeholders.

The above concept of a resource centre as used by IRC and its partners builds upon existing institutions and capacities in the national sectors. Since 2002 IRC runs a programme (RCD 18-countries) that promotes and supports initiatives for new resource centres. These initiatives are in most countries led by a small group of people representing sector capacity builders and completed with government agencies and/or international (implementing) NGOs. The role of IRC is to facilitate the growth of these national initiatives in full fledged resource centres, which are well positioned in the sector and have sustainable service delivery and a healthy financial situation.

A last important element to emphasise here is the network aspect of the resource centre. The RC-initiatives that participate in the RCD programme take shape in different forms. They operate as a single organisation, or as a consortium of a small number of organisations, or have formed a looser but larger network of organisations and individuals. This often depends on how the initiative got started, but also from the maturity and position of the initiator or main facilitator. All the initiatives, however, have in common their strong focus on building national partnerships and networks.

Learning Alliances

From the background paper for the LA Symposium ‘Learning Alliances for scaling up innovative approaches in the water and sanitation sector’ the following description of a LA is given:

Learning Alliances are a series of connected stakeholder platforms, created at key institutional levels (typically national, intermediate and local/community) and designed to break down barriers to both horizontal and vertical information sharing and thus to speed up the process of identification, development and uptake of innovation. Each platform is intended to group together a range of partners with complementary capabilities in such areas as implementation, regulation, policy and legislation, research and learning and documentation and dissemination.

The central premise of the Learning Alliance approach is that, by giving as much attention to the processes of innovating and scaling up innovation as is normally given to the subject of the innovation itself, barriers to uptake and replication can be overcome. The Learning Alliance approach has arisen from a sense of frustration over the evident failure of much relevant and effective innovation – technological or institutional – to move beyond the pilot stage.

Common ground

From this definition of the Learning Alliance *approach* and the concept of the Resource Centre, the following common elements can be identified:

1. partnership between sector stakeholders with different roles and responsibilities in the sector;
2. horizontal and vertical knowledge and information sharing and functions related to learning and sharing: documentation, packaging, dissemination;
3. process facilitation and – documentation; and,
4. identification of knowledge gaps leading to (new) knowledge development, capacity development of sector organisations and advocacy for sector issues.

The next paragraph will look into the potential of this common ground for both the concepts and practices.

Mutual Opportunities and Benefits

Partnership between sector stakeholders with different roles and responsibilities in the sector

Resource Centre as (co)facilitator of the Learning Alliance

Building partnerships and maintaining networks are essential for both the LA and the positioning of the RC in the sector. As LAs bring together a wide range of different types of stakeholders, careful facilitation of these LAs is needed. This can be done by organizations that are seen as “neutral” or honest facilitators or brokers of knowledge management processes. This neutral status is equally important for the RC: it will need to have the trust and mandate from the different stakeholders to be able to broker information and knowledge. To be recognized by the sector as a RC, rather than a self-proclaimed status of RC is what the centre needs.

The partnership build for a LA is normally subject-based and often for a limited period. In LAs it is likely that some stakeholders will participate, which are generally not seen as WATSAN sector players, for example the Ministry of Education in a LA on SSHE. This means that the LA and a RC network have not necessarily all the same members, although overlaps will be there. Also resource centres are often organised at the national level only. At the same time, quite a number of the RC-

initiatives do look for ways to reach out to the decentralised levels. Again not all parties that should be included in the LA platforms will be part of the resource centre or its network. This flexibility in who participates in a certain activity is typically for a network: the members participate only if they have a certain interest (responsibility, role) in the subject. In principle this means that the RC-network is a good platform to launch a LA, but it doesn't imply that automatically all partners of the RC-network will participate in the LA, and also that other stakeholders will be included.

The LA as proof of the pudding for the RC

In the process of developing the RC, often a core group for the RC-initiative is formed, which includes a representation of government and non-government stakeholders. In the initial phase this group often struggles with keeping the partnership active and alive. The main reason for this is that the group often lacks a concrete activity that proves to each other the value and the potential of the partnership and the concept of the RC. The creation of a LA around a concrete topic could very well have a catalyst role for the partnership and also proving to the sector the potential added value of a RC. This will contribute to the positioning of the RC in the sector. In cases where the core group of the RC is already more mature, initiating/facilitating a LA remains an excellent opportunity for strengthening the ties between the partners and for positioning of the RC in the sector.

National ownership of the LA

The Learning Alliance in turn may benefit a lot from the experience of the RC core group in bringing the different stakeholders together. Pre-requisites of course are the independency (acceptability) of the RC and that it is well connected to the different stakeholders.

Another aspect is that an important success factor for the LA will be the degree of national ownership of the LA. To have a national stakeholder, like the RC as the (co-)facilitator of the LA may therefore be preferable over international facilitators like IRC, PLAN or other international organisations, which ideally would act as co-facilitators (second tier) only.

Horizontal and vertical information flows in the sector and functions related to learning and sharing: documentation, packaging, dissemination

Providing better access to information is key in the mission of the RC. 'Horizontal information flows' refers to the exchange and accessibility of information and knowledge between stakeholders with relative similar roles, functions and positions in the sector. For example an exchange of methodologies and lessons learned between the different government and non-government programmes. It refers also to the sector professional who looks for information on capable organisations that can provide training to a WATSAN committee on e.g. cost recovery. 'Vertical information flows' refers primarily to the access of decentralised level stakeholders to sector information and knowledge at central levels and also the other way around: to the farmer who informs himself on subsidy modalities and procedures available for the extension of the water supply system in her village and to the policy maker who wants to have access to what happens and is needed on the ground.

There are different mechanisms that can help to facilitate these information flows, to mention a few:

- networks between organisations that have a common interest may improve the horizontal sharing of information and knowledge (meetings, workshops, joint initiatives);
- A website can improve the accessibility of information for all stakeholders;
- Newsletters are an efficient way of disseminating information on new developments, policies, etc...;
- Databases can provide information on sector statistics, sector organisations and persons;
- helpdesks (both virtual and physical, at central or decentralised level) that provide WATSAN service providers efficient support for issues that they have to deal with on the ground;

Also for the LA effective communication between and within its platforms at the different levels are crucial. It will be a key success factor for ensuring ownership of – and working towards the findings of the pilot activities.

The above example listing of information – and communication functions can be seen as part of an information infrastructure, which needs to be developed, maintained and managed. A LA may benefit from the infrastructure that is already developed by the RC and in turn the LA may provide the RC with an opportunity to learn and practice the development, maintenance and management of this information infrastructure.

The biggest advantage of positioning the RC in such functions is that the sector stakeholders will have continued access to the information and knowledge generated during the LA. But also long after the LA has ceased to exist.

It is important to note here the network character of the RC-initiatives, which allows for different roles and functions of the RC in the LA. The agency that has to carry out a certain task, being it the content management of the web-site or being the main facilitator of the LA, primarily will have to be selected because they have the capacity to carry out the task above anything else. Identification of the agencies may have to follow transparent bidding procedures. The network character makes that there doesn't have to be a conflict of interests between the different roles, because they can be carried out by different organisations, which participate in the same RC-network.

Process facilitation and - documentation

The development of both a RC and a LA are processes where different actors aim to reach a common objective, without knowing exactly the way that leads to the objective and what the final outputs will be. To work with a process approach means that all have to deal with more uncertainties, will have to open up towards the partners (which requires trust building) and that the actual benefits of the undertaking are not only the final outputs but are equally the learning's and side-effects that happen during the process.

'Flexibility – learning by doing - the better approach: the pilot was implemented as a "process" rather than a project with a fixed timeframe and set of activities. The pilot developed along the way, with objectives modified and several changes introduced during the pilot period. For instance, the idea to produce a video on the SSH situation in Kenyan schools was introduced during the second Core Group workshop. Video production was not part of the original pilot plan. Another example is the expansion of the pilot area, after joint consultation with members, to include two additional districts. Previously, the pilot was restricted to Nairobi.'(from the RCD Evaluation Workshop Report – Kenya, NETWAS 2005)

The facilitation skills, which get much attention in the RCD programme, may equally benefit the LAs. One aspect of process facilitation is process documentation. In the Learning Alliance Conference background document process documentation is described as in the box below.

Process documentation is about capturing change processes in a way that helps others to understand and adopt them – hence leading to scaling up. Documenting the process (as well as the results) of the action research is critical to scaling up because we need to know how things were done; what worked, but also what didn't? What were the blockages and how were they overcome? Change is often frustrated by political and economic interests, by tradition, by attitudes e.g. by conservatism and resistance. Capturing, or recording, the struggle over interests, resistance and direct or indirect protest is good: for learning, revealing agendas, encouraging struggle and for adaptive management.

Process documentation is an important (but not only) means to build **an institutional memory**, which is a typical RC function in the sector. It has therefore advantages to see if the RC can take up the role of coordinating/facilitating the process documentation in a Learning Alliance.

Identification of knowledge gaps leading to (new) knowledge development, capacity development of sector organisations and advocacy for sector issues.

In the Learning Alliance the capacity development (of stakeholders) concept is based on the principle that the activities are a result of a consultative process with the participating organisations. Based on a

learning-by-doing approach, capacity gaps, training needs and modalities are identified and developed. The capacity development is thus embedded in the process itself.

Resource centres use a similar approach to the strategic issue of capacity development of both the support entities and the service providers, especially in the context of ongoing decentralisation. Not by developing training projects or programmes, but by looking for institutional solutions. An important potential market for the RC is the facilitation of capacity development of the different sector support entities. This can range from the identification of knowledge gaps to new skills belonging to the new roles of sector organisations. The challenge for the RC is to facilitate the development of new training courses but also to lobby for - and provide tailor-made support to local governments (from mayor to engineers and administrators), ministry departments and NGOs. Capacity development includes human resource development but also organisational change. An important role of the RC can be to make the skills and knowledge, *which are already available in the country* accessible to the WATSAN sector.

In the case of the SSHE information pilot in Kenya, carried out by the RC-initiative, the focus was on an information strategy for putting school sanitation and hygiene high on the sector agenda. The pilot therefore had a strong advocacy objective. The next step is now leading to a new approach for SSHE for all stakeholders in the sector with the intention to scale-up school sanitation and hygiene without loss of quality of the interventions. The RC pilot seems to have prepared a good ground for starting a learning alliance. Although in the Kenya case, the LA will be more focussing on scaling-up SSHE, making optimal use of *existing* knowledge in the country than on bringing *new* knowledge to scale. In the discussions for follow-up it was acknowledged that in the new national approach a strong element of learning in adapting generic knowledge to specific circumstances is needed. The RC-initiative group agreed that the LA-framework is interesting to use for the design of the new programme.

Building the practice

It may be clear from the above that there are many functional areas that overlap for the RC and the LA. The challenge for the RC is to use the LA approach for positioning themselves better in the sector. By promoting the LA approach the RC provides a practical way for enhancing the use of innovative practices at a larger scale. It is an opportunity to show and prove to the sector that information and knowledge sharing benefits the sector and thus promoting the RC's *raison d'être* to the sector.

The LA conference in June 2005 in Delft where also a number of RCD partners are participating provides a good occasion to explore how RCs and LAs can find each other in the field. Which ways does the RC have to promote the LA? What capacities will the RC need to be able to fulfill the functions? What role can IRC play in this? But also: how can RCs emerge and evolve from the LA, and what will be needed for that?

From the perspective of the RC it is interesting to look at:

- what type of organisation is most suitable for facilitating a learning alliance? Looking at aspects as: leadership; position in the sector; competencies; services and products;
- what are the typical skills required of the facilitator of the LA?
- what are the knowledge – and information management functions that may need to be carried out in a LA?
- what are the capacities and skills needed to carry out these KM and IM functions successfully?
- what type of partnerships will need to be established in the LA and do they require (specific) paperwork?
- what are strategies for advocating and fundraising for LAs?

A number of papers in this volume looks into more details into these questions.