

## EDITORIAL

### **Learning for the water sector: quenching the thirst for knowledge and bridging the banks?**

This issue of *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* is dedicated to learning, knowledge management and cooperation in the water sector and it has been produced by the team of Guest Editors Ewen Le Borgne, Jaap Pels, Nadia Manning-Thomas and Russell Kerkhoven.

In this special issue, the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) sectors are under the spotlights. During 2009 issues around water have become a priority for both governments and the wider public, as was illustrated by the participation of 30,000 people in the Fifth World Water Forum held in Istanbul in March 2009.

Public attention and pressure around the *blue gold* is rising as the clock is ticking towards the next judgment day in the water sector. In 2015, target 10 of the 17 Millennium Development Goals comes under public scrutiny. Halving the world population without access to water and sanitation is a challenge that already seems compromised, and it says little about a more meaningful objective: sustained access to quality services.

There are plenty of statistics to show that it is a major challenge to provide sustainable access to water and sanitation or to manage water resources equitably in a context of ever-increasing demand.<sup>1</sup> Human beings crucially need water (and sanitation). Learning about the importance of water, learning how to change habits and learning how to collaborate can make a huge difference.

Due to the presence of various actors (policy-makers, regulators, providers, tariff-setters, consumers, capacity development actors), profiles (public, private and civil society) and levels (from grassroots to intermediate, national and international), the water sector is characterised by a significant fragmentation (UNDP and WWAP 2006). To add to the complexity, water is important as a natural resource that relates to a social service (sustained access to water – and sanitation for domestic use) and to a productive factor for economic gain. Fragmentation of the sector puts an enormous strain on the governance of water services, particularly as it goes in parallel with a global movement towards decentralisation of decision-making related to water and sanitation. The circumstances of climate change, economic insecurity and population growth add to this strain.

Nevertheless, there are signs that water sector actors have realised the significance of these challenges and are taking measures to address them. These initiatives follow a dual strategy. On the one hand, there is an increased emphasis on learning at a personal and organisational level; on the other hand, extra emphasis is put on cooperation between various actors, as a better guarantee to reach effective results.

## **Learning**

More and more organisations in the water sectors are realising the importance of learning both at personal and institutional level. Projects funded in the sector pay more attention to learning, as reflected in the titles of projects and networks.<sup>2</sup> At the 5th World Water Forum and at the 34th Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) Conference, both held in 2009, knowledge management featured as a prominent theme. Learning has permeated the water towers.

This renewed emphasis on learning translates into various complementary approaches: more joint visioning based on simple tools such as stories of change; more adaptive planning; and more emphasis on capacity development; more personal learning through communities of practice (beyond one's own institution), a better use of creative knowledge-sharing approaches (world cafés, road shows), and where infrastructure allows, information systems (wikis, blogs, etc). Monitoring is also re-examined as a place of choice to instil more learning: many organisations are going beyond the simple act of reporting as a requirement from their funding agency and are starting to use innovative and more objective forms of reporting as an opportunity to also collect insights that help them to indeed learn and improve their interventions.

## **Cooperation and integration**

On the other hand, the many networks and alliances and the increasing use of multi-stakeholder processes (e.g. learning alliances) or integrated approaches (e.g. sector-wide approaches) seem the way forward against autarchic and autistic tendencies in the water sector. Realising that they cannot reach significant improvements on their own, water actors are engaging in a variety of platforms: communities of practice bringing together peers that examine practical issues together; networks<sup>3</sup> that aim at becoming effective communities of practice or simply to disseminate information to a wider community of interest; partnerships of various sorts (private-public, tri-partite together with civil society) as more promising operating models to implement water and sanitation services; and finally multi-stakeholder processes bringing the promise of more sustainable and better integrated solutions to water challenges.

Regardless of their effective shape, these movements of cooperation and integration share a rationale: to compose a broader picture of water and sanitation challenges and to pool resources (financial and human resources) to address these challenge that require a mix of technical, political and social skills or a harmonised approach in planning, implementing and monitoring.

## **The papers**

This issue will showcase examples of learning, cooperation and generally knowledge management at play among various types of actors.

The paper by Kate Fogelberg ('Looking back to move forward in strength: monitoring of water system sustainability') introduces Water For People's efforts to turn monitoring into a powerful mechanism to encourage sustainability of services through learning. The focus of monitoring here is on the facilities that were installed in the past and on the reasons behind their sustained use or problems causing the lack of (or weak) access to water. The collaboration between Water for People and the World Water Corps' volunteers adds extra capacity and more objectivity. This three-year monitoring experience of Water for People highlights a number of lessons and innovative mechanisms that call for learning, cooperation and looking at the past instead of constantly focusing on new investments.

Jaap Pels examines the case of information management communication, information technology and particularly knowledge sharing in a multi-country project (WASHCost) researching the various types of costs facing sustainable water and sanitation services. After posing some principles of knowledge sharing, the author examines the choices made by the project team to communicate and cooperate across countries and teams. The paper ends by looking back at 18 months of practice: the challenges encountered, solutions tested but also opportunities to use and bear in mind.

Alexandra Evans, Samyuktha Varma and Carmen da Silva Wells shed more light on multi-stakeholder processes by showcasing specifically the attitudes and actions of participants in such processes. Between 2005 and 2008, a project called 'WASPA Asia' established multi-stakeholder platforms in two cities, Kurunegala in Sri Lanka and Rajshahi in Bangladesh, to address wastewater use in agriculture and its impact on farmers' livelihoods. Analysis of the methodology used for the review shows the benefits of regular joint monitoring, open communication, and the usefulness of relatively simple tools such as 'change stories'.

And finally, in 'From world cafés to road shows: using a mix of knowledge sharing approaches to improve wastewater use in urban agriculture' Philip Amoah and his co-authors sketch the processes and results of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) project 'Knowledge sharing in research' in Ghana. This innovative project about wastewater use in agriculture features a selection of creative knowledge sharing approaches that were designed to add value to research and support the overall impact of the project. From world café to multi-media materials, radio programmes and an interesting road show, these activities added extra emphasis on participation, exchange and cooperation between various stakeholders. Consequently the authors positively mention the ownership of the process but raise some questions as to the capacities required to facilitate such processes.

### **The case studies**

Given the often duplication of efforts and lack of knowledge sharing on current initiatives, good practices and lessons learned in the water and sanitation sector, one response has been the development of networks and communities of practice but little is explored or known about what these actually achieve. The paper by Bertha Camacho ('Contributions of knowledge networks and communities of practice to the water and sanitation sector in developing countries') provides some real examples of the role and contributions of networks and communities of practice by examining three case studies from the water and sanitation sector: the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN), the AGUASAN Community of Practice and the Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (UWASNET). The paper highlights four main categories of benefits from these forms of collaboration, supported by examples from three case studies. Through their creation of new knowledge for the sector bringing about involvement of decision-makers, providing opportunities for learning-by-doing and facilitating face-to-face interactions, these initiatives have enhanced collaboration, knowledge sharing and joint action towards more effective efforts for bringing about improvements in the water and sanitation sector.

Abraham Onugba's case study considers on monitoring in Nigeria. 'Challenges of inter-sectoral monitoring of developments in the provision of water and sanitation services in Nigeria' depicts the concerted efforts of governmental and non-governmental organisations to introduce the Water and Sanitation Monitoring Platform (WSMP) and to encourage harmonisation of monitoring requirements, approaches and reporting formats. The WSMP should be channelling all sector data, particularly about water and sanitation coverage, into

one system that connects communities all the way up to federal authorities. However the reality imposes strong leadership, requires more emphasis on participation and depends on excellent coordination. The system is more of a promise than a reality as yet, but it gives a fair picture of priorities in the sector in one of the most populous and challenging countries of Africa.

### **Perspectives**

This issue offers but a sketch of some approaches that are aimed at harnessing the value of learning, knowledge sharing and cooperation in the water sector. Beyond anecdotal ‘best practices’ and creative solutions, these papers show that there are many reasons to believe that the integration of the sector has just begun. The social web – online and offline – might be the first step towards a social wave requiring experts in facilitation of complex processes and multi-layer communication. And finally the pleas from so many sector conferences and events might be heard: let water knowledge flow!

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### **Notes**

1. Recent statistics from the World Health Organisation and UNICEF state that 884 million people are deprived of safe water [http://www.unicef.org/wash/23954\\_wes\\_index.html](http://www.unicef.org/wash/23954_wes_index.html) and a great 2.5 billion do not have access to sanitation facilities [http://www.unicef.org/wash/23954\\_wes\\_index.html](http://www.unicef.org/wash/23954_wes_index.html). 1.4 million children die every year from water-related diseases <http://static.water.org/pdfs/WaterCrisis09.pdf>. On the water resource management side, UNEP expects that human beings will need 40% more water in 20 years than now <http://www.unep.org/wed/2003/keyfacts.htm>.
2. Among projects are: RiPPLE: Research-Inspired Policy and Practice Learning in Ethiopia; LEAPPS: Learning for Practice and Policy on household School Sanitation and hygiene; SLIM: Social Learning for the Integrated Management and sustainable use of water at catchment scale. Among networks are: IW-Learn – International Waters Learning Exchange and Resource Network, Alberta Water Learning Network and a host of learning alliances in various projects.
3. AGUASAN, the Rural Water Supply Network and UWASNET are presented in this issue, but also the Gender and Water Alliance, Water Integrity Network, Streams of Knowledge and various national resource centre networks, knowledge nodes etc.

### **References**

United Nations/World Water Assessment Programme, 2006. Water, a shared responsibility. The United Nations World Water Development Report 2, Section 1, Chapter 2, p. 8. Available from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001444/144409E.pdf>