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Dreams and realities…
Capacity building for networking in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector

Ndala Duma and Peter J. Bury

In this contribution, Ndala and Peter talk about their experiences with capacity building for networking on resource centre development in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. The dialogue was held occasionally using voice Skype, but mostly text Skype, for documentation purposes.

A bit of background: capacity building for networking within the Resource Centre Development programme (RCD)
The Resource Centre Development (RCD) programme is a process-oriented multi-year initiative seeking to develop networks of national level resource centres in the Water Sanitation and Hygiene sector. Under the guidance of the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, about 18 partners in 14 countries are currently involved in RCD processes. The overarching objective of the programme is to offer sector stakeholders better access to - and support better use of - available information and knowledge.

As these RCD processes are in fact learning processes, the RCD programme also promotes learning and sharing through networking among the participating organizations and individuals. Over the years, a wide variety of learning and sharing opportunities have been developed, tested and offered, including:

- Face-to-face meetings
- Trainings
- Joint participation in international sector events
- Junior Professionals exchange programmes
- One-on-one support visits
- Electronic (inter)active learning and sharing, including websites / portal development; email; teleconferences (including tools like Skype); discussion platforms (e.g. Yahoo!Groups and Googlegroups) and extranets.

Chat between Ndala and Peter created on 19 June 2006

Subject: capacity building for networking

Peter: 12:24:49

Ndala, do you feel that the Resource Centre Development (RCD) programme provided any capacity building on networking? If so, what specifically?

Ndala: 12:27:13

Yes, I feel that way, even though that was not done overtly. I can give examples as from when I started in July 2004. What has been outstanding for me is the ability to bring different people together, people who are involved in the process; an example would be the RCD Training of Facilitators (ToF), which took place in November 2004.

Peter: 12:34:05

What type of capacity was built there? Any examples?

Ndala: 12:36:41

Meeting people who are also facilitators of the Resource Centre Development process in their respective countries was useful. We all gave presentations on the RCD process in our own countries. That helped us to understand better what the other people are doing, what their challenges are and how they were trying to overcome them. This was also a chance to share ideas on what was working, in the different Resource Centres, and we learned from each other.

Peter: 12:38:08

Did the networking only take place at the workshop or did it continue afterwards? If yes, with whom did you network and on what?

Ndala: 12:39:47

To be more specific on the type of capacity built, I'd say it was the capacity for us to understand that we were actually running networks in our own countries, no matter how differently the Resource Centres were structured. I think most of it only took place during the workshop, and not afterwards, and it's one of the weaknesses in the Resource Centre Development programme. Do you sometimes also feel that the "people to people" facilitation is driven only by IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, and that bilateral networking is not happening sufficiently?

Peter: 12:45:29

Yes, I also have that feeling. And I wonder if it is very different in other networks. Do you have any idea why there is little or no exchange between Resource Centre Development members (outside IRC)? Is there no need? Do others not offer anything interesting? Is it a technical/communications problem? Is it cultural? Is it a lack of time? Or... something else ;-)

Ndala: 12:48:37

An issue could be resources. Most organisations do not accommodate networking, in terms of time and probably financial resources.

Peter: 12:49:57

So you feel the Water Research Commission (WRC) is not giving you time to do this? Or it doesn't appreciate if you spend time on this?

Ndala: 12:53:54

I think there will be more exchange if people see a common direction, and maybe at the end of these interactions we don't leave with so much of a common purpose or vision, but tend to focus more on our own country processes.

Peter: 12:54:00

Did you ever interact with other Resource Centre Development people outside joint events (like workshops, international events, etc)? Try to speak for yourself: do you see any common direction between what WIN-SA (Water Information Network, South Africa) does and other RCD initiatives elsewhere?

Ndala: 12:55:41

Not on any organised events, but the communication has remained strong with some, and I have shared some documents with other upon request.

Peter: 12:56:08

Sounds interesting: what kind of documents with whom?

Ndala: 12:58:19

The Water Information Network (WIN) Business Plan has been shared on the RCD 18 Yahoo group, and the travel report on the Tanzania workshop.

Peter: 12:59:38

That's true and that was great! But did you ever have bilateral contact with anyone? In Pakistan, in India, elsewhere? With whom would you like to set up this regional collaboration (which region) and what type of collaboration (on what?)?

Ndala: 13:04:17

We have started talking with the Institute of Water and Sanitation Development (IWSD), Zimbabwe, (although they are not part of RCD, but we heard about them through the network). This will be in the Southern African region, and we would like to focus on capacity building for knowledge sharing in the region. It's still tentative for now but talks are going on. In your view, Peter, what are the most effective ways for capacity building for networking in the RCD programme?

Peter: 13:07:54

Well... I'm not sure, probably by showing examples and inviting Resource Centre Development community members to join in. Also, by continuing to encourage RCD community members to experiment with bilateral contacts (outside IRC) on anything related to RCD in-country.

Ndala: 13:09:27

I think the workshops are effective and so is concrete support like setting up web-portals, etc.

Peter: 13:09:30

For example: you read somewhere another RCD member developed a water sector Yellow Pages and would like to get a copy to see how it looks and then if you like the idea, get in touch and talk to them on how they actually developed them.

Ndala: 13:10:15

The thing is I don't read that much about what others are doing.

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Peter: 13:10:28

Ok... workshops: so are you saying that is the best networking way? Is once a year enough? What about the cost aspect of it? Bringing people from all over the world together for a few days in not cheap!

Ndala: 13:11:08

Workshops are the best yes, but they do need to be complemented.

Peter: 13:11:16

Ok... so you don't read, what about talking? Chatting? Workshops to be complemented: how and by what?

Ndala: 13:11:39

I think twice a year would be more useful... thinking about the one I just missed.

Peter: 13:11:47

Twice a year! Who pays???? South Africa is rich, and IRC has bit of money, but many other partners don't!

Ndala: 13:12:53

I talk a lot... and I would probably find it useful, more teleconferences maybe, but then we need those common issues before we dedicate time to such.

Peter: 13:14:14

I agree, so... do you see any interesting common issues? I mean, what issues are you currently interested in? (regarding WIN-SA work of course, not world cup soccer ;-))

Ndala: 13:14:48

Well, resources are an issue, that is why the workshops need to be complemented by sharing of documents and files that is not too cumbersome. We're very interested in documenting: what works and what doesn't work.

Peter: 13:15:30

What are other common issues that interest you?

Ndala: 13:16:10

Common issues to me right now is anyone trying to strengthen regional collaboration in Southern Africa for better knowledge sharing and for capacity building in the Water Sanitation sector. I'm also interested in how people are using portals and how they measure impact of the products and services they offer.

Peter: 13:16:29

So, how important is networking for you in your work?

Ndala: 13:18:49

Networking is very important for my work, because running a network like WIN means working with and interacting with different people on a daily basis. We also work in a vibrant sector with different things happening sometimes all at once and one needs to always keep the

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finger on the pulse… Do you think networking is promoted overtly in the Resource Centre Development programme?

Peter: 13:20:15

Yes, the RCD programme has explicitly tried to promote networking among partners: (1) by bringing them together in workshops and inviting them (not necessarily always all) to international events (2) by setting up a Yahoo!Group / Googlegroup and trying to facilitate exchange by email; (3) by supporting partners in setting up their websites and advertising (probably not enough) all these websites, including IRC's, to all Resource Centre Development partners. The RCD programme explicitly formulated a RCD Learning & Sharing component with specific – but limited – resources allocated to materialise things like regional workshops, training of facilitators, email-discussion groups, producing the RCD practical guides and facilitator notes (available on the RCD extranet to all partners).

Peter: 13:21:02

But what capacities for networking are missing in the RCD programme, do you think?

Ndala: 13:23:30

I think we need a clear map of who's doing what so that we know where to go for different issues that we might want to raise. We also need a quick channel like email instead of a channel that will ask us to log on separately as I find that too time consuming.

Peter: 13:25:35

I think that one weakness is that the programme has not managed to start up real networking among Resource Centre Development partners that are not dependant on involving IRC. So there is little RCD partners to RCD partner (non-IRC) interaction. How could we move away from mainly IRC driven in RCD networking?

Ndala: 13:29:31

The focus should be on building regional collaboration, where we get together as RCs based on common goals and the IRC can partner with us in the realisation of those goals.

Peter: 13:32:50

Do you feel that one-on-one visits are still necessary once a network (and trust among members) is well established?

Ndala: 13:35:05

One-on-one visits are always necessary in a relationship of support, because things always change anyway. The nature of the support also evolves quite a lot. A network partner can't stay away once trust is already established, however the number of visits might decrease, as there is more reliance on email, and other communication channels. What about you, are you finding one-on-one visits useful?

Peter: 13:38:27

One-on-one visits are crucial in terms of deepening the partnership, meeting more people than only the main contact people, and keeping a finger on the pulse of local realities (what is feasible, what not, what are new developments, etc.). In terms of purely networking (understood here as regular exchange of ideas, answers, experiences,

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documents etc.) I feel that once partners know each other and trust each other, face-to-face meetings are not absolutely necessary anymore. I think we should, more than we do up to now, jointly think better and prepare better.

Peter: 13:40:50

So, what is a striking lesson to you in Resource Centre Development?

Ndala: 13:44:14

The most striking lesson is that there is no uniqueness and therefore no formula to do it best, but we all fit in the concept to our different situations and contexts, sometimes it fits like a glove, and sometimes it doesn't, but it's okay because we do what works in our relevant contexts anyway.

Peter: 13:45:14

If you were a magician, what would you do to build more capacity for networking?

Ndala: 13:46:31

It's a good thing I'm not a magician, because it actually doesn't need magic, but a common value adding purpose and then it works out very well! Do you personally think networking needs an element of magic? Do give some ideas on this if you agree.

Peter: 13:47:00

The magic probably lies in the enthusiasm of people and the capacity of transferring that to others, including person-to-person voice contact, so using the phone and Skype more, rather than only email.

About the authors

Peter J. Bury, MSc. Geography is a programme officer at IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre with over twenty years of experience in the field of development cooperation. He worked 15 years in regional rural development and local government capacity building with UN and GTZ GmbH before joining IRC in 1996. Currently his main focus is, within the WASH sector, on local government capacity development within the context of a worldwide long-term resource centre development programme aiming at improved sector knowledge management. He specializes in facilitation of processes promoting learning and sharing. In this context he moderates the RCD Community of Practice network. He is a member of KM4Dev and experiments with Internet based learning and sharing. http://profbury.googlepages.com.
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Ndala Duma is a Programme Manager for the Water Information Network-South Africa (www.win-sa.org.za). She has worked in the development field for 11 years. Her career starting point was in mainstream and adult basic education. This was followed by a highly rewarding career in democracy development. She is currently working in knowledge sharing for local government development in the water

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sector. Her main focus is on the promotion of knowledge sharing for improved local government service delivery. This includes product development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and partnership facilitation and management.

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