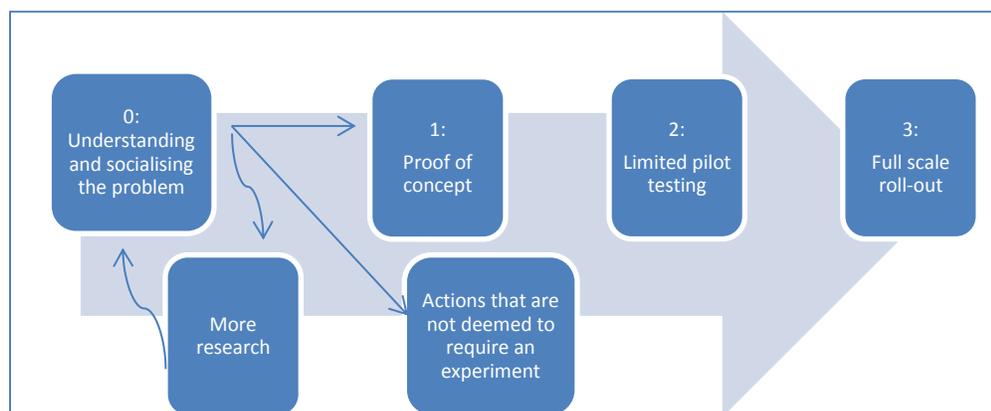# ANALYSING SECTOR LEARNING AND ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

Triple-S has applied strategic partnerships and learning platforms as vehicles for generating and sharing knowledge and for fostering change towards water services that last. A study was done to assess the significance and efficacy of the learning alliance approach in influencing learning and adaptive capacity in the rural water sector in Ghana. Sustainability of existing learning alliance platforms was also assessed. This document describes learning alliance activities and key findings from the study.

THE INNOVATION PROCESS

The Triple-S (Sustainable Services at Scale) initiative has led a process of learning and innovation to improve rural water service delivery in Ghana and Uganda. This document briefly describes one of the innovations with reference to the generic phases in an innovation process:

o **Phase 0: Understanding and 'socialising' the problem**, which leads to a clear articulation of a problem and generates awareness among stakeholders.
o Phase 1: Proof of concept, which leads to detailed articulation of an innovation and consideration of its feasibility.
o Phase 2: Limited piloting, provides evidence on outcomes, impacts and costs of the innovation and the requirements to make it work.
o Phase 3: Full scale roll-out, means application of the innovation (almost) nationwide and for multiple years.
o **'More research' ideas, which can be developed into further research into specific parts of** the problem
o There are also actions that are deemed not to require an experiment, for example because the cost of an experiment would be higher than implementing the innovation.

Figure 1 Innovation process: phases in experiments

BACKGROUND

The central purpose of the Triple-S project is to enhance the learning and adaptive capacity of actors in the rural water sector with the intention of creating a sector that continuously learns, applies proven innovations at scale and adapts to emerging changes.

Triple-S uses action research to investigate the causes of problems underlying the delivery of rural water services and to field-test solutions that could be applied at scale through collaborative learning. Strategic partnerships and learning platforms have been applied as vehicles for generating and sharing knowledge and for fostering change towards water services that last.

Prior to the Triple-S project, a national level learning platform for the WASH sector already existed in Ghana– the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP). The project has strengthened and worked with this platform and initiated actions towards the establishment of regional and district Learning Alliances in the districts where the project has piloted its interventions: East Gonja in the Northern region; Sunyani West in the Brong Ahafo region and Akatsi in the Volta region

PHASE 0: UNDERSTANDING AND 'SOCIALISING' THE PROBLEM

In 2002, a concept note on sector learning was developed as part of the IRC-funded, Resource Centre Development Project. It was shared with sector stakeholders to generate interest in systematic joint learning in the sector. Between 2007 and 2009 the Tripartite Partnership Project (TPP) and WASHCost brought an additional impetus towards developing capacity for sector learning and knowledge management. IRC partnered in the TPP, led by TREND to set up the Resource Centre Network (RCN) secretariat, which reconstituted the RCN core group. IRC also partnered with the RCN to attract funding and technical support from PSO, a Dutch NGO. This initiative gave birth to the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) in October 2009 and the consolidation of RCN as the convener, coordinator and documentation centre for WASH sector learning in Ghana. Experiences with learning alliances at decentralised levels were arguably less well developed.

Prior to Triple-S, national level stakeholders were aware that limited learning and knowledge sharing **was hampering the sector's ability to make optimal use of succe**ssful innovations. They recognised the value of learning platforms for promoting learning based on experience. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of the learning alliance approach was questioned.

PHASE 1: PROOF OF CONCEPT

Triple-S contracted Nkum Associates to assess the significance of the learning alliance approach in influencing learning and adaptive capacity in the rural water sector and the efficacy and sustainability of existing learning alliance platforms. The initial study findings were presented to

the core group in IRC and Triple-S for refinement. The study report was then shared with key sector stakeholders for validation and consensus building.

The study indicated that there have been some clear benefits of learning in the WASH sector and some changes can be linked to sharing on the learning platforms. However, further strengthening of the platforms is needed to ensure that lessons learned are applied to improve the sector. Key findings were:

- o   The dominant type of learning in most of the platforms is sharing field experiences, accompanied by open discussions ("experiencing").
- o   While the platforms also encourage observation, analysis joint research to determine the underlying causes and relative strengths of factors that account for persistent sector trends and patterns, change did not appear to have happened systematically and not as a result of tracking and enforcement.
- o   To ensure that learning alliances and platforms at national and sub-national levels can be sustained in the future, funding mechanisms beyond the current project funding must be explored.

PHASE 2: LIMITED PILOTING

The National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) has convened monthly since October 2009 and is attended by almost all key stakeholders of the sector. NLLAP is regarded as the most open and regular platform where all sector stakeholders (including the private sector) come to learn, share and network. The neutrality and professionalism of RCN promotes this sense of joint ownership among NLLAP participants. Outcomes of NLLAP sessions are documented and made available in various formats. Insights gained are sometimes fed into the annual Mole Conference, organised by CONIWAS, in which RCN serves as a critical and significant partner.

Triple-S, a core member of the RCN continues to provide support to the secretariat, and has shared on the NLLAP platform about five times. Funding for the RCN and NLLAP has been provided by IRC from 2012 to date. This includes the salaries of RCN personnel, and from 2013 onwards funding for office space, stationery and other utilities. Stakeholder groups who present on the learning platforms contribute to the cost of the meetings.

The Ministry of Water Resources Works and Housing has shown increasing interest in the platform and chaired several meetings. The membership of the RCN core group has increased from 13 in 2012 to 17 in 2013. Organisations that hosted national learning events also increased from 20 in 2012, involving about 344 sector practitioners to 31 hosting organisations and over 500 sector practitioners in 2013. RCN has helped design, facilitate and document learning events in major sector events such as the Ghana Water Forum and the NGO Annual conference.

Triple-S project established learning platforms in the Northern, Volta and Brong Ahafo Regions, involving 32 organisations. Core groups have been established for each Regional Level Learning Alliance Platform. Both Sunyani West District and the Akatsi District Assembly identified WASH sector actors and their activities, and each set up a learning platform and core group.

STUDY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Learning alliances and platforms have contributed significantly in enhancing learning, knowledge sharing and dissemination of improved service delivery approaches, standards and guidelines. However, without a mechanism to link the various learning structures links them towards decision making and enforcement of approved standards and guidelines currently results in a disjointed approach. To ensure that insights and knowledge are more systematically deployed to improve service delivery, the study recommends adopting the learning framework depicted in figure 2.
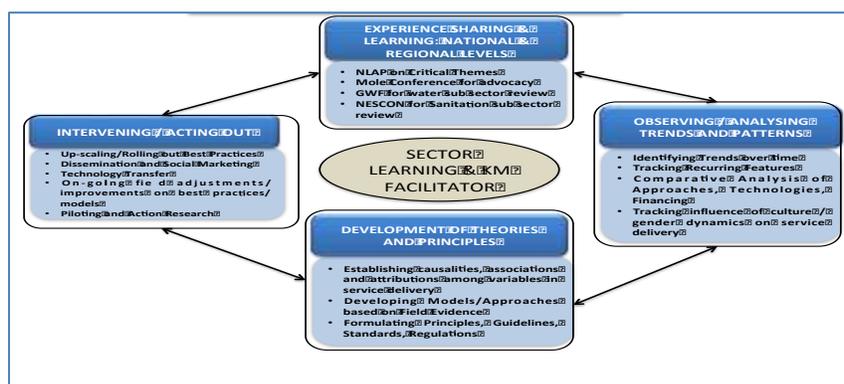
Figure 2 Stages in WASH Ghana Learning Cycle (adapted from D.Kolb) Source: Nkum Associates 2014

To ensure a more continuous and systematic approach to learning, the study recommended that the RCN and NLLAP be formally recognised and operationalised as the facilitator, manager and holder of learning and knowledge management for and on behalf of all stakeholders in the sector. This could legitimise regular allocation of government financial and human resources.

Building on the study findings, the UNICEF- funded Sanitation Knowledge Management Initiative will support the establishment of four additional regional learning alliance platforms, with support from the Environmental Health and Sanitation Directorate, Ministry for Local Government and Rural Development and a consortium led by IRC.

FIND OUT MORE

Analysing sector learning and adaptive capacity

Research report on the Learning Alliance Approach in Ghana

Triple-S Ghana Experiments