

Perspectives on Knowledge Sharing in Research

The knowledge Sharing project of

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Research project: IWMI WASPA project
KS approach: Learning Alliance
Perspective: Implementing partner-COSI (NGO)

On the visit by the Project Leader of the Knowledge Sharing in Research project to the IWMI Wastewater, Agriculture, and Sanitation for Poverty Alleviation (WASPA) project site in Sri Lanka-Kurunegala (LA) to monitor and evaluate the use of the Learning Alliance approach in the project a discussion was held with staff of COSI- the NGO partner working on the project in Sri Lanka.

From COSI I talked to Keerthi, Saman, Ranmeeni, Praba, and Indika-all working on various aspects of the project and had been involved with the WASPA Learning Alliance.

I first asked them whether they had been involved with any project before WASPA that had developed or used a Learning Alliance. For all of them this was the first time they have been exposed to or been involved in the Learning Alliance approach.

"Using the Learning Alliance approach is new" Saman told me, "but it has been very interesting and has provided a lot of new opportunities to us, the stakeholders involved, and the Project overall".

Key benefits of using the approach that were identified by various members of the team were:

- It is a good way to keep stakeholders aware and involved, especially those who would be the appropriate groups for taking over the project or carrying on the type of activities the project has been doing—it can help with sustainability of efforts during the project
- The LA is a combination of the all the **relevant parties for a particular issue** or topic being addressed- e.g wastewater
- This kind of forum helps to create **awareness** amongst various groups of issues and needs, projects and initiatives, and ideas and plans in the area.
- It provides a mechanism for **stakeholders to voice their problems and issues** and ask for help from other members and projects—"usually there is



Saman from COSI at a meeting of the Wilgoda Community, Sri Lanka
Credit: Nadia Manning-Thomas IWMI/ICT-KM, 2008

no chance to tell problems and ideas to relevant groups"

- **Decisions** can be discussed and made together at LA meetings—with greater **buy-in** than the usual top-down approaches. *"All feel that they are contributing"*
- Key problems are highlighted in the LA and discussions can be held about what should be done and whose **responsibility** it is
- Provides an opportunity for **collaboration**
- It facilitates greater **knowledge sharing** in multiple directions
- Provides **ideas for research and action**- *"new ideas emerged from the LA"*
- The LA is a good way to develop innovative ideas and plans
- The LA has created opportunities to bring together groups who usually don't get involved in certain issues

Keerthi gave an example of this saying that *"Agrarian services usually isn't an actor which participates in issues of or projects looking at waste—even though it is something that is affecting*

farmers. But this is a big issue for these farmers. Now through the LA the Agrarian Services are involved in looking at this issue which affects farmers and agriculture in this area.”

- LA provides an opportunity for multiple stakeholders to come together.

“The Learning Alliance is really good. Never before has there been such a platform which allows farmers and the Municipal Commissioner to sit together to discuss joint problems” praised Saman.

The COSI team also expressed that what is also interesting is that side and related issues are also raised and brought to the attention of all others. This can help to inform projects and other processes.

Some **challenges** that they noted were:

- There was an initial problem to bring together all the various stakeholders—this has not been done before
- Some stakeholders were reluctant to join the Learning Alliance as they thought that they would be required to pay or contribute some money to it
- Explaining the Learning Alliance can be difficult both in terms of language and conceptual ideas that the various stakeholders can understand
- It takes a while for stakeholders (and even those running the LA) to really grasp and understand the LA concept
- It takes a lot of effort, time and administrative work to gather all the stakeholders for the general assembly meetings of the LA (all stakeholders).
- There is a problem of continuity of participation in the LA. It is not the same people who attend each meeting—so you often have the problem that those attending have little background on the LA, previous meetings, overall Project and activities.
- The participation of government officials is often quite low
- Concept is new for many people and so they are not always ready to engage with it
- Many groups are busy and have many issues and projects to deal with. This particular issue and project (WASPA) is not their only project and not always their priority.
- Need to have buy-in from top government officials
- Difficult to get individuals participating in LA meetings and activities to share with their organisations

The project has tried to be innovative in making the LA work. One way was through forming a separate core group with 7-8 key stakeholders as members which can meet more often. The representatives in the core group are not top officials so they have time to come to more regular meetings.

This led to an interesting discussion about who should or would be best to participate in the Learning Alliance.

“While you want the authority and influence of those at the top, they are usually too busy to regularly attend meetings or get involved in Learning Alliance activities. But then you don’t want someone too junior only to attend who may have time, but is not able to give feedback to the necessary people in their organisations or have enough authority to make decisions. It is about finding the right people” commented Saman.

I was told by the COSI team that some key successes of the Learning Alliance approach can be seen from the most recent LA meeting, held in early June. In this meeting the innovation in knowledge sharing was that rather than the implementing team presenting information, there were presentations given by three Learning Alliance members:

- Greater Kurunegala Sewerage Treatment project
- Agrarian services
- Municipal Council

“This shows greater buy-in now from LA members.” remarked Keerthi, “It was also very interactive with other LA members asking questions and giving suggestions. We all learned a lot.”

“The LA was a great technique for the project period, but we are not sure what will happen afterwards”. The big question, therefore, is what will happen after the project, and what will have been the impact not only of the overall project itself but of the Learning Alliance too. We discussed various perspectives on sustainability and success of LAs.

One key measure of success of the LA from COSI’s perspective, even if the LA itself does not continue after the end of the project, is whether the various groups who were involved now are more aware of each other and have confidence to go to various members to share their problems and ideas, seek help, share knowledge, and look for collaboration on activities.

“Actions and improvements cannot and should not always have to depend on having intermediary groups like us (COSI) involved. The true test of the value of having introduced and used the LA approach, is whether the relationships forged during the process can continue on their own towards creating the same kind of benefits as during the LA” said Saman.

My final question to the team then was ‘Could the WASPA project be done without the Learning Alliance? The resounding answer from the whole team sitting in front of me was, “Yes, but not with the same results and overall impact”

They all said that the research could have been done on its own but it would not have always been directed at real problems being faced on the ground, would not have linked to direct actions and implementation, and would not have provided the added benefits of greater knowledge, networking and coordination between groups in the sector.

“The Learning Alliance helps to provide the link, to coordinate knowledge being generated to actions to be implemented on the ground. The Learning Alliance brought ownership and buy-in, otherwise it would have been top-down and even if it brought some benefits to the recipients they would not have been engaged in the process like they were through the LA—which we believe has a lot of impact.”