

# 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:** Wilgoda Community

The Wilgoda Community, a community of mainly Tamils working as labourers for the Kurunegala Municipal Council, is one of the members of the Learning Alliance of the IWMI-led Wastewater, Agriculture, and Sanitation for Poverty Alleviation (WASPA) project.

On the M&E visit to the WASPA project in Sri Lanka to evaluate the use of the Learning Alliance approach, the KSinR Project Leader spent an afternoon talking to the Wilgoda Community recently to find out their perspective on the Learning Alliance approach.

The Wilgoda Community was invited to be part of the Learning Alliance which is addressing wastewater agriculture.

Hum?! Doesn't it seem like a strange group to have involved when looking at wastewater agriculture? Well not if we are looking at more holistic management of water, sanitation and the two combined in wastewater- because the Wilgoda community have been contributing to the (mainly organic) pollution of the canal water which reaches the farmers at the end, by using it as a replacement for broken, communal toilets in their community.

Thus the WASPA project realised the need to bring together all the various actors contributing to, making decisions around, and with possibility to do actions etc...but needed a way to facilitate such collaboration, learning and research into action. They chose the Learning Alliance approach to help facilitate this.

So how does the Wilgoda Community feel about the Learning Alliance approach used in this project?

"We really like the WASPA project and also the Learning Alliance" remarked the Wilgoda Community Organisation Chairperson, one of four members of the community to attend LA meetings.

'But why', I pressed, 'has it helped you?'

As a marginalised community in the eyes of the state-run agencies such as the Municipal Council, these people face many more rights issues when it comes to land, housing, water supply and provision of sanitation infrastructure.



Credit: Nadia Manning-Thomas 2008

Before the project there were no proper sanitation (toilet and bathing) facilities. The toilets were leaking and there were no doors. "We were forced to use the canal instead". Before the Learning Alliance approach- "we had no way to tell others about these problems or seek help to address them". What the WASPA project with its LA process has resulted in for them they told me was "we now have had our toilets fixed and replaced and new systems for use, cleaning and maintenance developed. Our water supply has also been improved. We don't have to use the canal any more."

When asked what the larger impact of it all has been, the Chairperson said "the people are much cleaner now. We have better sanitation behaviour now-not everyone yet, but most people."

So I continued to explore what the key aspects of the Learning Alliance had contributed to their improved behaviours and lives.

Some key points raised by them were:

- Before the Learning Alliance they had no avenue for making relationships with groups working in or managing the sanitation (and other) sectors,

especially the Municipal Council. They were scared and didn't feel that they approach groups to help them.

- The Learning Alliance then offered them a chance to be able to meet and discuss with other groups.
- Over time they gained more confidence to speak to other groups, even outside of LA meetings
- At Learning Alliance meetings they felt that they had the opportunity to speak, to share their problems and discuss with others how to solve them.
- They were able to gain help and collaboration in plans to fix their issues, e.g toilets
- Before the LA, a lot of promises were also made but not followed through. The LA, however, made plans and carried them through to actions.
- They could be involved in activities in the LA—so gain a sense of empowerment and pride by being allowed, supported and motivated to plan, manage, and carry out activities.
- They got a lot of knowledge, skills and experience by being involved in the LA.
- While many of their perspectives on the Learning Alliance were positive, they did indicate a few issues:
- They feel that Learning Alliance approach requires an external intermediary such as WASPA project team or COSI to manage the meetings and relationships between groups—marginalised groups could still be marginalised in this setting if it is not managed properly

- How can they continue to have this kind of voice, support and access to relevant groups to help them?

From my own perspective I could see that despite positive results from the project through the Learning Alliance, the larger issues surrounding the marginalisation of these people and the resulting issues could not be resolved by the Learning Alliance.

The question of whether the LA experience has any longer lasting effects comes with two answers from my observations:

1. On the one hand the benefits seen during the project and LA will not continue without these in place. Without the LA intervention run by an intermediary, this kind of coordinated, collaborative activity will not continue
2. However, the process did build a lot of self-confidence and pride amongst the community which will have longer effects on the community taking actions themselves and changing behaviours.

*“The people are keeping the toilets and showers cleaner now. They have even started throwing shampoo packets into a small garbage instead of everywhere. If someone see someone making a mess or littering they tell them off”* the Chairperson proudly told me.



Credit: Nadia Manning-Thomas 2008