

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: Researcher-Alexandra Clemett

During the KSinR Project Leader's visit to the IWMI-led Wastewater, Agriculture and Sanitation for Poverty Alleviation (WASPA) project- a Pilot Project of KSinR, a meeting was held with the Project Leader Alexandra Clemett, an IWMI researcher, to discuss the Learning Alliance approach her project is piloting with support from the ICT-KM Knowledge Sharing in Research Project.

Alexandra shared a lot of her thoughts, ideas, frustrations, lessons, positive feelings, and challenges around using the Learning Alliance approach as a knowledge sharing strategy/mechanism in the research project she is leading.

We discussed two main aspects:

1. The Learning Alliance itself-evaluating it as a strategy for KS, how does it work within the research project, what are some of the successes, what are some of the challenges, what is the value, what has been learned, etc
2. The M&E framework which has been designed and is being used in the two Learning Alliances (Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) to derive lessons about the Learning Alliance approach

On the Learning Alliance itself (point 1), the following were some of the highlights of the interview:

- The Learning Alliance approach has some positives/values and some negatives/challenges.
- It is very time consuming. It takes a lot of personnel, time and energy to run this approach and this costs money and may take resources away from other research activities
- It is an expensive approach to use
- However in trying to create interventions on the ground that bring about impact it is necessary to build relationships, especially with those who can and will carry out actions.
- One has to be patient with the LA approach as you may not see results right away.



Stakeholders at an IWMI WASPA learning alliance meeting.
Credit: IWMI WASPA

- Many times the benefits of the LA approach are intangible, and some are even outside of the project mandate. It is hard to measure them and be accountable for them.

Then we discussed the M&E framework (point 2) that was developed and is being used with the Learning Alliances.

The M&E framework developed for the LA component of the project aims to inform not only the project about the direction, operation and value of the LAs but also to provide others with awareness of the approach and the realities of its use. The content results as well as the developed methodology will both be of use to others.

Alexandra explained that the M&E framework includes three main components:

1. Review of the process (LA) with the project team—using interviews
2. Review with all the stakeholders involved—through a mix of Focus Group Discussions and interviews

3. Exploring if the knowledge coming up in the LA has been shared or outscaled to others and if it being used

At this point they are starting to introduce and use the M&E framework, but later on what will need to be done is an evaluation of what worked from the framework which they finally decided on. Already Alexandra feels that the method is a bit too complicated and so may not be used properly or fully as it is. They will have to wait to see what kind of information comes out of using it.

We then discussed whether the Learning Alliance approach as it is presented/promoted is appropriate for this or other research projects. *“I think it is too much as it is and rather you need to think about what the minimum requirements for a Learning Alliance are or could be—and just use/do these”* remarked Alexandra.

“There is a lot of value in bringing a large numbers of relevant stakeholders together,” Alexandra stated, “but it is not necessary to have ALL stakeholders involved in ALL activities, at ALL times or stages of the project. It just becomes too cumbersome.” She followed this up by saying, *“The focus of energy turns to trying to persuade all stakeholders to come to meetings, rather than focusing on the necessary activities and the key stakeholders you need for a particular activity at that time”.*

“The reality is also that not all stakeholders have the expertise necessary to engage and be useful in certain activities. And the danger is that in coming together with other groups, some people try to pretend that they have the expertise and make a lot of statements and suggestions which are not correct or useful”, stated Alexandra.

The lesson we gain from this is that meetings and activities should be flexible to recognize that not all stakeholders need to be involved in certain activities or even certain meetings.

Alexandra told me that for individual activities she thinks that it would be better to work with the few necessary stakeholders. *“The value of having all stakeholders together comes first at the beginning of the project to identify problems with stakeholders, consult with stakeholders about ideas for how to move forward on these, and engage those who will be willing to collaborate”.* An example of this was the development of Participatory Action Plans (PAPs) to be carried out by the project, through the LA.

“You can come back to the larger group later to then share knowledge that has been generated and to showcase what actions have been accomplished and to once again check with them about next steps.”

Finally the stakeholders should be informed on all project activities and efforts made to see how actions and networks can continue.

“This is a different model for a Learning Alliance—meeting less often, with varied participation in different Learning Alliance activities. This is Learning Alliance-light, I guess” remarked Alexandra.

Key values of the Learning Alliance approach which should be capitalized on include:

- be able to do problem identification with a wide range of stakeholders—helps to improve research questions and methods, making it more appropriate and relevant to the reality on the ground
- **collaborating** with various groups on activities which gives experience, skills and greater buy-in
- place and opportunity to **share research findings** and knowledge with a number of stakeholders
- useful mechanism for getting **research into use**
- on the flip side Alexandra pointed out some challenges to using the approach:
- it is a highly ambitious approach with expectations of innovations coming out of it—while often the real needs can be met with quite basic solutions, but there is pressure to come up with something ‘amazing’
- how to integrate relevant training into the Learning Alliance
- how to measure and show real benefits from the Learning Alliance
- what to do after the project finishes—what does sustainability of the Learning Alliance mean?

I asked Alexandra the same final question as I did with COSI- ‘Could the ‘WASPA’ project have been done without using the Learning Alliance approach?’

Alexandra proposed that without the LA approach, WASPA could have been designed and carried out in two different ways: As a ‘Classic research project’ or a ‘Classic Implementation project’. She described these as extremes on the spectrum to make a point.

The Classic **research** model would have:

- had little buy-in or engagement
- decided on research questions in isolation of others or situation on the ground
- carried out research- generated knowledge
- come up with findings and recommendations
- had little way of getting actions carried out based on research

The Classic **implementation** model would have:

- top-down interventions without engagement of stakeholders
- little other benefits other than actual intervention, e.g empowerment, increased knowledge, skills and experience
- chosen and implemented interventions in isolation to other actors, efforts and issues; perhaps not understanding broader issues and limitations

What the **Learning Alliance** did is to bring these two types of approaches together and find a balance. So you are finding out the problems, discussing it together, carrying out research, sharing the research, deciding on actions, engaging in collaborative efforts, and implementing actions. The Learning Alliance helps to cover the spectrum.