



WORKING PAPER

Building strong WASH systems  
for the SDGs

## How to use learning alliances to achieve systems change at scale

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With the IRC WASH systems series we explore and connect you to the latest thinking around safe water, sanitation and hygiene services that last.

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Building strong WASH systems for the SDGs

# **How to use learning alliances to achieve systems change at scale**

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# Glossary

**action research** an active learning and research process carried out by practitioners supported by researchers in real-world settings. Action research in learning alliances generates knowledge, tests hypotheses and builds evidence for decision making.

**building block** a recognisable, widely recognised sub-system within the larger WASH system whose actors and factors work together to perform a key function. IRC has identified nine such sub-systems (Huston and Moriarty, 2018):

- **institutions:** the structural arrangements that define the roles and responsibilities of different actors
- **policy and legislation:** the defining vision for the sector, and the rules of the game that define how to achieve it
- **finance:** the fuel that makes the entire system run
- **regulation and accountability:** the mechanisms that ensure adherence to the rules of the game and hold service providers to account on behalf of service users
- **monitoring:** the ability to measure progress against plans
- **planning:** the ability to set out pathways to achieving policy goals
- **infrastructure:** the hardware that underpins all services and the ability to develop, maintain and manage it over time
- **water resources management:** the source of all water services and the sink to which waste water is returned
- **learning and adaptation:** the ability to adapt in the face of change: to and maintain progress towards a vision

**theory of change** the underlying logic about how change occurs within a system. A theory of change is a planning tool and is often represented graphically

**WASH system** all the social, technical, institutional, environmental and financial factors, actors, motivations and interactions that influence delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene services in a given context

**wicked problem** a complex, persistent problem whose boundaries, scale and outcomes can be contested or difficult to define

## Executive summary

Learning alliances, guided by change hubs, are a core element in IRC's praxis for strengthening WASH systems. Honed over more than a decade of application in the field, they are our approach to social learning and collective action, which we believe to be essential prerequisites to driving innovation and change in water, sanitation and hygiene service delivery.

This working paper sets out the thinking behind our use of learning alliances, offers practical guidance on how to adopt the approach and build a change hub to support it, and discusses examples from Ghana and Uganda.

The background situates learning alliances within a spectrum of approaches to social learning and collective action. It seeks to explain how viewing WASH as a wicked problem – a complex adaptive space with multiple actors and factors, all of which need to be in alignment for services to be delivered – leads to learning alliances as a practical approach to supporting innovation and change.

Guidance is provided on the composition of learning alliances, on identification of and engagement with stakeholders, and on the roles and required capacities of a change hub. Emphasis is given to the legitimacy of the change hub as a prerequisite for effective leadership and to the role of communication and knowledge management in maintaining the coherence of the learning alliance, feeding the process of learning and preparing the ground for replication. A generic change process, and the role of the learning alliance in promoting it, is described.

Experiences from IRC's use of learning alliances in Ghana and Uganda show how learning alliances work in the field. Effective learning alliances depend on the relationships between people and the skills of those supporting them, particularly in the hub.

Conceptually simple, learning alliances are complex in practice: a constantly evolving networks of actors with different and often competing drivers and needs must be inspired to collective action in pursuit of a common vision.

With the increasing need for learning and adaptation in the WASH sector, the value and importance of learning alliances cannot be understated. After more than a decade of working with stakeholders and supporting these alliances, IRC is convinced of their promise for bringing change that is locally valid, locally owned and, above all, locally sustained.

# 1 Introduction

IRC's vision is of a world in which everyone has access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. This vision underlies Sustainable Development Goal 6: "Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all".

IRC believes that delivering safe and sustainable **WASH services** to everyone requires strong **WASH systems**, nationally and locally. Our mission is to drive the creation of those systems in the districts and countries where we work, and to stimulate their creation everywhere through the sharing of knowledge and practical experience.

IRC's approach is rooted in an evolving, decade-old development praxis<sup>2</sup> that has moved from a focus on the sustainability of WASH services to an understanding of the need to engage fundamentally with the systems of people, funding and infrastructure that provide those services.

## 1.1 OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND AUDIENCE

This working paper introduces our use of learning alliances as an approach to delivering the **collective action** that we believe is fundamental to delivering **strong, resilient local and national WASH systems**. It is the second in a series of papers that present IRC's approach. The first (Huston and Moriarty, 2018) sets out our understanding of systems thinking as it applies to WASH and discusses the nine building blocks (e.g., regulation, planning) that help us understand and tackle the complexities of the WASH system. A third paper (Huston et al., 2019) focuses on measuring the strength of the WASH system and prioritising approaches to its strengthening. Although each paper stands on its own, they are intended as a series.

If the first paper in the series can be seen as introducing the what (the WASH system) of our approach, this paper introduces the *how*: how to drive innovation and change necessary to strengthen the system. It focuses not on the specific technical elements for strengthening individual WASH system building blocks but instead on the transformative change process achieved through learning alliances – an approach to social learning and effective collective action. A paper

published by Agenda for Change (2017) sets out a roadmap for systems strengthening at district level and is a useful companion to the IRC series.

This is not a scholarly piece. Rather, it seeks to share and make accessible IRC's emerging praxis in engaging with the WASH system. The primary audience is WASH sector professionals who are applying or interested in adopting a systems approach in their work.

Chapter 1 provides background on IRC's use of learning alliances. Chapter 2 introduces the concepts of learning alliances and collective action. Chapter 3 presents a conceptual framework for the learning alliance process and theory of change. Chapter 4 outlines the learning alliance process, and Chapter 5, the issues that arise when working with learning alliances. Chapter 6 presents two case studies of learning alliances in practice. And Chapter 7 provides concluding thoughts and recommendations.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND

IRC's approach to WASH systems comes from years of observing the complex challenge of providing sustainable, reliable and adequate WASH services, and more than a decade of experimenting with approaches to engaging with the problems. Over time, we have come to understand that sustainability remains elusive because of a failure to engage with WASH service delivery as a system. Particularly in rural areas, interventions tend to focus on providing infrastructure (which is easy), without considering why the infrastructure either wasn't there in the first place or soon fails to function (Box 1).

We understand WASH systems as *the actors, factors and links* amongst them that deliver a WASH service. In the WASH sector these are often referred to as hardware (e.g., infrastructure, technologies) and software (e.g., behaviours, policies, financing, regulations, learning). For services to be delivered over time, both the soft and the hard aspects of the WASH system need to function and interact effectively. That, in turn, requires that the actors in the system need to agree on, understand and be

<sup>1</sup> A full description of SDG 6 and recent progress can be found at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg6>.

<sup>2</sup> Praxis means action that is informed by theory and theory that is informed by practice. Although not in common use in the WASH sector, the word captures IRC's think-and-do-tank identity. IRC pursues a pragmatic mix of practical learning in the field that is informed by, and in turn informs, our development theory.

capable of fulfilling their roles. Incentives need to align so that the entire system is oriented towards the delivery of the WASH service.

#### BOX 1 PROJECTS, PROGRAMMES AND SYSTEMS

Classic management theory defines project as a time-bound set of activities that produce a specific output or deliverable. Projects occur as something special, outside the normal run of day-to-day activity. Typically, they require a specific alignment of skills and resources, often coming from outside the core business, and are intended to achieve a set end.

In international development, projects often refer to actions carried out by an external agent – an NGO or a donor – whose objective is to deliver something, perhaps a well or a latrine. Both in development and in the usual business sense, project implies a collection of skills and resources focussed on a specific objective over a specific time frame.

The common failure of water and sanitation services is that although projects can create new service delivery infrastructure, they cannot deliver the service itself. Service delivery is what happens outside the project – it is the day-to-day work of operating and maintaining infrastructure and managing the supporting financial and information flows.

Strong WASH systems deliver projects and provide lasting services and have the long-term vision to plan for constructing, repairing, replacing and upgrading the systems' components.

When we talk of a systems approach as opposed to a project approach, we mean it in this sense: development goals can never be achieved by individual projects, however well implemented, if the underlying systems cannot own and sustain the products of those projects.

A service delivery approach looks at what is needed to deliver services: planning, investments, operations, maintenance, regulation and monitoring. It also considers the level of service that users receive and the technology and business models used to deliver that service. We use the term *service delivery model* to describe the agreed-on roles, responsibilities and technologies required to provide a service, recognising that in any given context, a wide range of models and service delivery levels is possible. Service delivery fails when the roles and incentives are not known or not aligned, or when the required people, resources and skills do not exist. Often, the problem is all of the above.

WASH systems need to be context specific, and the service delivery models need to be defined. That does not mean that everything has to be reinvented in every household or community. But in a given country or region, service delivery models must address the needs and means of everyone – from the richest

inhabitants of a wealthy suburb to the poorest and most remote household in the country. The frameworks and behaviours implied by these models must be identified, codified and regulated. The WASH sector's failings, writ large, are due as much to lack of clarity about expectations as to lack of capacity: in short, a systems failure.

Given all the moving parts involved in a WASH system, we believe that the best way to overcome barriers and find solutions is to bring together a cross section of the system's actors in a learning alliance. Our experience, and that of others adopting similar approaches, suggests that the collective action process represented by learning alliances needs support – an entity that maintains momentum and facilitates reflection and learning. Since the 1990s, IRC has gained experience as such a 'change hub', supporting working groups and learning alliances across multiple projects. These projects have led to significant improvements in the systems where they have been applied.

This paper presents IRC's emerging praxis in acting as a hub for learning alliances, together with tentative suggestions for future applications of the approach. As will be emphasised throughout the paper, working with learning alliances is as much art as science, requiring sensitivity, flexibility, trust in other people and openness to change. Any prescriptive framework will inevitably be wrong.

Through this paper we also seek to encourage discussion and debate about how WASH systems in developing countries can be strengthened. We hope we can add to current knowledge and understanding of what learning alliances can achieve while situating our experience in the context of the current state of knowledge.

Despite our confidence in the strengths and potential of this approach, there is no single model or methodology for achieving change in complex systems. We promote the lessons learnt through the learning alliance approach while recognising that other similar processes, and even radically different approaches, have their merits, too. Hence our framework for working with learning alliances (Chapters 3 and 4) is offered as general guidance, allowing space for further development to suit the local context.

## 2 Wicked problems and soft systems

IRC believes that WASH services can be reliable and sustainable only if delivered by strong and resilient national and local **systems** – the networks of people, institutions, hardware and resources necessary to deliver services (Moriarty, 2017). Put another way, the WASH system includes all the actors (people, institutions) and factors (infrastructure, finances, policies, environmental conditions) that affect and drive the system (Huston and Moriarty, 2018) through both formal and informal processes.

### 2.1 A WICKED PROBLEM

The WASH system consists of a dynamic network of many actors working in parallel, constantly acting and reacting to what others are doing (Casella et al., 2015). Its overall objectives are, or should be, clear: to deliver WASH services to people. However, the incentives of individual actors within the system are not necessarily aligned with service delivery. For example, a WASH service may collapse because the infrastructure was poorly installed because the borehole driller's incentives were to be paid as much as possible to provide a borehole whilst minimising costs. Only when the driller's incentives are aligned with the overall result of the whole system – by both positive and negative performance incentives that are actively enforced – will this part of the system function properly. And this is a relatively trivial example. The WASH sector's multiple layers of overlapping, poorly defined and ill-aligned areas of responsibility and competence, its multiple actors and conflicting incentives, create a wicked problem: the issues are hard to define, the challenges are hard to understand, the sector contains multiple perspectives, the problem has no clear optimal solution.

Bringing about change in such environments requires an understanding of the system dynamics. Experiences from around the world suggest that by working together to achieve collective action, stakeholders are more likely to produce results than a single individual, however smart and clever, operating in a command-and-control model (Sutherland et al., 2009). What is more, changes in complex adaptive systems rarely follow a linear or predictable path (Lockwood and Duti, 2015). Agents of change must pursue approaches that are flexible and adaptive: try something, observe the results, then continue or adapt.

### 2.2 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO CHANGE

Collective action, collective impact, soft systems approaches, learning alliances: despite some differences, a common element of approaches to change in complex systems is the engagement of multiple stakeholders towards a common vision. Typically, collective impact and other approaches bring **different** stakeholders from across the system, whereas communities of practice tend not to.

Learning and change in the system are underpinned by the generation of new knowledge through critical investigation and framing and reframing the problems. The recent history of learning alliances in the WASH sector can be traced to earlier projects on integrated water resource management in the Middle East (Moriarty et al., 2005, 2007) and South Africa (Penning de Vries, 2007), as well as urban water cycle projects (Smits et al., 2009).

Approaches based on bringing about system-wide change in a complex system are often called soft systems approaches (as opposed to the 'hard systems' of classic engineering projects). Soft systems approaches are based on the idea that change comes from the evolution of the system as a whole, driven by evolution of the actors and the relationships between them. Such approaches tend to be based on an assumption that at least part of the solution to problems lies with the actors themselves, and that change can be brought about through learning, negotiation and finding of accommodation from within the system, rather than pushed by external agents.

Approaches to systemic change include collective impact (Stachowiak and Case, 2018; Kania and Kramer, 2011), soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1985), systems thinking (Arnold and Wade, 2015), innovation systems approach (Hall et al., 2003), social learning systems, strategic niche management, network theory, strategic alliances, communities of practice (Wenger, 2000, 2010), social learning agents and multi-stakeholder platforms (Faysee, 2006; Warner, 2007). These approaches are being used in systems as diverse as ecosystem management, watershed management, healthcare and education, agriculture and market development. All engage multiple stakeholders with varying views or perspectives, all recognise the complexity of system behaviours and interactions, all promote partnership and

collaboration, and all realise that the outcomes are not known from the beginning. The differences amongst them appear as they applied in the field. In a review of the collective impact approach, Stachowiak and Case (2018) observe that ‘there are many ways to engage in systems change.’ They highlight the importance of recognising that there are always multiple approaches to change, thereby addressing the common mistake of promoting any particular approach as the solution. Initiatives aimed as systems change take different forms and have varying levels of formality.

Perhaps the major difference between social learning and soft-systems change lies in the extent to which they are focussed on improving the knowledge or capacity of individuals versus achieving directed change in the overall system. Communities of practice lie at one end of the scale by explicitly targeting certain actors and seeking to incrementally improve specific aspects of the system. Collective impact (Box 2) lies at the other end of this spectrum; it involves a cross section of actors seeking transformative change for which the specific ideas develop and emerge over time as the collective understanding builds. Learning alliances, as used by IRC, generally focus explicitly on systems change.

#### BOX 2 COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND LEARNING ALLIANCES

The collective impact approach identifies five conditions that can align stakeholders towards achieving change at scale: **a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continual communication and a backbone support organisation.** Together, these elements create the conditions that can bring about change (Kania and Kramer, 2011; Turner et al., 2012). The five conditions resonate with the learning alliance approach, and all five are present in the approach as applied by IRC. For a discussion of IRC’s experiences with learning alliances analysed through a collective impact lens, see Lockwood and Duti (2015).

### 2.3 A HISTORY OF IRC’S APPROACH

IRC has used a learning alliance approach in a range of settings and found it robust for dealing with the complexities of diverse WASH systems and successful in driving deep and lasting change.

IRC adopted the term *learning alliance* in the early years of the century (Smits et al., 2007), during the

Multiple Use Systems project (2004–2007). This project, implemented in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ethiopia, Bolivia, Colombia, India, Nepal and Thailand, used stakeholder platforms to scale up innovations aimed at promoting multiple uses of water. Another early project that used multi-stakeholder platforms was EMPOWERS (2003–2007), which had national-level stakeholder platforms across three countries and one regional platform bringing together all the stakeholders from the different countries. These experiences fed into another project, RIPPLE (2006–2011), whose stakeholder platforms were referred to as ‘learning and practice alliances’.

IRC’s concept of a learning alliance has been fairly flexible in its implementation but always included the following elements:

- A focus on innovation, learning and scale (active experimentation to find solutions to shared problems that were replicable or applicable at scale);
- A multi-level structure (linked platforms at different administrative levels including multiple stakeholders that explicitly addressed the multi-level nature of WASH systems);
- Facilitation, knowledge management and communication (constant facilitation of the learning alliances supporting information sharing, learning and maintaining of a shared vision)

Beginning in 2007, the emerging concept of learning alliances became an approach adopted consistently in IRC projects. IRC has used learning alliances in projects for sanitation<sup>3</sup>, urban water management<sup>4</sup>, the life-cycle cost approach<sup>5</sup> and WASH technologies<sup>6</sup>, and learning alliances have been central to such IRC programmes as the Tripartite Partnership, Sustainable Service at Scale (Triple-S) and, most recently, the Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership. Over the past decade, IRC has implemented more than 29 learning alliance processes and approaches in some 20 countries. IRC recently adopted the term change hub to describe the organisations that support learning alliances. This is a role that IRC often plays, and it is central to our current strategy (Moriarty, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> LEAPPs, 2007–2011; PILS, 2009–2012

<sup>4</sup> SWITCH, 2006–2011

<sup>5</sup> WASHCost, 2008–2011

<sup>6</sup> WASHTech, 2011–2013

## 2.4 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

IRC defines a learning alliance as a series of connected multi-stakeholder platforms, at different institutional levels (national, district, community), seeking innovation at scale in an area of common interest (Smits et al., 2007; Moriarty et al., 2005).

Learning here means social learning, which occurs through interactions of stakeholders. It takes place in a social setting through dialogue and interaction rather than through one-directional flows of information. It is action oriented – learning to do and not just learning about – and the results extend beyond just the individuals involved to generate **change in the system itself**.

In this sense, learning pre-supposes knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and utilisation of knowledge: all must be present. Learning is not complete unless through the act of using knowledge, people undertake action and begin to do something differently. Learning can be observed in multiple ways: the use of knowledge to inform practice (single-loop learning), the use of knowledge to inform our thinking and assumptions (double-loop) or the use of knowledge to fundamentally challenge what it is we are doing (triple-loop). Perhaps most importantly, in IRC’s praxis, we think and talk about learning in active terms that bring with it assumptions about change in behaviour: learning to do as opposed to learning (to think) about.

Figure 1 illustrates the concept of single-, double- and triple-loop learning. An example of single-loop learning might be improving community management by strengthening the supply chain. Questioning the existing model for rural services and then changing from community management to private sector

provision would be double-loop learning. And coming to a new understanding about services – what is being delivered and by whom – and then moving from a system where sub-standard services are the norm towards one in which the local government assures high quality water is available on premises to all households regardless of income, would constitute triple-loop learning.

Lundy and Gottret (2006) describe how true innovation emerges from a complex process that involves interaction amongst stakeholders and requires technical, social and institutional changes. The emphasis is on the process and interactions leading to innovation rather than the product. **A key feature of a learning alliance is the involvement of multiple stakeholders.** Diverse stakeholders form an alliance that could be considered a system that enables innovation. The learning alliance platform provides space for validated representation and communication of different perspectives. The different stakeholders are representative of the system: the alliance represents the different institutions and by extension the complexities in a WASH system. Without a stakeholder engagement process that builds a network to seek consensus on solutions, innovation is unlikely to happen (Smits et al., 2007). The proposition is that through genuine participation and insights from stakeholders representing different perspectives, innovation can be identified, developed and implemented.

Learning alliances seek a genuine exchange of knowledge amongst stakeholders: their participation is not token. The alliance enables stakeholders to work together and jointly learn through **a process of co-creating knowledge and acting on it**. The building of networks is also instrumental in scaling up results from the learning alliance approach. Change will not

### Triple Loop (Transforms)

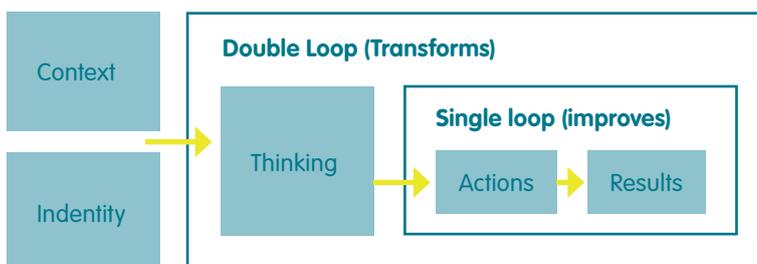


FIGURE 1 LEARNING AS A SYSTEM

happen just because stakeholders are brought together. Rather, participants must make a deliberate effort to develop knowledge that leads to change.

Systems thinking needs three things (Arnold and Wade, 2015): a purpose or goal, defined elements and interconnections. Drawing on earlier work (Moriarty, 2015; Smits et al., 2007), we note that learning alliances meet those criteria:

**Purpose or goal: innovation and scaling up.** The learning alliance goes beyond building capacities of individuals to bringing about change in the larger system. To achieve the agreed-upon goal, innovations are scaled up across multiple institutional levels and across different communities and geographic areas.

**Defined elements: multiple institutional levels, multiple stakeholders, facilitated platforms.** The learning alliance starts with building partnerships amongst stakeholders and giving the process legitimacy. Partners meet to define a common vision. The activities of the alliance are determined by its members and include action research – generating knowledge by testing a hypothesis and building evidence for decision making – that supports learning.

**Interconnections: facilitated space for development of networks and innovation.** The coordination of all stakeholders is a key to the success of an action research process (Moriarty, 2011). The learning alliance platform includes joint meetings for facilitated discussions. Monitoring and process documentation track progress towards the objectives, promoting a common understanding of the issues and supporting communication and dissemination. Facilitation of the entire process by a change hub is critical.

### 3 Learning alliances: Social structure for change

An effective learning alliance changes the mind-set of stakeholders (and the facilitators) and helps them work more effectively together towards a common goal. The change in mind-set emerges when stakeholders who have different perspectives undertake systems diagnosis together, initiate and learn from action research activities and eventually reframe the issues. Gradually and often unevenly, stakeholders come to see their shared interest in addition to their own individual or organisational interests. The learning alliance is structured to encourage the process of change.

This chapter provides basic guidance on creating a learning alliance. Application of the framework and methodologies will differ, depending on the context.

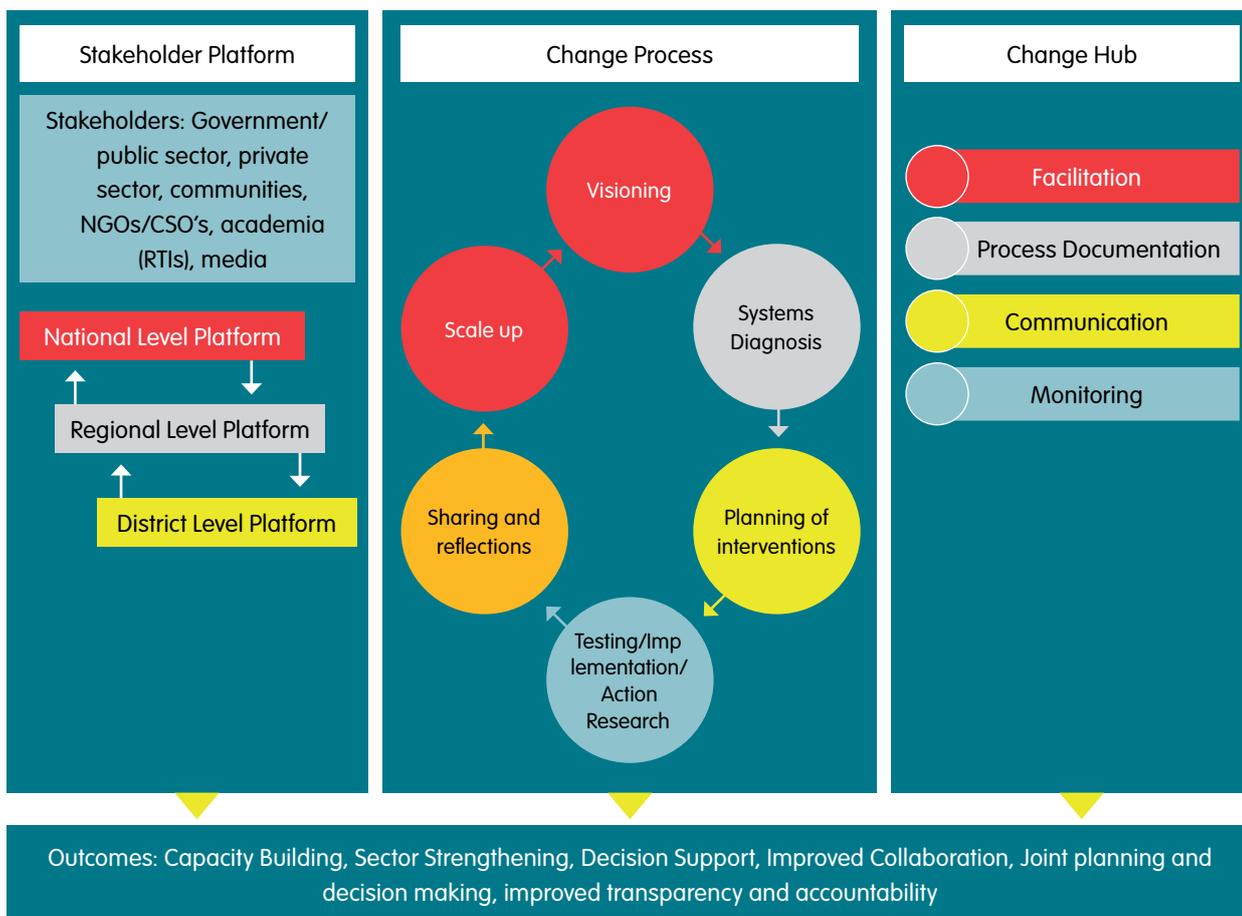
In IRC’s current praxis, a learning alliance has two components. A change hub that catalyses and

coordinates learning and collective action by multiple actors in one or more platforms, where stakeholders work together to achieve a common goal.

Figure 2 shows the main elements of the learning alliance: stakeholders and stakeholder platforms at different levels supported by a change hub and engaged in a shared change process.

#### 3.1 THE CHANGE HUB

The change hub is the structure that initiates, drives and facilitates the change we seek to achieve. It is analogous to the backbone organisation in collective impact (Lockwood and Duti, 2015) and comparable to catalyst, transition manager, change facilitator, collective impact driver and systems leader (Casella et al., 2015).



**FIGURE 2** LEARNING ALLIANCE ELEMENTS  
 CSO = CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION; NGO = NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION; RTI = RESEARCH AND TRAINING INSTITUTION

Senge et al. (2015) suggest that change in complex systems requires leaders who facilitate the conditions within which others can make progress. These 'systems leaders' have three fundamental capabilities:

- seeing the larger system;
- fostering reflection and generative conversations; and
- shifting the collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.

Systems leadership is often dispersed amongst several individuals or organisations and may even be invisible from the outside, but it is a critical function of the change hub.

The change hub also builds the systems leadership capacity of stakeholders – encouraging them to view the system as a whole, promoting reflection and conversation, helping stakeholders find different ways of working, fostering the co-creation of knowledge, providing space for creating a vision, and taking a forward-looking perspective on the issues. The visioning and action research process puts the stakeholders in a position to work differently: they think ahead rather than provide reactionary responses to issues.

In practice, the change process builds on the resources, competencies and capacities of local systems. Although the change hub facilitates the process, the lead and true decision makers are local with, in WASH services, a special role for local government. The change hub may push for change (and must be honest and up-front about doing so), but government and other local stakeholders are the final owners of the process: leading it and setting boundaries, direction and vision.

The change hub facilitates change but is not the owner of the change process or the only group driving change, even though it supports and in some cases leads the process. In practice, the degree of active leadership varies over time. When acting as a change hub, IRC does not enter the process as a purely neutral facilitator but instead comes with a strong commitment to driving change towards universal access to sustainable WASH services. What IRC is not doctrinaire about is how this vision is achieved: IRC has no stake in particular methodologies or mechanisms of service provision. IRC's role as an 'expert' and technical adviser may evolve as the learning process develops, but it remains committed to sharing best global practices for the learning alliance participants to consider and draw on.

To initiate the learning alliance process, the change hub identifies and mobilises stakeholders. It then coordinates communication and learning activities, convenes meetings and facilitates workshops, ensures the participation of all stakeholders (particularly marginalised groups), brokers trust and manages conflict amongst learning alliance members, and understands knowledge management and action research. The hub also brings together the different aspects of WASH – both hard and soft dimensions – for a whole-systems approach. Finally, it facilitates the flow of information and learning within and between platforms in the learning alliance: this facilitation is essential to maintain stakeholders' focus on the overall objectives.

All those functions require diverse skills – too many for one person to master and manage effectively. Hubs are therefore organisations – external support agencies, international or national NGOs with the funding capacity or interest to support a change process – whose staff contribute the different skills needed. To engage and support stakeholders and manage the day-to-day issues and activities, a basic core team usually has a team leader or lead facilitator, a knowledge manager and communications expert, and a technical expert or researcher. Complex learning alliances with more functions may have larger teams representing more disciplines and may call on a pool of experts to offer reflective support. Managing this team of experts becomes another task for the core team.

Experience in Ghana and Uganda (Chapter 6) shows that being an effective change hub is both an art and a science. The science lies in understanding WASH, the political-social-economic context, and the concepts of collective action and social learning. The art lies in guiding the process and the emerging outcomes. The science provides the theory of change; the art sets the pace and sequencing in practice. Although the technical competencies (hard skills) of the hub are critical and required, the soft (people) skills are, in our experience, the more important.

### 3.2 PLATFORMS

WASH services are delivered through the actions of multiple individuals and organisations at different institutional levels (community, district, nation) and geographic scales (catchment, aquifer, basin, region). Moreover, scaling successful innovations identified in a local setting requires policy and regulatory change, typically at the national level, where most such decisions are made and financial resources are allocated.

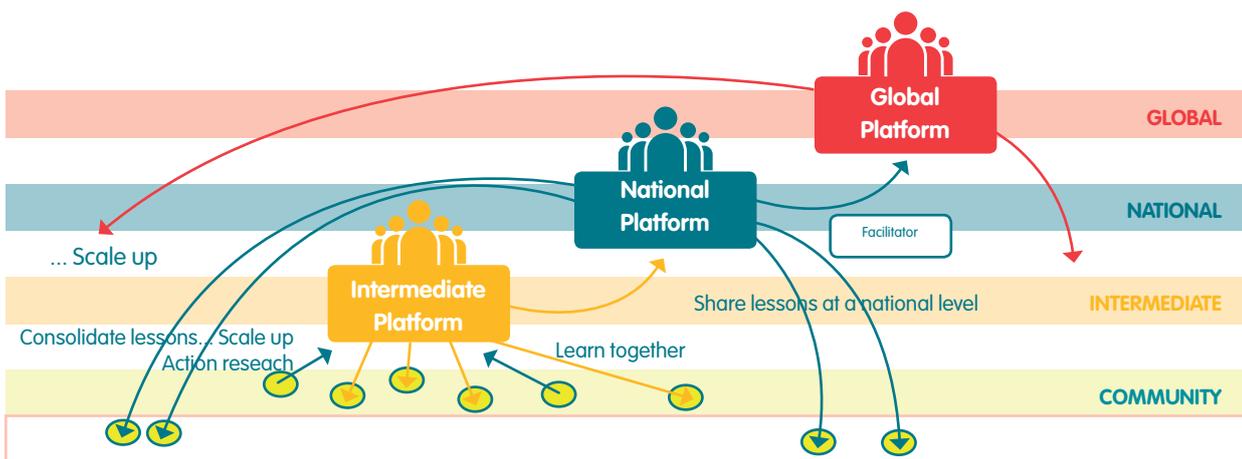
Learning alliances therefore normally consist of multiple platforms at different levels (Figure 3), with the hub ensuring that they are linked and that information flows between them. Depending on the context, goal and stakeholders, a learning alliance may have platforms for the following levels:

- global
- national
- regional
- district or local government
- community
- basin or catchment or aquifer

The change hub needs to consider what kind of learning alliance is being set up, and therefore what platforms to create. In theory, a learning alliance is a network of platforms, but in practice, it often

becomes one platform with different stakeholders participating in different meetings. The key to effective learning alliances is flexibility, underpinned by the principle of inclusivity and representativeness.

At which institutional level should a learning alliance start? It depends. A platform at the level of service delivery allows users to engage directly with those providing the service. Districts are often responsible for the delivery of WASH services – as service authority and sometimes service provider – so platforms at this level create opportunities for service authorities to craft local solutions. A national-level platform allows government leaders to support district- or local-level testing of new approaches by removing policy, regulatory or financial barriers to scale and by granting any necessary permissions to experiment.



**FIGURE 3** LEARNING ALLIANCE PLATFORMS WORKING AT DIFFERENT SCALES, SUPPORTED BY A HUB, FACILITATE LEARNING, SHARING AND SCALING

## 4 The change process

At its heart, the learning alliance approach is a shared process of change. We have emphasised the need for flexibility, adaptiveness and ‘art as much as science’. That said, we can nevertheless identify a broad life-cycle or process timeline that, if understood as being general, can help structure the work of a learning alliance. This cycle represents a continual process of visioning, experimentation, adaptation and learning (Moriarty et al., 2007).

The three broad phases of the learning alliance process are illustrated in Figure 6: initiation, learning and testing, and scaling. The timeline – with ten years allocated for the entire process – is intended to show that results from a learning alliance are not immediate. Lockwood and Duti (2015), writing about the Triple-S project, suggested that the formative stage may take one to two years and the learning and testing stage two to five years; the scaling phase is additional but should be considered from the outset. In their review of collective impact, Stachowiak and Case (2018) suggest that results may appear in four to 24 years. The timeline is therefore not set and will vary by process and country. The critical point here is the staging of the phases and the activities that generally take place within each phase.

As Figure 4 shows, two of the three main phases include additional steps:

- Initiation phase: vision development and systems diagnosis
- Testing phase: identification and testing (through action research) of potential solutions

All the phases and steps are embedded in a cycle of continual learning and feedback, where potential solutions are tested and evaluated and lessons learned are fed back in the cycle – sometimes even altering the original assumptions contained in the visioning and diagnosis. As these processes unfold, the learning alliance may change form, boundaries and sometimes direction. Although the phases are presented as a sequential series, in practice, individual steps can run in parallel, phases can overlap, and what is expected to be a linear process becomes anything but.

For ease of explanation, however, the following sections set forth the learning alliance process as if it were a roadmap.

### 4.1 Phase 1: Initiation – vision and diagnosis

The initiation phase, the start of the learning alliance process, can be divided into a pre-engagement phase, before stakeholders are brought on board, and a subsequent engagement phase. In practice, there are almost always ongoing activities and existing networks and structures that the change hub will build on to start the process.

A first step in the pre-initiation stage is establishing a change hub. As discussed, the hub’s core role is process facilitation: initiating and supporting the change process. Working with the existing situation, the hub considers how to present the initiative, and what issues will engage potential learning alliance members. The partners and hosts of the learning alliance platform are engaged. Scoping exercises – ideally undertaken with at least some potential members – clarify stakeholders’ interests and options and generate buy-in. A baseline or initial diagnosis of the issues can also be carried out at this stage.

Typically, a learning alliance is formed as an intervention to address a given problem or challenge – for example, how to improve sustainability of rural water points, or how to deliver WASH services to everyone in a district by 2030. The change hub

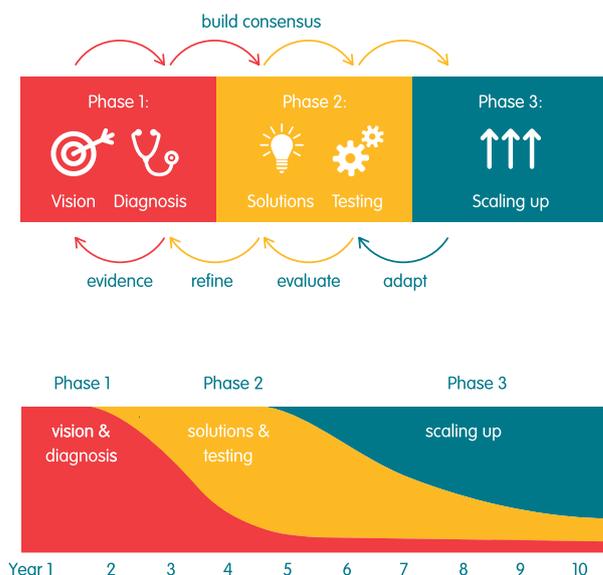


FIGURE 4 PHASES OF CHANGE IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS

identifies the stakeholders in this problem or challenge, brings them into a collective search for solutions and builds trust in the process. Once the learning alliance has been conceptualised in broad terms (a process led by the hub), potential members are typically invited to a stakeholder meeting to discuss and refine the broad terms. If the idea ‘takes’, the learning alliance can be considered to have been formed, and the process properly started.

At this point, the initial systems diagnosis can be expanded to include more detailed stakeholder analysis and institutional mapping. This is often also the moment for undertaking initial visioning and prioritisation of focal areas. Stakeholders jointly identify the goal, challenges and broad areas of intervention to improve the capacity of the system to deliver services. A broad theory of change may be developed to frame these areas of intervention, and stakeholders identify the roles that each can play within them.

At the start of this stage, the vision is yet to be defined and developed, and stakeholders may have limited understanding of the workings of the system. They may still not know each other well, or for historical relations trust may be lacking; they may seek to protect their turf and prioritise individual and institutional goals above the network relationships. Challenges often involve legitimacy, questioning of the vision or problems, and lack of trust and collaboration. The hub guides the network in developing partnerships and building trust through joint discussions. At the conclusion of this stage, the stakeholders should self-identify as a learning alliance (platform), with a shared, system-level diagnosis, a vision, and a plan for initial action.

This formative stage typically spans one to two years.

#### 4.1.1 Vision

A vision can be described as a desired future state. The visioning process is used to develop a **precise and shared description** of what stakeholders want the WASH system and services to look like at some point in the future (Moriarty et al., 2007). The aim of working with stakeholders to develop a vision is to create a shared understanding of the challenges and issues that require interventions. For the learning alliance to undertake concerted action towards a vision, that vision must be shared. It must also be tied into national-level goals and policies: the results of the learning alliance should align with the goals and interests of the existing institutions.

One challenge with developing a vision is getting stakeholders to look beyond current issues. Here the change hub must ask the right questions, provide background information and help participants develop a systems diagnosis or assessment to provide information for decision making (see Section 4.1.2). Another challenge is that stakeholders may develop a wish list or prescriptive solutions. To avoid this, the change hub must help participants distinguish short-, medium- and long-term goals. The long-term goal (‘basic WASH services to all by 2030’) then becomes a framework within which short- and medium-term challenges can be articulated (‘understand who is unserved and what are the barriers to serving them’; ‘drill five new boreholes next year’).

#### 4.1.2 Diagnosis

Diagnosis highlights the WASH system’s issues and challenges. This requires accurate, robust data for informed decision making about interventions and action research. It may include expert-led analyses of the system or sub-systems as well as emergent understanding from social learning and active enquiry. In the SWITCH project in Accra, for example, the inadequacy of information to support the visioning exercise led to the development of a ‘resource, infrastructure, demand and access map’ (Adank et al., 2011). This document explained the issues with Accra’s urban water system and helped stakeholders navigate the visioning and scenario-planning process. Other tools, such as modelling and institutional analysis, are also useful for systems diagnosis. Research institutions that are part of the learning alliance may help with data collection and analysis to ensure rigor and quality.

### 4.2 PHASE 2: SOLUTIONS AND TESTING

Here the learning alliance process turns to action: identifying, testing and learning about promising solutions. In practice, there is no hard boundary between phases, which run in parallel. Often buy-in and confidence can be stimulated by quick diagnosis and initial testing of relatively simply innovations (innovations in the data collection itself are often a good place to start). This is a phase of consolidation and gradual growth as existing members deepen their shared understanding and new members join. Diagnosis continues, and there is a consistent and deliberate effort to gather data and evidence to support decision making for the innovations being tested. The information obtained from the implementation and testing of interventions is regularly fed back to the learning platform.

#### 4.2.1 Identification of potential solutions and planning of interventions

The planning stage is a turning point: the initial diagnosis and strategy development are translated into action. Planning involves designing the interventions that were identified following the systems diagnosis. The hub can help identify potential solutions or innovations to test – for example, by arranging visits to locations where a different model of service delivery is already being trialed.

Stakeholders' plans to guide action research are often the culmination of long scenario and strategy development processes. The plans detail the specific interventions, demonstrations and pilots, methods, costs, sources of funding, stakeholders' responsibilities, schedule and priority of activities, tenders, terms of reference and agreed targets (Moriarty et al., 2007; Lockwood and Duti, 2015). Tools useful for planning include participatory learning and action, life-cycle cost assessments, log frames and problem tree analysis.

Rarely can a learning alliance test ideal potential solutions. In practice, and particularly where the learning alliance has been developed for a specific intervention, resource constraints and contexts may not permit complete flexibility. Even if the learning alliance identifies an ideal long-term intervention, there may not be adequate funding for implementation. Helping stakeholders align their interests with available resources and prioritise potential actions is part of both the science (using tools like cost-benefit analysis) and the art of the hub.

#### 4.2.2 Implementation and testing

Action research is the implementation and testing of solutions, innovations and new models. For most stakeholders, it is this phase that makes them feel that the learning alliance is achieving results. Getting to this implementation and testing stage, even if the intervention is relatively small, provides motivation for stakeholders to remain part of the process.

This stage typically involves active work at community and district levels. Here the value of a strong and broadly based local platform comes into its own. The hub continues to provide support, particularly by providing a framework for assessing results and keeping all members of the learning alliance abreast of developments. But the focus of the work now shifts to partners more directly involved in implementation. This phase is where the bulk of effort and resource expenditure should take place.

Tools for the change hub in this stage of the process include process documentation, monitoring and learning and capacity development.

### 4.3 PHASE 3: SCALING UP

Once an innovation has been tested and shown to be successful (in practice, often even before this), scaling up or replication begins.

#### 4.3.1 Evaluation and replication

Evidence from the test is shared with the alliance and used to adapt the approach (e.g., by identifying changes that allow for scaling) and motivate others to adopt it. If the necessary changes involve policy, the stakeholders must create an advocacy plan for political or regulatory approval.

This stage relies on communications and knowledge management by the hub, including targeted advocacy. In previous phases, platform members are likely to have adopted different ways of working at both individual and organisational levels. In the scaling phase, this change is consolidated, and strategies are developed to encourage change in non-members.

If it was formed to address a specific problem, the learning alliance may now start to wind down its activities. A learning alliance with a more general goal may seek further growth: the end of one intervention is simply the time to identify another one. In fact, and in our experience, both situations can occur simultaneously. Stakeholders interested in a specific intervention drop off, new members join, and the overall process keeps moving forward – assuming an organisation is willing to continue to play the role of hub.

In all cases, a systematic approach ensures that learning is consolidated: information should be shared around the network. Getting this right is critical for the overall sustainability of the change that has been achieved by the alliance. Failure to embed and consolidate change – through communication, advocacy, capacity development, policy change and resource allocation – will cause the intervention to collapse. Recall that the goal of the learning alliance is permanent change in ways of seeing or acting.

#### 4.3.2 Sharing and reflecting (learning)

The hub encourages sharing and reflecting throughout the process so that stakeholders can change direction before expending time and resources on unpromising avenues. Now, in the final phase, sharing and reflecting become the focus. Pausing provides an opportunity for reflection,

allowing actors to review the results, which may either confirm the theory of change or suggest changing the theory. The stakeholders must develop and use common indicators that can be tracked over time and monitored as the action research goes on. Data must be collected, analysed and shared so that they can objectively review progress.

The learning alliance platforms provide a space for sharing and disseminating information and for discussing and validating the findings from the learning process. A real danger is that the learning alliance can become just a series of meetings for information sharing. The hub provides the leadership that moves the learning alliance beyond meetings and towards change.

Results from the reflection and sharing may either endorse the results for scaling up or get the stakeholders to revisit the vision and interventions.

## 5 Issues in learning alliances

In this chapter we consider five important issues that need to be addressed in creating strong learning alliances: legitimacy (of the hub), stakeholders, action research, facilitation and process documentation.

### 5.1 LEGITIMACY

A critical question for a learning alliance is legitimacy: what is the legitimacy of an organisation – in particular, the change hub – that seeks to catalyse change through a learning alliance?

From the beginning of the process, the change hub must focus on building consensus and gaining support from stakeholders, whose participation is crucial for establishing the legitimacy of the learning alliance. By engaging stakeholders early, the hub can incorporate their knowledge and elicit their priorities, which should then have significant influence over the process. Often this process is lengthy, and stakeholders may not even realise their own value at the beginning.



**FIGURE 5** HOLDING UP A MIRROR; SOURCE: DREAMSTIME.COM (FPMT.ORG)

Stakeholders may not understand the nature of the system, their role or that of others within it, or how these affect service delivery. The role of the hub is, in the first instance, to hold a metaphorical mirror up to the system (in the form of shared analysis) and provide a space for reflection on workings of the

system. This often reveals the issues that need to be resolved, brings about genuine participation based on stakeholder interests, and helps stakeholders understand their roles and contributions to the system. This is a role the hub can play without appearing to be prescriptive.

### 5.2 STAKEHOLDERS

For social change and collective action, the right stakeholders have to be involved. Before deciding to set up a learning alliance, the hub organisation should conduct basic background research on the issues and the stakeholders, both those who contribute to the issues and those who are affected by them. Two tools that IRC has used for this purpose are stakeholder analysis and institutional mapping. Other social network analysis tools and stakeholder power mapping tools can also be used. Generally, for assessing stakeholders, consider the following:

- Who are stakeholders?
- What are their organisational mandates, interests, motivations, priorities and goals?
- What groups, platforms and forums already exist? Can they be built on rather than supplanted?
- What gaps exist in the WASH system network?
- Will the stakeholders 'own' the learning alliance? What strategic contributions can they make that will be inputs in the learning alliance process?
- Do they trust one another? What are their previous partnerships and engagement experiences, and how well have they worked together in the past?

Following an initial scoping or stakeholder analysis, the actors with sufficient interest in the process should be consulted and engaged, and from this initial basis, successive rounds of stakeholder identification and engagement undertaken. Building and reinforcing the stakeholder network will continue throughout the process.

From the outset the change hub must be clear about its objectives, which may change over time as more stakeholders come on board. Learning alliances are embedded within a local system, with all its diversity and complexity, including existing networks and platforms.

### 5.3 FACILITATION

The reality of processes that rely on stakeholder engagement is that everyone has a day job and cannot be expected to pursue the work of the group to the detriment of their organisations. This is why networks that rely purely on voluntarism often fail. Very few processes or movements are intrinsically self-supporting.

The stakeholders themselves cannot be expected to organise and facilitate meetings, platforms and the learning alliance process – these are the critical functions of the change hub. Facilitation, by a change hub, requires capacity in terms of human resources, financial resources and time. Knowledge of local systems is important because the facilitation process may require translation of concepts, language or perspectives. Hub facilitation teams require, time, skills and perseverance to build relationships with stakeholders and to drive changes processes within the system (Moriarty et al., 2007).

### 5.4 ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is the driver of learning within learning alliances. This participatory process brings stakeholders together to identify practical solutions to real-world problems (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). IRC understands action research primarily in the sense of learning by doing or collaborative learning – terms that underline the idea that learning is an active and practice-oriented activity. We learn to do as much as we learn *about*.

The three elements of any action research process are **a clear vision, a baseline and set of indicators, and documentation and regular dissemination of results.** In a learning alliance, action research is the way locally relevant innovations are developed and lessons relevant for scaling up are learnt (Smits et al., 2007). A given learning alliance might have multiple cycles of action research. For example, the city learning alliances in the SWITCH project (see Section 6.1) conducted several action research activities simultaneously in water demand management, urban agriculture and social inclusion, amongst other thematic areas (Butterworth et al., 2011).

Action research can be done at different levels; it can be led by experts or be a social learning process in which stakeholders identify the issues, take action and learn from the results. One challenge is finding the right balance between the expert-led and the demand-led approaches. Another is designing a process balanced between action and reflection, and between theory and practice.

Conducting interventions within a learning framework supports the learning alliance process and its goal of bringing about change, not just locally but across the system, in several ways. Action research builds a solid evidence base that can be used for advocacy. It tests new ideas in a real-world setting before encouraging wider uptake. Stakeholders are more likely to adopt policies and guidelines based on the results of action research that they had helped design and carry out. In short, action research promotes change that magnifies the results and enables scale.

### 5.5 PROCESS DOCUMENTATION

Process documentation captures the activities of the learning alliance as a way of monitoring progress. The information tracks changes, provides insight into how and why changes occur, yields information for reflecting on the process and is useful for reviewing and revisiting the vision and planning further actions and strategies.

Process documentation has particular value when the findings and issues are disseminated and communicated to the learning alliance, since feedback is part of the action research cycle. Communication keeps the learning alliance members informed about progress, particularly regarding the testing of innovations and pilots, and helps maintain stakeholders' interest in the process.

## 6 Learning alliances in practice: Two case studies

IRC's use of learning alliances started in 2006 as a series of project-level interventions. Over the years this has evolved, with hub support now being provided to national, sub-national and district level platforms, some established by IRC but most pre-existing. In this section we present short case histories of IRC's experiences with acting as a hub for learning alliances in two countries: Ghana and Uganda.

### 6.1 GHANA

Currently IRC's core hub team supports learning platforms at national, regional and district level, building on prior relationships.

#### 6.1.1 Origins and development

IRC's first experience with supporting learning alliances in Ghana began in 2006 with projects in integrated urban water management in Accra (the SWITCH alliance; Butterworth et al., 2008; Verhagen et al., 2008) and peri-urban and small-town water and sanitation (the Tri-Partite Project)<sup>7</sup>. Three further initiatives – WASHCost (2007–2013), Triple-S (2008–2014) and WASHTech (2011–2013) – adopted and promoted the learning alliance approach. Each initiative supported its learning alliance in a different way: SWITCH provided a part-time city-level facilitator, TPP contributed part-time and WASHCost full-time national-level facilitation, and Triple-S had full-time facilitation at the national level as well as regional-level facilitators in the offices of the national Community Water and Sanitation Agency. All the initiatives also received support in communications, technical and research from IRC's Accra-based change hub. As the initiatives evolved, IRC also supported a national-level network, the Resource Centre Network<sup>8</sup>, and in 2010 helped it create a semi-permanent learning and sharing platform called the National Level Learning Alliance Platform.

More recently, between 2015 and 2017 the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation supported an initiative called Strengthening Local Government Capacity to Deliver Water Services to plan and deliver sustainable services in 13 largely rural districts in five regions of Ghana. This exercise in cooperation amongst national

and local governments, research organisations and NGOs involved interventions at regional, district and community levels, partnership work at national level and the building and strengthening of learning platforms in districts and regions (Macintyre and Duti, 2017). This work has led directly to IRC's continuing support to our partner district Asutifi North, where a full-time learning alliance facilitator is embedded with local government.

#### 6.1.2 Results

Over the years, learning alliances linked to those different projects and initiatives have produced local-level results while also contributing to broader change at the national level.

The SWITCH project, for example, was successful in promoting integrated urban water management and a watershed approach to WASH<sup>9</sup>. The WASHCost project was successful in promoting the life-cycle cost approach to planning and budgeting for water and sanitation investments nationwide. Safi Sana<sup>10</sup>, established during the Tri-Partite Project, has spun off into a public-private partnership that is recovering energy from waste. The technology applicability framework developed by the WASHTech project is now a nationally accepted process being used to assess sanitation technologies. The Triple-S project, which operated at the national level, in three regions and in three districts, fostered the development of a district implementation model that clearly defined roles in delivery of rural water and sanitation services and fostered a paradigm shift in suitability. It also contributed new service delivery indicators to the national monitoring framework. These indicators have changed the goal for water service delivery from counting new infrastructure to ensuring sustainability. From this start, a rural water monitoring system was established and later scaled to cover nearly two-thirds of the country; remaining challenges including funding for monitoring and establishing a baseline in the remaining third of the country. Nevertheless, Triple-S collected evidence that buttressed the argument for reforming the rural water sector, particularly in professionalising

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.washghana.net/node/44>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.washghana.net/>.

<sup>9</sup> In Accra, planning for integrated urban water management needed to consider the districts surrounding the city. The project used the term Greater Accra metropolitan area (GAMA), which became popularised and has been adopted for other projects and in the Ghanaian WASH sector.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.safisana.org/en/>.

management of small-town water systems and remedial actions to rehabilitate non-functional water facilities.

At the district level, service delivery monitoring undertaken in pilot districts and the participation of stakeholders in this process deepened understanding – particularly in the political realm – of the WASH system and led directly to real (if limited) increases in budget allocations for WASH investment. Perhaps more significantly, district planning and budgeting were expanded to cover the whole water life-cycle, including operation and maintenance, expansion and major rehabilitations. All those changes led to small but visible improvements in system functionality. The reliability of hand pumps from 2011 to 2013, for example, improved from 69% to 73% in Akatsi District and from 59% to 61% in East Gonja District.

More fundamentally, the various learning alliance processes supported by IRC have helped highlight the limitations of the community ownership and management approach to water systems in rural areas. This model is now being fundamentally questioned, and the national Community Water and Sanitation Agency is testing a new role as a rural utility. Here is an example of a contribution to true double-loop learning: instead of leading to incremental improvements to the existing model, the learning helps stimulate fundamental change.

### 6.1.3 Status and legacy

Nationally and in its partner districts, IRC continues to provide hub support through facilitation, communication and knowledge management services. The National Level Learning Alliance Platform continues to function with technical support from the Resource Centre Network and is partially funded by a service fee paid by host organisations for using the platform for their presentations. A platform established under Triple-S in the Northern region has continued beyond the initial project and is supported by the Community Water and Sanitation Agency's regional office. This learning alliance has altered how the government engages with NGOs in the WASH sector, with government now bringing stakeholders together for frequent meetings. A second regional platform, in the Upper West region, was independently initiated by regional government.

Currently, IRC is supporting a new district-level learning alliance in Asutifi North in Brong Ahafo

region. Led by local government, this alliance brings together NGOs, private service providers and donors and has supported the district government in creating a master plan to achieve universal access to water and sanitation services by 2030.

Beyond specific changes in policy and practice, a lasting legacy is Ghana's national learning alliance platform<sup>11</sup>. Since 2010 this platform has consistently engaged stakeholders every month on various topics chosen by the participants. It has had national influence and has consistently supported national-level learning events, such as the annual Mole Conference of the Coalition of NGOs in the Water Sector and the National Basic Sanitation Stocktaking Forum for the rural sanitation sector. It has contributed to the development of a national strategic sector plan.

### 6.1.4 Hub

IRC's work as a change hub has evolved from interventions in specific projects to a longer-term engagement in the sector. The hub's core team in Accra has provided continual support: convening and facilitating meetings, connecting and building a network of people and organisations, developing publications, and planning and sometimes conducting research. At least one learning alliance facilitator, either full- or part-time, was dedicated to the district or city level, focussing on convening, coordinating the network, communicating and managing knowledge, and bringing in expert advice. All of this was led, at the national level, by an IRC country director with a strong network reaching to the highest levels of government, civil society and the private sector, supported by a core team that includes communications, research, monitoring and learning specialists. IRC continues to support the Resource Centre Network and national learning alliance by providing a full-time facilitator and knowledge manager.

## 6.2 UGANDA

IRC provides hub support to Uganda's national WASH Agenda for Change coalition and to a network of partners in Kabarole district.

### 6.2.1 Origins and development

IRC's involvement goes back to 2007, with a project called Learning for Policy and Practice in Household and School Sanitation and Hygiene (LeaPPS)<sup>12</sup>. This project facilitated district-based multi-stakeholder learning processes in four districts in the Northern and

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washghana.net/NLLAP>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ircwash.org/resources/how-district-based-multi-stakeholder-learning-leapps-made-difference>.

Western regions, introducing the concept and practice of a learning alliance and laying the foundation for future learning alliance initiatives in Uganda.

In 2009, IRC followed with the Performance Improvement through Learning in Sanitation (PILS) project, which supported local-level management of sanitation services in three districts in Northern Uganda. IRC then collaborated with sector actors at national and decentralised levels to support learning and innovation in rural water and sanitation service delivery through regional learning forums. In these forums, participants shared experience with innovations, some of which (e.g., a district strategy for management of user fees) were replicated in other districts. In 2010, the WASHTech project also adopted a learning alliance approach to identify new technologies for investment. This project focussed on strengthening the sector's capacity to make informed, evidence-based decisions on the choice of WASH technologies.

Through these initiatives, IRC developed the skills required to be an effective change hub, supporting the alliances and their members with convening, communications, knowledge management and expert input. This experience then became the basis for IRC's Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S) project (2009–2014)<sup>13</sup>. Taking up the challenge of sustainability of rural water supply services, Triple-S adopted a social learning approach. The Triple-S learning alliance grew to become a central part of Uganda's WASH sector, supporting government-led initiatives for learning and adaptation and in turn supported by IRC as a hub.

Most recently, IRC continues to support a learning alliance in Kabarole (one of the original Triple-S districts) whose goal is universal access to WASH services by 2030. Throughout, IRC has ensured that the process is owned by national and local government leaders.

### 6.2.2 Results

The learning alliances delivered results that ranged from increased district budget allocations for hygiene and sanitation, to testing and adapting new approaches, to expanding safe sanitation at the district level.

The Triple-S learning alliance process led to the development of a national district implementation manual<sup>14</sup> that set out the roles and expectations for rural water service delivery. The manual filled what

alliance members had identified as a critical gap between national policies and the day-to-day work of district-level service authorities and service providers.

The learning alliance also monitored service delivery, experimenting with new service-level indicators of sustainability. After four years of testing, four of the 18 trial indicators were included in Uganda's performance monitoring framework for the sector<sup>15</sup>.

As it grew in confidence and ambition, the learning alliance started to support experiments with new service authority and service delivery models to improve sustainability. Sub-country water boards were created to bridge the gap between district and user levels<sup>16</sup>. In Kabarole and Lira districts, the mandate of water and sanitation boards for piped water supply was expanded to include support for operation and maintenance of standalone water supplies. Guidelines and business models were developed for handpump mechanics associations, which encouraged private local entrepreneurs to improve maintenance<sup>17</sup>.

### 6.2.3 Status and legacy

IRC continues to provide hub support to platforms at national, regional and district levels. At the national level the platform involves ministries and government agencies as well as NGOs, donors and the private sector. The regional and district levels are a partnership with local government actors, technical support units and other stakeholders.

New organisations have joined the learning alliance. Recent innovations being tested by members include creation of regional utilities, water quality monitoring, water safety planning, metered 'pay as you fetch' management models for rural handpumps and business models for sanitation services. In 2018 the Kabarole learning alliance supported the development of a district WASH master plan for universal access by 2030.

Through consistent championing of learning, the IRC hub's value has become recognised by national and local government leaders, and although the hub plays a supporting role, convening is almost always now done by government. Thus the hub and network of learning alliance platforms it supports are not a parallel structure but an integral part of the national, government-led structure for learning and adaptation.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.irccwash.org/projects/triple-s>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.rural-water-supply.net/en/resources/details/704>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.mwe.go.ug/library/sector-performance-reports>.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.irccwash.org/search-site?search\\_api\\_views\\_fulltext=SWSSBs&x=0&y=0](https://www.irccwash.org/search-site?search_api_views_fulltext=SWSSBs&x=0&y=0).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.irccwash.org/resources/district-hand-pump-mechanics-associations-uganda-improved-operation-and-maintenance-rural>.

Perhaps the most important change driven by the learning alliance has been the strengthening and embedding of learning and adaptation in Uganda's WASH sector. Stakeholders have transitioned from passive audiences in 'talk and chalk' workshops to active participants who seek out and implement interventions. Initial scepticism ('We are not school students – why should we spend all this time learning?') turned to active engagement as stakeholders adopted learning to do rather than learning about.

Because of government ownership of the process, the learning alliance has been integrated into existing governance structures. The district offices see it as support for planning and achieving agreement on practical modalities. At the national level it is seen as a space for sharing and networking.

Service users are involved through local civil society organisations that are members of the learning alliance, particularly through regular community learning visits. That the alliance gives a voice to users has been crucial for accountability. With the country's explicit commitment to reaching universal access, involving the grass roots in evidence building and decision making ensures that the benefits of improved service provision can be assessed.

The learning alliance in Uganda started small, with a series of problem statements based on the observation that progress had stagnated because good practices had not been shared and replicated. The slow but steady process of identifying small goals and specific interventions and then using success to build legitimacy has allowed the learning alliance to expand and engage more stakeholders without undermining local leadership. Over time, through several initiatives, it has become unambiguously centred on achieving universal access.

#### 6.2.4 Hub

The hub team in Uganda consists of a full-time learning alliance facilitator based in Kabarole district. This facilitator is supported by a national core team that brings together skills across communications, research, and monitoring and learning. The hub is led by IRC's country director, who has an extensive national and regional network that reaches into the highest levels of government, plus NGOs and the private sector.

### 6.3 LESSONS LEARNT

Both case studies show how a learning alliance approach contributes to change – in particular, improving the sector's capacity for learning and adaptation, a building block of a strong WASH system.

The learning alliances have also contributed to a sector-wide shift away from installing new hardware to planning (and to some extent budgeting) for services. Action research provided the evidence needed to support decisions made by stakeholders, and communication and advocacy led to replication and national adoption of innovations. These changes in understanding and behaviour have been accompanied by changes in policy and regulation that have in turn re-defined stakeholders' roles and responsibilities.

Learning alliances – networks of people engaged in discussion and learning – are engines of change. Specific changes are usually initiated by one or a small number of members, however the discussion and learning that happens within the alliance may plant seeds or contribute to the change process. They are most effective in developing outputs or activities: a new district implementation manual, a revised sector policy, new monitoring indicators, stronger handpump mechanics associations. Their influence becomes more diffuse where they engage with higher levels of governance. Yet it is this level – where sector actors may be only vaguely aware of each other's efforts – that arguably has the most profound effect on the sector as a whole. Creating learning and adaptive capacity and moving stakeholders from incremental single-loop learning at the district level to more structural and challenging national-level change show the true strength of social learning.

In Ghana and Uganda, IRC primarily worked with existing national platforms and processes: technical working groups, joint sector reviews, district assemblies, national planning processes. Its added value as a hub was in looking across multiple processes and scales at the WASH system as a whole, and connecting actors and activities. A platform's contribution to specific improved services is more difficult to pin down – not least because of the collective nature of a learning alliance.

Even in the earliest days, IRC's core hub support always consisted of a minimum of two or three full-time professionals with funding for a range of expenses, from travel to organising and hosting meetings. Drive and movement require resources. Indeed, a change hub arguably exists to help overcome the transaction costs related to collective action – expenses that are often difficult for individual projects or organisations to justify. As acting as a hub has become a defining role for IRC, so we have championed the need for supporting collective action, even as we support and encourage other organisations to take up this critical role.

## 7 Conclusions and recommendations

Achieving the sustainable development goals for WASH requires strong national and local WASH systems. This in turn calls for sector change and reform, including the identification and adoption of service delivery models appropriate to different country contexts. IRC believes that the most effective approach to delivering this change is through collective action involving all the actors in the WASH system. As part of its praxis, IRC has worked with learning alliances for more than a decade to enable and encourage collective action.

Versions of the learning alliance approach have been successfully applied in more than 15 countries, projects and contexts. Experience shows that learning alliances can bring together stakeholders for collective action: collectively developing visions, establishing priorities and identifying, implementing and scaling interventions. These interventions, undertaken at local to national levels and as part of individual projects and larger initiatives, have strengthened various aspects of the WASH systems.

For a complex social system like WASH, specific outcomes cannot be pre-determined. This is why we talk of praxis: theory-inspired practice with a constant interplay between conceptual insight and practical lesson learning, guided by evidence. More than a decade of evidence shows that learning alliances work as a mechanism for stimulating stakeholders towards collective action.

Based on experience, IRC offers six broad recommendations.

**Build on what's already there.** To be effective, learning alliances need to build on existing local systems rather than create parallel systems. The exception is if the local systems have no structure that accommodates learning.

**Don't just talk; act.** Learning alliances are an approach to social change and innovation. Although they do not themselves build infrastructure, train people or create new monitoring systems, their members can and must do all of these things, and more. Members and projects should be capable of the actual 'doing' to generate buy-in and make progress: learning alliances don't work if they are just talk shops.

**Plan for a long time horizon.** Learning alliances can be useful for individual projects, but the time-limited nature of a project is always a challenge. They really come into their own when they develop a broader agenda that is supported by multiple projects.

**Ensure the legitimacy of the hub.** Learning alliances provide a space for stakeholders to make decisions jointly by building evidence for decision making. The change hub must therefore have the legitimacy to convene. It should avoid any appearance of pushing a particular agenda (other than the shared agenda of the alliance), model or technology.

**Use appropriate evidence.** Generating evidence that is appropriate and useful to stakeholders is essential. Researchers' evidence is part of this but must be presented in an appropriate format and timeframe.

**Fund the process and the hub.** The leaning alliance process, and particularly the role of the hub, needs to be funded. Individual stakeholders can contribute time and resources to their own work, but the transaction costs of social learning are high. Our experience suggests that without a reliable funder, the hub and then the network risk collapse.

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# Resources for further reading

The list below provides links to some useful tools for setting up and working with learning alliances.

## 1. Learning alliance process (engaging with stakeholders, stakeholder analysis, facilitation, process documentation, etc.)

- a. SWITCH Learning Alliance Briefing Note 1: An introduction to learning alliances – [http://switchurbanwater.lboro.ac.uk/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2\\_BRN\\_1\\_Intro\\_to\\_LAs.pdf](http://switchurbanwater.lboro.ac.uk/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2_BRN_1_Intro_to_LAs.pdf)
- b. RiPPLE Information Sheet: Learning and practice alliances – <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08beae5274a31e0000e8a/LPA.pdf>
- c. The MSP Guide: How to Design and Facilitate Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships – <http://www.mspguide.org/msp-guide>
- d. Learning Alliance Briefing Note 2: Stakeholder Analysis - [http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2\\_BRN\\_2\\_Stakeholder\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2_BRN_2_Stakeholder_analysis.pdf)
- e. Multi-stakeholder management: Tools for Stakeholder Analysis: 10 building blocks for designing participatory systems of cooperation – <http://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/en-svmp-instrumente-akteuersanalyse.pdf>
- f. SWITCH Training on Facilitation - [http://www.switchtraining.eu/fileadmin/template/projects/switch\\_training/db/event\\_upload\\_folder/41/Facilitation.pdf](http://www.switchtraining.eu/fileadmin/template/projects/switch_training/db/event_upload_folder/41/Facilitation.pdf)
- g. Morris (2019) Guidance for Facilitating Learning Alliance Approaches, IRC, The Hague (forthcoming)
- h. The Facilitation Toolkit, IRC, 2007. Contains notes on facilitation, adult learning, cultural dimensions, capacity building, and a lot of detail on the design and conduct of training courses, and useful exercises. <https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/facilitation.pdf>
- i. IRC WASH Governance Facilitator's Guide [https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/wash\\_governance\\_training\\_programme\\_facilitators\\_guide\\_2011.pdf.docx](https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/wash_governance_training_programme_facilitators_guide_2011.pdf.docx)

## 2. Developing visions

- a. Learning Alliance Briefing Note 9: Visioning - [http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2\\_BRN\\_9\\_Visioning\\_draft.pdf](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2_BRN_9_Visioning_draft.pdf)
- b. Batchelor, C. and Butterworth, J. (2011) 'Developing a Joint Vision', in SWITCH in the city putting urban water management to the test, IRC, The Hague. Available at: [www.ircwash.org/resources/switch-city-putting-urban-water-management-test](http://www.ircwash.org/resources/switch-city-putting-urban-water-management-test)

## 3. Process documentation

- a. Learning Alliance Briefing Note 6: Process Documentation - [http://switchurbanwater.lboro.ac.uk/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2\\_BRN\\_6\\_Process\\_documentation.pdf](http://switchurbanwater.lboro.ac.uk/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2_BRN_6_Process_documentation.pdf)
- b. Introduction to process documentation for learning alliances and action research [http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2\\_CLOD\\_PRS\\_Day\\_1\\_introduction\\_LO\\_Jul07.pdf](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/outputs/pdfs/WP6-2_CLOD_PRS_Day_1_introduction_LO_Jul07.pdf)

## 4. Annotated bibliography on learning alliances

IRC has developed an annotated bibliography on learning alliances as a resource for anyone interested in using the learning alliance approach. It reviews more than 60 publications on learning alliances, indicating the general topics and geographic area and summarising the content. The bibliography also provides further reading for the country case studies (on Ghana and Uganda) presented in Chapter 6.

Available: <https://www.ircwash.org/resources/annotated-bibliography-irc-learning-alliances>

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