

Blog by Amall A-G Saleh on her internship experiences at IRC

How can the WASH Systems Academy help with the application of knowledge?

The internet

When we are stuck or are trying to learn something new there is one thing that a lot of us have in common - the world wide web. We can sign up to an online course, browse the internet, watch a video on YouTube or read a post on social media. Whether it is learning to skateboard or trying to fix the remote control, we, especially those of us in the Global North, tend just to search on the internet and find the answer instantly.

However, as accessible, and simple the internet can be, it is not always the case for our families and friends in the Global South. It might be because societies and technologies are underdeveloped, or governments control the population's access to internet connectivity. Whatever it is, the whole 'search and find' concept we have is not always the same around the world and this has a dire effect on the application of knowledge when trying to tackle the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or more specifically Goal 6 on universal safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene services.

The application of knowledge for local-level entities is, in my opinion, the most pivotal part of creating universal change.

Whether it is about applying practical tools to their field of work or about applying skills in conversations with governments and high-level officials. How to go from paper to action is something we all ought to work on. Even though it is crucial to learn these skills such as systems strengthening, the whole notion of application and the process that it takes to apply it, is what's important in order to drive long-lasting change.

There are 10, if not 100's, of concepts and ideas that are being taught all around the world to help reach SDG 6, such as the [WASHTech TAF](#) and [IRC's 9 Building Blocks](#). These are all amazing concepts that have particularly important aspects for creating sustainable and long-lasting change. But how do we get people to or even show people how they can apply it in their day-to-day work?

WASH Systems Academy

Similar to a YouTube skateboarding tutorial, where it shows step-by-step "how to do it" with added tricks and tips to get it right, these added extras of applying the skills will take time, and you will always be learning new things to improve how to do them. This is the same when it comes to how e-learning can help with application. The WASH Systems Academy already has such a wide range of information and practices that is open and free for anyone who wants to learn, no matter their experience! Also it's great that knowledge can be provided on these types of platforms, but it's sometimes the extras that can help others find what works for them in applying the knowledge.

When I started the internship at the IRC, I had unconsciously presumed that after someone is presented with knowledge (e.g. the Academy) they can then easily go ahead and apply it to their work! Interestingly enough, the whole conclusion of my undergraduate dissertation (which was based on what went wrong when trying to reach MDG 7 – Water, hygiene and Sanitation) was the whole idea of 'education' and the lack of it. The argument I had initially made was that individuals were being provided with the tools and resources but not in a sustainable manner. It would have been more sustainable during the MDGs to not only provide tools and resources but to then also teach and train

those who would benefit on the long run. And obviously now we have come a long way from the initial MDGs and how to implement them.

Interviews

Over 40 interviews were conducted as part of the market research that myself and my co-intern had done for upscaling the Academy. We interviewed the likes of country directors and staff members of IRC as well as external partners and professionals who have heaps of experience and knowledge between them all. It was such an amazing experience to spend up to 1-hour speaking with people I would have otherwise never met. I learnt loads from their thoughts on upscaling the Academy to their views on where they felt the issue really lies. However, one thing that really stuck out was the number of times that 'application of knowledge' was mentioned.

More complex than I thought

Now, that I have completed my internship with the IRC, I have come to understand that the process of reaching these goals for Water, Hygiene and Sanitation is way more complex than what my 'undergraduate mind' could comprehend!! The interviewees felt that the application of knowledge or the 'how to' approach was lacking, but also felt that the Academy is in the perfect position to help provide it...and I could not agree more!

I think that some of the ways the Academy could help with the application of knowledge is through creating a visual. A visual that users can relate to. It could be through different types of case studies that are significant to their work or country. Or having a platform where they are able to connect with others trying to solve the same problem whilst using the same knowledge. Something where they could say 'hey, that sounds like the challenge I am trying to deal with in a similar setting, and I could apply this in this way rather than that way to improve'.

Blended learning should include interactions

I think the best way to promote the application of knowledge would be through the blended learning approach which is a combination of online teaching and facilitated teaching. An approach that is totally possible especially when COVID measures are lowered. During our research for the upscaling of the WASH Systems Academy we found that users prefer a level of interaction with their facilitators over a self-paced self-guided approach. It is definitely a feasible possibility that not only could help with the quality of learning, but also help with the quality of application.

As a result, I view the Academy as the skateboarding YouTube video which provides all the knowledge you need. Then I view the options of a forum, case studies and blended learning approach as the added extras of the skateboarding videos, the tricks and tips... and with the combination of both, I believe the application of knowledge will be far greater with the Academy being the driver of change to do so!

Internship Testimony:

I have learnt loads on the 4-month internship not only about Water, hygiene and sanitation but also the skills you need to learn when leaving education and going into the working world! I would say I have learnt more than I did in university to use the skills I did not even know I needed. Conducting interviews with directors on the other side of the world, sending the perfect email and making sure I

have typed their name correctly (however, I did slip up once or twice). I can say that I have used functions in Excel that before these 4 months I did not even know existed! It was the perfect opportunity to dive into my passion for Water, Health and Sanitation all whilst working with the extremely supportive IRC family.

My internship was completely virtual! Microsoft Teams was my office for the whole duration, and it was a shame I never physically met my manager and co-workers. However, it always felt that we were in an office environment and never had the feeling of being left out of any of the staff gatherings. We had regular bi-weekly meetings and even shared my CV in front of the team who offered to help me improve it. I was also fortunate enough to be there over the Christmas period when we had a Secret Santa and Christmas games night. I promise I still had loads of work to do! My co-workers and manager regularly checked up on me to see how I was and how the work was going. I could easily contact them over video call or email which was extremely helpful. So even though it was completely virtual it still felt like I was working with a team and more importantly I felt part of the team creating change in Water, hygiene and Sanitation! I have really appreciated this opportunity and I am extremely grateful to everyone at the IRC, especially Jeske Verhoeven, for their warm welcome and faith in me to be a part of the upscaling of the WASH Systems Academy.