Taking Learning Beyond the Hotel Conference Room

How Local WASH Organizations Implement New Ideas

CONSIDERATIONS FOR: PROGRAM IMPLEMENTORS

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How Local WASH Organizations Are Practicing Organizational Learning and Flexibility.

THE MONDAY MORNING PROBLEM

WASH program implementers spend a lot of time and money attending events and exploring online tools that are designed to help them use new approaches or skills. For many local program implementers, countless hours are spent in hotel conference rooms sharing knowledge, building new skills, and learning about new approaches or tools. But implementing new ideas isn't just about learning the steps or downloading the right software.

At Results for Development (R4D), we call this the "**Monday Morning Problem.**" For example, imagine that you attend a workshop where you learn about a new monitoring and evaluation tool, and then you go back to work on Monday morning and are faced with the difficult task of actually integrating that new tool into your program. Challenges might include tailoring the tool to meet your specific needs, teaching the tool to new staff members, and establishing new processes. In other words, the Monday morning problem refers to the challenges that happen between learning about a new idea and implementing it successfully.

In an effort to better understand how to support implementers in their journey from learning to implementation, R4D interviewed WASH program implementers in India and East Africa about the challenges they face when implementing new ideas and the strategies they use to learn and adapt. In this brief, we share some of the practices that local WASH innovators use to enable learning and flexibility within their organizations.

HOW WASH INNOVATORS ENABLE ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND FLEXIBILITY

In our conversations with WASH program implementers, we asked, **"What enables your organization to be flexible?"** In other words, what allows them to implement new ideas and adapt their programs or processes?

Here are some of the **key insights** from our conversations about what helps local WASH organizations implement new ideas:

SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

" The implementation teams decide who should be getting the [menstrual hygiene] pack and when, and they can use their best judgement because they have the best connection and best understanding of the communities."

– Meenakshi Gupta, GOONJ

Respondents shared that having support for learning and adaptation from the management or leadership level allowed the organization as a whole to be more flexible. Supportive leadership was characterized by empowering staff at all levels to contribute feedback and ideas , and providing the time and resources necessary for staff to learn and test new tools or approaches.

FLAT ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

" Everything that happens here happens very organically. It's not a top down thing. It's not like the boss gets something, and things have to work that way. We have very regular meetings, and we are very open to ideas, and even the youngest volunteer has the same right to share an idea as the founder of the organization."

—Angana Prasad, Project KHEL

Many respondents attributed their ability to be flexible and adaptable to their flat organizational structures. Field staff or other implementing staff were the drivers of change in these organizations, and communicated regularly and openly with managers. Some respondents actively rejected terms that categorized staff as "upper" or "lower" level, and emphasized their non-hierarchical organizational structure.

DEDICATED TIME FOR INTERNAL LEARNING

" We have a meeting every two weeks to know what is new in the organization. At the end of the meeting we decide what priorities we should focus on."

– Willy Walusimbe, Rural Health Care Foundation Uganda

Respondents found that having a method for sharing information, generating new ideas, and problem solving was an important aspect of their ability to learn and adapt as an organization. A focus group discussion in India revealed that some organizations have monthly meetings where staff share anything they've learned from workshops or meetings they attended. Respondents from smaller organizations simply shared resources via email that they found particularly useful or relevant.

COLLABORATIVE FUNDER RELATIONSHIPS

*" We don't like funders who **just** bring money. We want a conversation. We want a relationship."*

– Lionel Oludhe, Umande Trust

Relationships with both funders and partners that are based on collaboration and true partnership (rather than only regarding local implementers as resources to carry out pre-determined programs) allow local implementers to learn and be flexible. Many respondents said that they would like funders to visit the organization and the communities in which they're working and contribute their expertise to co-developing interventions.

CONNECTIONS TO PEERS AND MENTORS

" When you talk about mentors, I think everybody could use more of that. One of the things I find very useful in working with expats is not only somebody who has a skill, but somebody who is doing what I want to do. That is what is helpful for me."

—Pamela Otali, Consultant

Platforms like WhatsApp were cited as helpful tools for staying connected to peers for continued learning and information sharing, especially after connecting through a workshop or other learning event. Access to mentors or technical experts was also an important resource for many organizations.

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" The tea and coffee breaks are the most useful - when you are just talking to people. It's not the actual lectures or the actual sessions. Although sometimes there are some interesting discussions, but most of the time it's more about those one-on-one face-to face-interactions. […] That is how you learn and make connections and share resources."

– Name Withheld, Whave Solutions

The value that respondents find in conferences, workshops, and other learning events is in the relationships and partnerships that are built between sessions. Coffee breaks and social time are the most important parts of in-person learning events according to many respondents.

RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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MILLENNIUM WATER ALLIANCE

MORE INSIGHTS FROM LOCAL WASH INNOVATORS

Although local implementers can institute practices that enable learning and flexibility at an organizational level, there are many other challenges that implementers face that make it difficult to implement new ideas. Some of those challenges are related to relationships with funders and partners, including:

- Short project timelines
- Changing donor priorities
- Lack of funding for experimentation, learning, and growth
- Lack of visibility in the international development space.
- Limited access to mentors and experts
- Lack of skilled, trained local staff
- Learning events and resources designed without consulting participants
- Lack of easy-to-use, accessible, and adaptable tools and resources

Read more about the roles of funders and partners in local implementer learning and adaptation by visiting.

WASH IMPACT NETWORK

Since 2014, WASH Impact Network and R4D have implemented capacity building and applied research aimed at uncovering the ways in which innovation WASH interventions "stick" and become sustainable for WASH innovators. The WASH Impact Network, an initiative of R4D, is a diverse cohort of over 120 innovative WASH programs across India and East Africa. They include for-profit, not-for-profit, and hybrid organizations working in WASH arenas such as sanitation marketing, community-led total sanitation, hygiene promotion, menstrual hygiene management, fecal sludge management, water systems and filtration, government engagement and advocacy, and more. WASH Impact Network activities were implemented in close coordination with regional partners, Dasra in India, and the Millennium Water Alliance in East Africa.

RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (R4D) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to unlock solutions to tough development challenges that prevent people in low- and middle-income countries from realizing their full potential. Using multiple approaches in multiple sectors including, Water, Sanitation andy Hygiene (WASH), Global Education, Global Health, Governance and Market Dynamics, R4D supports the discovery and implementation of new ideas for reducing poverty and improving lives around the world.

ABOUT OUR PARTNERS

Dasra meaning 'enlightened giving' in Sanskrit, is a pioneering strategic philanthropic organization that aims to transform India where a billion thrive with dignity and equity. Since its inception in 1999, Dasra has accelerated social change by driving collaborative action through powerful partnerships among a trust-based network of stakeholders (corporates, foundations, families, non-profits, social businesses, government and media). Over the years, Dasra has deepened social impact in focused fields that include adolescents, urban sanitation and governance and has built social capital by leading a strategic philanthropy movement in the country. For more information, visit

Millennium Water Alliance (MWA) is a consortium of 16 major WASH organizations that aims to bring sustainable solutions to the WASH sector through advocacy, shared knowledge, and collaborative programming. MWA works with governments, corporations, foundations, individuals, and other non-governmental organizations to advance best practices, share knowledge, build collaborations, and advocate for greater commitment to WASH globally.

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