Learning for Learning Alliances:

Capturing and sharing lessons learned from the Lodz SWITCH Learning Alliance through process documentation

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Prologue
Are you part of a Learning Alliance? Then this report may be useful to you.

It is not a blueprint, however, for how a Learning Alliance should be set-up and run. Rather this report provides some perspectives, lessons learned and best practices from the Learning Alliance in Lodz City in Poland which is one of the 9 demonstration cities for the SWITCH project. This report is meant to share experiences, give some insight, provoke thoughts and actions, and to provide suggestions for strengthening a Learning Alliance approach.

The lessons presented here are of course based on the particular conditions, needs and people present in Lodz but can be more widely useful too. However, any use or application of these lessons needs to be considered within the particular context in which a Learning Alliance is.

Introduction

The water and sanitation field, as other development fields, has often suffered from a situation in which there is little coordination between sectors, uneven participation from relevant actors, lack of opportunity for joint innovation development and poor scaling up and out of key innovations. To address and re-dress these conditions and primarily the mostly sectoral operation within the water and sanitation arena, the Learning Alliance approach has started to be widely adopted. A Learning Alliance is a process in which multiple stakeholders are engaged together in a joint process of innovation and scaling up. “Learning Alliances are about building the structures needed to bring people together to analyse and address problems…and jointly learning how to find solutions” (Smits et al, 2007) and “their structure and activities are designed to optimize relationships, breaking down barriers to both horizontal (i.e. across platforms), and vertical (i.e. between platforms) learning “ (Butterworth and Morris, 2007; p3).

The Learning Alliance approach has been adopted as a backbone for the SWITCH (Sustainable Water Management Improves Tomorrows Cities Health) project as a mechanism to encourage, facilitate and support inter-sectoral planning, decision-making and action. The project is designed to work through a city learning alliance which represents independent multi-stakeholder platforms at different levels. Each demonstration city in SWICTH has or will be developing a Learning Alliance. The project, through these learning alliances, aims to put research into use across different aspects of the urban water cycle.

The SWITCH project in the City of Lodz has developed a Learning Alliance. This Learning Alliance, set up in late 2006, has a wide range of stakeholders involved in the process and up to now has had four meetings.

Rationale

Since there a number of different Learning Alliances being developed and tested within the various cities where the SWITCH project is being implemented as well as in other projects, there is bound to be a wide range if experiences in the LA approach’s implementation. This broad range of implementation offers a great opportunity for sharing with and learning from others to help strengthen the approach and how it is implemented.

Information source
To make use of this broad range of experiences, the various Learning Alliances need to capture and share lessons learned from their processes. Therefore a key component in the Learning Alliance approach should be process documentation. Process documentation aims to document, share and learn throughout the entire process of a project or alliance using various tools and targeting a number of stakeholders both within and outside of the process itself. “Process documentation is a tool that helps project staff and stakeholders to carefully track meaningful events in their projects. It enables reflection and analysis of these events in order to understand better what is happening, how it is happening and why it may be happening.” (SWITCH Training Agenda document). Apart from valuable documentation provided, lessons derived from process documentation should be fed back into the process to help the overall learning within the Learning Alliance and ensure it is moving in the right direction. These lessons can and should also be shared with a wider Learning Alliance community.

This report is the result of a process documentation exercise. This process documentation was undertaken through interviews with some members of the Lodz Learning Alliance. The interviews undertaken were with the following:

- Przemysław Senderecki, Private Water Company (ZWiK)
- Andrzej Czapla, Wastewater Treatment Plant
- Professor Zawilski, Environmental Engineering Department, ERCE
- Monika Dziegielewska-Geitz, Lodz Learning Alliance Facilitator

Lessons Learned

A number of key lessons were derived from the interviews with the various LA members as well as the LA facilitator. These lessons have been arranged in a number of key topic areas.

Participation

Participation is a key part of the Learning Alliance approach. Some key lessons learned were as follows:

- There is a need to include the private sector in the Learning Alliance.

- Learning Alliances should try to encourage and involve as many groups that are related to the subject area as possible. A concerted effort should be made at the beginning of the process to identify the stakeholders to be involved.

- However it will not be possible to gather all stakeholders in the beginning, so it should be seen as something that is done throughout the process. Inclusion of stakeholders should be a continuous process; stakeholders should be added as they are identified as missing from the process.

- It is important to include people on the local level, including community groups.

- It is good to work with current LA members to identify other institutions and groups to involve (e.g. use an exercise with stakeholders to identify missing stakeholders).

- Learning Alliance members should feel that the important and necessary groups are involved in the Learning Alliance as it gives more validation to the process and makes them feel that there participation is worthwhile.
• Work needs to be done on encouraging groups which are not eager to participate in the Learning Alliance to join the process.

• The Learning Alliance coordinators need to work with the various member organizations and groups to identify appropriate individuals to participate in the process and to figure out how they can have enough time to devote to the process.

*Organisation and operation of the Learning Alliance*

The organization and operation of the Learning Alliance was an interesting topic discussed with the various interviewees. Some key lessons learned were as follows:

• There is a need to identify champions for/within the Learning Alliances approach.

• A good facilitator is needed for the process.

• A good structure for how Learning Alliance meetings and activities are carried out is key. Meetings and activities need to be well structured. Meetings should include more than just brainstorming but work towards developing more concrete plans and outputs towards carrying out and achieving actions.

• There is a need to develop greater buy-in amongst the Learning Alliance members. Participation needs to be linked with proper incentives and expectations.

• The Learning Alliance is a good platform for discussion and interaction. There is high potential for integration amongst multiple sectors.

• There is a need to facilitate and coordinate relationships between LA members- this will not just happen on its own or through being part of the LA alone.

• Participants need to be encouraged to regularly attend meetings.

• Need to encourage feedback to their own organizations- this happens very little at present

• The LA approach needs to allow for various sub-topics and groups to be formed to allow for stakeholders to be involved in topics/areas which they are interested in- not all stakeholders are interested in ALL aspects of the LA.

• The Learning Alliance approach needs proper financing.

• The Learning Alliance approach needs to be an open process which gives all people voice.

• There needs to be greater awareness raised with and involvement ensured of top officials.

• Allow LA members to analyze the problem and develop plans and actions for solutions

*Communication*
Communication is essential. Some key lessons learned were as follows:

- Internal communication is important; communication processes needs to be carefully developed and improved.
- It is necessary to figure out which tools are most effective for achieving communication within the Learning Alliance.
- The agenda of workshops need to be communicated to members before the workshops to give them time to prepare.
- The reports of workshops need to be prepared and shared amongst LA members.
- It is important to explain as clearly as possible what a Learning Alliance is; engage the members in a discussion of what it is, how it should operate and what it should achieve.
- It is important to stimulate communication between LA members; facilitate internal networking and encourage it beyond the LA.
- The web is a good tool; but the use of the web needs to be strengthened through:
  - Providing more content; making sure it is up to date
  - Including an interactive component such as a discussion forum
  - Providing links to other experiences and information, especially on an international level.

**Approach**

There are important considerations of how the approach is designed and implemented. Some key lessons learned were as follows:

- There is a lot to learn from other Learning Alliances. There should be some cross learning organized between LAs of the SWITCH project and also with other projects using the LA approach.
- The approach should be continually strengthened by feeding information back into the process and learning from the process.
- There is a need to show the benefits of the approach to the stakeholders.
- Keep your promises! This helps to build trust in the LA and gives it a reliable reputation which encourages participation and activeness.
- Keep a focus on impact. The process should be directed towards achieving some positive impact that people can envision.
• Be open to working with different projects and ideals (e.g. adding social inclusion, working with other projects).

• The Learning Alliance provides a good platform for stakeholders to come together, to know each other and to coordinate activities. It helps to:
  o Combine forces
  o Optimize work
  o Minimize costs
  o Achieve common goals

• It is important to try to change the attitude of people.

• Focus on solutions- on finding solutions.

• Show value of the LA approach compared to other types of approaches or institutional arrangements.

• Need to integrate plans and concerns from multiple groups.

• LA provides a good link to action research.

• Learning must be a key focus- and needs support.

• The process requires dedication and hard work to keep it going.

*Inputs and Outputs*

The Learning Alliance requires certain inputs and should provide certain outputs. Some key lessons learned were as follows:

• Some key outputs from the LA should be:
  o Awareness raising with wider society and specific stakeholders
  o Information on the process for wide range of stakeholders
  o Information on process and results for wider society
  o Key information on general conditions, problems, hydrology, river systems and other information for wider public

• Some key INPUTS to the LA should be:
Need to establish strong links to good information and data to support decision-making [data, monitoring system, modelling processes, etc]

New ideas, technologies and approaches to be brought into the LA process

Information and experiences from other projects should be introduced into the LA approach

Benefits

From interviews with various members of the Lodz Learning Alliance a number of key benefits of the LA from the perspective of these members were identified. These include:

- Exchange of knowledge between participants (and also with other cities and LAs).
- Learning Alliance opens new doors to wider interaction.
- LA provides opportunities for working with other stakeholders.

Conclusion

While the intention of this report is to share the lessons with others in the hope that it may inform and strengthen their LA approach, it must be mentioned that another lesson learnt is that process documentation is a valuable technique for the LA approach. Process documentation may be used for achieving communication and dissemination, awareness raising, documentation and archiving of a process as well as vital learning which is a key part of monitoring, evaluation and adjustment activities. Therefore the production of this report in itself is useful to the process.

References and More information


SWITCH website: [www.switchurbanwater.eu](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu)
Especially- [www.switchurbanwater.eu/learningalliances](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/learningalliances)

Process Documentation Training (Lodz, Poland, 12t-5th July 2007) BLOG: [http://www.processdocumentation.wordpress.com](http://www.processdocumentation.wordpress.com)

EMPOWERS project: [www.empowers.info](http://www.empowers.info)