SWITCH Policy Briefing Note 1

Acting Together for Better Water Management in Cities

The following briefing note contends that 'acting together' in cities will be at the heart of achieving any substantial system change or 'paradigm shift' towards more sustainable or more integrated urban water management. It is aimed mainly at decision makers on integrated and sustainable urban water management, local government including urban planners, water utilities, and major international agencies working in developing countries.

> *"It is easy sometimes to get sidetracked by all the nifty technology and planet-saving goodness that comes with ecocities and forget about the people part"*
>
> *(Mad Architect, 2008http://ecocity.wordpress.com/2008/04/03/)*

Headlines

1. Social and institutional issues, rather than technical issues, are the key to sustainable urban water management
2. A Learning Alliance is a group of organisations from a given system that seeks to effect widespread impact through the adaptation and up-scaling of an innovating approach
3. SWITCH is successfully engaging users of research, with potentially high impacts, and ensuring that research is getting into wider use
4. Multi-stakeholder research processes are challenging and expensive, and the costs of promoting change are frequently underestimated

Introduction to urban water governance

Urban water management typically involves and impacts on a long list of stakeholders. These include: organisations who effect changes in policy and practice; service providers; people who influence decision-makers; civil society organisations who can bring pressure to bear on decision-makers; water user groups; activists working to address poverty, gender, environmental issues etc; training and research organisations; the media; and donors and financial organisations (Morris, 2006).

> **What do we mean by governance?**
> Governance is not synonymous with government. Rather, it is about how governments, institutions and social organizations interact with citizens when making decisions and implementing them. It is the process of decision making which determines how decisions are taken and who has the power, and in what capacity, to make decisions. It is also about who is held accountable for these decisions.
>
> *(da Silva et al., 2008)*

This long list of stakeholders contributes to the complexity of urban water management and makes it difficult to influence, adapt, or improve the situation. It is argued that social and institutional issues are actually the key to sustainable urban water management more than technical issues. Brown and Farrelly (2009) advise the focus therefore to be on "community, resources, responsibility, knowledge, vision, commitment and coordination" in any programme of change.

In response to these challenges, and the difficulties of transitioning to a better approach, SWITCH has sought to understand governance issues and to support cities to develop stakeholder platforms known as Learning Alliances (LAs).

Issues and challenges

Working together to overcome challenges and constraints

Learning Alliances are about creating new or better innovation systems to build bridges between researchers, implementers and policy makers that often work ineffectually in their corners of the sector. The urban water management 'system' or 'sector' (like many other parts of the water sector) often has relatively little inherent ability to adapt or learn, and a Learning Alliance creates mechanisms and a process to facilitate more learning and sharing.

SWITCH Learning Alliances have supported many types of activities (Box 1) aimed at finding common ground between stakeholders, finding better solutions to problems through demand-led research, and creating incentives for learning.

Box 1. Typical Learning Alliance activities

- Meetings, often bilateral and focused on developing trust, understanding and gaining buy-in of key stakeholders
- Workshops on specific technologies or approaches, visioning and scenario-based joint planning and strategy development
- Training to build awareness and skills of best practice of city practitioners
- Facilitating communications on the activities of SWITCH and other related actors in the city
- Needs assessment and expressing demand for research based on shared understanding of local problems
- Design of pilot demonstration projects to test new technologies and approaches
- Awareness raising e.g. using local mass media, school art competitions, and joining other city initiatives
- Visits to other cities and key sector events such as the World Water Forum
- Process documentation: documenting what happens and why

Working together in new ways

SWITCH has been successfully engaging users of research, with potentially high impacts, and ensuring that research is getting into wider use. This is demonstrated by the following example (Box 2) from the Polish city of Łódź (Butterworth et al., 2008).

LA meeting in Zaragoza

Box 2. Experience of an engineer at the Łódź wastewater treatment plant

Many organisations are involved in water and wastewater management in Łódź and it is institutionally complex according to Andrzej Czapla. This is where he sees the SWITCH supported Learning Alliance having an important role: it has improved communication between the different organisations and provides a cross-institutional platform to share information and discuss water and sanitation issues. SWITCH is giving an overall picture of how everything is working together in the city and is addressing the issues in an integrated way which is helpful as individual organisations only work on a small part of the system. Andrzej says that the Learning Alliance has enabled the participants to 'send signals' about key issues to the city authorities, and to 'open the eyes' of people to areas that are beyond the scope of their own jobs.

Andrzej and his colleague have attended all the Learning Alliance meetings held to date. Although these take up a lot of his scarce time, he feels it is worth it. He was happy to be involved in the development of the SWITCH programme and is looking forward to the results it will generate. In fact, he would now like to see more meetings and events including smaller workgroups to take up specific issues. It has been useful to learn from other cities about how similar problems have been tackled and he cites the learning opportunities he has had from Birmingham, and Krakow through the Polish Association of Water and Sewerage Operators, visits to Germany and contacts with the International Water Association. In the future, he would like the SWITCH Learning Alliance to address stormwater management issues, since 50% of the city has combined stormwater sewers, and the plant struggles to cope with peak flows of highly diluted sewage.

The costs and benefits of stakeholder engagement

In analyzing the effectiveness of Learning Alliances, it is important to link outcomes to the investment made. Multi-stakeholder processes are time and resource intensive, while expectations can be high and budgets low.

It was initially assumed that city level facilitation and operational costs did not require funding, as this could be secured locally in the cities. However, budgets were later approved for recruiting Learning Alliance facilitators and operating costs, with further investment to support LA processes.

Stakeholder engagement will not be sustained if investments are restricted to projects, and even within projects it is difficult to allocate sufficient resources. While many partners will readily contribute inputs in kind, inputs for initial facilitation, training and capacity building are considerable. 'Software elements' need funding from the start of a project and may be difficult to finance later.

The main focus of SWITCH Learning Alliances initially was at the city level. However, there has since been a progression to other levels, with events such as: the 'Global Citywater Futures Summit' (2009), the 'Integrated Urban Water Management in Cities in Latin America' initiative (2010), and the planned conference on 'Sustainable Water Management in Cities: Engaging Stakeholders for Effective Change' in Zaragoza (2010).

Box 3. Examples of tangible benefits:

Łódź

- The work of the LA in Łódź has resulted in the concept of a city-wide Blue-Green Network . The idea is to link development of a network of (restored) river systems and green areas (agricultural areas, parks, wastelands, degraded areas) as a basis for spatial planning and economic development. Linking 'blue' and 'green' spaces offers good outcomes for maintaining the continuity of ecological processes and providing an integrated approach for issues such as stormwater retention purification, improving the microclimate in the city and adapting to climate change; improvements to health and urban environmental quality, and increasing zero-CO2-emission public transportation.

Tel Aviv

- There is a high level of expectation within the LA and the City of Tel Aviv that SWITCH will actively support the development of Sustainable Water Indicators for the Water Chapter in the City Master Plan. SWITCH will fund a part-time Water Expert to join the Planning Department of the Municipality to develop these indicators and define how these would be monitored. This is seen to be a vital element of SWITCH in Tel Aviv and one which will have a lasting impact on the city.

Conclusions/Recommendations

- It is vital to understand existing governance contexts, decision-making systems and cross-institutional platforms and issues before trying to promote change in urban water management. Learning Alliance processes can then be better designed to overcome constraints to innovation and getting research into use.
- Learning Alliances, as adopted by SWITCH, appear to work well with positive outcomes and be cost effective compared to other research costs. However, these costs are frequently overlooked. Investing in high quality facilitation is especially important.
- Whether better communication and coordination (in search of IUWM) are sustained after the end of the research project and activities is an important question. There are some indications that Learning Alliances are going to be sustained or adopted in some cities as a mechanism for on-going activities.

LA meeting in Łódź

Key references

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A series of SWITCH Learning Alliance Briefing Notes provide access to further information and are available at www.switchurbanwater.eu/la_guidance.php

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First LA meeting Beijing

The SWITCH project aims to achieve more sustainable urban water management in the “City of the Future”. A consortium of 33 partner organizations from 15 countries are working together on innovative scientific, technological and socio-economic solutions, which can then be more speedily replicated around the world.

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