



LEARNING BRIEF

Are we doing the right thing? Critical questioning for city sanitation planning

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City-wide sanitation planning is widely perceived as an important enabler of coordinated improvements in efforts to achieve universal access to sustainable urban sanitation services in developing countries. However, investment in city sanitation planning has not always led to sustainable and equitable outcomes as intended. It is important to reflect on and critically question 'why?'

This learning brief presents highlights from the learning paper '*Are we doing the right thing? Critical questioning for city sanitation planning*' aimed at prompting an audience of practitioners, policy makers and development agencies to reflect on their approaches to city sanitation planning, especially the assumptions that underlie them.

The framework for critical questioning was based on desktop research of planning approaches in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India and the Philippines, and of planning theories represented in different approaches. Greater awareness of underlying assumptions in sanitation planning and consideration of how well they match realities may allow better-targeted approaches to sanitation planning to be adopted, for improved outcomes.

Both the learning brief and learning paper were prepared by SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney, as part of their partnership for research and learning to improve urban sanitation sector knowledge and practice.

Key messages

- **Approaches to city sanitation planning, dominated by 'rational comprehensive' thinking, are underpinned by assumptions that often do not hold true.** Confronting and reflecting on implicit beliefs or assumptions enables learning that can enable practitioners and organisations to make informed decisions in complex and rapidly changing contexts.
- **Accepting that 'less is more' in city sanitation planning, for instance, placing less emphasis on the comprehensiveness and more on the relevant political economy, may deliver better outcomes.** Consistently low consumer demand and political will to support sanitation services are key factors in the failure of sanitation planning to result in sustainable services.
- **Monitoring and embedded learning processes need to be integrated within any planning process to examine what happens during and as a result of the process.** This requires re-balancing resources to potentially reduce the scale, comprehensiveness and/or ambition of a sanitation planning itself, and reallocating such resources to learning processes and improving outcomes.

Why examine assumptions in city sanitation planning?

Raising awareness of assumptions being made in sanitation planning has potential to lead to better targeted planning approaches. The usual way to address failures, such as the failure of sanitation planning to deliver specific outcomes, is to analyse the results from the perspective of what worked and what didn't, and to modify actions to make the strategy (or 'plan') more effective in getting results. This is called single-loop learning.

However, questioning the **beliefs and assumptions** that led to certain actions being taken leads to **'double-loop' learning** which is promoted in organisational learning theory, that contrasts with and complements the usual 'single-loop' approach (figure 1). Double-loop learning allows deeper engagement and learning around the **causes of persistent challenges** and enables more informed decision-making.

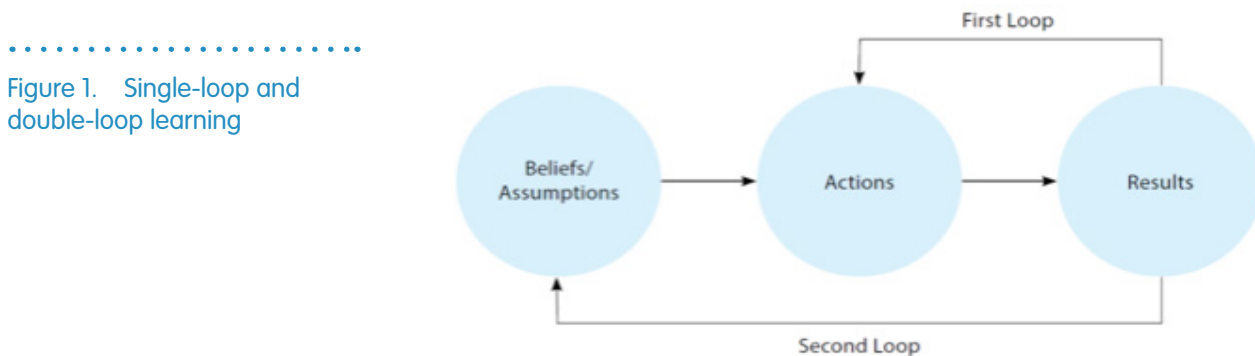
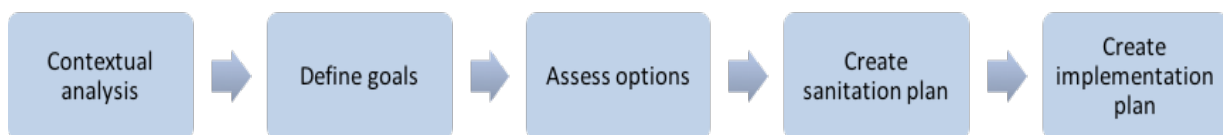


Figure 1. Single-loop and double-loop learning

A focus on double-loop learning shifts the focus from **'doing the thing right'** in order to get the intended results (the domain of single-loop learning), to **'doing the right thing'** that involves critical reflection and questioning of assumptions so that we can re-think our strategies and actions, and hopefully, in doing so, deliver more effective outcomes.

Dominance of the rational comprehensive approach in sanitation planning

Sanitation planning, and planning practice more generally, has been dominated by the 'rational comprehensive' approach that follows a classical set of linear activities or steps (figure 2) that leads to the **development of a plan** (as distinct from implementation or results). The appeal of this approach to planning lies in its ability to explain planning decisions so they appear to be derived from reasoned argument. Planning is viewed as a scientific enterprise led by technocratic experts, as the means for reaching defined objectives through a rational process of analysis.



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Figure 2. Classical steps in city sanitation planning

Critics point out that its simplified version of reality misses the more messy and open nature of the real world, so plans cannot be implemented fully in real-world contexts. While the limitations of this linear 'rational comprehensive' approach to sanitation planning have increasingly been recognised over the last decade or so, and addressed through complementary processes such as community/ stakeholder participation to different degrees, sanitation planning largely remains founded in the rational comprehensive approach with its classical steps.

‘Rational comprehensive’ sanitation planning in Indonesia

Local governments, responsible for delivery of key services under Indonesia’s decentralisation laws, undertake the development of City Sanitation Strategies for delivery of wastewater, drainage and solid waste services, with direction and oversight from the national government. A prescriptive strategic planning framework for sanitation development guides local governments through a comprehensive and systematic planning and implementation process (table 1) characteristic of the ‘classical steps’ in figure 1.

Planning time line

<i>Preliminary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness raising by campaigns, education and advocacy activities. • Institutional and regulatory preparation for participation (in the district). 	
<i>Year 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situation assessment including an environmental health risk assessment and mapping (first six months). • Preparation of the district/city sanitation strategy (SSK) (second six months). 	Monitoring, evaluation, and guidance (this is intended to run from the start and continue throughout all stages).
<i>Year 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation of the Program Memorandum (MPS) – memorandum of commitment for the implementation of select programs, with budgets allocated from regency/city, provincial and central government. 	
<i>Year 3+</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program implementation. 	

Table 1. Schedule and steps for development of City Sanitation Strategies in Indonesia

The centrally-controlled locally-undertaken planning model was expected to lead to ‘local ownership of sanitation challenges and improvements’ as a result of the local implementation of the planning process. As the approach has been rolled out at scale, however, recent reviews show that the process has largely been undertaken as a ‘formality’ by local governments, the quality of planning documents produced is low, and there has been little impact of these documents on increasing investment in sanitation at the local level.

City sanitation planning: an interplay of national and local dynamics

Sanitation sector development and planning relies on national governments’ commitment and prioritisation of sanitation, to be driven by national policies and regulations. The Human Rights Council (2013) stresses that national governments bear most of the responsibility for ensuring the realisation of human rights, including ‘a duty to regulate and monitor the way in which local governments respect, protect and fulfil the human rights to water and sanitation’. The level of prioritisation from the national level for planning and implementation of city-based sanitation influence its roll-out to the local level, depending on the particular forms of decentralisation adopted by each country.

The balance between the imposition of national government requirements on local governments or implementation agencies, and the level of autonomy experienced by locally based agencies to respond to their particular context and innovate, may be viewed as a spectrum. **Top-down** approaches at one end of the spectrum are completely driven by centralised authorities. **Bottom-up** approaches at the other end would have local actors (e.g. local governments, communities) given complete autonomy over sanitation planning – although in practice higher levels of government will have some degree of influence. Figure 3 illustrates this concept in relation to the case study countries (relative placements are indicative only).

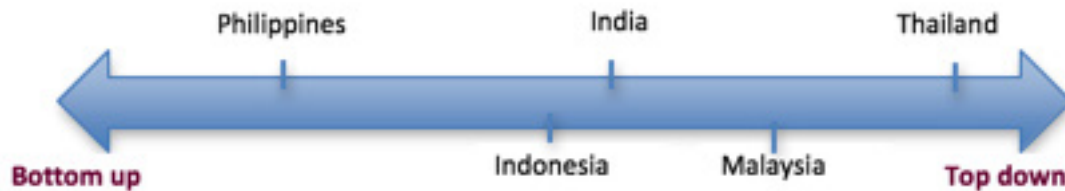


Figure 3. Continuum of bottom-up to top-down sanitation planning processes

Critical questions designed to reveal unquestioned assumptions

In many cases, reflecting on assumptions that are implicit in the way specific aspects of city sanitation planning have been designed and undertaken frequently reveals that they do not hold true.

For example, the assumption that a planning approach that succeeded at pilot scale can be scaled up nationally with equal success is implicit in the approaches taken in Indonesia and India, but there has been little shift in sanitation service delivery.

Equally, regarding participation, many would argue that ‘more participation is better’, both through engagement of multiple government agencies and community participation. However, little attention is given to the significant resources and expertise needed to make such engagement effective, and the associated trade-offs. Limitations in available skills and knowledge in relation to sanitation also undermine assumptions about participation.

Examples of critical questions we must ask about city sanitation planning...

- What does it take to ensure top-down guidance from national level results in quality and coherence of local planning processes?
- What are the trade-offs between the simplicity of single agency implementation of sanitation planning and active participation by relevant stakeholders?
- Do incentives exist for relevant staff and stakeholders to invest in acquiring sufficient knowledge about sanitation, such that they can meaningfully participate?
- What type of participation or participatory design is appropriate to bring the community members into sanitation planning as citizens, and as users, and at which point(s) in the planning process is this needed?
- Will funds flow once there is a plan?
- What is the right balance between setting a vision with a long-term focus and pragmatically addressing immediate issues?

Three illustrative examples are provided on the following pages. Please refer to the learning paper for a more comprehensive discussion of these and other examples.

Collaboration and the challenge of reaching true consensus

There are many actors with a stake in sanitation planning and implementation, with the choices about who is best placed to lead, and who is best placed to participate in a planning process depending on the institutional arrangements in different countries and cities. There are many actors with a stake in sanitation planning and implementation, with the choices about who is best placed to lead, and who is best placed to participate in a planning process depending on the institutional arrangements in different countries and cities.

In Indonesia and India, city sanitation planning is designed as a cross-disciplinary collaboration of relevant stakeholders. Sanitation working groups in Indonesia (Pokja Sanitasi) are made up of staff in specific positions within local government divisions of planning, public works, health, environment and budgeting etc. In India, planning is overseen by a City Sanitation Taskforce with representatives from agencies of local government directly responsible for sanitation, agencies indirectly involved or impacted, representatives of the different stakeholder sectors etc.

Varying (and sometimes competing) assumptions behind approaches to leadership and collaboration for sanitation planning include:

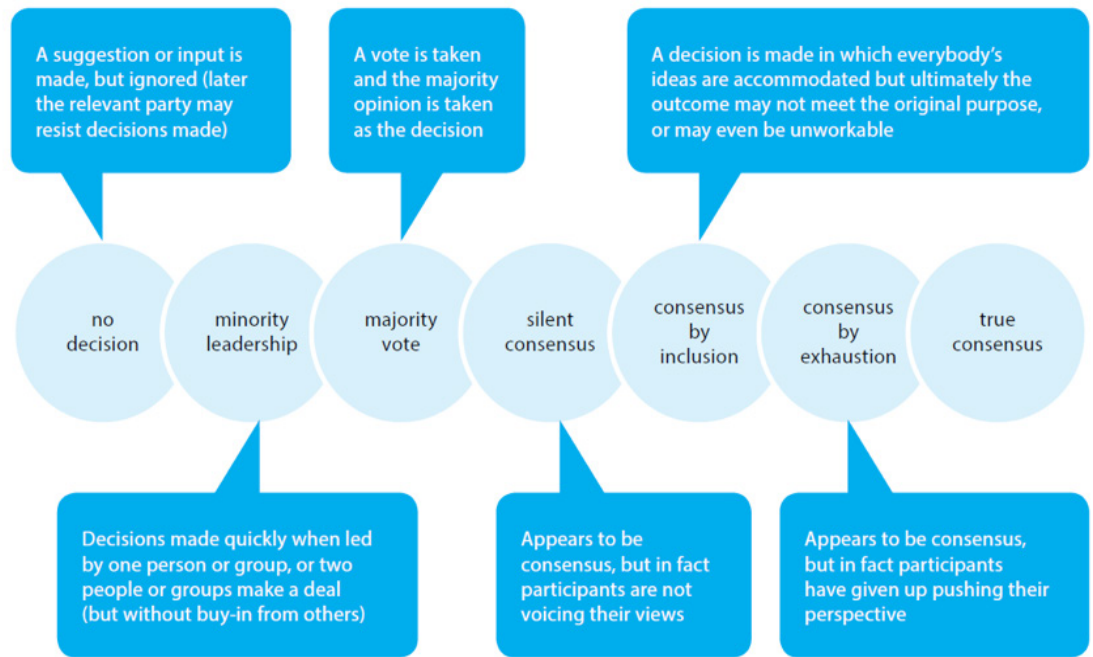
- *Sanitation demands collaboration and engagement between different administrations/agencies to respond to its cross-sectoral nature.*
- *Staff/representatives from different sections and agencies can and will cooperate and work together to create a mutually agreed coordinated multi-sectoral plan.*
- *It is possible for stakeholders from different agencies to gain sufficient knowledge and sufficient 'care' or interest in the issue of sanitation to contribute to effective decisions.*

In practice, bringing together staff from relevant departments to form a sanitation working group in Indonesia has not ensured effective collaboration or empowered decision-making. Membership on the basis of positions has not ensured the capacity to undertake sanitation projects, or the interest and commitment to sanitation, and staff rotations have led to loss of institutional knowledge and capacity.

While the concept of integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines and multiple sectors within sanitation planning is compelling, the complexity of multi-stakeholder decision-making needs to be appreciated, and often it is not. Particular attention needs to be paid to how decisions are actually made when many actors are involved, and to the existence of different incentives, power relations, competing priorities and competing interests that all affect collaboration. The different ways that individuals and groups interact in collective decision making is complex and diverse (figure 4).

Although it is commonly assumed that collaboration involves true consensus, buy-in, mutual understanding and agreement, it appears that true consensus rarely takes place in city sanitation planning, and this affects the outcomes of the process. If this is the case, one could question whether an emphasis on extensive collaboration in city sanitation planning is the best choice.

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 Figure 4. Continuum of dynamics and involvement in decision-making and consensus (adapted from Hope & Timmel (1984))



Single agency leadership – pros and cons

In Thailand and Malaysia, leading the planning process is part of the responsibility of the single agency with responsibility for delivery of city sanitation services: the Ministry of Health in Thailand and Indah Water Konsortium (IWK) in Malaysia.

Assumptions behind this approach to sanitation planning may include:

- Leadership by a single agency provides clear lines of authority and accountability.
- Leadership by a single agency increases efficiency in reaching ultimate outcomes.

Some significant sanitation outcomes have been achieved in Malaysia and Thailand over a relatively short time. Clear lines of authority and accountability arising from a single agency's leadership may have helped. It is possible however that single agency leadership could miss important 'other' perspectives, given the diverse nature of sanitation.

Reflecting on planning for and securing financing

There are differences in the way planning for financing sanitation is undertaken – an essential aspect of sanitation planning for investing in infrastructure and sustaining services. Rational comprehensive approaches to sanitation planning tend to create master plans first, and seek finances for implementation in a subsequent step.

In the corporate operating environment of Malaysian government-owned Indah Water Konsortium (IWK), financial planning takes place as a routine ongoing function alongside investment planning, as common in good business practice. Financing is provided through a combination of government contributions, tariffs and private sector participation. Government subsidies form the most significant revenue source, while policies and regulations enable IWK to access other sources of funding – notably to draw capital investment in sewerage systems from real estate developers. Although the government made tariffs be revised downwards in the last decade, tariff revenues are made secure through separate legislation that obliges users to pay sanitation tariffs.

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In the Philippines, central government support of sanitation financing is focused on large infrastructure investment for densely populated urban centres – support that does not extend to the majority of cities that are not categorised as ‘highly urbanised cities’. The funding program supports local cities and municipalities with implementing sewerage systems, and for promoting faecal sludge management (FSM) and regular desludging. While FSM cost models enable full cost recovery tariffs, and have potential to safely manage the sludge component of sewage from onsite systems over the long term, it does not address the effluent component that can contaminate water resources and pose a public health hazard.

Some of the assumptions underpinning approaches to financing are:

- *The funds will flow once the plan is completed.*
- *Sanitation is a public service so the public purse must contribute to financing.*
- *The service provider does not have to secure finances for everything – other stakeholders can and should help.*
- *To achieve effective service delivery in decentralised contexts, local governments need to raise sanitation funds locally (through local taxes and user fees).*

It was assumed that the Philippines government offer of a cost share facility, under which the federal government pays 40% of the upfront costs of sanitation schemes, would incentivise sanitation investment by highly urbanised cities, but few cities have considered the offer. Local governments consider this fraction insufficient to meet the large upfront costs, while finding the procedures for accessing the funds complex and unclear.

Responsibility for sanitation service provision is one of many responsibilities that fall on local governments, so sanitation often competes against other services in LG budgets. Infrastructure and services that are more visible to the public gain political support and funds, in preference to ‘invisible’ sanitation. In contrast, dedicated government funds go to wastewater management by IWK whose sole function is wastewater service provisions.

Concluding reflections

Rational comprehensive planning incorporating varying aspects of wider stakeholder or community collaboration was found to be the dominant approach influencing contemporary city sanitation planning in the case studies considered in the learning paper. Yet such technocratic planning processes are likely to remain ineffectual without sufficient citizen interest, political will and appropriate incentives to address sanitation issues with an increased sense of urgency.

It is time to consider alternative paths to planning sanitation that are grounded firmly in the technical, political and capacity context, to seek progressive improvements that can be sustained rather than to aim at planning the perfect system that is never implemented – and accepting that ‘less is more’. In particular, we need to ask the kinds of ‘critical questions’ asked in this paper to help move beyond potentially unfounded assumptions that will hinder or undermine expected outcomes of a planning process.

Re-balancing resources to reduce the scale, comprehensiveness and ambition of sanitation planning itself, and reallocating resources to **learning and improving** is likely to improve outcomes. Building in processes for continuous monitoring for evidence concerning the effectiveness of planning processes, and critical reflection including questioning assumptions are essential for learning from experience and acknowledging that approaches taken have been ineffective, and underlying assumptions haven’t held true, is not easy when large investments of time and effort have been based on them. But failing to change tack is likely to be even more costly.

About us

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) is a not-for-profit international development organisation with a long-term, local presence in over 30 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. SNV's global team of local and international advisors works with local partners to equip communities, businesses and organisations with the tools, knowledge and connections they need to increase their incomes and gain access to basic services – empowering them to break the cycle of poverty and guide their own development.

SNV's Urban Sanitation & Hygiene for Health and Development (USHHD) programme works with municipal governments to develop safe, sustainable city-wide services. The programme integrates insights in WASH governance, investment and finance, behavioural change communication and management of the sanitation service chain. We engage private sector, civil society organisations, users and local authorities to improve public health and development opportunities in their city.

As part of our USHHD programme, we have a long term partnership with the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (ISF-UTS) focused on research and learning to improve practice and contribute to the WASH sector knowledge and evidence.

For further information please visit: www.snv.org

Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney

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For further information please visit: www.isf.uts.edu.au

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This learning brief draws on the following learning paper:

ISF-UTS & SNV (2016), Learning paper: *Are we doing the right thing? Critical questioning for city sanitation planning*. Prepared by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, by Abey Suriya, K., Kome, A., Carrard, N., Mukheibir, P., and Willetts, J. Available online at www.snv.org/explore-more and www.uts.edu.au.