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Civil Society Organisations' learning for impact in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene programming

Summary of research findings

Despite the large quantity of information available on good practice in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector through a range of knowledge sharing initiatives and platforms, there is a gap in knowing what works: what evidence is being used by civil society organisations (CSOs), and how? What are the organisational characteristics and processes that support uptake of evidence-based approaches?

This research focussed on understanding **how CSOs can improve organisational knowledge and learning (K&L) processes for improved practice, and what types and formats of K&L products are most preferred and considered most effective.** Commissioned by the CS WASH Fund[1], research findings and recommendations will be useful to CSOs and WASH researchers aiming to improve the sharing and dissemination of their work. Views were sought from CSO representatives and other non-CSO stakeholders, including governments, academics, donors and consultants working in the WASH sector across the world. The full report of this research is available at www.cswashfund.org.

EFFECTIVE ORGANISATIONAL K&L PROCESSES

- Peer-to-peer and on the job learning
- Reflection processes
- Leadership driving K&L
- Time and funding for K&L
- Feedback loops between M&E and programming
- K&L duties in workplans

CSO learning

EFFECTIVE K&L PRODUCTS

- Face-to-face, hands-on and experiential formats
- Practical guidance and toolkits
- Well-written, concise and evidence-based
- Multiple online formats

FAST FACTS

Traditional paper based formats of information sharing, such as reports are still relevant, but are most effective when presented in a practical, well written, concise and evidence-based manner.

Face-to-face learning with peers is valued, and reported to lead to improved practice.

Leaders set the tone when it comes to creating space, time and resources for knowledge and learning activities, as well as providing safe and supportive environments to learn from failure.

Greater focus on learning from M&E processes will be beneficial to evidence based practice.

CIVIL SOCIETY WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE FUND

Australian Aid

UTS:ISF INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Learning for improved practice: 6 key ingredients

A successful organisational learning culture is one that is able to take up new evidence and apply it meaningfully in policy and programming. Research participants were asked about barriers and enablers to learning, and six core themes emerged.

Credits: International WaterCentre

1. PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Learning from peers and whilst on the job is the most beneficial mode of learning. This includes workshops, conferences and networks, as well as learning exchanges within organisations and between organisations – for example, field advisors from one country or context meeting with advisers from another context. Learning alliances, communities of practice (CoP) and other networks within the WASH sector are also important learning forums. Of the CSO survey respondents, 65% reported that they are part of a formal learning alliance and/or CoP.

2. REFLECTION PROCESSES AND LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Reflection processes are critical to learning within organisations and for translating available knowledge such as evidence from M&E processes, into policy and practice. Of the non-CSO survey respondents, 89% strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement: 'CSOs don't have time to learn and reflect on policy and practice outside of day to day duties.'

Learning from failure is a key area for improvement within organisations and is closely linked to limited reflection processes. Other factors that hinder the systematic use of failure in learning processes include: fundraising and brand/reputation concerns influencing the space for openly discussing failures; perceived donor expectations; and fears of negative personal consequences resulting from admitting that things did not go according to plan.

INFORMAL LEARNING WITHIN ORGANISATIONS COUNTS

68%
of CSO survey respondents identified discussions within their organisation as being very important to their learning.

76%
identified learning on the job from experience as a key source of learning.

3. LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a key factor in driving and supporting a 'learning culture' within CSOs in the WASH sector. Lack of support from upper management for time, space and resources dedicated to K&L is a key impediment to effective organisational learning processes.

Power dynamics and hierarchical structures can affect organisational leaders' or K&L champions' ability to get buy-in from staff at different levels. These issues were not identified as being a significant problem within the CSOs surveyed however, with 63% responding that such organisational dynamics and structures did not hinder information flows and uptake within their organisation.

4. LEARNING ORIENTED MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES

Feedback loops between monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes and programming need to be strengthened within CSOs. Of the non-CSO survey respondents, 40% stated that M&E is not at all used effectively for continuous improvement in the CSOs that they work with, and 60% stated that M&E was somewhat effectively used. CSOs also identified a need for M&E processes to be better utilised in programs. One common challenge identified was that donor driven M&E processes are not as relevant to 'on the ground' CSO knowledge needs as they could be. Further, as identified by non-CSOs respondents, there are risks associated with outsourcing some M&E functions, as this can hinder CSOs' ability to develop understanding and ownership of the data collected, and subsequent learning.

5. TIME AND FUNDING FOR K&L

Lack of time and financial resources for K&L activities is a key constraint to learning within WASH sector organisations. Although most CSO survey respondents reported that their organisations provided them with funding and time for K&L activities, the extent of this support varied across the surveyed CSOs, and overall, was not considered adequate. The issue of who gets access to learning opportunities was also raised, with some CSOs reporting that field staff didn't get as many opportunities as management at the organisations' headquarters, and that more focus needs to be placed on connecting knowledge and learning systems across organisations and between roles, especially within large organisations.

Addressing this constraint requires defining priorities and being strategic about where to focus available resources. Several CSOs interviewed had conducted an internal assessment of their organisations K&L needs, capacities, and opportunities to steer these resources strategically.

Donors were also found to play important roles through requiring K&L processes and outputs as conditions for funding and within funding agreements.

METHODOLOGY

The research drew on theories of organisational learning, and knowledge and information management in over 50 sources of academic and grey literature. A mixed methods approach was used, including two online surveys and semi-structured interviews, targeted at Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as well as other non-CSO WASH sector stakeholders such as donors, consultants and academics. In total, over 100 WASH sector practitioners were involved in the research: 14 CSO representatives and 6 other non-CSO stakeholders interviewed; 60 CSOs survey respondents and 22 other non-CSO survey respondents.

6. K&L DUTIES IDENTIFIED IN WORKPLANS

A strategy to enable effective organisational learning includes embedding K&L roles and activities in staff work plans, and including time and funding allocated for these. Three organisations interviewed explained that K&L was a core function of the organisation and one of their key objectives, and that this made it possible to fund specific K&L support roles, and for K&L to be embedded into work plans (see box below).

MAKING K&L CORE BUSINESS

One CSO has made K&L core business by using strategies that include:

- **K&L is defined** in the **overarching goals** of the organisation

- **Annual reflection studies** for each program

- Regular **learning events**

- **K&L responsibilities** clearly defined in work plans

- **Formative research** studies

- **K&L budget lines** in every project

- **Donor support** for K&L

- **Joint projects** with academic partners.

CHALLENGES

Weaknesses identified by CSOs and non-CSOs to knowledge and learning processes and practices were identified primarily as:

- **Lack of time for reflection** and to take on the results of M&E processes and data

- In some organisations, **leaders are not driving a 'learning culture'**

- **Reputation and funding concerns** impeding K&L processes

- **Learning from failure is ad-hoc** and sometimes avoided due to perceived pressures from donors and not wanting to be exposed (personally and organisationally)

- **M&E data and processes not being used more effectively in continuous improvement.** This included that some M&E processes are outsourced and therefore knowledge sits outside of some organisations; the donor driven nature of some M&E processes seen to not be as relevant to 'on the ground' knowledge needs as they could be; and lack of time available/built in to learning from M&E.

Preferred and effective types of K&L products

The types of K&L products that are most preferred and most effective for CSO learning are:
- Face-to-face formats (such as conferences, presentations and networking events)
- Materials that provide practical guidance (such as manuals, field guides, and 'how to' guidance notes, toolkits and training materials)

K&L product perceived to have led to the greatest level of improved practice within organisation

■ Number of respondents

Conferences, presentations and face-to-face networking — **15**

Manuals, field guides, and 'how to' guidance notes — **13**

Toolkits and training materials — **11**

Social media — **9**

Fact sheet and case studies — **7**

Videos (e.g. TED talks, animations) — **6**

Reports and working papers — **6**

Briefing and policy notes — **5**

D-groups and e-discussions — **5**

Peer reviewed literature — **4**

Webinars and web forums — **3**

Massive open online courses (MOOC) — **3**

> Sometimes web-based tools are ineffective in the Pacific because they are too large for the connection speeds.
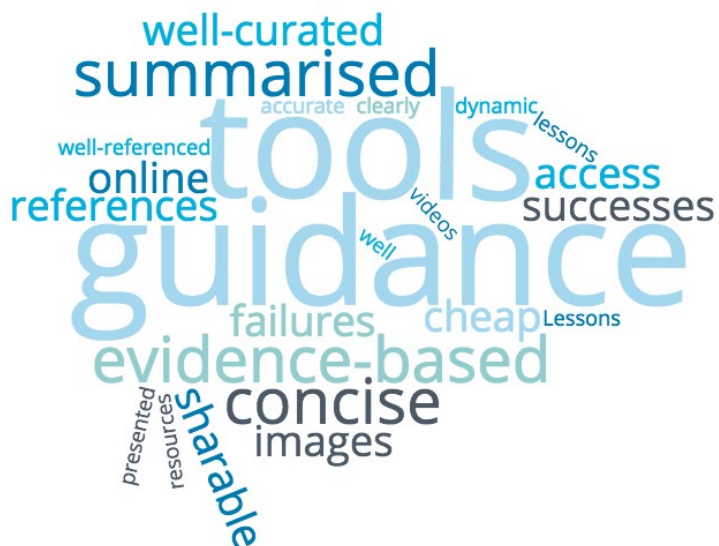> *(CSO interviewee)*

> I like webinars that are recorded, because I can view them at any time.
> *(CSO interviewee)*

The value that people place on face-to-face learning formats supports research on learning that emphasises the transformative experience people have when learning by doing, and with their peers. Additionally, by taking CSO staff away from their offices and normal routines, face-to-face formats such as learning events create time for learning and reflection that may not otherwise be available.

The lower rating of web based tools and webinars and web forums may be a result of internet access/speeds issues as identified by respondents from the Pacific. The data indicated that WASH practitioners use a diverse range of online formats depending on individual preferences.

Characteristics of effective K&L products

Research participants reported that useful and applicable K&L products need to be evidence-based, practical, well written and concise, with a focus on providing tools and guidance.

well-curated summarised accurate clearly dynamic lessons well-referenced online tools access references guidance successes videos well failures cheap Lessons evidence-based concise presented resources sharable images

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSOs DRIVING A LEARNING CULTURE

- Leaders set the tone when it comes to creating the **space, time and resources** for knowledge and learning activities, as well as providing **safe and supportive environments to learn from failure.**

- K&L activities and initiatives need to be actively resourced: CSOs would benefit from developing **budget lines for K&L across the organisation and within projects** where possible.

- Attention needs to be given to **ensuring that K&L opportunities are provided across an organisation** – from field staff to those at 'headquarters'.

- **Greater focus on learning from M&E processes** will be beneficial to evidence based practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSOs PRODUCING K&L PRODUCTS

- Traditional formats of information sharing (such as reports) are still relevant, but are most effective when presented in a **practical, well written, concise and evidence-based manner.**

- **Face-to-face learning with peers is critical**, and reported to be most effective in learning for improved practice.

- There was a clear **preference for guidance materials,** however these need to be **concise, well written and curated,** and often require **mentoring to guide adaptation of learning into a new context.**

- When using online platforms, it is preferable to use a **variety and combination of formats** (e-discussions, webinars, social media, etc.) to accommodate the range of preferences that individuals have.

1. The Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Fund (CS WASH Fund/the Fund) is an Australian aid initiative funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The objective of the Fund is to enhance the health and quality of life of the poor and vulnerable by improving sustainable access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene. www.cswashfund.org

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