Timely, relevant and actionable feedback for stronger sanitation programmes

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Rural sanitation poses complex and often intractable problems, and the momentum and scale of sanitation programmes across much of the South Asia region is unprecedented. The speed of implementation means that rapidly identifying what works, filling gaps in knowledge, and finding answers that provide practical ideas for policy and practice can have exceptionally widespread impact provided they are timely, relevant and actionable. This presents unique and urgent challenges which require new approaches to innovation, learning and sharing.

Recognising this, SACOSAN VI passed a Resolution (Number 7) to *promote continual learning and sharing of experiences between and within countries…*In the spirit of that Resolution, India's *Guidelines for Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin)* of October 2017 includes two sections, 5.2.10 and 5.2.11, devoted to rapid action learning. This is envisaged at National, State and District levels as required. The Guidelines see a need for small scale and flexibility in order to find fast and effective ways forward, developing, sharing and spreading solutions. When learning has to be so fast, questions arise not just about the 'how' of programme implementation but also the methodological 'how' of learning, sharing and feedback to policy and practice. Conventional research and feedback through reports and their dissemination is often too slow and cumbersome. New ways of practical action learning with rapid feedback to policy and practice have as a result become urgent imperatives.

To meet these needs a range of innovative approaches to learning, sharing and feedback have been developed and tested in India. Four of these which should be widely replicable are:

- immersive research
- rapid topic exploration
- crowd-sourcing ideas and innovations
- Rapid Action Learning Workshops including horizontal sharing and learning peer-to-peer

1. *Immersive Research[1]:* Praxis, WaterAid and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) undertook an immersive research approach (IRA) to understand and review successful practices in behaviour change in rural districts that had been declared open defecation free. The purpose of using the IRA in the context of the ongoing SBM-G was three-fold:

    a. to test and develop the IRA methodology,
    b. to gain substantive timely insights which might not be so readily accessible with other more conventional methods and
    c. to lead to recommendations back to government and development partners.

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[1] This approach drew on other experience with immersions including the Reality Check Approach www.reality-check-approach.com/

Immersions were undertaken in a few purposively selected communities with researchers living with families for 3-4 days and nights, and then meeting together to discuss, compare and contrast findings. Though immersions in this case were thematically focused on sanitation and hygiene, in this approach researchers were relatively free to learn open-endedly from lived experience. There were no questionnaires or interview schedules. Efforts were made to offset elite bias and to include those who were marginalised or very poor, and also children, youth, women, girls, the disabled and elderly.

Examples of major findings fed back to Government informally and without delay included the need for IEC (Information, Education, Communication) to focus on technical knowledge about toilet designs and materials, more focused support to households less able to help themselves, and representation of lower castes and marginalised groups on Nigrani Samitis (village-level sanitation committees).

The immersive research approach proved to be a great way of examining the realities of the SBM-G. It allowed the researchers to unpack some of the complexities of the real life of rural households and the dynamics happening around the sanitation drive, providing insights that other methods tend to miss out. In addition, efforts were made to ensure lessons learnt and recommendations were fed directly back to government at different levels immediately following the immersions.

2. *Rapid topic explorations:* IDS commissioned four different rapid reports, each by a single researcher. They were asked to review accessible literature, conduct key informant interviews and undertake field visits where appropriate. Review topics were
    - twin-leach pits
    - septic tanks and rural faecal sludge management
    - men and open defecation
    - sanitation coverage, usage and health impacts.

It was not possible to identify a researcher to take on the fifth topic which was water and rural sanitation. Aspects of water use and its influence on behaviour remain a blind spot. These topics were chosen because they spanned disciplines and tended not to have been studied holistically and with a strong and up-to-date field empirical element.

Each researcher was given freedom to be highly flexible in approach. The key conditions were:

a. *Up-to-date grounded realism* where appropriate with field visits
b. *Timeliness:* they were given only 15 days for literature review, fieldwork and report-writing
c. *Actionable*: reports had to be oriented towards action, with recommendations for practice and policy to strengthen the SBM-G

This experience demonstrated that rapid synthesis of knowledge can be coupled with field investigations to generate insights and actionable knowledge in a short period, key conditions being original, flexible and innovative researchers, and freedom to them to use whatever methods and approaches they decide or improvise under pressure (for instance one faced with fieldwork where she did not speak the language twice recruited, briefed and trained her taxi-driver to be her translator, becoming in effect a co-researcher; others through contacts arranged telephone interviews with people with special knowledge; and so on).

3. *Crowd-sourcing ideas and* innovations. The *Swachhathon 1.0 or Swacchata Hackathon* was an innovative, large-scale and very rapid approach conceived, initiated and conducted by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation. It invited practical contributions on six topics: technology, menstrual hygiene management, monitoring usage, behaviour change, operation and maintenance of school toilets, and early decomposition of faecal matter.

   The Ministry received a rich harvest of over 2,000 contributions from many sources across the country. These were sorted and panels were convened to select the most promising and practical and award prizes[2].

For more information see innovate.mygov.in/swachhathon-1-0/

4. *Rapid Action Learning Workshops:* Since 2014 four workshops have been co-convened by the Government of India, WSSCC and IDS, one at the national level, two at Divisional level, and one of Blocks at District level. These have brought together those working on SBM-G to share and learn from each other and plan for next steps. They have evolved over time – emphasis is placed on peer-to-peer horizontal sharing and learning, with teams spending time reflecting and considering changes they can make to their SBM-G plans and actions.

   The overriding aims of these workshops are:

   a. to provide the state, districts, blocks and villages with the ideas and means to accelerate progress towards sustainable and equitable ODF
   b. to learn from successful experiences and to provide opportunities for sharing insights, innovations and successful practices, including methods, processes and approaches developed in the districts
   c. to make these accessible for adoption and/or adaptation as desired by other districts
   d. for district teams to review practical lessons learnt and to integrate that learning into district specific actions

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

Lessons have been learnt from the experience of these four approaches. These should be relevant across the region, and can been seen as a response to the resolution of SACOSAN VI for countries to take steps to learn and share. They should also have applications within and beyond the WASH sector.

Synergies and trade-offs with timeliness. A common academic view will be that rigour generally requires more rather than less time, and that less time means less rigour. However, these cases qualify this in two ways. First, the quality and depth of insights that result from these rapid approaches have their own rigour through serendipity, quick triangulation, and being in touch and up to date, and with synergies through cross learning with the workshops in particular. The speed of having to find out fast drives exploration, innovation and successive approximation. Second, conventional rigour can delay learning which may then come too late to be of practical and policy use, especially when a programme is being driven forward with energy and priority. In sum, done well, the synergies of timeliness can often be a win-win.

Rapid reporting and actionable feedback. A key lesson is the importance of rapid reporting. The common syndrome is a workshop leading to enthusiasm but follow through limited by a long wait

for a long report which is a never-read non-event. Delays can result from analysis, cross checks and clearances. In the case of the immersive research, the longer report was delayed by the involvement of several organisations and individuals in the drafting. One solution is clear responsibilities without too many cooks to spoil the broth.

With research, planning for immediate informal feedback to policy and practice without waiting for a report. By planning this in advance and alerting decision-and policy-makers, they may be more engaged in wanting to know what has been learnt. At the same time this is a significant commitment for researchers and should be an incentive to seek useful findings, thus increasing the focus of their attention on actionable issues and outcomes.

With Rapid Action Learning Workshops, recruiting capable people for recording, analysis and write-up, and allocating adequate resources for this. Those recording a workshop's proceedings should be well versed in the subject, and committed in advance to staying on for two days immediately after the workshop toon site to complete a short and final report. This can then be distributed to participants and others on the third day after the workshop. Shortage of time forces brevity and prioritising to focusing on the main actionable points. Receiving an actionable report so soon can inform and reinforce workshop participants while the memory and relevance of insights, outcomes and commitments are hot, set a standard for prompt action, and give them material and ammunition to use with colleagues and their seniors.

Direct involvement of senior policy-makers avoiding normal biases. Senior policy-makers often gain misleading views of field realities on visits arranged and stage managed by field staff. The importance of engaging senior policy-makers in direct personal learning from unbiased field exposure cannot be exaggerated. This can be through staying in communities, as recently in India, or through unplanned field visits without accompanying staff. Direct experience both for personal learning and to set an example can also be powerful as when all State Principal Secretaries recently entered mature twin pits and themselves dug out manure.

High-level support and promotion. The value and scale of rapid action learning depend on demand by government and agencies for feedback. Ideally this will be part of an action learning culture in which promising innovations are identified and spread, and challenges identified and worked on. The identification and reporting on what does not work or what may be going wrong is not always welcome but is as necessary for better performance as is the identification and spread of good practices. In the spirit of the SACOSAN VI resolution, we hope that the methods and experiences presented here will encourage more innovation, adoption and sharing of good practices for rapid action learning within and between countries in South Asia.