

Coordinating Efforts: Using learning alliances to improve sanitation and hygiene

By Rashidah Kulanyi

Sanitation and hygiene is a major issue in Uganda. Yet the problem may not be that the government is paying too little attention to water, but *too much*.

One might reasonably assume that the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) is solely responsible for improving sanitation and hygiene in the country, but it is not. It is only responsible for sanitation in public places and at new water points, while the Ministry of Health (MOH) is responsible for improving sanitation and hygiene in homes and the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) is responsible for sanitation issues in schools. That means there are actually three different government ministries dealing with water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in Uganda.

But no matter if one is discussing WASH in the home, WASH in school or WASH in the community, water is water. Recognising this, the three ministries agreed to better coordinate their programs. The ministries' efforts might have been sufficient, were it not for the fact that the work on the ground is actually carried out by district water departments, health departments and education departments, each representing their respective ministry. While the national ministries recognised the need for coordination, their district counterparts who were responsible for carrying out projects continued to work in isolation—even after forming district water and sanitation coordination committees. Meanwhile, civil society and nongovernmental organisations active in water and sanitation were equally unaccustomed to coordinating activities or sharing information. Without better cooperation, no one could reach the most vulnerable groups, primarily women and children who are put at risk of rape or missing school by having to travel long distances for clean water.

An outside perspective was needed to encourage local governments, civil society and the private sector to collectively craft and implement WASH policies. SNV Netherlands Development Organisation—in partnership with International Resource Centre (IRC) Netherlands (and later with the Centre for Governance and Development, or CEGED)—stepped in to fill that role, introducing an approach called Learning for Policy and Practice in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, or LeaPPS.

Learning alliances

The LeaPPS approach recognises that locally-generated solutions are much easier to scale up than imported solutions because they are more culturally relevant. It also understands that some common problems cannot be solved by a single ministry or organisation. For this reason, the approach involves a variety of local people from the parish to the district level who have a stake in solving the problem, including representatives from schools, water user groups and village health teams. LeaPPS encourages cooperation between participants because it centres around the concept of a "learning alliance" involving WASH users, service providers and promoters.

In a learning alliance, outside facilitators—in this case SNV, the Network for Water and Sanitation (NETWAS) Uganda and IRC Netherlands—help partners to identify problems and craft innovative ideas to deal with them. Using an "action research" methodology, the learning alliance chooses to pilot several innovations that are cost effective, affordable, sustainable and gender empowering. SIMAVI, a Dutch organisation working on WASH issues, agreed to fund the action research portion of LeaPPS.

This particular learning alliance brought government actors together with civil society organisations like Participatory Rural Development Agency (PARUDA), Community Initiative for the Empowerment of

Vulnerable People (CIFOVUP), Community Empowerment for Rural Development (CEFORD), Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment (RICE) and the Adjumani NGO Forum to build relationships that had the potential to solve common problems that could not be solved individually.

The results of coordination

The learning alliance was just the shot in the arm district departments and local NGOs needed to start working together. Multiple organisations took responsibility for overseeing implementation of the action research, including the Network for Water and Sanitation (NETWAS) Uganda, the Youth Development Organisation (YODEO) and CARITAS Arua. Throughout Arua, Yumbe, Adjumani and Koboko, a newfound spirit of cooperation was evident.

Koboko District departments pooled financial and human resources for a “sanitation week” covering WASH issues across schools, homes and public places. Elsewhere, two Arua sub-counties (Aroi and Biliafe), empowered by the learning alliance, conducted action research on low-cost, ecologically-friendly sanitation facilities like Arborloo and Fossa Alterna in local households and four primary schools. They also tried out new participatory approaches to create awareness among community members and children about the negative consequences of poor hygiene and sanitation. One of the approaches used shame to trigger change by conducting a community mapping exercise that identified community spots used for open defecation and which households were responsible.

Vukojo Pius, a health assistant from Yumbe, illustrates the effect of the LeaPPS method in Yumbe schools: “LeaPPS reminded me of my roles as a health assistant and has given me space to share my work and experience with the other stakeholders who come for these sessions. The learning alliances have also improved my working relationship with Midigo Primary School staff.”

Indeed, Yumbe schools increased coordination of WASH activities with the district education department so that safe water chains and proper hygiene became a component of all school inspections in addition to aspects like enrolment and teacher absenteeism. To help schools meet these new expectations, the district supported schools with low budgets to construct low-cost latrines in partnership with surrounding communities, increasing latrine access for 700 girls and 650 boys across three primary schools. To increase hand washing at the new latrines, eight schools also constructed “tippy taps” with assistance from head teachers and health assistants. Children then took this skill home and built low-cost tippy-taps for their households using locally-available materials.



Lodonga girls practice washing their hands next to their new latrine

In homes, the formation of village WASH committees led to a tremendous increase in sanitation coverage in five Arua sub-counties (Aroi, Vurra, Logiri, Offaka and Dadamu). Sixty-nine percent of these sub-counties’

residents now have access to a latrine; in Vurra, 940 tippy taps have been constructed; in nearby Offaka, 74 village health teams (VHTs) were trained with support from World Vision International (WVI) to construct 51 household hand washing facilities.



Handwashing ambassadors in Offaka demonstrate how to use a tippy tap

In public places, the Adjumani Town Council in particular made great strides in improving sanitation and hygiene. With technical support from GIZ, the German Development Organisation, the town council revitalised a defunct joint savings and credit cooperative organisation (SACCO) to manage over USD \$5,000 in fees collected by water user committees for operation and maintenance of their facilities; constructed a solid waste composting facility; installed sanitary facilities in public offices that were lacking them; built a 5-person latrine after market vendors expressed the need for a public facility to eradicate open defecation; and put up 12 ecological sanitation (EcoSan) facilities, which have increased appreciation for environmentally-friendly latrines in urban centres.

Districts that have used the learning alliance approach have seen marked improvements in sanitation practices at all levels of the community. In Yumbe District alone, the percentage of residents with access to safe drinking water more than doubled from 2009 to 2010—from 34% to 76% according to the 2010 MWE Sector Performance Report—as a direct result of the political support the technical officers received during a district-wide sanitation campaign.

In total, due to the districts' newfound capacities to coordinate policies, prioritise WASH and adopt appropriate solutions, LeaPPS contributed to improved access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene for 1,032 households and 1,800 pupils across four districts. The success of this learning alliance proves that districts and sub-counties are up to the task of improving sanitation and hygiene—as long as they coordinate their efforts.