SanCoP 11 – Learning from Failure in Sanitation - Synopsis

The eleventh meeting of the UK’s Sanitation Community of Practice was held on 14th November 2012 and kindly hosted by WEDC, the Water, Engineering and Development Centre, at Loughborough University.

After the previous three SanCoP meetings focused on different aspects of ‘Urban Sanitation at Scale’, this meeting took a different theme: ‘Learning from Failure in Sanitation’.

The key theme of the meeting asked how we can learn from our failures in sanitation:
- What questions does the trend of ‘admitting failure’ in development raise for the sanitation sector?
- What do we mean when we talk about failure?
- What role does talking more openly about failure play in making our work better?

Over 40 participants attended, including a number of WEDC's graduate students.

The day was kindly opened and concluded by Andrew Cotton, from WEDC, and the sessions were chaired by the SanCoP committee; Stephen Jones, Ruth Kennedy-Walker, and Hayley Sharp.

The day was split into three sessions. The first session aimed to set the scene, discussing what we really mean when talking about ‘admitting failure’ in development and sanitation, and how we can more effectively learn from failure. Ashley Good, the CEO of EWB-Canada’s Admitting Failure initiative, discussed her experiences in promoting the discussion of “failures” within the NGO and donor communities. Robert Chambers, from the Institute of Development Studies, presented his ideas around “failure” in sanitation, discussing the impact of language, contrasting paradigms, myths and pitfalls around failure, and the potential for failure within CLTS implementation.

The second session of the day looked to share case studies of failure, with three candid presentations. Ashley Meek (Engineers Without Borders-Canada) discussed her experience implementing CLTS projects and working with the local government in Malawi. Andrés Hueso González (Universitat Politècnica de València / Institute of Development Studies) presented lessons from India’s Total Sanitation Campaign. Nick Burn (Water for People) discussed an analysis of two contrasting projects in Malawi.

The third and final session saw the SanCoP members split into groups to discuss how we can learn from failure.

The following is a very short synopsis of each presentation, the ensuing questions and discussions and an overview of thoughts from the attendees on posed questions about the future of the community.

All presentations are available on: http://iwawaterwiki.org/xwiki/bin/view/SanCop/

Thanks

Many thanks for WEDC for hosting our event. Thanks to our speakers and chairs Andrew Cotton, Ashley Good, Robert Chambers, Ashley Meek, Andrés Hueso González, Nick Burn, all those who facilitated the discussion exercises, and those who assisted in note taking, including Joanne Beale and Nicola Greene. Finally, thanks to all those who attended and contributed.
Synopsis of presentations and discussions:

Session 1: Setting the scene: ‘admitting failure’ in development and sanitation

Presentation 1: “Failing Forward”
Ashley Good, Engineers Without Borders Canada, and CEO, Admitting Failure.

In this presentation, Ashley examined failure as a catalyst for learning, and particularly focused on how it’s possible to maximise learning returns, or "failing forward". Ashley focused on three key areas:

1. Building community around talking about failure

Ashley discussed how the most important aspect in learning from failures is to build a community or network enabling open conversation around failures. She discussed a number of tools aiming to facilitate a safe space for communication, including the publication of EWB-Canada's "Failure Report", the website “Admitting Failure” (www.admittingfailure.com), and other practices such as "blameless post-mortems", and fail faires. Ashley also discussed EWB-Canada’s experiences in working to promote openness and transparency within donor agencies.

2. Learning and adapting to failures

Ashley discussed how she felt that one of the key ways to encourage people to learn from and adapt to failures is to provide a safe space that encourages innovation by accepting failure as a possibility, and the importance of maximising the learning return from failures. Ashley also discussed seven norms that she feels need to be adopted by organisations.

3. Accept failure, nurture innovation

In Ashley’s final section, she described how innovation is often proportional to risk of failure – a well-recognised fact in the private (and particularly the financial) sector, but not often openly discussed within the development and donor community.

Ashley concluded with a final thought: that it’s impossible for an individual to see failures as failures when they’re involved within them; and that everyone can benefit from a community of external peers to help them reflect, and to provide support and guidance.

The discussion followed a number of themes:

*How do we ensure the real failure is identified rather than dismissing a whole concept (e.g. ecosan, CLTS, PHAST) as based on a failure?*

- Often the problems occur in the way a process is implemented, not the principle itself.
- Expectations need to be managed
- It is important to ensure the correct nature of the failure is understood – for example, not all microfinance projects “fail” - often just specific elements, which could be changed.
How do we make donors part of this process of understanding and recognizing failures?

- Donors range from ‘dinosaurs’, through to ‘we want to see more failure!’ (for example, some high risk donors may fund 10 innovative projects of which they expect 9 to fail, but one to have a large impact that makes the process worthwhile).
- Ashley discussed how more donors need to move along this spectrum

What are the outcomes of the “Failure Report” used by EWB-Canada?

- The failure report is best used as a cultural driver.
- Change needs to come from within our own organizations – it’s about being honest not pointing fingers.
- In the long term we need deeper conversations between organizations.

Do people or organisations often share surface level or “cosmetic” failures, whilst underlying fatal flaws are ignored?

- The Failure report is a poor learning tool, more for shifting cultures - and this is just the starting point

How do we extend these principles – being open about, and learning from, failures – to the communities where we’re working?

- We need to give them a voice – and this starts with changing the implementing and funding organizations.
- The risk and consequences of “failure” can be greater within communities so it can be difficult to talk about
- Communities need to know that the people asking the questions really want to know what is wrong – it is important not to penalize them for being open, and to reward if possible.

Presentation 2: Admitting failure
Robert Chambers, Institute of Development Studies

Robert developed on a number of Ashley’s concepts whilst introducing new themes:

1. Words and language

- Robert described the word "failure" itself as an unfortunate word - generally people associate "failure" with blame and penalties, and do not necessarily associate "failure" with "learning opportunities". Similarly, "admit" implies blame – is it possible to use words like "embrace", "celebrate", "reward"?
- Robert discussed how a number of currently used M&E methodologies, such as randomised control trials, can often take years to produce results that can then be acted upon.
- Can “action learning”, or rapid learning, be used more effectively? For example toddlers make many mistakes, but learn fast

2. Paradigms

- Robert discussed the disjuncture between engineering and technology (“Newtonian”, and working with people (“Complexity”).
• For example, within infrastructure and engineering, you need top-down, standardized, uniform, methodologies and procedures – but that this can’t transform to the human side, which needs principles, guidelines, and cannot be so structured.

3. Experience of failures within CLTS (Community-led Total Sanitation)

• Illustrating the contrast between the “Newtonian” and “Complexity” paradigms, in one situation, if a community undergoing CLTS did not become open-defecation free in 3 months, it was considered that something was wrong – that the community has “failed”. However this was a mistake – the community is affected by the seasons, and may for instance have to wait for the right time for materials like coconut fronds needed for building their latrines.

• Error can be reinforced and perpetuated when we say something in public several times and are not contradicted - the more we say it, the more it is embedded in our belief systems. It becomes dogma – but it is important for people to challenge this.

• Sustainability is key – in the beginning of CLTS the latrines were built fast and badly but many people were oblivious and continued the projects - failing through overgeneralization. In the beginning, learning was often held back by the enthusiasm for the projects

4. Beware!

• If there isn’t continuous learning, myths get generated. Don’t conceal failure with a myth.
• Repeating dogma until it becomes an ideology is rife (personally and institutionally)
• Defensiveness (ego) and denial are challenges
• Brickwallitis! If you bang your head against a brick wall and it doesn’t fall down, don’t bang harder! A failure to learn and adapt.
• PHAST vs. CLTS. PHAST has a “right” way of doing things – CLTS is not as prescriptive, and is facilitative rather than didactic.

5. How to improve learning from failure?

• Speed is critical - early quick feedback loops. The increased use of ICTs may help with this.
• The value of 3rd parties – if they’re not judgmental or imposing – can be huge.
• Regular meetings of people to reflect and learn can prevent the potential build up of a “mega disaster” and help establish confidence and freedom between colleagues.
• It is good to reward people who “admit failure”.
• Some people can’t admit failure and some apologise too much – it’s important to recognize this personal dimension and to be open to learning from whatever happens.
• Thriving on Chaos is the title of a book by Tom Peters from the 1980s, from which the term failing forwards comes. And the founder of Honda said that for business success represents the one percent of your work that is possible because of the 99 per cent you call failure.
Session 2: Sharing Case Studies of Failure

Presentation 1: “CLTS and local government monitoring”
Ashley Meek, EWB-Canada (in Malawi)

Ashley first introduced the role of EWB-Canada in Malawi: EWB collaborates with government, donor and NGO partners to enhance the sustained adoption of water, sanitation and hygiene behaviours.

- Generally, EWB-Ca provides technical assistance to partners, but in this case were undertaking programme implementation - pilot CLTS project activities - with a local partner.
- One of the main goals was to co-develop a system of administration and monitoring that could be effectively transitioned to local government.
- The pilot CLTS activities were going well, with CLTS triggering were taking place and extension staff conducting follow ups. Field workers had the resources they needed, and there was a strong flow of information to the district managers.

EWB-Canada had two months to carry out a transition plan towards the end of the project: to map out roles and responsibilities and breakdown activities. However, after the handover, it became apparent that the district government did not have the resources to maintain the project activities as had been done previously.

Implications:
- The local representative could only mobilize half the extension staff as he could not provide lunches any more
- Headman told villagers not to participate without the celebration so communities were not coming to meetings
- The M+E process was not sustainable as they couldn’t pay for fuel to collect forms as planned

Ashley identified the issue as the failure to work within constraints of local government:
- EWB had “projectised” CLTS – implying a start and end date, instead of thinking about ‘systemic integration’.
- Got caught up in indicators
- Felt that there was regular consultation with government and staff, but it hadn’t been enough

Ashley admitted how EWB-Canada agreed that they had felt that they were pressured to achieve results in the pilot project so had injected capacity and funds - effectively creating an artificial environment.
- Pilot projects often succeed because of this but it’s not a real test.
- We need to get away from ‘making’ the pilot work - they must be designed within constraints of the organization.
- Regular meetings aren’t enough – need to embed local actors in pilot projects from the beginning.

Discussion points included:
**How flexible was the funding for this project?**
- It was funded through the Global Sanitation Fund – and the project plan had flexibility built into it, enabling a focus on evaluating capacity.

**How is the NGO role defined in Malawi in terms of post triggering?**
- The ODF task force in Malawi includes varied stakeholders.
- There is a defined ODF strategy for Malawi including ‘no subsidies’ (for technology)
- Most vulnerable people can access funding but must be assessed.
- In terms of post triggering follow ups, it is not dictated by policy. Many donors still funding training (predominantly ToT, or “training of trainers”).
- CLTS should become a part of everyday work of government extension officers. (for example, celebrations should not be further funded).

**How have you used this example with others to learn from failure?**
- The failings and learnings were presented through the ODF taskforce, and the S.H.I.T.S. (“Sharing Highlights in Total Sanitation”) EWB-Ca newsletter initiative.

**How do you deal with these issues at community level?**
- Lessons learnt workshops – the challenges have been well received. Helps people see ways of continuing despite challenges.

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**Presentation 2: India’s Total Sanitation Campaign**

### Andrés Hueso González (Universitat Politècnica de València/IDS)

Andrés presented on lessons learnt from India’s Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). The programme had started in 1999, with the aim of achieving an open defecation-free rural India by 2012. It aimed to be demand-driven, incentive-based and community-led, and was complemented with an award scheme for ODF villages. Reported progress was impressive, with a stated 68% coverage in 2011 compared to 22% in 2001.

However, by 2008, people had started to see a disconnect in terms of intent and action; TSC has been implemented in a subsidy-based and top-down way. Reported coverage data differed markedly from Census data, with only a fifth of toilets reportedly built actually found to be in place. Also, TSC could not keep up with population growth, and there are now 8 million more households without toilets compared to 10 years ago. Andrés pointed out the implications of these numbers – if progress is maintained at this rate, rural India would not be ODF until 2088.

Andrés discussed the main issues to learn from as:
- Subsidies accompanied by limited awareness raising leads to “supply-led” projects
- The “Award scheme” for ODF villages, which only required a single verification, led to top down and rushed implementation
- Good guidelines do not necessarily lead to good implementation – problems can include a lack of capacity, misdirected incentives, and vested interests
- Need to look more broadly – would true TSC work anywhere? Andrés analyzed success stories - for example Himachal Pradesh state where the subsidy was downplayed, there...
was a competitive state level award given and there was strong and supportive political will.

The Government of India’s response to the sanitation failure is a new policy with increased focus on awareness and better targeted subsidies, but no real change in terms of implementation gap or related explorations. Andrés concluded:

- In order to learn and change we need to be open to shortcomings and criticisms, realize the reality on the ground and have the will and means to make changes as a result of these.
- It is ok to admit failure for those at the higher levels of government, but not lower down. Little information travels from the ground to those with influence.
- In India power and politics impeded change (frequent post transfers, misdirected accountability, electoral interests, etc.)

Discussion points included:

*It seems the biggest challenge is related to governance – can you compare this with Bangladesh?*

- Not been able to compare between countries. Bangladesh have been using TS campaign and they have involvement of strong NGOs in the process.
- Main difference is political will but cannot expand. In addition, Bangladesh has a huge NGO sector and women are very empowered.

*India had many supply driven sanitation campaigns and it’s still fundamentally supply driven. Nothing seems to have changed in 30 years. What is the way forward?*

- A shift was encouraged at policy level in 1999, but it changed things in paper and not on the ground. And it is difficult that they change if political economy issues are not addressed.

*Which of the failures could have been foreseen? Lack of capacity? What do we mean by failure? Lack of foresight or things we couldn’t have foreseen?*

- Yes we could have foreseen the problem. People did and it still continued. It is not so much about foreseen failure, but about having the will and the power to tackle it.

**Presentation 3: Failing Slowly and Fast**

**Nick Burn – Water for People**

Nick presented and analysed two projects in developing sanitation businesses: one in a low population density, rural context, the other looking at high population density urban sanitation.

Low density rural sanitation

- One north of Lilongwe, in Malawi, changed focus from promoting ecosan to the development of sustainable businesses.
  6 years and a couple of thousand latrines later, WfP have concluded that the building and promoting these latrines are not viable as a standalone business - There were many
challenges and a lack of demand for latrines, low costs and turnover, low density of market, all contributed to an unsustainable business.

High density urban sanitation

- In Blantyre, Malawi, 40,000 toilets are needed for full coverage.
- Project started to create the conditions in which this could be delivered.
- Focus on small scale masons, with no hardware subsidies.
- Links with local banks to provide loans. Looked at new technologies inc pit emptying.
- So, changed from masons to market system. Show people that money can be made from toilet building and pit emptying.
- Now there are 10/12 entrepreneurs providing these services. Even those providing the Business Development services have gone into the market.
- Main blockage is sanitation loans.
- Important to keep asking whether it’s working.
- Worked because it’s dense, clear demands, businesses see the potential.

Conclusions

- Don’t think projects, think sustainable service
- Be clear about outcomes
- Poor isolated rural areas are always going to be hardest – need to marry sustainable service delivery for people to move on. It’s possible to use business led approaches in these areas. At the moment it’s much more obvious in urban how this applies.

Discussion points included:

**What was the dialogue to change how things were done?**

- The aim was to create project teams which go beyond NGO staff to include local stakeholders and create space for learning.

**Can we create economies of scale in rural areas using mobile phones?**

- Yes, in some areas.

**What is role of the state in service delivery in Malawi?**

- In Blantyre, the state or local government have the responsibility for the dumping sites which people pay to use – which means everyone’s working towards the same end. In the rural setting it’s much more laissez-faire. *Should we be talking about “failure” or embracing learning? Do these debates happen within WfP without calling it failure?*

- Yes, in WfP it is often called adaptive learning.
Session 3: Discussion groups - how do we learn from failure?

The workshop broke up into a number of smaller discussion groups to reflect on the presentations and discuss how we can learn from failure under a number of different themes. Key points are highlighted below:

Group 1: How can we learn from failure in urgent humanitarian situations? What are the particular challenges in a humanitarian response as opposed to a development context?

- In urban areas you may be often looking at a systems failures => affecting huge numbers
- Often tempting / or there is pressure to instigate quick fixes without looking at the broader problem
- The process of transitioning from relief to recovery => how can you maximise the probability of success?
- The humanitarian world is very different to the development world, with different challenges
- A humanitarian situation can often have shifting goalposts – the problem you are trying to solve may move
- Are humanitarian agencies less willing to talk about failures than development organisations? If so, is this due to more high-profile work, or pressure from the media?
- Chronic disasters lead to challenges in continuity
- Is added pressure a good thing? It can force action – the “humanitarian imperative”

Group 2: Using Monitoring & Evaluation to capture failure – how can M&E be used for learning?

- How can we do M&E better?
  - Use results to make changes and learn
  - Monitoring in order to improve
  - Learning process and reporting tool
- Retrospective evaluation at the end of a project, with a project focus. But should M&E be embedded in the project management approach, not tagged on the end
- M&E are probably two separate things, with monitoring undertaken as the project progresses, and the evaluation for looking back in retrospect?
- Cross-cutting reflection
- MDG evaluations – how are they useful? The JMP (Joint Monitoring Programme), different people using different measures
- WASH monitoring – only measure outputs not outcomes
- How do we use outcome measurement?
- We do know what outcomes look like – but not shared with other sectors

Group 3: Marketing failure: How do we market failure to partners, donors, and other stakeholders?

- Failure is a term that’s very difficult for NGOs to discuss even internally.
- Whilst sharing failures with donors may be difficult, there is an incentive to market those failures for transparency
- NGOs could market failures between themselves – however maybe this isn’t prudent if they’re competing for funding?
Should governments be encouraged to talk about failures? Individual politicians are often working on short-time frames, and governments often have a vertical organisation structure which may not be conducive to sharing failures.

Group 4: What are the gaps in addressing failure?

- Personnel – you need to have the right people (geography, qualifications, trained)
- Money – curative side
- Relationships – communities/partners/governments
- Project not demand led by community themselves
- Is the community led approach the “best” way?
- Economy – top-down approaches e.g. UK, South Africa
- Real basics of sanitation – lack of capacity and knowledge
- Infrastructure/pit emptying/disposal and treatment
- High turnover of staff
- How the sector markets itself - WASH and advocacy in parallel rather than isolation
- Few journals concentrating on sanitation
- Complexity of sanitation – no one right answer

Group 5: How do we create safe spaces and long-term accountability to learn from failure?

- Key words from this discussion were:
  - “Reflection”: when is the best time in a project cycle to reflect?
  - What would you “recommend”? A good question for project staff, or communication post-project
  - “Lead by example” – hierarchies can be a blockage, so it is the responsibility of the more senior people to lead the way and to be unconventional
  - Quality of the “conversation” is what matters. You need a conversation (not just report-writing). It needs challenge and support
- This group decided not to call it “failure” – then people would be more prepared to talk, and it is less about assigning responsibility.

Final Wrap Up

One theme that arose during the day was whether the word failure is the best term to use. Asking the group whether the word failure should be used, or replaced with something with less negative connotations such as adaptive learning, embracing complexity or rapid realism, around two-thirds of the room thought that the word “failure” should not in fact be used in encouraging people to learn and share from failure! About one-third still thought that using the word failure was the best way to get these messages across.