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LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND  
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES

**Rapid Action Learning Unit: new Initiative to institutionalize  
learning under the National Sanitation Programme in India**

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*This paper presents the highlights and insights from regional consultative workshops, which were run by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) in June, 2016 across five regions of India with the support of the Government of India. This initiative was organised with the objective of developing a better understanding of Rapid Action Learning Units under the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) / Clean India campaign, and for supporting and institutionalising cross-learning and sharing at different levels of implementation to accelerate progress. This paper discusses the current learning and sharing mechanisms, the challenges, the concept of rapid action learning and institutional structures for learning under the programme. The paper seeks to highlight the critical elements and key recommendations for creating strong rapid learning and sharing units.*

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**Introduction and background**

The Clean India Rural Campaign / Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin), the national sanitation programme of India has shown that a great variety of approaches and methods are being innovated in many Districts and States of the country to counter the challenges of scale and diversity. Rapid sharing, learning, adopting and adapting of, and from these is necessary to accelerate progress and with quality towards a clean India (Chambers, 2014). With a promise to widen the range of options and actions for all States and Districts and to expand their capacities, Rapid Action Learning Units (RALU) have been stipulated in the national programme guidelines (GOI, 2014). These proposed flexible units at the national, state and district levels are meant to advise on corrective actions and share the knowledge to scale-up successful innovations, methods and approaches. This landmark provision formally acknowledges the need to institutionalize learning and sharing under the programme across all levels of implementation. Central to the programme is the flexibility allowed to states to move beyond the one-size-fits-all mandate, to be more innovative, and to engage in continued improvement in ways that benefit their State directly.

The RALU has varied and diverse roles to play in the national sanitation programme. At the national level, it means learning to influence strategic decisions including policy and monitoring while for a district, it serves for learning from a more operational point of view. The RALU is expected to function distinctly at the district, state and at the national level, and to seamlessly integrate itself into the programme plans at each level.

**Progress**

The national level RALU was constituted in June 2015 (GOI 2015). Soon after, the national workshop on Rapid Action Learning and Sharing of Innovations in Rural Sanitation in Bhopal in August 2015 served as an important first step towards institutionalising the practice of documenting, learning and sharing of what has worked and what has not, at the field level (GOI 2015). Over the course of one-and-a-half years, the central and the state governments and non-government agencies have come together in several learning workshops and thematic sessions. At the state and district level, different formal and informal models of learning and knowledge sharing have emerged to activate RALUs. The Society for Participatory Research in

Asia (PRIA) in collaboration with WaterAid India and the Department of Panchayat Raj and Rural Water Supply, Government of Andhra Pradesh is implementing an independent RALU in the State of Andhra Pradesh (Hueso, 2016). The State government of Rajasthan is capacitating select district resource groups in Rajasthan with the support of the World Bank. The State of Telangana has formed a RALU with members from the Government and non-government agencies. Some States are steadfastly working towards institutionalising their learning and sharing processes. At the same time, there exist other States that are waiting to start.

### **Regional consultations**

WSSCC embarked on a series of national consultations in 2016 bringing together 200 implementers and government functionaries, representatives from administrative training institutes and other academic institutes, representatives of local governments, natural leaders, state level non-government and civil society organizations, and state level development partners from 26 states (WSSCC, 2016). The regional consultations were the first of their kind and enabled States to come together to assess and unpack the concept of a RALU, develop a granular understanding of what it could achieve and to evolve their own way of implementing it.

### **Existing learning and sharing mechanisms under the sanitation programme**

The key objective for learning under the national programme is to accelerate sanitation results. Implementers at all levels are interested in sharing success-stories and understanding what has worked to inspire and encourage others to follow. Gram Panchayat (GP) and Block level practitioners express learning needs that are more technical in nature and programme-related, such as health, hygiene, toilet construction and technology; while District and State level practitioners express learning needs around implementation, infrastructure, equity, policy and administration.

Considerable learning and sharing is already taking place at various levels through both formal and informal methods. Most states and districts have formulated or are trying to devise mechanisms to speed up learning and sharing across geographies through strong internal communication mechanisms, using WhatsApp, frequent video and telephonic conferences and workshops. Block and Gram Panchayats (GP) prefer more participatory and visit-based experiential learning and sharing through active discussion rather than through reports and studies. Exposure visits, field visits, community meetings, workshops and visits by District Collectors and other officials appear to work well, as they bring the implementers to where the action takes place, help them interact directly with the various stakeholders and get a holistic view.

Recognition is a powerful incentive for learning and sharing. ODF Celebrations in villages are examples of vibrant learning and recognition platforms.

### **Challenges for learning and sharing**

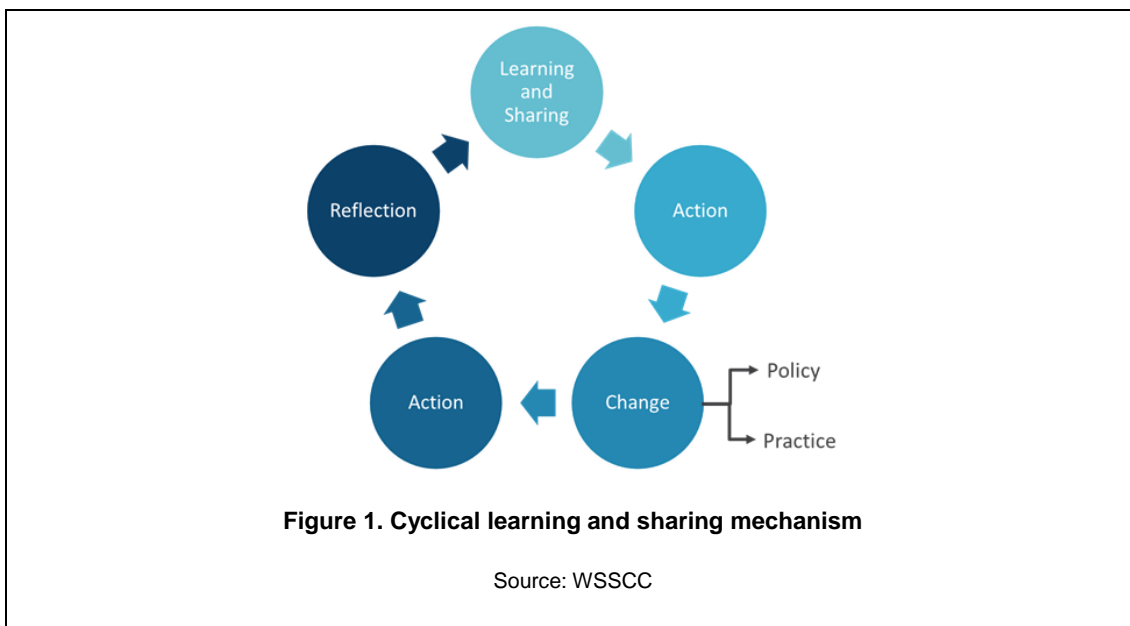
- Learning as a concept or as a process is not well understood. Data or information is sometimes mistaken for knowledge and shared in forms that are not easy for others to follow or use. Besides, mass dissemination often takes place instead of targeted knowledge sharing, which is more useful
- Most learning at the Gram Panchayat (GP) or Block level is vertical i.e. the learning flows upwards or downwards, from Gram Panchayats to the Blocks/ Districts or vice versa, rather than horizontally amongst practitioners at the same level
- The chosen methods like learning and sharing workshops and visits are poorly structured and targeted. Lengthy documents and reports are not considered effective for learning at the Gram Panchayat or Block level
- Learning and sharing is frequently a function of the personal interest of individuals in leadership positions. Also, resources are limited and there is little skill-building support to capture and share knowledge
- Other challenges include target-driven approaches and hierarchical mind-sets that hamper learning.

### **Rapidity of the learning and sharing mechanisms**

Figure 1 demonstrates the cyclical and rapid learning-and-sharing mechanism, one in which knowledge flows from the community to the decision-maker and then goes back to the community – and vice versa – at a speed that resolves the problem or results in change as early as possible. Reflection is important in

processes of learning and sharing, for only then can the action-reflection-action continuum mature into a process and not merely a one-off event.

The ‘rapidity’ of learning and sharing between the experience-sharer or a problem-solver and the learning-recipient or a solution-giver is based on the context, the number of stakeholders, the layers of information exchange, the decision-making and other issues at play. The States shared that the time taken for action and change is often determined by leadership and the speed of their internal communication process. The ‘rapidity’ of the learning and sharing systems varies across different regions and ranges from one week to six months to resolve issues and communicate solutions. Most examples of rapidity and speed shared by participants ranged from a time period of one week to six months that the States took to resolve issues and communicate solutions (either in form of policy or practice). Box 1 provides some examples that involved issues including skilful management of funds by implementers, technical know-how, or innovations stemming from community feedback.



### **Institutional structure for rapid action learning and sharing**

Based on the programme guidelines, certain principles that a RALU should embody were developed as stated in Box 2.

The role of a RALU at the national level must be less prescriptive and play the role of a facilitator and enabler of knowledge, learning and exchange between states. This should be supported by swift action at the policy level when required. While designing the basic structure of a state level RALU, most states put forth one of two models: 1) Partnership model of the Government with development partners, civil society organisations, academics and technical experts; and 2) Embedded completely within the Government (through the current system or through existing government technical training institutes). A RALU is expected to be autonomous and yet work closely with the government to influence policy and practice. In addition, the design must consider the risk of replacing existing informal learning and sharing systems that may otherwise be working well and could be strengthened. At the district level, the learning is best anchored by the district administration authority responsible for implementation of the programme using local networks of resource persons and organizations.

### Box 1. Examples of rapidity

- Kerala: The State decided to club two funds – the SBM fund with the Gram Panchayat fund – as the former was not reaching beneficiaries on time. It took one week for the matter to be resolved from alerting the state about the action and the passing of the order for funds to be moved.
- Assam: Twin pit toilets consist of two pits, which are linked, using a Y-junction, to a toilet. A local village innovator and an engineer by profession suggested a Y junction made of plastic, instead of the ones made of concrete, as were being marketed across the state. The innovation led to the entire block being declared ODF in six months, where the earlier estimate was two years had they stayed dependent on the concrete Y junction.
- Himachal Pradesh: The field teams brought out an issue with the school sanitation reward scheme to notice, that the incentive was being given only to the primary and middle schools and not to high schools and secondary schools. The scheme was altered to ensure all schools received the incentive. The change took about six months.
- Karnataka: An officer working in Solid and Liquid Waste Management contacted an agricultural university to develop a microbial solution. After six weeks, he invited the minister to see the process. Within a week, the minister passed a recommendation to the cabinet that the microbial solution can be used. This entire process took two months.

### Box 2. Proposed principles of RALU

- An autonomous and non-biased entity
- Contextual and dynamic (evolves over time)
- Relevant, useful and applicable knowledge
- Mechanism for inclusion of community-based knowledge
- Integrate an equity mandate
- Appreciation of successes as well as failures
- Learning from action and through action
- Inform policy and practice rapidly

## Recommendations

Drawing on WSSCC's experiences, the following recommendations are made for the national programme to create strong rapid learning and sharing units at all levels of implementation.

- Some current learning and sharing tools need to be targeted, more structured and methodical. For example, there should be more guidance for exposure visits to be effective. Similarly, reports should be customized for each level to ensure knowledge absorption. A regular summary of information shared on social media or other technology platforms could make learning more effective for implementers. Workshops could be made more thematic and targeted based on a learning calendar that addresses most needs and gaps expressed by implementers.
- Horizontal learning could be improved at the grassroots level particularly at the Gram Panchayat or Block level by offering opportunities to learn from peers, facilitate exchange of good practices and failures and encourage them to replicate good practices following an appreciative inquiry approach
- There is a need for capacity building on 'knowledge capture', 'learning' and 'sharing' so that implementers can differentiate between knowledge and information. Capacity and skill-building support should be extended to functionaries at the grassroots level to document their own successes and failures through case studies or audio visuals without having to rely on external resources.
- There is scope to collaborate with other Ministries such as Health which have already demonstrated significant learning and sharing outcomes. Cross learning between ministries can help clearly define the scope of the Rapid Action Learning Units in the sanitation programme to provide specific, measurable and realistic outputs throughout the programme.
- In order to enable learning and sharing, it is crucial for strong leadership at every level to be invested in learning and un-learning, to break hierarchies, to create an environment where learning is incentivized through recognition and to develop robust internal communication processes.

## Conclusion

Rapid Action Learning Units (RALU) is a powerful concept. If implemented well, it can significantly impact the sanitation outcomes in India that the country has otherwise struggled with over the last three decades. There are already strong foundations in most States for learning and sharing, so a RALU does not have to start from a blank slate but can evolve based on the local context. There is a clear need for a system that facilitates ‘unlearning’ as rapidly as ‘learning’. The entire process should be dynamic and rapid, so that it informs the implementation mechanism almost on a daily basis, which may not be the case currently. A knowledge system may not always be in an institutional structure but there may be other models (group of individuals, existing networks) that may organically grow into RALUs.

Recognizing the importance and need for rapid action learning and with the insights and substantial recommendations from the regional consultations, the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India has followed up with States on the forward planning of RALUs. Practitioners in other countries may wish to consider replicating this concept and approach to institutionalize learning and sharing through similar multi-stakeholder consultations.

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