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## **Facilitating participatory learning and sharing remotely: experiences from a multi-country, multi-partner pilot**

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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:  
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**Facilitating participatory learning and sharing remotely:  
Experiences from a multi-country, multi-partner pilot**

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**Introduction**

It is increasingly recognised that to reach everyone, everywhere with improved sanitation and hygiene (S&H), more flexible and adaptive programming for specific contexts is needed (World Bank Group, *et al.*, 2019). Processes to support learning and adaptation are integral to this shift, but are often poorly prioritised and resourced (Casey and Crichton-Smith, 2020). The Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH) supports learning and sharing across the S&H sector. SLH uses participatory approaches to engage with practitioners, policy-makers and communities, many of which have traditionally relied on face-to-face interaction. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a desire to reduce travel-related emissions, prompted SLH to reimagine how some of these approaches could be replicated or adapted to work remotely. This paper shares lessons learned on supporting the documentation of case studies remotely and facilitating virtual learning workshops.

**Approach**

From late 2020 to early 2021, SLH collaborated with local government actors and development partners in Siaya County, Kenya (with UNICEF), Nyamagabe District, Rwanda (with WaterAid) and Moyo District, Uganda (with WSSCC) to pilot a remote approach to support sharing and learning on how sub-national governments can be supported to drive progress towards area-wide S&H coverage. The objectives of this were to: 1) review experiences of increased sub-national government leadership and prioritisation of S&H, 2) identify levers and barriers of change that have impacted S&H becoming and remaining a priority, 3) explore stakeholder roles and responsibilities, 4) assess steps taken to leave no-one behind, 5) test a remote process to collect case studies and analyse these collectively with local government and development partner staff, and 6) develop an action plan to fill gaps in knowledge and identify solutions. Individual kick-off calls with development partners in each country were held initially to clarify these objectives, roles, responsibilities, timelines and get suggestions for strong local government partners. These were followed by a joint call bringing together all stakeholders, including local governments identified, to launch the pilot.

Local government and development partners in each country were then supported to document their experiences of working together to increase the prioritisation of S&H within the focus sub-national government. Each local government-development partner pair developed their case studies using a template and guidance shared by SLH at the start of the process. The template helped ensure that the case studies followed a comparable format to enable subsequent cross-case comparison, while the guidance covered recommended steps to take including choosing the focus of the case study, identifying sources of existing information, planning additional information gathering, sample interview questions and processes to reflect on findings. SLH also offered tailored individual support for case study development, including reviewing plans, tools and drafts, and support conducting interviews.

Following the development of the case studies, SLH facilitated three three-hour online participatory workshops with those involved to analyse experiences collectively and draw out learning from across the three cases. Internet credit was provided for local government partners without strong or reliable connections. The

first workshop focused on introductions between participants, presentations of the case studies, and initial group work to identify commonalities and differences between them. The second workshop further explored themes emerging from the commonalities and differences. The third workshop reflected on the lessons learned and began to draw out recommendations for the wider sector. At the end of each workshop, feedback on what should be covered in the next was sought. Participants were also encouraged to share suggestions throughout via email or anonymously using a padlet (online platform).

Throughout the process, facilitators kept a learning diary documenting the steps taken and process learning. Two reflection sessions were held between facilitators to reflect on this learning and draw out recommendations for improvements to the process. Feedback was also gathered from participants at the end of the final workshop through an anonymous online survey. Overall feedback was extremely positive and anticipated challenges, for example around participant drop out, did not materialise. However, several areas of improvement were identified, highlighted below.

## Reflections on the approach

- **Building familiarity:** Early kick off calls were essential to clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities, and to enable the process to be adjusted to meet each partners' needs. They were also a useful opportunity to begin getting to know each other and build excitement and momentum for the process. With introductions and virtual ice breakers in the first workshop, this helped establish familiarity between participants and create an environment where people felt able to share both positive and negative experiences.
- **Workshop purpose:** the workshops were initially designed for case study analysis to draw out learning for the wider sector but also proved useful opportunities for participants to share and learn from each other. Group work was the most popular element of workshops and produced the most valuable insights but recreating more informal networking spaces that are common in face-to-face workshops was challenging.
- **Case study value:** the most useful outputs for external audiences ended up being those on joint learning from workshop discussions rather than the individual case studies. This prompted questions on whether the case studies – which were time consuming to develop – were a necessary part of the process. Facilitators felt that they helped participants critically consider their experiences and informed their workshop inputs, but that they could have been collected more rapidly.
- **Flexibility:** each case study development team used the support offered differently and workshop agendas evolved based on previous discussions, reinforcing the need for flexibility. Flexibility on timing was also needed to maximise participation, particularly as case studies took longer to develop than anticipated and connectivity issues impacted workshop schedules.

## Emerging lessons

- Consider more participatory approaches to case study development to draw out partners' experiences ahead of workshop discussions to reduce the documentation burden on them.
- Invest time in introductions and relationship building, and schedule workshops at times everyone can make, to establish a supportive online environment in which people get to know each other over time.
- Explore ways to facilitate more informal networking during or alongside workshop sessions.
- Know how much time partners can dedicate to the process and be realistic about what can be achieved in this, prioritising group work and balancing time for networking, analysis and (in)formal learning.
- Keep technology platforms simple and support connectivity to minimise disruptions.

## References

Casey, V., Crichton-Smith, H., 2020. System strengthening for inclusive, lasting WASH that transforms people's lives: Practical experiences from the SusWASH programme. WaterAid.  
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