



RESULTS FOR
DEVELOPMENT




BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING NEW IDEAS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM WASH, HEALTH AND EDUCATION
INNOVATORS ACROSS EAST AFRICA AND INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Millions of dollars are invested each year in events and programs designed to facilitate the learning process in international development, but little is understood about the process of taking a new idea (including “best practices”) and successfully implementing it into a program or organization. We call this “**the Monday morning problem**”: if a program manager attends a learning event, what barriers do they face when they return to work on Monday morning and try to implement the new ideas they learned?

In 2014, Results for Development Institute (R4D), with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, began working with in-country implementers of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programs to provide learning opportunities, and at the same time try to better understand the barriers these programs face when trying to implement new ideas acquired through structured learning moments. R4D, with regional partners Dasra and the Millennium Water Alliance (MWA), created the WASH Impact Network. The WASH Impact Network is designed to identify innovative WASH programs in India and East Africa and connect them to each other with the intention of spurring collaboration and knowledge sharing. The WASH Impact Network builds on existing programs at R4D in the health and education sectors, including the Center for Health Market Innovations (CHMI) and the Center for Education Innovations (CEI).

Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene	Health	Education
		
Began: 2015	Began: 2010	Began: 2013
Total Programs: 120	Total Programs: 1,478	Total Programs: 672
Geography: East Africa & India	Geography: Global	Geography: Global
Not for Profit: 90 (67%) For Profit: 26 (19%) Hybrid: 18 (13%)	Not for Profit: 907 (78%) For Profit: 259 (22%) Hybrid: N/A	Not for Profit: 573 (87%) For Profit: 56 (9%) Hybrid: 27 (4%)
Topics of focus include: waste disposal and reuse, menstrual hygiene, safe water and sanitation marketing.	Topics of focus include: primary care; maternal, newborn, and child health; social franchising and mobile money.	Topics of focus include: early childhood development, girls’ education, skills for work and low-cost private schools.
washinnovations.r4d.org	healthmarketinnovations.org	educationinnovations.org

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT LEARNING

Due to R4D's relationship with innovators across a range of sectors, R4D is uniquely placed to investigate and map the learning process for on-the-ground program implementers. To do this, we conducted thirty-nine interviews with program managers who are part of the WASH Impact Network, CHMI or CEI¹. During these interviews, we asked program managers to identify a new idea that they encountered through a learning activity. Program managers spoke about their experiences participating in learning exchanges, workshops, conferences, and other peer learning events. They traced the learning process from exposure to the new idea, through the embedding of the idea into their programs or organizations, and identified barriers they encountered during implementation.

Lessons learned from these conversations were captured across four key categories that can help program managers, funders, and learning facilitators better support the knowledge acquisition process across sectors:

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING NEW IDEAS

- **Lack of reach-back support**
- **Lack of customizable tools**
- **Lack of resources**
- **Lack of buy-in from staff at all levels**
- **Lack of flexibility within the organization**
- **Lack of flexibility from funders**

NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR LEARNING & ADAPTATION

- **Flexibility**
- **Buy-in from staff and management**
- **Sufficient resources**
- **A solid support system**

HOW FUNDERS CAN CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING & ADAPTATION

- **Make reporting requirements sufficiently flexible**
- **Provide sufficient resources for learning and adaptation**

¹ See Annex for full list of interviewees

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING EVENTS THAT BETTER SUPPORT THE LEARNING PROCESS

- Utilize hands-on learning
- Topics address current challenges for participants
- Customizable tools are provided
- A support system is established

In the remainder of this report, each of these findings will be further explained, and recommendations will be made to improve capacity-building programs based on in-depth conversations with innovators across the WASH, health and education sectors.



BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING NEW IDEAS

Program managers who were interviewed identified six major barriers to implementing new ideas that they had learned from their peers or from other learning activities.

Lack of reach-back support

When programs learned a new skill or approach, particularly in the context of a workshop session delivered by an expert in the field, it was difficult to implement that new tool or skill in their organizations without the ability to reach back out to that expert when they had questions. Many of the people we spoke to described access to a mentor or expert that was available throughout the process of implementing a new idea as critical to their success.

“In the end, I had to do my own research and do it myself, but it would have been great if someone who spoke [at the event] could have been an ongoing mentor.”

Dani DiPietro, ayzh

Lack of customizable tools

Many programs we spoke with said that it is difficult to find tools that fit the unique needs of their organization. When tools are shared during a learning event, they are often shared in PDF format or hard copy, creating a barrier for a program manager who wants to start using the tool on Monday morning. For example, imagine that a program manager learns about social marketing at a workshop she attends. Although her organization is not selling a product or service, she believes she can use marketing plans to improve her hand-washing behavior change messaging. She was given a USB at the workshop with all of the tools and presentations, but found that the marketing plan tool was in a format that made it difficult to begin using immediately. This program manager might put in the time to adapt the tool, but she might also decide to put it aside in the face of the other pressing demands of her day-to-day work. Sharing tools in a format that can be used first thing Monday morning can save program managers valuable time.

Lack of resources

Innovation requires testing, iteration, and a willingness to fail as part of the learning process. Programs found it challenging to go through the testing and iteration process while attending to all of their day-to-day responsibilities. Some programs that received funding specifically to test a new approach expressed that the funding was extremely beneficial to the innovation process, but they were often challenged by the short timeframes they were given to show results. Programs said that having a dedicated person to take on additional tasks, funding to test the new idea, and sufficient time to observe and document results, would have helped them turn learning into more permanent behavioral change.

“We’re a small organization and we have a core business to run. We still had to offer clinical services but at the same time we have a lot we’re trying to learn. It would have been great if several members of our team could have gone off to focus on learning and come back with some great ideas. But we’re small and we just don’t have the bandwidth.”

Allison Howard-Berry, Care2Communities

Lack of buy-in from staff at all levels

A new idea needs support at every level: from management to the people at the foundation of the organization. Without support and commitment from managers, the idea will likely not be implemented at all. The idea may become impossible to implement if it is not approved, or management may approve it but fail to make it a priority for staff by not holding them accountable, not following up on action plans, and not incorporating the new idea into performance reviews.

Attempting to implement a new idea without the buy-in of all staff—in other words, taking a top-down approach—can also make adaptation more difficult by creating a negative culture around the learning process. Leaders need to make buy-in a priority and create space for the ideation and testing process at every level. Middle-managers need to have the time and resources to test new ideas, and lower level staff need to feel empowered to contribute to the process and understand the importance of doing things differently.

“When the idea came from the top down, uptake didn’t go well. Staff weren’t brought into the process of understanding what the idea was, and how it would apply to and improve their work.”

Anonymous, East Africa WASH Program

Lack of flexibility within the organization

It is difficult to implement new ideas in a rigid organization. Organizations that prioritize the status quo lack the flexibility to engage in the try/fail/iterate process needed to improve on existing practices. Some organizations we spoke created flexibility within the organization by setting up expectations as early as the first interview with potential new staff. Interviewees were told that they would be expected to regularly try new things and to contribute to the testing process for new ideas. In addition, some organizations had processes and tools they used to test new ideas. These processes, when they are not overly cumbersome, can help organizations be more organized in the way that they try new ideas without losing their flexibility.

“One of the barriers was that the organization had a culture of maintaining the status quo, and any changes that were made were taken as personal failures.”

Anonymous, East Africa WASH Program

Lack of flexibility from funders

Many programs identified strict donor requirements as a barrier to implementing new ideas. Donors that require programs to use specific templates for monitoring and evaluation, or that discourage programs from diverging from set timelines or workplans, create challenges for programs that want to try something new. Doing something differently takes both time, and risk-acceptance – and while funders crave innovation, they do not provide the types of flexible and long-term funding needed to truly drive it.

“Most funders don’t make space for learning and growing and testing and making mistakes.”

Katrin Macmillan, Projects for All

NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR LEARNING AND ADAPTATION

Within an organization, there are a few key ingredients that help create a permissive environment for learning, adaptation and innovation. While these do not necessarily guarantee success, they vastly increase the likelihood that good new ideas will take root, and stick over time.

Flexibility

An organization that is able to learn and adapt will likely have a culture of change versus a culture of maintaining the status quo. When the processes for implementing new ideas are cumbersome and time consuming, it can discourage people from trying new ideas or changing practices that are not working.

“We try really hard to be a learning organization, so new staff know that they will be expected to try new things, and existing staff aren’t surprised when they hear we’re going to do another experiment.”

Dani DiPietro, ayzh

Buy-in from staff and management

When staff understand the “why” behind a new idea, and their input and feedback is sought and valued, new ideas are more likely to stick. Likewise, innovation tends to happen more in an organization where leaders within the organization support the testing and iteration process and has a system in place for implementing it.

“In some situations...a top-down approach can work. But when you’re working with people who have valuable first-hand experience, they should be involved at every stage. Let them express themselves and make mistakes without being overly critical. Respect people by involving them.”

Michael Onyango Sombe, Afri-Can Foundation

“We have an innovation management tool we use. It gives you structure so you have a documented process for whether you should stop or go, and prevents you from constantly questioning your decision. It gives both flexibility and discipline.”

Kate Radford, War Child Holland

Sufficient resources

Implementing a new idea requires sufficient funding for the supplies, equipment, or services needed for the new idea. For example, a sanitation program that wants to improve their communications and marketing materials based on new research findings may need to seek professional services to design and print the materials. A primary healthcare clinic that wants to make the switch to electronic medical records will need the resources to invest in tablets for staff, as well as software and training services for staff on how to properly use the new system. In addition to equipment and professional support, implementing new ideas requires that staff have the time available for testing and iteration, as well as time to collect and evaluate data that indicates whether or not the idea was successful. The programs we spoke to achieved this by helping staff reprioritize existing work to carve out the necessary time for the trial process, or by hiring temporary support to test the new approach. Without the necessary technical expertise, time, and equipment, a new idea is unlikely to be successful.

“We want to make a more compostable sanitary napkin, but our main challenges are that we lack funds for research and development, and our current staff lacks capacity to do behavior change communication in tandem with innovating the product.”

Naina Kansar, Aakar Innovations

A solid support system

New ideas are often learned from peers or technical experts, but skills needed to implement the idea are difficult to transfer in the short timeframes of learning events. Program managers who are connected to a network of peers and experts can benefit from the guidance and technical advice provided by such a support system.

“I participated in a one-week leadership training, and a lot of it was about learning about the other participants. The value in that was the relationships that came out of that experience, and learning what each program was really good at so when a challenge came up, I would know who to go to.”

Maggie Sheahan, Educate!

HOW FUNDERS CAN CREATE AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING & ADAPTATION

While there are many ways that organizations can create enabling environments for learning and adaptation by creating a learning culture, flexible processes, and collaborating with peer organizations and experts, programs are also dependent on funders in many ways. Programs interviewed identified two key ways that funders can support them in the learning and adaptation process.

Requirements are sufficiently flexible

Funders that have heavy reporting requirements redirect program implementers' time and energy away from the learning and adaptation process towards the preparation of reports. Program managers need flexibility from funders to adapt tools and approaches to fit changing circumstances or to test new ideas. Recognizing the time and patience needed to innovate and test new approaches, funders would benefit from ensuring their systems and requirements allow programs to be as agile and flexible as possible.

“Trying new things is complicated, and right now all of our time is spent reporting. Funders want education attainment data in six weeks, but that’s not possible. With a little time and freedom, we could give them a lot of incredible data, but the way it is now we have to report before we’re even finished implementing.”

Katrin Macmillan, Projects for All

Programs are sufficiently resourced

When asked what they need to be able to implement new ideas, programs said time, money, and people. Some programs that were able to acquire funding to test a new idea were discouraged by the short timeframes they were given to show results. This was especially true for WASH and education programs, where measurable results can take years to see. Programs that do not have unrestricted funding or funding dedicated to the learning and adaptation process often lack the people and supplies to test new ideas. Funders that want to support learning and adaptation should recognize the resources that are needed for the process, and ensure that the programs they fund have what they need.

“We were happy to have the funding to do the pilot. It was small, but it took the pressure off. The funding was enough to defray some of the costs of supplies and equipment, but if we’d had more funding we could have hired someone to manage the process and then everyone else could get on with their day jobs.”

Allison Howard-Berry, Care2Communities

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING EVENTS THAT BETTER SUPPORT THE LEARNING PROCESS

Most of the programs we spoke to had participated in a learning event facilitated by the WASH Impact Network, CHMI and CEI. They identified four characteristics of learning activities that make it easier to implement the new ideas they learn.

Utilizes hands-on learning

Participants that learn a skill by practicing it find it easier to implement that idea on Monday morning². For example, practicing pitching a program in front of the group, filling in a logframe template with real-life examples, or developing their own theory of change can all be great hands-on practice that can help participants retain the new information. Further, programs that have already developed an action plan at the learning event for how they will implement the new skill, tool, or approach are less likely to set it aside and carry on with business as usual following the event.

Topic addresses a current problem

Programs find learning events most useful when the topic of the learning event helps them solve a problem they are currently trying to tackle in their organizations. Learning about how to create a social marketing campaign, for example, may be an important skill, but for an organization that will not be ready to start formulating and implementing the campaign for years will find it difficult to retain the skills and knowledge until they are actually needed. By surveying programs about the current challenges they are facing and trying to solve in their organizations during the learning event planning process, learning facilitators can design better events that are more relevant for participants and are more likely to result in real changes in the organization or program.

² This finding supports a robust body of knowledge on adult learning theory suggesting that learning-by-doing increases knowledge retention. Read R4D's review of the existing literature on practitioner learning in international development at <http://r4d.org/about-us/press-room/r4d-publishes-new-look-practitioner-learning-international-development>.

“When we are intentionally seeking out answers to challenges in the organization, this is where I think we take what we learn and turn it into real operations. When we go in just generally learning, it’s good for building networks and sparking new ideas. . . but if we’re not ready to implement that specific idea, then it might not go anywhere.”

Maggie Sheahan, Educate!

Customizable tools are provided

When tools or frameworks are introduced during a learning event, they are rarely one hundred percent relevant for all participants. If the tools are difficult to adapt to a program’s unique needs, it will be a challenge to make use of it on Monday morning. Tools that are designed with this in mind, and learning events that communicate how the tool can be adapted effectively, may be more beneficial to programs.

A support system is established

Rarely are learning events focused, intensive and long enough to allow participants to truly master a new skill. Rather, workshops are great ways of being introduced to a new tool or approach, but the real work begins after the learning event is over. Programs who had experts guide and mentor them through the adaptation and learning process *after* the learning event found the task of implementing new ideas much easier. In addition, most programs we spoke to highly value peer support. Programs cited specific methods they employ to stay connected with their fellow participants after a learning event, including Facebook groups, Whatsapp groups, and Slack groups. By establishing support systems that are ready to go after the workshop, participants can better maintain relationships and pursue opportunities for peer learning outside the scope of the workshop.

“...there is less of a feeling of loneliness. Like, am I the only one doing this crazy thing? Once you meet other people, you realize there are a lot of other crazy people also!”

Devashish Saini, Ross Clinics

WHAT CAN WE DO DIFFERENTLY?

PRACTITIONERS

- Seek input and new ideas from lower level staff
- Ensure buy-in from lower level staff on any ideas that come from the top-down
- Allocate appropriate resources to test and implement new ideas, including helping lower-level staff carve out time to do the additional work
- Invest in mentorship from both peers and experts

FUNDERS

- Create reporting requirements that allow programs to be flexible and agile
- Support programs in course correcting and trying new approaches throughout implementation; avoid punishing deviation from a log frame or original work plan.
- Provide funding that gives programs the time, human, and financial resources to learn and adapt

LEARNING FACILITATORS

- Design learning events that allow participants to learn by doing
- Survey participants before the workshop to understand the problems they are currently trying to overcome, and design content that will help them do so
- Send participants home with “soft” versions of tools that they can immediately use, or easily adapt to their needs
- Set up reach-back mechanisms for participants to consult with experts and stay in touch with peers

LOOKING FORWARD

As we continue supporting programs in the WASH Impact Network through 2016, R4D will collect additional data on the learning process from WASH, health and education programs to ground truth the lessons presented in this report, and identify best practices in supporting learning and adaptation for donors, development practitioners, and on-the-ground program implementers. In-country learning events will take place in India and East Africa in 2016, in addition to webinars, online discussions, and monthly newsletters that share helpful tools and highlight program innovations. R4D will continue its close engagement with innovators across sectors to better understand the learning and adaptation process, and strengthen the innovation ecosystem.

ANNEX

LIST OF PROGRAMS INTERVIEWED

Name of Organization	Name of Person Interviewed	Sector	Link to Online Profile
Aakar Innovations	Naina Kansal	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/aakar-innovations
Afri-Can Trust	Michael Onyango Sombe	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/i-care-pads
Afrisol Energy Ltd	Amos Nguru	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/afrisol-energy-ltd-eco-toilet
ayzh	Dani DiPietro	Health	http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/supply-chain-solution-essential-care-around-time-childbirth
Banka BioLoo	Sanjay Banka	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/bio-digester-toilets-by-banka-biolo
Biome	Shubha Ramachandran	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/intergrated-water-management
Bridge International	Lucy Bradlow	Education	http://www.educationinnovations.org/program/bridge-international-academies
Care2Communities	Allison Howard-Berry	Health	http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/care-2-communities-c2c
Chujio Ceramics	Dr. Wanja Wambugu	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/chujio-water-filters
Consortium for DEWAT Dissemination Society (CDD)	Rahul Sachdeva	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/decentralised-basic-needs-services-dbns
Ecosan Services Foundation	Ajith Edathoot	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/ecological-sanitation
Educate!	Maggie Sheahan	Education	http://www.educationinnovations.org/program/educate-experience
Gramalaya	S. Damodaran	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/gramalaya
Green Heat	Nsubuga David	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/on-site-waste-management

iKure	Sujay Santra	Health	http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/ikure-techsoft
Irise International	Emily Wilson	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/menstrual-hygiene-management-program
Joint Effort to Save the Environment (JESE)	Rugumayo Godfrey Mulinda	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/environmental-landscaping-and-sustainability
Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS)	Sabyasachi Rout	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/life-skills-education-based-wash-promotion
LEAF Society	Sai Prathyusha Kondiseti	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/dignified-sanitation-solutions
Nidan	Ratnish Verma	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/urban-sanitation-program
Project Hello World	Katrin Macmillan	Education	http://www.educationinnovations.org/program/project-hello-world
RACIDA	Mohamoud Dagane	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/innovative-water-harvesting-systems
Reap Benefit	Gautam Prakash	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/behaviour-change-in-waste-water-sanitation
Ross Clinics	Devashish Saini	Health	http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/ross-clinics
Rural Initiative for Community Empowerment (RICE)	Pax Sakari	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/sustainable-sanitation-and-hygiene-for-all-ssh4a
Samarthan – Center for Development Support	Mankaj Kumar Singh	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/towards-health-and-dignity-improving-wash
Sanitation Solutions Group	Sherina Munyana	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/sanitation-solutions-group
Sanivation	Benjamin Kramer	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/sanivation
Svadha/eKutir	Rohan Jha	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/sanitation-entrepreneur-development
SWAP	Edith Alu	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/safe-water-and-aids-project-swap
Transformation Textiles	Carol Kioi	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/eva-wear
Umande Trust	William Misati	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/bio-centre-initiative
UMC	Rajesh Karan	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/ahmedabad-sanitation-action-lab-asal
War Child	Kate Radford	Education	http://www.educationinnovations.org/program/opportunities-children-and-youth-war-child-south-sudan

WaterHealth	Apar Kulshrestha	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/water-health-centers
Waterlife India Pvt. Ltd.	Lekshmi Krishnan	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/waterlife-community-drinking-water-program
Wello	Raghav Anand	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/delivering-clean-water-to-a-thirsty-world
Whave	Emma Goring	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/safe-water-security-program
Wherever the Need	Abraham Lingan	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/community-and-school-ecological-sanitation
ZanaAfrica	Elizabeth Ombech	WASH	http://washinnovations.r4d.org/program/zanapads