

Mistakes to successes: Learning from errors

World Water Week 2015 Event

'We will LEARN from failure. Failure is no reason to be ashamed. Failure shows leadership, innovation, and risk-taking in pushing the boundaries of what is possible in scaling ideas from pilots to global programs'. <http://failfairedc.com/>

1. Introduction

Exploring unknown grounds with the risk of making errors is an important element of development processes. Identifying errors requires systematic observation/monitoring, evaluation and knowledge sharing (processes and tools). Moreover, turning errors into successes calls for appropriate mechanisms, including close collaboration between research and practice enabling the development and testing of new approaches. It also calls for appropriate decision-making processes and donor's openness to ensure the necessary flexibility to adapt project planning based on lessons learned. Even though organisations' willingness to openly communicate on errors cannot be taken for granted (personal and institutional barriers are very high), a paradigm shift in how errors are considered can be observed.

The objective of the 2015 World Water Week Seminar '**Mistakes to successes: Learning from errors**' is to provide recommendations on how to improve organisational learning and sharing of learning on errors. The session will start with an introductory input based on an assessment of approaches to improve water quality at point of use in Benin. The participants will then join the World Café to share their experience and deepen the topic of 'what does it take to learn from errors'. Facilitators will guide the World Café discussions around the following topics: i) how to create an **enabling environment** that promotes an attitude of questioning, space / time for critical reflection, and open communication on errors; and ii) what are **processes and tools** to effectively learn from errors with a focus on building in moments of reflexion into the Project Cycle Management.

1.1 Setting the scene: the case of water quality at point of use in Benin

The starting point. Guaranteeing safe water at household level by minimising recontamination during transport and storage of safe water is a challenge in the WASH sector. In 2012, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation launched an impact assessment of its WASH project in Benin to learn more about the effectiveness of approaches with regard to ensuring water quality at point of use. The assessment was conducted by an independent academic institution (the Centre for Development and Cooperation at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, ETH/NADEL).

Limited effectiveness of hygiene promotion approaches. The results were not surprising: whereas the project is effective in improving water quality in the wells, water quality at household level could not be significantly improved.

Towards a new behaviour change approach. The effectiveness and sustainability of 'traditional' hygiene promotion approaches, among others in preventing contamination during transport and storage, is often limited. Based on this, HELVETAS decided to completely rethink its hygiene promotion strategy. A 'learning expedition' on behaviour change was launched in collaboration with the Eawag, a research institute.

The objective is to adapt the scientific RANAS (Risk, Attitude, Norm, Ability, Regulation, Self-regulation) behaviour change model developed by the Eawag into a simplified, practical tool targeted to practitioners in various countries. However, this 'simplification process' raises a number of questions. How far can we simplify the approach without losing its essence? How much support do local project teams need to implement the approach in their project activities? What is the cost-benefit ratio of introducing a more systematic behaviour change approach? Keeping these questions in mind, a number of pilots in Haiti, Mali, Benin and Mozambique are being implemented. First results are

available. To improve water quality in Benin, for example, norms and self-regulation have been identified as the key behaviour change factors. A new behaviour change campaign is being developed on the basis of these factors and its effectiveness will be evaluated by mid-2016.

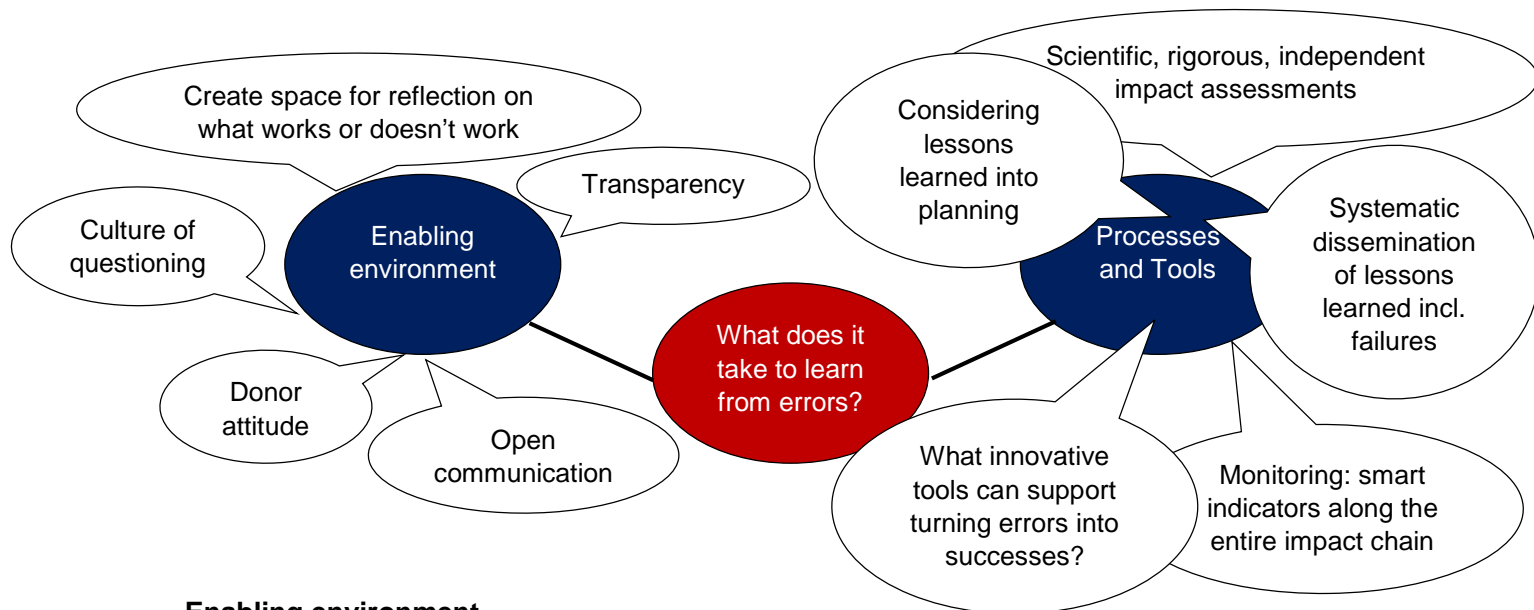
Lessons learned. This illustrative case highlights the importance of rigorous independent impact assessments. But, beyond this, a culture of questioning and space for critical reflection is key.

1.2 Different instruments to learn from errors

- Space for critical reflection (see Benin case)
- Processes in place to identify, analyse, document errors and take corrective measures: monitoring, impact assessments, documenting both good practices and failures, ensuring management responses and considering lessons learned in the planning...(see Benin case)
- Fail Faire (see example IFAD, <http://www.ifad.org/events/failfaire/programme.pdf>)
- Failure reports (see <https://failforward.org/learning-modules/failure-reports/>)
- ...

1.3 What does it take to learn from errors?

To structure the discussion on learning from errors, we propose to focus on two topics: the enabling environment and processes & tools.



Enabling environment

The example from Benin highlights the challenge of communicating on errors. Many development organisations are dependent on donor funding and thus tend to focus communication on successes. While one can certainly learn from success stories, publicly sharing learning from errors is expected to limit the 'replication of errors' and therefore contribute to accelerate progress in the sector. But the challenge is not only about open communication of failures. The Benin example also highlights the importance of having space and time for critical reflection.

There are a number of questions we would like to tackle in the discussion. How do we make questioning an integral part of how our organisations works? How to encourage our organisations to create space and time for critical reflection? What are incentives for our organisations to consider errors as something positive and communicate them openly? What donor agencies instruments or mechanisms could encourage organisations to share errors? What communication platforms (e.g. Fail FAIRE, failure reports) could contribute to this paradigm shift?

Processes and tools

‘Processes and tools’ in this context relate to how the Project Cycle Management (PCM) can support learning from errors. It is about monitoring of key indicators, impact assessments, identification and dissemination of lessons learned (both good practices and failures), and systematic integration of lessons learned into planning. We would like to share experience on what are effective processes to learn from errors and what are the challenges in putting in place and implementing those processes. We also would like to exchange on innovative tools to support learning such as online monitoring tools. But in this discussion, we would like to go beyond a review of ‘traditional’ PCM elements. We also would like to find out how to effectively build in reflection into PCM. And also how to make it fun.

2. Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter summarises the main outcomes of the World Café discussions.

Develop a culture of responsibility

Developing a **culture of responsibility** including voicing things that went wrong within the organization is key to fostering learning from failures. This means stopping the ‘blame game’ and shifting from finger pointing to active response (taking actions based on learnings).

Concretely, this implies **creating a safe space** to encourage communicating on errors. *Small working groups* can be a start to foster this open voicing of problems/mistakes. This may provide a more secure environment for the individual talking about mistakes. The *role-model of the upper management voicing their mistakes and subsequent learnings* is a good way to promote a culture of learning from mistakes (e.g. monthly meeting during which management members present things that “they” did wrong and how and what they learn from this). With this the effect can trickle down and encourage lower level staff to also voice their learnings. Sometimes local culture makes it very difficult to voice mistakes (losing face). In this case, using *anonymous mistake reporting* may represent a compromise. Moreover, the culture of responsibility also requires **budgeting resources** in terms of finances, knowhow and time to *document processes, conduct evaluation, reflect and discuss on what went well or not, why, and what can be done differently*.

Change the narrative

Clearly, a **positive terminology** will make reflection on errors more likely to be accepted. The aspects of learning, improving, developing, and advancing should be highlighted. Let’s call it *continuous improvements* rather than learning from mistakes.

Translate mistakes into learnings and actions

This calls for revisiting the traditional Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning process. In addition to mid-term or end of phase evaluations, **regular reflection on successes, errors and failures** should be institutionalised. Reporting templates should encourage **documenting not only successes but also failures**. Concretely, chapters on ‘deviations from the plan’ and ‘learnings’ could be systematically added. Writing **knowledge briefs** and compiling ‘**does and don’ts**’ on specific topics are appropriate tools to share mistakes and learnings. **Online reporting** also enhances transparency in sharing what works well and not. Most importantly, organisations should ensure that actions are taken on the basis of learnings. **Management responses** to evaluation reports for example have proved to be effective to allow for adopting better practice. This however requires **flexibility** also from the donor’s side to **enable project adjustments throughout implementation** (continuous improvement!).

Let our customers assess whether the project is a success

Sometimes there is a discrepancy between the satisfaction of an institution implementing or financing an intervention and the satisfaction of the beneficiaries. Adopting a '**customer satisfaction measurement tool**' (e.g. involve customers in evaluating water services) or conducting **participatory impact assessments** could highlight the beneficiaries' perspectives on the actual 'success' of the intervention and enable implementers to draw lessons on what should be improved. Besides, this strengthens ownership. More generally, learning is not only an expert thing: peer-reviews, cross-visits are effective ways to learn from each other.

Donors and funding mechanisms are key to encourage turning mistakes into learnings and actions

In general, donors can encourage process documentation, provide flexibility to adjust project plans throughout implementation¹, and reserve resources for monitoring and evaluation. Regular, open and transparent communication between implementing organisations and funding agencies can build trust and foster continuity in monitoring and reflection on mistakes and corrective measures to take. Funding agencies could also invest in studies to find out about reasons of failures or success of previous projects prior to launching new or larger interventions. Investments in prototyping (trial and error) and innovation are also considered as crucial. Finally, donors could reward well documented mistakes (compilation of mistakes).

¹ Continuous monitoring and evaluation as well as adaptive planning has already been recommended many years ago (see among others '*Watering white elephants?: lessons from donor funded planning and implementation of rural water supplies in Tanzania*', Therkildsen, O., 1988, Publications from the Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen).

Annex Programme

Mistakes to successes: Learning from errors

Stockholm City Conference Center, Stockholm, Tuesday 16:00-17:30, FH 202

Convenors:

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, Eawag/Sandec, International Centre for Water Management Services (cewas), iDE, Swiss Water Partnership (SWP)

16:00 – 16:10 **Setting the scene**

The power of impact studies to learn from errors: measuring water quality in Benin.

A short overview of different instruments to learn from errors.

Introducing the World Café discussion: What does it take to learn from errors?

Agnes Montangero (SWP).

16:10 – 16:40 **World Café session 1**

A facilitated round table discussion on what it takes to learn from errors, more specifically on how to **create an enabling environment** and to **effectively build in reflection into PCM** to improve organisational learning and sharing of learning on errors.

Table hosts: Chris Zurbrügg/Christoph Lüthi (Eawag/Sandec), Johannes Heeb/Dorothee Spuhler (cewas), Yi Wei (iDE), Agnes Montangero (HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation).

Overall moderation: Marco Daniel (SWP).

16:40 – 17:10 **World Café session 2**

A facilitated round table discussion on what it takes to learn from errors, more specifically on how to **create an enabling environment** and to **effectively build in reflection into PCM** to improve organisational learning and sharing of learning on errors.

Table hosts: Chris Zurbrügg/Christoph Lüthi (Eawag/Sandec), Sarah Achermann/Dorothee Spuhler (cewas), Yi Wei (iDE), Agnes Montangero (HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation).

Overall moderation: Marco Daniel (SWP).

17:10 – 17:30 **Key messages and wrapping up**

Presentation of key messages by the moderators and concluding messages.

Closure.