



Information needs of water staff help shape action

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INEFFECTIVE OR MISSING information exchange and knowledge sharing is one of the causes hampering progress in the water and sanitation sector in many developing countries. This is one of the main findings from various recent sector stakeholder workshops in Nepal, Bangladesh, Ghana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. IRC and partner organizations organized these workshops as part of the various resource centre development support programmes in the water and sanitation sector. These include the five-year DGIS - funded Resource Centre Development Programme, the three-year DGIS funded Streams of Knowledge coalition and the five-year DFID- funded WELL Resource Centre Network for Water, Sanitation and Environmental Health.

These workshops also revealed that a lot of information is shared, but (for various reasons) not used by the receivers and that a lot of knowledge and information gained by the various stakeholders is not shared at all.

Participants of a recent RCD workshop in Nepal confessed that sending documents was often a matter of just sending of what was produced and that information exchange within and outside the organization are unsystematic and sometimes not used, effecting the effectiveness of the sector. This is a waste of resources and a missed chance to learn from one another.

This happens at the central level in Kathmandu. What happens in the regions, district and communities is less known. Since the information we have may potentially be very useful it is wise to get a more exact view on information needs and the best forms and channels for the various groups of people requiring information. This is the foundation on which to build information sharing activities.

To obtain this more exact view Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH) in collaboration with Integrated Development Society Nepal (IDS/N) and IRC in 2003 conducted two Information Needs Assessments with 18 people from community water and sanitation committees and from the district support organizations (NGO's and local government) from the hills and the flatter Terai area in Nepalganj and Biratnagar, in the mid western and eastern district. This is further described below.

The Information Needs Assessment is just a picture of the situation at a certain moment in time and based on discussions in a limited geographical area. Lessons learned will be shared from this and similar information needs assessments.

Better exchange of information needed

The first information needs analysis sector stakeholder workshop in Nepal was organized in Kathmandu (October 9, 2002). Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH) in collaboration with Integrated Development Society Nepal (IDS/N) with the support of IRC. They have started a process that will eventually lead to effective sharing, so that information is available to people who need it at the appropriate time, in the appropriate form. This work is part of the 2002–2006 Resource Centre Development collaboration, finance by the Netherlands Government.

Participants of the RCD workshop confessed that documents were often sent out without much thought and that information exchange inside and outside the organisation is unsystematic and sometimes completely missing. This is a waste of resources and a missed chance to learn from one another.

This was the story from the central level in Kathmandu. What happens in the regions, district and communities is less well known. The information that is available is potentially very useful: what is needed is a more accurate view of people's information needs and the best forms and channels to reach them, as a foundation for successful information sharing.

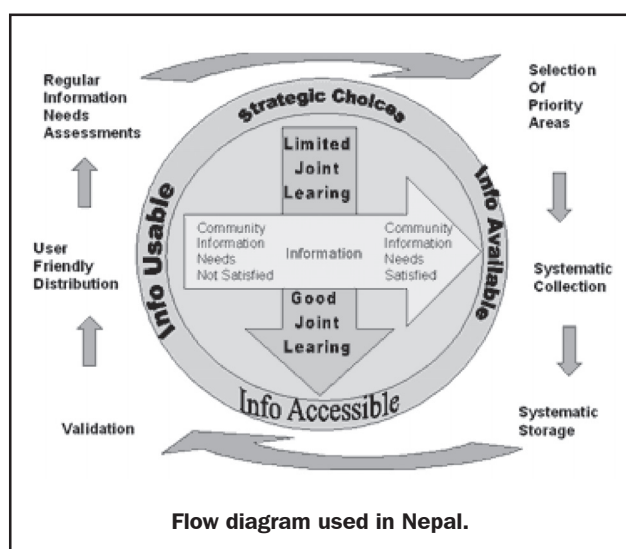
To sharpen the picture, NEWAH, IDS/N and IRC conducted two additional Information Needs Assessments in the last week of January 2003 with 18 people from community water and sanitation committees and from NGO and local government district support organisations. Those attending included people from the hills and flatter Terai area in Nepalganj and Biratnagar, in the mid western and eastern districts. This process gives a picture of the situation at a certain moment in time, based on discussions in a limited geographical area.

Information flow diagram used in Nepal (see overpage).

Conclusions

The main overall conclusions from this process are:

1. There is currently no strategic and structured way of dealing with information. Much of the sharing that does take place is uncoordinated and people get information by chance.
2. Community members are very outspoken about their problems and the information they need about quite a number of issues. If sector organisations want to be of



service, there is a need to make information available and accessible so that community members see the various alternatives they can choose from. Stakeholders in the RCD workshop selected a couple of areas where they will start this work. Once they have gained experience on how to improve information flow, the number of issues can be expanded.

3. Representatives working at the intermediate levels would gain a lot if there was improved coordination and sharing of information about work undertaken and approaches applied. They also expect better information from the national level about policies and about rules and regulations with respect to ownership issues.
4. Before information materials are designed, careful thought has to be given to the form and channels to be used. Pre-testing materials before large-scale production will prevent expensive mistakes. Assessments need to be done at regular intervals, to keep abreast of changing information needs in the field.

Information/knowledge needs

Information is essential so that people can solve problems. Community members and participants from intermediate levels identified the need for better information as their most pressing problem. The topics they want information on varies greatly.

User committees in the Nepal study want information about:

- How diseases spread and how to prevent them;
- The availability and quality of spare parts, and how to manage them;
- How to motivate community members to pay for water;
- How to look after the system;
- Management skills such as book keeping and conflict management;
- Where to go for water quality testing;
- How to improve drainage.

Intermediate levels need information about:

- Who is doing what and how (approaches used) in the district;
- How to monitor effectively;
- How to motivate community members about hygiene issues, the proper use of facilities and the management of the maintenance fund;
- Training opportunities (so they can inform communities);
- The usefulness of alternative technologies and implementation approaches;
- Opportunities and methods for water quality testing.

The need for useful information at various levels is huge, and it may not be wise to try to address all these needs at once. What to do first? Nepalese stakeholders at national level agreed in early February to form a task force, which is now preparing an action programme and an organisational structure to decide how to build on existing efforts. They are also identifying what can and should be done at the national level and what can and should be done at regional district level. The plan will be validated in Nepalganj and Biratnagar before more structural knowledge sharing actions will begin.

Joint publishing in West Africa

Partners also ask for IRC support in joint publishing of newsletters and books and training in electronic communication. Recent consultations with the francophone world involve CREPA (the Centre Régional pour l'Eau Potable et l'Assainissement à faible coût) in West Africa are a case in point.. Since July 2002 CREPA is also involved in producing the French newsletter "Sources Nouvelles", once a month by e-mail and on the web site and one quarterly issue with features. They translate selected English news and features from Source. CREPA and L'association H2o, the French electronic magazine published from Paris add francophone news on water and environmental sanitation.

In Burkina Faso IRC helped CREPA to do an interesting assessment of CREPA's capacities and opportunities in the areas of information and communication, and developed plans for joint publishing activities. With centres in 10 different countries, CREPA has a tremendous potential for development and dissemination of information on topics relevant to the West African region. such as cost recovery and hygiene promotion. These centres, however, also need to be strengthened. The director and several other CREPA staff voiced a strong need for training in terms of documentation and 'capitalisation' and dissemination of information.

Joint publishing and dissemination activities for 2003-2004 by IRC and CREPA include:

- Inspired by a meeting with the mayors of Burkina Faso and the training course on cost recovery, CREPA and IRC will jointly produce three small training modules on cost recovery meant for local government staff.

- IRC and CREPA will co-publish the masters thesis of one CREPA staff member, concerning cost recovery in peri-urban areas.
 - Thematic Overview Papers (TOPs) are a new Internet based publication series that IRC has recently launched.
 - The first English TOP was on hygiene promotion. CREPA has agreed to translate this and, where necessary, adapt it to the context of francophone Africa. CREPA will also produce a new TOP on participatory methods.
 - CREPA is now finalising translation into French of an IRC book on community management, 'Keep It Working'. Once the French translation is co-published, CREPA will be the main distributor of the book in francophone Africa. This book (and other IRC publications in French) will be distributed under the 'solidarity pricing principle'. This means that a price is established that is locally affordable.
 - IRC will facilitate a training workshop for CREPA on communication and 'information management' (collection, treatment, distribution, documentation), including information distribution by electronic means.
- Each TOP consists of:
- An overview with all the latest thinking
 - Case studies of best practice
 - TOP Ten Resources: links to books, papers, articles; links to websites with additional information; links to contact details for resource centres, information networks or individual experts in your region;
 - A chance to feedback your own experiences or to ask questions via the Web.
- All the thematic overviews are also downloadable in PDF format. People without internet access can order an individual paper copy.
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Thematic Overview Papers on key topics

Responding to outcomes of various user surveys and requests from the field for short, concise publications on key topics IRC in 2003 started with publishing web-based Thematic Overview Papers (TOP), see <http://www.irc.nl/page.php/15>. Produced by specialists from IRC and partners they provide visitors with a single source of the most up-to-date thinking and knowledge in the sector on key topics.

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