



Source: Simavi (Uganda)

From online learning to increased impact

Author: Femke van Heun

Learning in the WASH SDG Consortium

Sharing knowledge and building on each other's key strengths is widely considered one of the advantages of working in a consortium. To deal with (new) challenges and innovate, partners need to learn from each other's experiences. Within The Netherlands Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Sustainable Development Goal (WASH SDG) Consortium, the global Learning and Knowledge Development (LKD) component is an integral part of the programme. The programme's three global LKD trajectories provide a sharing and learning space for programme staff, partners and others from the WASH SDG network and beyond.

A well-developed LKD process can enhance the effectiveness of overall and long-term programme goals. Building on a [previous study](#) that explored the best practices and lessons learned from the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) learning trajectory, the current article showcases how this trajectory, and specifically its online learning clinics, contributed to improved programme implementation of GESI objectives. The results are based on in-depth interviews with three programme teams¹, the experience and documentation of the GESI LKD consultants, the midterm review as well as other internal documentation.

¹ The three teams were contacted based on learning logs that tracked the learning process over the whole implementation period.

WASH SDG learning and knowledge development: the results

- Dedicated time for a learning topic changed mindsets and led to mainstreaming of the topic in programming, implementation and reporting.
- Global learning exchanges led to cross-country adaptation and contextualisation of concepts and approaches, which increased the programmes' impact on GESI.
- The success of global learning clinics is depended on the dedicated time and support for staff to actively participate and share their knowledge, which is in turn a result of positive leadership and management attitudes to learning.
- The WASH SDG Consortium was able to support a way of institutionalised learning that is not self-evident in other consortium structures of many partners and subprogrammes.

GESI learning trajectory

The goal of the GESI learning trajectory is to make GESI more practical and doable for WASH teams. In practice, this means improving the knowledge, skills and capacity of WASH SDG staff and partner teams. Through the online learning clinics, the subprogrammes and other experts shared programmatic innovations, promising practices, challenges and successes. These 1,5-hour Zoom sessions focused on one specific learning topic and allowed 2 or 3 sub-programmes and/or external experts to present their case through a presentation or video, followed by a Q&A and discussion. Typically, between 25 and 30 people would attend from different countries and organisations, including partners and local government staff at the regional or district level.

During the three years of implementing the GESI trajectory², the WASH SDG Consortium has been learning about how knowledge development happens across the WASH SDG programme, institutionalising the GESI process within the programme as well as systemising reflection and turning this into action. As concluded during the programme's MTR, momentum and progress on GESI are building: there have been achievements in both mainstreaming GESI and improving the GESI performance and effectiveness of programmes.

GESI mainstreaming

The experiences of the WASH SDG Consortium demonstrate that dedicated time and space to focus on a learning topic, in this case, GESI, can change the mindset of WASH teams. One of the WASH SDG subprogrammes in Nepal, the SNV Nepal four city sanitation programme, speaks about "real staff transformation" on GESI. The programme's GESI advisor explains how improved GESI knowledge of their staff has been crucial in mainstreaming GESI in the WASH SDG programme and in other programmes implemented by SNV Nepal.

Inspired by the introduction of the GESI LKD, the Nepal team conducted rapid assessments to understand their team's GESI knowledge. Based on this, they designed a training package and

² The GESI learning trajectory was implemented with the great support of consultants Sue Cavill who is a specialist in GESI in WASH programmes and Tracey Keatman who is a specialist in LKD in WASH programmes. See <https://youtu.be/cVFA1dhowes> for a summary of the GESI learning and development journey.

organised monthly coaching and mentoring sessions. As described in the LKD's learning log: "These included self-reflection sessions, organised storytelling sessions and a training on LGBTQ+ issues which was a very interesting reflection for everyone at the office. There's less focus on this generally, but it's definitely required when thinking about WASH." As these training sessions were both well-received and successful, the SNV Nepal team also involved their partners in this approach. This is also a great example of how knowledge shared through a learning trajectory and online learning clinics can cascade down to teams and partners.

The effect of the increased focus on GESI is considerable. For instance, a follow-up survey demonstrated that both staff and partners understand GESI issues in more depth. The GESI advisor also observed how the team adopted a more inclusive vocabulary. She explains the effect of GESI mainstreaming on their programme implementation as follows:

"The team and partners really support the participation and representation of women and excluded groups in the community structures, for instance in WASH committee meetings on various levels. Besides this, they know how to engage women and excluded groups in training and activities, and put them in key strategic positions"

The increased attention to GESI through the learning trajectory thus impacted individual transformation and knowledge as well as GESI mainstreaming in programme activities through tools, techniques and resources.

Another result of the learning trajectory is related to reporting. Before the learning trajectory, both the team and partners mainly reported data on the number of people that were reached or trained. However, SNV developed a database to record data on sex, caste and ethnicity to improve the monitoring of GESI indicators. Gathering disaggregated data is an essential step in understanding and analysing the marginalisation and empowerment of women and excluded groups. In addition, the GESI advisor indicates that they have been linking GESI with WASH more generally throughout all their reporting.

GESI performance and effectiveness of programmes

There are many examples of how the WASH SDG teams have implemented learnings from the LKD. In a [previous survey](#)³, 66,7% of the respondents indicated they have adopted GESI learnings from the online learning clinics in their programme. To understand the process of how subprogrammes learn and adopt concepts from learning clinics, it is useful to unpack such processes. What happens after a successful learning clinic? How do programme teams look back on their learnings? And, most importantly, how are new concepts and ideas taken up and implemented?

This process is nicely illustrated by the programme manager of the WAI subprogramme in Ethiopia. Based on the learning clinic on female entrepreneurship in the WASH sector, which included examples of the subprogrammes in Tanzania (SNV), Uganda (Plan and WAI) and Nepal (Plan), the programme in Ethiopia explored the possibility of supporting female entrepreneurs in their intervention area. As explained by the programme manager: "The session really inspired us. We immediately followed up and mobilised resources to find potential female entrepreneurs and link them to other enterprises and the sanitation market".

³ This was an anonymous survey amongst 15 WASH SDG colleagues who have actively participated in the GESI LKD.

The effects are significant:

“This was kind of a unique experience in our programme. For example, we established a market centre with the support of the local government, the female entrepreneurs own this centre now. They built confidence, have a license and currently, we’re supporting them in developing a business plan for scaling up their current business”

The GESI checks during the midterm review also found increased training and participation of female entrepreneurs, which in turn has an effect on women’s economic status.

Contextualising concepts and approaches

Transferring concepts and approaches from one subprogramme and context to another does not go without its challenges. To implement the female entrepreneurship concept, it was crucial to know the context and players in the market. The same applies to the Plan International team in Zambia. As explained by their programme manager, the GESI learning clinics have been a great source of reference material. For instance, due to the learning clinics, the programme focused more on the participation of elderly people. During implementation, they had to be aware of social norms and ideas around this, and regularly trained and consulted with traditional leaders in the implementation area, which was necessary for this specific context.

Aside from increased awareness or attention to specific groups, the learning clinics were also useful for the exchange of concepts and tools. For instance, the SNV subprogramme in Nepal adopted ‘gender facilitation cards’ that have been developed in Ethiopia (see Figure 1). The SNV GESI specialist explains: “Our staff really liked the cards. Gender is intangible and difficult to understand. But, when we use those cards, it’s easier to understand”. Again, there was a need for contextualising the cards, as the pictures required adapting to fit the Nepali context.

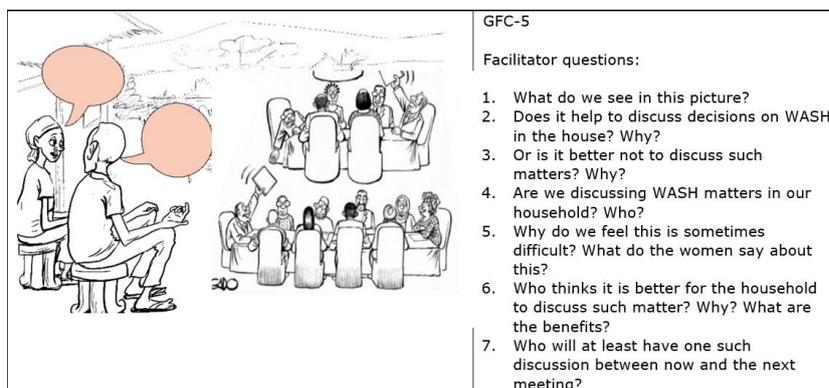


Figure 1: Example of a gender facilitation card

Final thoughts

The examples from the WASH SDG Consortium have demonstrated how online learning clinics can have a considerable effect on programme implementation. From conversations with WASH SDG programme staff, it becomes clear that the effectiveness of learning clinics is closely related to dedicated time and support to actively participate in such clinics. The success of the LKD clinics depended on the dedicated time and support for staff to actively participate and share their knowledge. Because the WASH SDG Consortium and the subprogramme's management created and encouraged an online space to learn and exchange knowledge, the WASH SDG subprogrammes were able to implement new ideas and concepts that improved their performance on GESI.

As such, the WASH SDG Consortium was able to support a way of institutionalised learning that is not self-evident in other consortium structures of many partners and subprogrammes. The effectiveness of online learning clinics also shows how (new) online tools can be used to link and learn from a distance, which becomes more and more relevant considering issues such as pandemics, international teams and environmental sustainability.