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ACCESS TO SANITATION AND SAFE WATER:
GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND LOCAL ACTIONS

# A global community of practice: creating resource centres that build capacity in local WASH service provision

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*Since 2001, the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) has explicitly promoted the concept of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector Resource Centres to provide sector capacity building products and services. These centres operate mainly at national level, but focus capacity building at the decentralised WASH governance level, including local authorities and service providers. Products and services centre on providing better overview, access and use of existing WASH information and knowledge to improve the provision of services. The IRC Resource Centre Development Programme (RCD), which ran from 2001 to 2006, was designed as a partnership for joint learning and sharing in capacity building, and was implemented in 18 countries. To support the initiative, a global community of practice on resource centre development was created. In IRC's current work, the resource centre development concept is carried forward in its six regional programmes. This paper presents the experiences of the global RCD community of practice in providing support to local WASH action.*

## Introduction

The core assumption of the Resource Centre Development Programme (RCD) coordinated by the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) since 2001 is that in a decentralized context, WASH services provision can only be assured, if all involved have good overview, access and make good use of existing information and knowledge they need (IRC, 2004). For this basic knowledge management skills; networking for learning and sharing and; geographically spread hubs (Resource Centres or Networks) are required. In order to speed learning and exchange of experiences, the RCD Programme was set up as a partnership based on learning through implementation and sharing. Though only named as such half way through the five year programme, a community of practice (CoP) approach was chosen (RCD CoP, 2006). This paper shares the RCD experiences and lessons learned of a global partnership contributing to capacity building for WASH service provision at local level.

## Resource centre development

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim to address the needs of the poorest and most deprived communities, including halving the number of people without access to clean water and sanitation by 2015. This is a very tall order. It will mean getting clean water to an additional 250,000 people and sanitation facilities to 350,000 every day till 2015.

Can this be done? The know-how is out there - spread and fragmented among the tens of thousands of engineers, planners, policy makers, administrators, technicians, trainers and, community groups who plan, construct, manage and use WASH facilities. Ways need to be found to share this wealth of know-how and experience and make it available to those who need it.

Over the past couple of decades, much has been learned about how to implement and manage effective WASH services - and how not to. Yet many successful small innovative initiatives are never mainstreamed, and many high-profile schemes continue to be a source of disappointment - grabbing the headlines when new, but soon falling into neglect and disrepair. Lessons learned, new knowledge and experience, are useless until they are accessible and understood by those who have to provide the services.

Over the past five years, IRC has provided support to WASH resource centre development, on a demand-led basis, in over 18 countries. The RCD programme included the following main components: (1) building national sector networks, sharing information and building an ability to absorb and repackage information; (2)

advocating in the sector for the importance of quality information; (3) building capacity in information and knowledge management; and (4) exploring innovative funding mechanisms for resource centre functions (e.g. encouraging governments and funding agencies to finance sector knowledge management) (IRC, 2004).

The RCD programme focuses on ensuring that all those involved in researching, planning, building, maintaining and using the WASH services can benefit from the lessons of yesterday and the experiences of those involved in similar projects today, so that systems designed to achieve the MDGs by 2015 can still be relied upon in the years thereafter (Lieshout, 2005).

### The intelligence services of the water sector

The RCD Programme promoted the creation of sector Knowledge Management hubs – or spiders in the web, or facilitators of learning and sharing – and calls them resource centers. Their roles included: (1) building strong connections among all WASH sector players: from academia and engineering departments to government ministries, international aid organizations, technical training colleges, local government departments, community organizations, and resource centres in other countries; (2) knowing what these players provide - not just their activities, but also the lessons they are learning through their own experiences, often invaluable, but rarely documented; (3) repackaging and making available existing information and knowledge for, in particular, local WASH authorities and providers; (4) knowing what demand for information and knowledge exists at the local WASH service provision level; (5) pointing these 'users' to the 'providers' who hold relevant information, support and advice, whenever they need it and, through channels and in a format the 'users' can readily use and understand.

The programme was initiated in African, Asian, Latin American and European countries. In some countries RCD is working with long-term IRC partner organizations; in others it started from scratch, identifying genuine demand from organizations active in the sector (Bury, 2007a).



**Figure 1 RCs participating in RCD**

Source: IRC
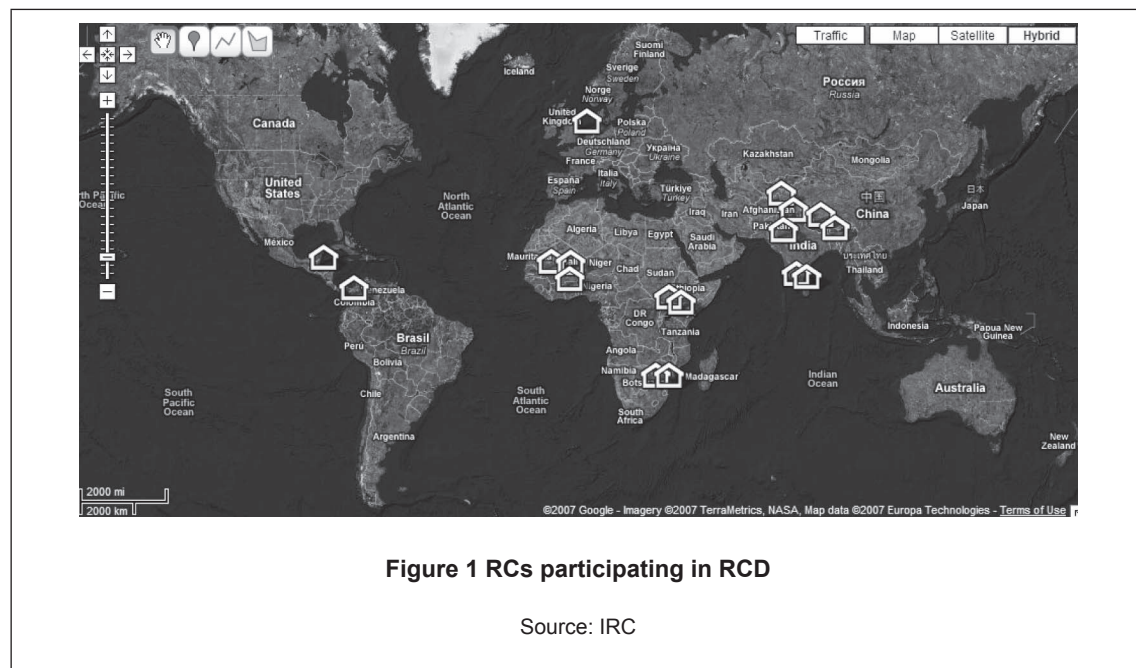
### Using a community of practice

Rather than IRC implementing the programme with over 15 partners individually, the effort from the onset, was designed as a joint learning and sharing programme. The assumption being, that such an approach would also at programme level and among participating resource centres lead to more creative and sustainable solutions to achieve our joint objectives. The programme understanding of a community of practice approach resembles in broad lines the definition given in the box below. An effective community of practice is a major effort and not created in one night.

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**Community of practice**

The concept of a **community of practice** (often abbreviated as CoP) refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations. It refers as well to the stable group that is formed from such regular interactions. The term was first used in 1991 by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger who used it in relation to situated learning as part of an attempt to "rethink learning" at the Institute for Research on Learning. In 1998, the theorist Etienne Wenger extended the concept and applied it to other contexts, including organizational settings. More recently, Communities of Practice have become associated with knowledge management as people have begun to see them as ways of developing social capital, nurturing new knowledge, stimulating innovation, or sharing existing tacit knowledge within an organization. It is now an accepted part of organizational development (OD).

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_Practice (Bury, 2007 b)

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Though the programme was fairly well endowed, learning and sharing throughout the 5 years could not rely only on expensive face-to-face gatherings. The more so since in each partner resource centre (including IRC itself) several people with different roles were involved in the process. Hence, though starting up with face to face meetings and on site visits, the emerging community of practice experimented from the start with various 'non face-to-face' forms of joint learning and sharing (Duma, 2006). Building the RCD community of practice benefited from the following, more or less chronologically presented, events and channels for learning and sharing:

- Inception visits to countries by IRC team, and once collaboration agreed, typically followed-up with 2-3 times a year support visits;
- Inception workshop at IRC, Delft, involving all participating resource centre managers;
- Regional workshops on RCD practical guidance for partners in Latin America, Africa and South Asia;
- A Yahoo!Group platform for exchange of information;
- A Junior Professional Officers (JPO) programme involving young partner's staff exchanges between IRC and 6 partner organizations. JPOs returning to their organization after completion of the programme;
- Exchange visits among participating resource centres (e.g. JPOs from South Africa to Uganda and various Indian partners among themselves);
- Email based contributions and feedback on RCD practical guides and RCD facilitator notes;
- Joint writing of papers and case studies;
- Joint participation and presentation at relevant international events (e.g. a Sector information management symposium, a Learning Alliance symposium, a Strengthening Local Governance symposium, WEDC conferences, STREAMS of Knowledge events, etc.)
- Joint (process) documentation initially using the IRC portal, gradually increasingly on partners' own websites;
- Establishing a RCD community of practice extranet for programme internal documents in combination with a Google group based RCD community of practice discussion platform;
- Series of RCD community of practice thematic case studies followed by RCD community of practice e-discussions and publication of outcomes in Source;
- IRC RCD staff peer-to-peer coaching in providing support to partners.

## Local capacity building

The overall aim of the RCD programme is to build capacity, particularly at local WASH governance levels. Resource centres develop products and services that contribute to this capacity building. The identification, development and appropriateness of these products and services benefited from the intensive community of practice exchange of ideas, problems, solutions and experiences among partners. Products and services developed include both meta-level and direct WASH support. Meta-level products and services, including among others newsletters, websites, face-to-face sector fora, typically provide 'users' the overview and access of existing information and knowledge elsewhere. Direct WASH support products and services include development of guidelines and manuals, conducting workshops, training events, exchange visits and learning journeys. Concrete outputs and outputs have been inventoried and made accessible to the sector world wide through social book marking (Bury, 2006d).

## Lessons learned

The RCD programme formally ended in December 2006. However IRC's current five year business plan to 2011 aims for a more integrated sector support in 6 regions of the world, incorporating the RCD concept. Integration consists in seeking stronger synergies between our knowledge development, advocacy, RCD and knowledge management and, support services work. Hence the RCD concept and approach is maintained in the new regional programmes.

This section presents – without any claim of being comprehensive - key lessons learned, both in terms of weaknesses and failures and in terms of strengths and successes.

### RCD programme lessons

*Weaknesses and failures*

1. The term "resource centre" creates confusion among sector professionals world wide. In many contexts "resource centre" is understood as being a library or documentation centre, providing a fairly supply driven service to the sector. Clearly not what the programme intended to focus on.
2. Though IRC developed the RCD concept based on years of experience in supporting de-facto partner resource centres, the programme lacked focus and led to different understanding among IRC staff themselves. This may partly reflect the fairly innovative thinking that lies at the basis of the programme.
3. Insufficient upfront cross-checking with funding agencies and high level sector policy development agencies (at global and national levels) was done to assess if in principle the concept of RCD generated interest for donors to provide long term funding for the resource centre approach.
4. The programme was designed for a five year period and highly ambitious in terms of the number of countries and resource centres to support. IRC's 40 years experience shows that such processes, involving cultural, institutional and organizational change, usually require more time.
5. Insufficient evidence about the long term cost-benefit ratio of resource centre functions in the sector. Most WASH resource centres need more than the 5 year time span, provided by the RCD programme, to build own capacity to gain reputation that warrants sector willingness to sponsor them or purchase their products and services. Those that manage show the benefit they provide to the sector.
6. More joint learning and experimenting is required to provide an effective and efficient interface between the digital based KM and actually making accessible, and adequately used, the wealth of information and knowledge to those in need, that do not (yet) have access to digital material but still have to rely on non-digital channels.

*Strengths and successes*

1. The concept and role of a resource centre as a hub, or spider, in the WASH sector web, ensuring better overview, access and use of existing information and knowledge, gradually matured and, convergence to this understanding among the RCD partners and their local sector enablers and supporters emerged. The RCD programme provided the opportunity for this learning and sharing process. An overview and access to concrete outputs is accessible world wide (see social book marking in Bury, 2006d).
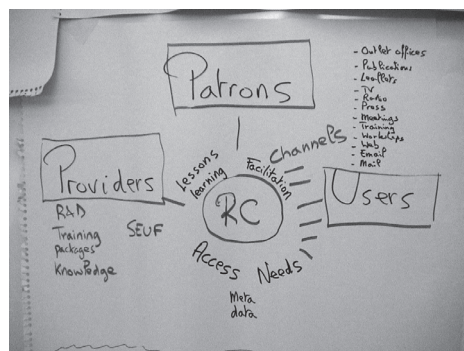


**Figure 2. A resource centre as a spider among patrons, providers and users**

Source: Bury, P. J.

'**Patrons**' are understood as enablers, those providing a mandate and where needed resources to resource centres and their function. '**Providers**' are all those that hold or develop sector relevant information and knowledge. '**Users**' are all those that make use of products and services made available through or by RCs (Figure 2) (Bury, 2006c).

2. A series of guidance documents on RCD have been developed, including: (1) a set of frequently asked questions (IRC RCD team, 2001-2004); (2) RCD practical guidelines; (3) process facilitation notes (RCD18, 2002).

3. The RCD concept is increasingly understood, within IRC and its partners, but also in the wider sector as being about knowledge management aiming at:
   – Better **overview** of who has which information, which knowledge, which wisdom and where;
   – Better **access** to existing information, knowledge and wisdom, rather than producing new knowledge (not that this is not needed, but others than RCs have the mandate to ensure this);
   – Better **use**: Resource centres have a role to play in building capacity among the users of their products and services how to better express their needs, how to make use of affordable access channels and how to identify valid material and actually make the best use of the material obtained.

4. Resource centre partners are making a gradual switch from previous "funded NGO" thinking, towards more market oriented thinking, based on concepts like: social entrepreneurship; meeting demand rather than thinking supply driven only; thinking in terms of products and services;

5. Participating resource centres do offer an increasing range of products and services to the sector, particularly 'metalevel' ones, that help their clientele get overview, access and advise on how to make best use (Bury, 2006 d);

6. In at least 2 countries (South Africa and Pakistan) the resource centre achieved recognition by government and a clear mandate and hence access to substantial funding;

7. The RCD concept has been widely shared both on various web-based platforms as well as in series of global, regional and national level events.

## Community of practice lessons
### *Weaknesses and failures*

1. It took the programme time to organize itself in a more explicit and structured way as a community of practice. It would probably have been better to make this an up-front requirement to participate. Later buy-in to working as a community of practice by partners was slow and not complete.

2. With a few exceptions the community of practice membership has remained limited to people in partner organizations (or similar interested but not RCD involved organizations) directly involved in implementing the RCD programme. Indeed the RCD community of practice is primarily a community of peers: people working more or less at the same level within the WASH sector and with similar professional background or work experience. The limitation of working with a community of practice in a programme like RCD is that other stakeholders, in particular 'patrons', 'providers' and 'users' (Figure 2) of RC products and services have often not been directly involved in the process. A Learning Alliance approach, which IRC has adopted in its current work (Verhagen, 2007), would have aimed at including different levels (typically 'patrons' at (inter)national levels; 'providers' as other actors at the same level as RCs and; 'users' typically at lower levels, e.g. local WASH governance level).

3. Despite giving much attention to culture differences and creating pre-requisites for a learning-and-sharing culture, many involved in the RCD programme remained reluctant or did not find the time, to more actively make use of various communities of practice channels, in particular the non-face-to-face ones. This is not to say that e-collaboration did not have positive effects. Indeed global research on this and our own internal evaluations (Bury, 2006 b) show that 'passive' use (a.k.a. lurking behaviour) is actually widely practised and perceived by members as highly beneficial.

### *Strengths and successes*

1. In several written and oral surveys and informal monitoring throughout the programme's lifetime, community of practice members expressed their great satisfaction with benefits they gained from being member of the RCD community of practice;

2. Partners have indicated at regular programme internal monitoring and reflection moments, that participating in the RCD community of practice, led to more learning and sharing than the average member would have done before. Ideas generated in one RC were indeed often copied by other participating

RCs (e.g. PR leaflets; developing websites; sector Blue Pages; local community of practices; etc.) (Bury, 2006 a).

3. Though RCD monitoring had its weaknesses, a simple Google search will reveal that RCD partners refer on their own websites to other RCD partners, without this ever having been explicitly suggested!

## Concluding words

The concept of Resource Centres, organized in global, regional and national networks, providing (meta-level) products and services seems appreciated by the sector. What remains a challenge is to enhance the quality of resource centre functions and so provide convincing evidence of a positive cost-benefit ratio. For a 5 year programme this seems to have been too tall an order. IRC's coming five year regional programmes incorporating the RCD concept provide more time to show evidence, and more funding for efficient and effective sector knowledge management.

Using a Community of Practice as a way to enhance learning and sharing and to change the working and learning culture has proven highly beneficial to RCD participants. Once trust has been built through face-to-face collaboration, e-collaboration can work and reduce costs. A next step to enhance learning and sharing is to open up a typically homogeneous community of practice to a wider group of stakeholders that can contribute to find more integrated, widely endorsed and sustainable solutions to MDG challenges. A Learning Alliance approach opens up horizontally and vertically to bring together patrons, providers and users to make this possible. IRC is experimenting with this in the coming five years and beyond.

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## Keywords

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