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**LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND  
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES**

**Real Time Emergent Learning (RTEL): a promising  
approach for adaptive programming**

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*In the WASH sector, learning is too often an afterthought in programme design and insufficient in practice. The Real Time Emergent Learning (RTEL) approach is a framework that has been used to help set up systematic learning and nurture a culture of learning collectively for rapid programmatic adaptations. RTEL is characterised by 4 principles and a focus on making learning: real-time, networked, evolving and reflexive'. When facilitated and nurtured, this approach has the potential to create the conditions for learning to emerge from practice and help inform operational and strategic decision making. So far, the shift to a real-time learning mode in two of GSF supported programmes (Kenya and Cambodia) has resulted in significant changes. The aim of this paper is to present the conceptual framework, how some of the concepts are applied in practice, the challenges, and some reflections points.*

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**Background and rationale**

Real time Emergent Learning (RTEL), best known in country programmes as real-time learning (RTL) is an innovative learning approach which primary aim is to develop collective learning and adaptive capacities in organizations, programmes, and networks. The foundational assumption is that developing collective learning and adaptive capacities will in turn inform strategic and operational adaptation and ultimately increase efficiency and the likelihood of development interventions to be more inclusive and better fitted for the context. The RTEL conceptual framework has been developed and part of it implemented in the context two large scale Sanitation and Hygiene (S&H) programmes supported by the Water Supply and Collaborative Council's (WSSCC) Global Sanitation Fund (GSF). The GSF aims to achieve sustainable collective behavior change at scale through the use of the Community-Led Sanitation approaches. The GSF has been established in 2008 with support from the Governments of Australia, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It operates at country level under the leadership of the government through Programme Coordinating Mechanisms that includes sector actors. Its funds are hosted by Executing Agencies who in turn provide sub-grants to local government and non-governmental organization (NGOs). For each country programme, a Country Programme Monitor (CPM) is appointed to conduct regular independent financial and technical verifications.

The RTEL approach was designed in response to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda to leave no one behind. We might agree that being successful in leaving no one behind depends largely on our ability to design and implement interventions driven by rapid and iterative and rapid cycles of mapping vulnerabilities, adaptation and learning.

Like many organizations in the WASH sector, GSF programmes are implemented in rural realities that are complex, diverse, messy and rapidly transforming. These conditions taught us over the past years that focusing on demand creation, supply and supporting the enabling environment without a deliberate intention to factor into the equation elements of complexity and diversity is not enough. In most of the cases where GSF programmes were relatively successful in overcoming such challenges, the solutions to those were often the results of local adaptation and rapid learning. This paper focuses on the particular experience in the Cambodia Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Improvement Programme (CRSHIP) and the Kenya Sanitation and Hygiene Improvement Programme (KSHIP) where a shift into a real time mode has taken place. Information

about how the other eleven GSF supported programmes work and learn are available in the GSF 2015 progress report which can be found at WSSCC.org.

A note on the two aforementioned programmes: CRSHIP is implemented by Plan International's Cambodia office as the Executing Agency (EA). The Learning and Documentation grant (L&D) of CRSHIP is implemented by WaterAid Cambodia. In addition to developing new tools and practices for learning through action, the WaterAid L&D team supports CRSHIP with documentation, research, training, and advocacy.

KSHIP is implemented by Amref Health Africa in Kenya as the EA. The learning and documentation activities are implemented by the team and learning champions with support from a full time learning and documentation officer recently hired. The learning strategy, design and practice is developing rapidly, including through learning exchanges with the CRSHIP L&D team.

### **RTEL conceptual framework**

The RTEL approach has also been developed to respond to the urgent necessity to increase our ability to solve implementation problems in the field as they arise as opposed to documenting past experiences at the end of implementation cycles. It is also the result of learning from best practices, participatory methodologies used in the WASH sector, and on the application of complexity sciences in international development. Shifting into a real time learning mode can be as simple as making the collective decision to share day to day micro fragment of experiences (near zero cost option), or in investing substantial resources in the facilitation of an elaborated reflexive learning systems, and every other possibility in between.

Some of the concepts RTEL borrows from are summarized below (see reference section for specific sources):

#### **Emergence and self-organization**

The design of the learning strategy for CRSHIP and KSHIP includes processes for learning to emerge from practice and the dynamical relationships and interactions in the network as opposed to being overly planned and output-predicted. Country programme experience in a real-time learning mode after more than a year demonstrates that an open ended emergent approach to learning can be achieved progressively in a conducive and facilitated environment. Complexity sciences offer a number of concepts such as emergence and self-organization as alternatives to conventional management approach. Among all the relevant examples that could be cited, the work of Ramalingham B. and Burns D., among others, provide ample scholarly and practical demonstration about the potential and applications of complexity thinking in development aid.

#### **Adaptive pluralism and self-critical awareness**

The RTEL approach includes regular and institutionalized Pause and Reflect (P&R) milestones. These are processes, activities and workshops dedicated to reflect on how the implementation on the ground has been conducted, what can be learned from action, and how to solve problems at hand. P&R combined with the information gathered through participatory social mappings and assessments (PSAM) supports the processes focused on the inclusion of the most vulnerable and in putting people's needs at the centre. The RTEL integrates perspectives and elements from the Adaptive Pluralism concept and philosophy.

#### **Systematic Action Research (SAR) and emergent development**

The RTEL approach has elements of design using participatory processes, methods and tools to help better understand and makes sense of how change is happening in whole communities we work with as well as with the whole programme itself. The generation of substantial volume of micro-narratives (posting on the learning platform 20 to 100 words describing what can be learned from action combined with thematic photos), and the collection of learning data against learning themes combined with social mappings, among other source of information, also contributes to inform and nurture emergent processes driven by the findings specific to each context to get closer to people's aspiration and needs. The pioneering work of Danny Burns on Systematic Action Research explains the importance of designing programmes sensitive to diversity and complexity.

**Sense making and distributed cognition**

Sense making invites intuition and automatic expert judgment (local experts in this case) to generate ‘an eagle view’ of complex situations. In both CRSHIP and KSHIP, an intentional and facilitated networking of the local expertise of implementing partners (distributed cognition) coupled with social media and the information made available by a substantial volume of micro narratives allows a faster identification of emergent issues, practices, and opportunities.

**Reflexivity on the edge of chaos**

Ideally, conditions and processes will be created for increased complex multi-loop feedback and interactions in the learning network coupled with intentional facilitation to challenge existing knowledge and push the learning network away from its routine to the edge of chaos. The edge of chaos being where creativity and innovations is at best. Creating a reflexive learning systems can also be achieved through the creative exploration of alternative ways of learning, and encouraging the modification of the design of the learning system and strategy when needed.

In addition to the above references, a number of learning approaches and methods offer a rich spectrum of experiences and ideas to draw from: The Government of India designed Rapid Action Learning Unit (RALU), the Positive Deviance, the Reality Check Programme, and the Problem Driven Iterative Approach (PDIA) among many other.

<b>Table 1. The 4 principles of the RTEL conceptual framework</b>			
<b>Real-time</b>	<b>Networked</b>	<b>Evolving</b>	<b>Reflexive</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediacy of information and sensitivity to local systems</li> <li>• Early detection of issues for rapid response (sensing the ‘tsunami’ learning wave)</li> <li>• Emergent trends and patterns of practice</li> <li>• People driven with rapid realism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embedded collective expertise of the network in the learning system</li> <li>• Collective capacity building and cross pollination</li> <li>• Co-generation of knowledge and learning</li> <li>• Horizontal availability of knowledge in the network by the network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cumulative triangulation and correlation of information, data and findings over time</li> <li>• Coherent alignment with strategic goal</li> <li>• Self-criticality</li> <li>• Iterative adaptations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitated multi loop feedbacks and interactions</li> <li>• Creative exploration and improvisation</li> <li>• Modification of the learning system by the network</li> <li>• Self-organization over time on the edge of chaos.</li> </ul>

**How it looks in practice**

- We started by developing a common understanding amongst implementing partners to put learning at center of our work;
- We set up and signed a learning grant before any other thing in CRSHIP. And, we accelerated the recruitment of a learning officer in Kenya to prioritize learning over end cycle reviews and documentation;
- We agreed to institutionalized Pause and Reflect milestones (described above). After a short lead period of implementation to allow quality time for reflection and informed decision making on how to scale up with quality and inclusion; and
- We paid careful attention to partners with qualified and passionate professionals.

<b>Table 2. RTEL in practice</b>		
<b>CRSHIP / year one</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>Practical examples</b>
Horizontal flow of learning in real time. Sharing local expertise across 12 implementing partners. Improved collective and systematic learning	683 micro narratives posted in real-time for the vast majority, 1000+ thematic photos, 16 P&R field sessions, 10 monthly learning reports 12 case studies, 3 practice based report, real time learning and sharing amongst more than 140 members of the learning network	<i>'I Experienced a problem with the chief of the village being upset because of CLTS shit calculation (morning). I posted my problem in the learning network in the evening, got solutions and advises from other IPs and the EA the same evening. I then applied the solution the following day in the next village we triggered. The solution was to better explain the CLTS process, approach and objectives to the leaders of the village, and it worked for me'</i> EkUdom Sok, Project Coordinator, Kampong Chnang Province Cambodia
Improved and timely decision making. Knowledge management, documentation, and generating initial elements of evidence	Facebook (FB) platform can be used to conduct light touch research, makes knowledge products available to all, allows independent studies to fact checks work on the ground with 1000+ photos and 683+ micro and short narratives	<i>'The real time learning approach is helping me a lot as Programme Manager primarily because it provides me with real, relevant, and current information on all levels of activities, especially at ground level with our Implementing Partners (IPs). These current and timely information, while not always 100% accurate, provides a sound basis for decisions and actions that are truly responsive because the action or response can be taken whilst the issue or challenge is happening and/or persisting'. Rafael Catalla., CRSHIP Manager</i>

<b>Table 3.</b>		
<b>KRSHIP / year one</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>Practical examples</b>
Horizontal flow of learning in real time. Sharing local expertise across 11 sub-counties. Improved collective and systematic learning	More than 350 micro narratives posted in real-time for the vast majority, 1000+ thematic photos 12 short narratives ,4 case studies, 100 members networked through the KSHIP real time learning network	<i>"Certification for 10 villages that had been verified in Narok had just began, this was late November 2016. From the posts in the KSHIP real time learning network, I noticed that the certifiers were sampling households instead of doing 100% households as per the revised Kenyan 3<sup>rd</sup> party ODF guidelines. Once I noticed this, I immediately called the County Public Health Officer in charge and enquired about how certification processes were conducted in his county. He explained that the team doing certification had been trained before the ODF guidelines were revised, (the earlier guidelines allowed 30 % sampling of households). After our discussion, he immediately reached out to the team with corrective measures". Vincent Ouma, Programme Officer</i>
Supporting analysis, Knowledge management, documentation,	FB platform can be used to conduct light touch research and analysis, makes knowledge products available to all, can be used to allows studies to fact checks work on the ground	<i>'The use of the learning platform allowed us to analyze 2016 activities leading to the realization that some components and themes were not well covered by the programme. We are now able to support our partners better focus implementation and learning in those areas' KSHIP team.</i>

*" I find the Real Time Learning platform refreshing from traditional learning. As a practitioner, by a click of a button, the platform has enabled me to share with other practitioners, our interactions with vulnerable women, men and children living in our target areas. It has been fulfilling being able to share our successes and limitations with our colleagues through the learning platform and getting real time feedback and innovative suggestions that has informed appropriate decisions while still in the field' Irene Gai, MHM champion Kenya.*

### Outcomes and challenges

Note that KSHIP and CRSHIP have their own specific learning plans, experiences and challenges. However, we can note common learning related outcomes in both programmes. First, they both achieved a collective shift into a real time learning mode to put learning at the center. Second, a stronger culture of learning has emerged, allowing the strategy of the programmes be more sensitive to local conditions, and consequently better support processes to leave no one behind.

Some of the challenges faced before and during the implementation includes:

- the difficulty to convince that real time learning is possible;
- the challenges in the identification of qualified partners and learning officers;
- the challenge of developing the practice of focusing the sharing on how we solve problems;
- the challenge of processing the volume, the variety and the speed at which huge amounts of information and data is generated by this approach. This means in practice that we were not always able to synthesize all emergent learning into digestible chunks.

### Emergent learning and reflections

What we learned from learning is that it takes time, commitment and several iterations before getting close to what we want to achieve. We did not get it right from first try and were often wrong in some of our assumptions. One of the learnings that should be kept in mind is that developing a learning system and network requires the collaboration of a lot of like-minded people interested and open to learn from each other, and ready to explore and improvise. While the practical application of some of the concepts of the RTEL approach is at its early stage, we can already observe encouraging positive effects on the capacity of CRSHIP and KSHIP programmes to respond and adapt more rapidly to emergent issues and opportunities. These can range from a rapid light touch adjustment on how ODF verification is being conducted, or a more a more strategic decision to adapt processes to ensure vulnerable groups are identified and their needs made visible. These small and substantial adaptation combined have the potential when made timely to help leave no one behind.

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### Notes

The RTEL approach and framework is the results of literature review and field practice with various partners.  
The design of a RTL approach can be as simple as a short scenario to give a start point and the key principles and processes to follow. Reference: Hadjel H. September 2015 (short narrative), Developing a Learning grant  
See the DDD manifesto here: <https://buildingstatecapability.com/the-ddd-manifesto/>, and World Bank Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior / chapter 11: adaptive design, adaptive intervention <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/487191482349881446/Chapter-11.pdfworld>  
The complexity and unpredictability of Rural realities is not a new observation. See Robert Chambers' seminal book Rural Development: Putting the last First.

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