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

**The influence of real time learning  
in WASH programming**

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*In an effort to improve programme outcomes, particularly in ensuring sanitation for all, the Cambodia Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Improvement Programme (CRSHIP) has introduced tools to strengthen the programme's ability to adjust interventions to the specific local conditions, priorities, and opportunities. In 2016, CRSHIP introduced Real Time Learning (RTL), providing an opportunity for continuous reflection and learning leading to context adaptive programming. Using RTL, programme partners are able to report on activities, invite feedback and request support, or offer insight reflecting their experiences. RTL is still an emerging practice with some challenges in implementation, including introducing adaptations throughout institutional arrangements, and limited quantitative findings to date, however current empirical evidence suggests it may carry significant potential to enhance knowledge management, quality of implementation, support inclusive and equitable programming, and expand the breadth and impact of programme works.*

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**Introduction**

The first phase of the Cambodia Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Improvement Programme (CRSHIP) began in 2011 as a five-year US\$ 5.09 million grant awarded by the Global Sanitation Fund (GSF) of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) to the Royal Government of Cambodia through the Ministry of Rural Development. Plan International Cambodia is the Executing Agency (EA) for CRSHIP. The goal of the programme is to increase access to improved sanitation and promote sustainable key sanitation and hygiene practices in rural Cambodia by utilizing approaches such as Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), School Water Sanitation and Hygiene, Sanitation Marketing, monitoring systems at commune and village levels, and widespread awareness-raising activities.

The objectives of CRSHIP are to:

- Promote the sustainable practices of consistent use of latrines, hand-washing with soap, and drinking only safe water in rural communities
- Develop and strengthen capacity in government, local authorities, and local NGOs in promoting improved sanitation and hygiene

CRSHIP 1 targeted 200,000 households in 2,000 villages from 53 districts across 6 provinces: Kampong Cham, Tbong Khmum, Kampong Speu, Takeo, Svay Rieng and Kandal. CRSHIP 1 aimed to achieve Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in 60 percent of target villages (1,200 ODF communities). At the time CRSHIP began, less than 41 percent of rural Cambodians had access to improved sanitation, the lowest rate in rural Southeast Asia. As CRSHIP 1 ended in early 2016, it had promoted sanitation and hygiene practices in over 2,027 rural communities, 630 of which achieved ODF. Though 31 percent of participating communities achieved ODF, one of the highest in Southeast Asia, CRSHIP 1 fell short of achieving its intended goal of 60 percent ODF within the programme timeframe.

CRSHIP 2 implementation started in 2016 in 5 new provinces (Prey Veng, Kampot, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom and Kratie), expanding the geographical footprint of CRSHIP in the southern and central parts of Cambodia. It targets roughly 261,000 households in about 1,500 rural villages. CRSHIP 2's approach is informed by its experience implementing the first phase, and includes a greater focus on the needs of those living in vulnerable situations including ID Poor 1 and 2<sup>i</sup>, Persons with Disability, and inclusion of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) in schools and community work. A critical programmatic shift in CRSHIP 2 is its focus on a context driven adaptive strategy to ensure that programme implementation is informed by the information, conditions, strengths, opportunities, needs, and learning from the field. Moreover, the design of CRSHIP 2 takes into account lessons learned from the first phase of the programme, the global WASH sector, as well as state-of-the-art thinking around international development as reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the objectives remain the same, CRSHIP 2 was designed to better align with the targets included in the Cambodian National Action Plan for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation, and the SDG target 6.2, with its focus on the sanitation and hygiene needs for all, particularly women, girls and those in vulnerable situations.

### **The learning and documentation (L&D) grant**

During the first phase of CRSHIP, it became apparent that the challenges in the field were not being sufficiently addressed or communicated by Implementing Partners (IPs) to each other and to programme management. Furthermore, there was limited monitoring beyond basic data on sanitation coverage. Challenges and lessons learned from the field were not well documented or disseminated, thereby limiting project impact on learning, advocacy and adaptive change.

In late 2015, CRSHIP partnered with WaterAid to lead the Learning and Documentation (L&D) grant. The overall method and approach of the L&D grant builds on lessons learned from CRSHIP 1, development aid, complexity science, various participatory and action learning methodologies – most notably the Rapid Action Learning Unit initiative in India – and input from sector thought leaders within the CLTS Knowledge Hub at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. CRSHIP's L&D grant is primarily designed to support knowledge management from within to help solve implementation problems, and to increase the overall effectiveness and the quality of the results on the ground. The key objectives of the L&D grant are:

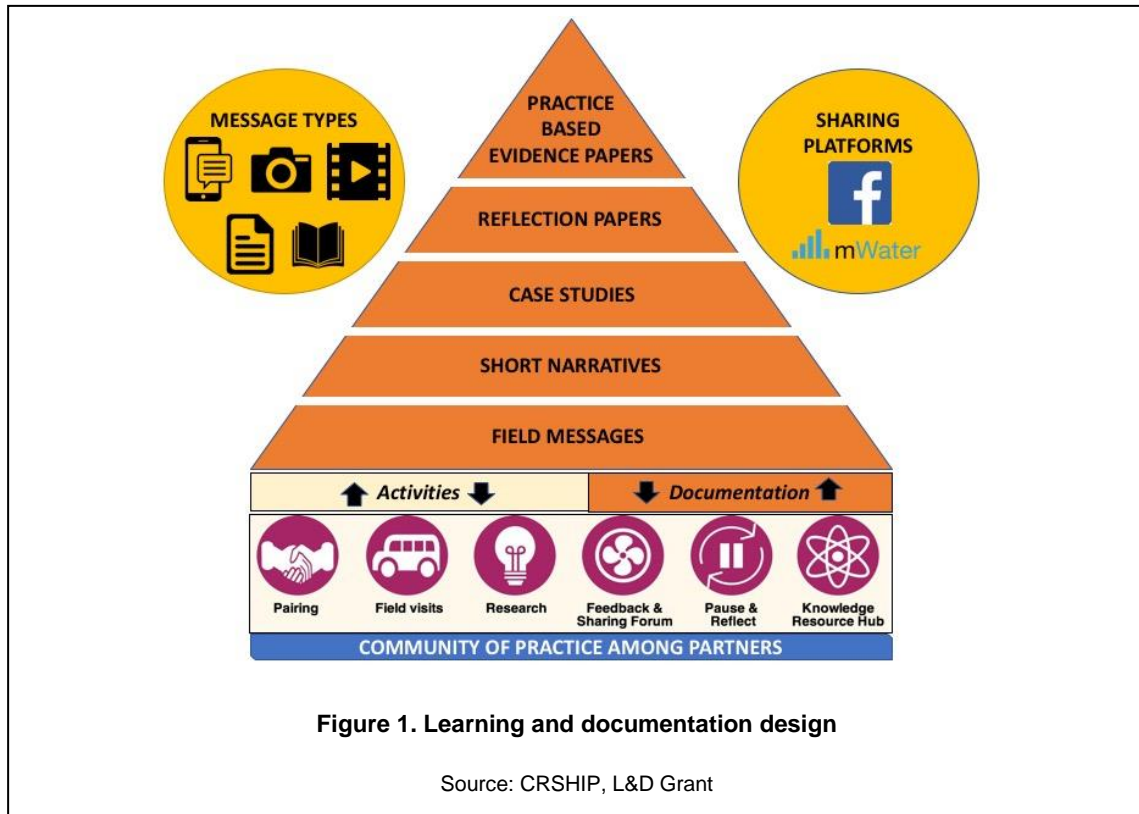
- To improve programme effectiveness through learning and documentation
- To increase programme impact through research and dissemination of lessons and innovations in Cambodia and internationally

The basic approach to CRSHIP's L&D is to loosely plan a set of 'action learning' activities to identify and disseminate emerging practices and innovations, and allow IPs to self-organize and shape the programme's learning agenda. Through each activity, the L&D team works closely with IPs to build their capacity to tell their own story and the story of the communities they serve, and benefit from a knowledge management system by learning from others.

The L&D team also collaborates with other stakeholders within CRSHIP, such as the EA and government partners, to identify, investigate and document successes, innovations and challenges emerging from the field. The L&D team's three key objectives among its stakeholders, including IPs, are to:

- Create a community of practice among stakeholders to share learning, exchange ideas and expand knowledge resources,
- Improve skills at documenting and learning from their own work, mentoring them to develop self-reflection practices and responsiveness to evidence based findings, and
- Document and learn from the work of IPs through capturing and analysing lessons learned.

Figure 1 illustrates the L&D grant's design, showing the different types of activities at the base of the programme (field visits, research, pause and reflections etc.), and the hierarchy of information it seeks to gather through the activities (field messages, short narratives / case studies etc.).



### Real time learning in CRSHIP

A large part of the L&D grant’s mandate is to help identify and communicate critical problems in the field as they arise; thereby informing the implementation strategy in real time. To do so, it has to monitor what is happening on the ground in near-real time and document not only the outputs but also the processes it took to get there. To achieve this the L&D team has developed tools, activities and processes which emphasized participation by all stakeholders to contribute to and benefit from the leaning. Below are some of the key tools, activities and processes:

#### The learning network Facebook page

At the very start of CRSHIP 2, the L&D team met with each partner organization individually to build rapport and to learn about how they liked to learn and communicate. From those early meetings, the team found that nearly all of the partners preferred visual and ‘learning-by-doing’ methods. Capacity to communicate formally through email, reports and briefs varied, however nearly all partners, including government, used social media, particularly Facebook, as a source of information and personal communication. Hence, the L&D team chose to use Facebook as the platform for the Learning Network (LN). The L&D team encourages participation on the LN by uploading relevant content, facilitating discussions and, perhaps most effectively, holding competitions among partners to contribute learning. The L&D team monitors and tracks the learning that is posted on the LN, including developing a database to documenting and harvesting learning into monthly summaries.

The LN has proven to be an effective tool for enabling real-time learning throughout CRSHIP with 100 percent participation among IPs, and an average of 80 posts per month. The majority of posts describe field activities and events and usually include photos; the L&D team categorize these types of posts as ‘Field Messages’, the bottom level in the information hierarchy.

#### Field visits

Field messages provide an informative yet limited view of what’s happening throughout the programme. To gain a deeper understanding of events, activities and the stories reported on the LN, the L&D team go to

where partners are to provide capacity building support to IPs to produce short narratives and case studies. Over the recent months, IPs have been posting their case studies on the LN with stories ranging from their work with integrating persons with disabilities, menstrual hygiene management, and income generating projects into their WASH programs.

### **Pause and reflect (P&R) meetings**

The L&D team hosts facilitated Pause and Reflect (P&R) meetings, which are conducted periodically to provide space for IPs, government, and CRSHIP staff to identify and discuss successes and challenges. These meetings also serve as collaboration and coordination meetings where partners together identify solutions or points of adjustment that need to be made to the programme approach and timeline. Key learnings and action items from each meeting are documented and reviewed during subsequent meetings to follow-up and close the learning cycle.

### **Inflection points attributed to real time learning**

The real value and purpose of Real Time Learning (RTL) is that it encourages implementers, managers, and partners to be aware of the work in the field as it is being implemented, recognise trends and patterns, and be immediately aware of questions and field challenges. To facilitate focus and management of information, CRSHIP 2 has identified key learning themes that allows targeted tracking, monitoring, and probing. The learning themes are areas focused on supporting increased access to improved sanitation in rural Cambodia and promote sustainable sanitation and hygiene behaviours. The key learning themes include: Participation of Communities, Engaging the Poor & Equity, Local Government Engagement, Quality of Field Facilitation, and Context Specific Hygiene. Cross cutting themes also include the Participation of Women and Girls and Reducing Inequality. All posts made to the LN are tracked by the type of message (i.e. field messages, short narrative, case study, report etc.) and the learning themes; which then can provide an indication of the key areas of potential further investigation or research.

The introduction of RTL is credited for introducing inflection points, or changes and enhancements to programme implementation. Though there are examples of inflections within each learning theme, in this paper, two key areas will be explored: Quality of Facilitation and Engaging the Poor & Equity. A thorough review of the Learning & Documentation initiative will be conducted within the year which will provide an evaluation of RTL and its role in programme design and implementation. Nonetheless, the ongoing information collected indicates that the frequent, consistent, and responsive information collection and sharing have had positive implications in the trajectory of the programme.

### **Quality of facilitation**

A number of inflection points were identified under the Quality of Facilitation theme which are described below.

The reports and messages on the LN provided CRSHIP management and fellow IPs insight into the field work and the processes of the IPs. Information from the LN revealed the IP activities were not being implemented in alignment with the conceptual and programmatic shifts between CRSHIP 1 and 2. A number of the IPs supporting CRSHIP 2 were also IPs for CRSHIP 1, and the activities they engaged in and planned indicated that their programme reflected CRSHIP 1 outputs. The recognition of this conceptual gap provided CRSHIP management an opportunity to reconvene implementation partners and re-explain the changes to the programme. Subsequent P&R meetings contained sessions specific to reiterate and capture experiences implementing under the conceptual shifts in the programme; particularly activities around contextual learning prior to implementation of community WASH interventions.

During early implementation, the LN was a critical platform for IPs to engage in broad discussions around the practice and challenges they had with assessments tools, facilitating techniques and collaboration with government counterparts. Many IPs used the platform to indicate their challenges or post reports of their progress. IPs indicated during their P&R meetings that the LN allowed them to learn by doing and by watching others do it. CRSHIP management was also able to follow the posts and messages on the LN and noticed trends and key challenges in the implementation of assessment tools. Management responded by facilitating field level support to IPs to help address their challenges. This field level support was unplanned and unanticipated however was identified as necessary. This helped to ensure that the information the IPs were collecting were as accurate as possible, and prevented the possibility of needing to conduct a total repeat of the assessment.

Finally, a key area of influence of RTL on practice relates to the appropriateness of some methods used during CLTS triggering of communities. IPs started triggering work in their programme areas and posted photos, videos, updates, reports, and questions related to triggering. A number of photos and videos highlighted triggering work with children. Though working with children is a regular part of the triggering process and is part of Cambodia's National CLTS Guidelines, some of the photos and reports raised concerns whether triggering with children was appropriate or necessary. As a result of these discussions, the role of children in the triggering process has been suspended within CRSHIP until further review and investigation. A study is currently being commissioned to investigate and provide recommendations on possible adjustments to the tool and national guidelines.

### **Engaging the poor and equity**

As a key area of focus for CRSHIP 2, the use of the LN and other L&D processes to introduce, reiterate, and discuss equity and inclusion has been critical. Workshops and regular meetings included introductions of equality and non-discrimination concepts, sanitation needs of women and girls, and inclusive WASH. After conducting workshops, tools, materials, and other relevant content were posted on the LN. Following these postings, partners began posting their activities and experiences working with some of the key target groups (people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, women and children). These tracked messages on the LN have helped to provide evidence supporting the influence that program trainings have helped to increase awareness, information, and guidance to IPs and the communities they serve.

As a specific example, one of the IPs posted their work on integrating MHM into CLTS. The discussion on the post on the LN was limited, however the L&D team followed up with that IP to elaborate on their work and to produce a short narrative to document it. Furthermore, the IP presented their experiences with introducing MHM to their target communities during a P&R meeting attended by other IPs, government partners, and CRSHIP management. The discussion led to the recognition by all partners that MHM is as a critical part of the provision of sanitation for all, and agreement by many to make it a key focus of their WASH projects moving forward.

### **Key challenges and observations on the practice of RTL**

Below are four key challenges and observations from the first year of implementation of RTL:

- Adjusting CRSHIP's plans in order to adapt and respond to emergent learning demands programmatic and institutional flexibility that is not necessarily built into existing management and financial systems. The partnerships at all levels including at the donor, the EA, and the IP levels all have differing degrees of flexibility and levels of constraints which impedes the potential RTL has to impact programmatic shifts. The multiple layers of institutional barriers are sufficient to stifle the value that RTL can bring.
- The initial time and resource investment of the L&D team was focused on mobilising and supporting IPs participate in the LN therefore the first year had limited input, usually from a few members and largely focused on providing a photo and a short caption regarding the activity rather than reflection or insights. The L&D team also noted that they had to invest in eliminating some of the barriers in participation, particularly access to the internet in rural Cambodia. The IPs were then provided with a phone capable of use in rural areas and with sufficient access to mobile internet networks. The concept and practice of RTL required consistent collective and individual coaching by the L&D team in order for IPs to gain the understanding and the confidence to regularly participate.
- The impact RTL has had on programme performance is still undetermined. Furthermore, the means of evaluating RTL's impact is still being developed.

In the first year, CRSHIP's investment in RTL was less than six percent of the overall CRSHIP 2 spending in 2016. RTL is currently supported by a dedicated L&D team (1 project manager and 2 officers). Though the experience of the first year suggests that a small investment in RTL has the potential for high impact, more time is necessary to assess the optimal level of effort and investment required.

### **Conclusions and future direction**

RTL is still an emerging practice with some challenges in implementation and limited quantitative findings to date, however current empirical evidence suggests it carries significant potential to enhance knowledge management, quality of implementation, support inclusive and equitable programming, and expand the breadth and impact of programme works. Initial evidence indicates that RTL has encouraged the programme

to rapidly address emergent issues and topics related to WASH, thereby helping CRSHIP 2 become more adaptive and potentially have a greater impact than CRSHIP 1. Furthermore, the information generated through these different processes allows for a narrative of CRSHIP to emerge that provides a comprehensive look at how processes unfolded. A key area of focus for the CRSHIP management in the future is the integration of the existing monitoring and evaluation system and framework with RTL in order to draw from the different available data and information gathering processes to develop a more detailed and informative story of CRSHIP.

An assessment of the L&D grant will be conducted following this first year of implementation to document the overall L&D practice and to begin to determine the effectiveness, including the cost effectiveness, of the L&D grant. The assessment will also provide recommendations on possibilities regarding future L&D programming, including scaling up. Given the sanitation context in Cambodia and globally, it may be beneficial to broaden the community of learners and develop opportunities to make the learning, methods and tools accessible to partners outside of the CRSHIP programme.

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### Notes

ID Poor 1 & 2 is the Kingdom of Cambodia's official National Standardised Procedures for the Identification of Poor Households. The programme enables direct targeting services and development assistance to the poorest households in a village.

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