NOTES FOR CONVENING, FACILITATING AND FOLLOWING UP ON RAPID ACTION LEARNING AND SHARING WORKSHOPS

The Bhopal Workshop of 18 and 19 August 2015 on Innovations in Rural Sanitation was convened under the heading Getting to Swachh Bharat Faster through Rapid Action Learning and Sharing. At the end several States indicated that they wished to hold similar workshops. This note for them and others is based on the experience of the Bhopal Workshop and earlier ones at Nainital and elsewhere. Amendments and additions invited. Some points are common sense; some others based on experience are less obvious. It has three sections: planning and convening; facilitating; and following up.

TIPS FOR PLANNING AND CONVENING

Ask strategic questions

- What do you want to achieve? What would be good outcomes?
- What is your theory of change? How do you hope this workshop will make a difference and through what causal pathways?
- What does this tell you about who to approach, who to seek out to invite, who should do the convening and logistics, and who should be engaged in follow up?
- What does this tell you about timing, location and duration?

Choose a suitable venue

More obvious criteria:
  a. Accessibility (or isolation if you want to be undistracted).
  b. Amenities of an acceptable standard.

Less obvious criteria:
  c. A room that is large, with space to move around e.g. stand on a ‘map’ (see below).
  d. Walls on which masking tape can be used.
  e. Small tables and chairs that are easy to move. Light plastic chairs are convenient.
  f. Flip charts, stands, white boards, marker pens etc etc.
  g. Quiet. Surprising how often venues are noisy (traffic, fans, airconditioning etc...)
  h. Congenial management and staff – a happy place.

Plan the programme

There is often pressure beforehand from participants, sponsors and senior officers to provide a full and detailed programme. However, a good participatory workshop never happens exactly
according to what was earlier planned or expected. Flexibility is a watchword. Here are things you can do for optimal planning to get the best of both worlds – satisfying those who want a detailed programme, and leaving space for responding to dynamics and priorities and opportunities that emerge in the course of the workshop.

- Plan with cards on the ground (this can be quick and efficient). Write cards for fixed points or activities – starting with the end of the workshop, blocking off the time needed for final discussions including commitments and plans for follow up. The opening (as informal and quick as reasonable) can also be planned, together with expectations and introductions. Having topped and tailed the programme in this way, the rest remains to be filled.

- Brainstorm other activities you anticipate, write them on cards and sort them on the ground leaving some sessions empty.

- Label the empty sessions OPEN SPACE, or BREAKOUT GROUPS or INTERACTIVE SHARING or something similar which will allow you flexibility.

- Send out the programme with a note saying that it is an outline and that you will respond to emerging priorities and opportunities.

- Observe proper protocol and decorum, but minimise the formality of the opening. Thoughtful opening remarks can be invaluable in setting the scene. Ensure as far as possible that the start is not delayed by the late arrival of a VIP or long speeches.

- Plan for follow up (see below).

**Invitations**

Who should be invited depends on the nature of the workshop. If you are seeking innovators, you will need to devote time to asking around and finding them. Again and again excellent contributions, and breaths of reality, have been provided by local Natural Leaders. Be bold in the mix of people you convene.

If you want participants to bring their experiences, consider sending them a template, as we did for Bhopal (see annex), with sections for context, what to do – actions and process, challenges faced, practical tips and advice, and contacts for further information. Or adopt other headings to fit requirements.

Request invitees to arrive on the day before the workshop, and not to leave before it is decently concluded.

Consider declaring the workshop a powerpoint-free zone. Except occasionally for diagrams or photographs, powerpoint tends to be a time-consuming distraction, and preset in content instead of responding to the dynamics of the workshop.
TIPS FOR FACILITATING

Preparation

- **Facilitation team.** Allocate and share roles and responsibilities with which all are comfortable. Engage participants in facilitation. Try to ensure gender and other balances.

- **Documentation.** Ensure that you have documentation covered, including where necessary documentation of breakout groups.

- **Meet the day before** the workshop, and every evening.

- **Prepare the room** well in advance. Chairs and round tables usually work well.

- **Language and translation.** In advance, or right at the start, identify whether some are marginalised by language. If so, sensitise all participants. Either arrange for those who are marginalised to sit together with a quiet translator, or occasionally have full or summary translations in plenary. When groups form, language groups may sit together.

Establish a relaxed and participatory atmosphere

- **Name cards.** If these are on tapes for hanging round the neck, make sure the name is in LARGE LETTERS and on both sides. Alternatively in an informal workshop, let participants write their names with large pens on sticky labels.

- **Informality.** Encourage everyone to meet people they do not know and to mix up. There are many ways of doing this.

- **Map and introductions.** A good icebreaking option is to ask everyone to stand on an imaginary map of their State or, if from abroad, country. Torn up flip charts can have place names in big letters. Encourage people to see where others are and to adjust their position accordingly. Standing where they come from each person can then do a 10 second self-introduction giving, say, name, place and post. This can be remarkably quick – at Bhopal over 90 people took about 4 minutes – if anything too fast. But warn that all should clap if anyone goes over the limit.

- **Expectations** Groups and/or individuals brainstorm hopes and expectations from the workshop and write these in capital letters with marker pens on paper slips, each point on a separate slip. A4 torn into thirds is a good size. Sort the cards on the floor or a wall and give clusters headings. Do this sorting during the first coffee/tea break with feedback immediately afterwards before starting the main programme. If adjustments to the programme are indicated, they can be discussed and you can use the open spaces.

Options for sharing approaches, insights and innovations

Many of these are well known. Here is a short checklist of some options. Sharing can be in or through:
• **Plenary.** All can hear. But too much plenary can become a bore, and fewer contributions may be possible.

• **Groups** with summary feedback.

• **Rotating groups.** 3 or 4 stations are set up. Presenters stay put. Groups rotate so that except for the presenters, everyone goes to each station. Good for the early afternoon. Movement and variety make it easier to stay awake.

• **Wall posters** presented in sequence. This can work well with say 5-10 posters, with people standing and moving as a plenary group, if the plenary is not too big.

• **Scattered wall posters** with presenters repeating, and people going where they are most interested.

• **Fish bowl.** Those with something to share sit and talk to each other, with all others sitting outside listening.

• **Panel.** A panel present and discuss.

• **Topic clusters.** Presenters are clustered by topic, and others go where their interests lie. Rapporteurs summarise in plenary feedback.

• **Open space.** Champions of topics stand separately and describe their topic — either a sharing, or a brainstorming etc — and people go where their interests lie. Feedback to plenary.

• **Expectation clusters.** Groups form around topics that emerged from the expectations.

**Conclusion and closure**

A checklist:

- Action plans
- Other commitments
- Workshop summary and fuller report
- Participants’ list and emails
- Future communications
- Future meetings and dates
- Take-aways
- Evaluations
- Valedictory

Conclusion and closure are often rushed and incomplete. To minimise this:

- **Plan backwards** (see above), **ring fence the time** needed, and then add a bit in case however hard you try the rest of the programme does overrun.

- **Do all you can to avoid people leaving early.**

- **Some options for concluding activities,** besides some or all of the checklist above:
- **Groups (e.g. Districts) present plans** and commit to action. It is easy to under- or over-estimate the time groups need to draw up and present action plans and commitments.

- **Participants share their take-aways** – limit to one each if numbers are large. One or two sentence takeaways can give strong feedback, reminding everyone what has been learnt and telling everyone what has struck others.

- **A final panel** of key participants who have been alerted in advance.

- **A final valedictory.** Done well, this can be a good conclusion and send off.

- If possible it should come from someone who has taken part throughout.

For follow up, invite participants to tie themselves down to commitments and dates.

**TIPS FOR FOLLOW UP**

Follow up can be strong or weak, and prompt or delayed.

- Allocate time immediately after the workshop before the team disperses to write a summary or short report or to refine any statement that has come out of the workshop. For Bhopal we faced problems because the team dispersed almost immediately. In the Nainital workshop of April 2013 the team stayed together and worked intensively for two days to draft a two page consensus document that was then sent to participants for their reactions within a strict and short time limit. This worked well and the two-pager lightly amended provided a consensus input for a large policy workshop convened in Delhi three weeks later.

- A longer report should follow at the same time or soon after. Its utility or chances of being read diminish with time. The longer report can be a non-event. This need not be the case if it is well written and well presented. It can be a valuable record and source of reference.

- A consensus statement, short report, or a longer report are much more likely to be noticed and to have an impact if they are sent fine-pointed to key people with a covering letter.

- One option is for reminders of action participants have committed to be sent to them on an agreed date. Another is that they will communicate action taken and its outcomes to a communication hub.

*The IDS/WSSCC Team for the Bhopal Workshop*  
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This is a working document. Please send suggestions for additions or changes to Vinod Mishra vinodmishra2810@gmail.com