Despite real achievements and progress in some countries, there are still an alarmingly large number of people without access to the types of sanitation and hygiene facilities that they need to manage their basic bodily processes safely, with ease and dignity. While recognition of the huge potential of sanitation for improving health, wellbeing and child development provides important fuel for the drive to sustainable sanitation for all, achieving this goal is going to need context specific and adaptive programming, particularly in relation to reaching the poorest and the most vulnerable, where progress has been by far the slowest. A lack of safely managed sanitation is a major public health issue which has impacts on interrelated human rights (Figure 1, Musembi and Musyoki 2016; UNRIC nd). This has multi-dimensional impacts on poverty, affecting health, education and standard of living (UNDP, 2018).
**Vision:** The overarching aim of our work is to support and strengthen the S&H sector in tackling the complex challenges it faces in delivering universal safely managed sanitation by 2030. Realising the human right to S&H for all is vital to ensuring human wellbeing and development.

**Mission:** We believe that achieving sustainable sanitation and hygiene for all requires timely, relevant and actionable learning to enable the sector to innovate and adapt in an ever-changing environment. We engage in learning about, understanding, promoting and sharing good practices, ideas and innovations in participatory, community-centred S&H programmes and policies. By co-generating, curating and disseminating these and making linkages between organisations and between people we will add to the energy and momentum behind the collective drive to reach SDG 6.2. We innovate, develop and spread different methodologies that improve learning, support positive change and promote adaptive programming in the sanitation sector. Over the coming years we will continue to be alert and nimble in identifying emerging needs and challenges, and exploiting the opportunities they present. By being in touch and up to date with what is likely to be a rapidly evolving landscape, we will endeavour through rapid, adaptive and collaborative learning to influence policies and programmatic practice.

**Niche:** In such a diverse and challenging sector, the spaces we create for reflection and the co-generations of answers to emerging questions are more vital than ever to ensure good quality of practice. The IDS team are sensitive, agile and able to adapt quickly to emerging priorities, identify gaps and expose what is being overlooked. We build on over a decade of work and the longstanding relationships and trust that have developed over this time. Partners and contacts have routinely welcomed our ability to reflect on, digest and disseminate information coming from different organisations and countries. We receive high levels of requests for services and collaboration from practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and communities (over 70 a year on average), thus demonstrating the demand from other actors and organisations to work with us as well as the extent to which we are able to draw on the expertise of others working in the sector. Our publications have been cited 668 times since 2014, with a number of these in influential publications e.g. the 2018 WHO Guidelines on Sanitation and Health. Furthermore, our neutral position as researchers, convenors, facilitators and communicators has always allowed us to work across organisational and geographical barriers, between different levels and to break through silos of professional specialisation.

**Credit:** United Purpose/ Jason Florio

**Credit:** UNICEF/ Ben Cole
Our relationship with key stakeholders and the sector

Over more than a decade we have built up a network that comprises many different groups and individuals in the WASH sector: practitioners, policy-makers and researchers across many different organisations, countries and regions. Our work has positioned us at the meeting points between these different groups. This is a privileged and unique position that enables us to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, learning and innovation between and within this diverse mix of stakeholders and to collaborate and engage with them in order to better understand and improve policy and practice.

Our approach

Learning is at the core of our work. Our approach is based around three learning and engagement processes as highlighted in the figure below: capturing and disseminating field level realities and community perspectives; rapid action-orientated research and learning activities; and government and organisational policy and practice level engagement. Dovetailing these three processes leads to stronger and more adaptive evidence-based S&H programming, which in turn delivers more equitable and sustainable outcomes. The ways we interact with key stakeholders, and our activities, outputs and methods are all developed with this in mind.
**Methods and activities**

Our activities are designed to support the co-creation of learning and innovation for stronger policy and improved practice. We undertake a mix of face-to-face, hands on activities (e.g. workshops, immersions and networking); writing of practical guidance and toolkits and evidence based, concise publications (e.g. *Frontiers of CLTS* and Learning Briefs); and online activities and formats (e.g. website, webinars, e-newsletter, audio-visual). Building on the successes of the past project cycle we will continue high-impact activities as well as developing new learning approaches. These activities cut across different thematic concerns such as sustainability, equity and inclusion, menstrual hygiene management, disability, handwashing, support for the poorest and most marginalised, and highlight blind spots such as the links between faecally-transmitted infections and undernutrition.

The programme’s main components will include:

- The innovation, testing and spread of rapid action learning approaches.
- Action-orientated research, publications and tools which distill learning from field level realities and are targeted at policy-makers and practitioners.
- Communication, dissemination of learning, and networking.

They have been divided into sections for clarity, however all Hub activities are interlinked and all interact and support each other. Learning, monitoring, feedback and reflection on results is essential to the development and adaptation of all our approaches and methods.
Rapid action learning approaches

A central activity of the Hub is innovating, testing and spreading action-orientated learning approaches to provide evidence and insights for policy, practice and research and strengthen sector capacity. Examples of the approaches we use include:

Peer to peer horizontal learning

Sharing and learning about ideas, successes, failures, challenges, innovations, delving into new areas and themes. Face-to-face discussion and sharing of experiences and generating ideas with peers are central benefits of this approach. Rapid, concise reporting (2-4 days after events) is undertaken to immediately feed findings and recommendations into policy and practice and maintain momentum.

This form of learning is often done through workshops, for example:

- **Rapid Action Learning (RAL) workshops** facilitate horizontal knowledge sharing between participants and immediate planning for action using what has been learnt.
- **Regional sharing and learning workshops** to bring together sanitation experts within one region to discuss ways forward, map knowledge gaps and network in order to improve capacity and knowledge in the region and build consensus on the way forward.
- One day sharing and learning workshops. These are held the day before larger WASH conferences and are an opportunity for participants to pause, take stock, reflect on their own and other people’s experiences, share knowledge and learning, and exchange ideas and innovations. Actions and recommendations are fed into the main event.
- Thematic workshops and writeshops, based on a priority topic. The aim is to come to a consensus on ways forward and to produce an action-orientated output for wide dissemination.

Evidence of impact

A final evaluation case study investigating some of the known impacts of the 2018 regional workshops found the following:

- The East and Southern Africa (ESA) workshop made an important contribution to instigating a collaboration between SNV and UNICEF in the specific instance of piloting effective disability-friendly handwashing and toilet facilities in the refugee resettlement camps in Zambia’s Luapula Province.
- The workshop and participants’ attendance at subsequent regional pre-planning meetings for AfricaSan made an important contribution to the wider movement for evolving the conceptualisation of and planning for reaching the last mile and equity and inclusion in the hygiene and sanitation field in Africa.
- Recommendations from the learning brief contributed to the improvement of the Kenya Ministry of Health WASH Hub’s monitoring and reporting tools to accommodate equity and inclusion issues and post-ODF planning.

Credit: The Sanitation Learning Hub

Credit: The Sanitation Learning Hub
Action-orientated research, publications and tools

A central role of the Hub is to identify gaps, blind spots and emerging questions in the sector and to gather evidence and challenge policy-makers, practitioners and knowledge partners to reflect on them. This is another way to generate learning through improved understanding, awareness and co-created innovative answers to these issues. Examples of this nature include our advocacy of the links between health and lack of sanitation; the pioneering study on men and boys and gender transformative change in WASH; as well as challenging the preconception that CLTS and WASH programmes inherently include vulnerable and marginalised households. We produce a number of publications and tools that are based on learning by ourselves and others, and in turn support sector-wide learning through disseminating innovations and insights quickly and widely. Our publications are distinctive in that they are academically credible, action-orientated and produced in a way that gets information to practitioners quickly. As we are not bound by the strict protocols that often result in delays in academic publishing, we are able to release information in a timely fashion whilst it is still current. The Frontiers of CLTS: Innovations and Insights series is an example of a publication that offers practical guidance on new methods and approaches, and thinking on broader issues and emerging topics and gaps in the sector.

We also seek to strengthen capacity in the sector through approaching practitioners to write about their experiences. Through our publications, we give the opportunity to practitioners to share their challenges, experiences, innovations and priorities with the sector, either as authors or as contributors of case studies on specific innovations. Our aim is to make our outputs as useful as possible, whilst also giving field level practitioners a platform and voice. Another way we do this is through inviting blogs and contributions for the website, such as the recent Market Shaping three part blog series.

Examples of impact

- Frontiers #10 Equality and non-discrimination (EQND) in sanitation programmes at scale (part 1) helped frame WASHPaLS’s thinking around equity and inclusion as part of their preparatory literature review while designing an experimental study to evaluate the impact of pro-poor subsidies in a CLTS programme in Ghana (Final Evaluation impact case study).
- Frontiers #4 Sustainability and CLTS - Taking Stock was used to draft a 4-pager for the UNICEF country offices in the West and Central Africa region, sharing with the teams possible interventions to increase sustainability and making sure interventions for each dimension of sustainability is included in the planning. The issue provided a framework through which the country offices could examine the sustainability of their programmes and interventions, and this framework assisted the UNICEF staff to make their programmes more sustainable (Final Evaluation impact case study).
- Our book Sustainable Sanitation for All: Experiences, Challenges and Innovations is the most downloaded open access book from the Practical Action website.
- Feedback on Frontiers #6 ‘Breaking the Next Taboo - Menstrual Hygiene within CLTS’ included:
  - “I am implementing CLTS within menstrual hygiene component, and the “Frontiers Issue 6” help[ed] me to identify key indicators and improve the methodology we have used” AGETIP, Senegal (User Survey 2016).
  - Samuel Musyoki, Country Executive for Plan International Zambia, also spoke about how the issue was found to be particularly useful for Plan International when promoting gender issues in schools and advocating for custom made latrines for girls (Year 2 annual report).
  - “For MHM and CLTS those tools were really applicable and can be translated really easily. I think a lot of cultures struggle with that topic in similar ways and although there are differences you still have this quasi taboo and breaking that taboo and here are some techniques on how to do that and how to integrate it into your programme is really applicable.” (James Dumpert, Program Learning and Effectiveness Manager for WaterAid, Cambodia, User Survey 2018).
Examples of new research methods being trialled and adapted by the Hub

**Immersive research** to help raise an agenda for action, investigation and research, providing nuanced insights with implications for policy, practice and research. The approach is about taking the time to build rapport and listen to people, making an active effort to reach out to those who are marginalised, very poor or disempowered. When policy-makers are involved in the process it can also help overcome misleading views of field realities on visits arranged and stage managed by field staff. The core of immersive research is usually 3-5 days staying with a family in a village, sharing their life, chatting, wandering around, observing, seeking out and meeting 'last mile' people, taking photographs, and finding out about topics of concern.

**Rapid topic explorations** on a range of topics which span disciplines and where knowledge is rarely summarised. Treating these topics holistically brings the potential for insights with immediate policy relevance. They also could benefit from ground-truthing to understand field realities. Each researcher is given freedom to be highly flexible in approach. The key conditions are:
- Up-to-date grounded realism where appropriate with field visits;
- Timeliness: 15 days for literature review, fieldwork and report-writing;
- Actionable: reports are oriented towards action, with recommendations for practice and policy.

**Participatory video.** Working with researchers using visual methods with 'last mile' communities. Visual methods such as participatory video or digital storytelling are good for working with marginalised, non-literate, hidden, potentially resistant groups. Using a visual approach helps people to feel more visible – and using an approach where they are seen and heard is an empowering process in itself for many participants. This approach unpacks intersecting inequalities and damaging power dynamics and helps groups to tell their story from their perspective (whatever they decide that is). They also set the agenda for who they want their story told to – participants create videos or digital stories with specific audiences in mind (such as policy-makers), their stories often creatively conveying very nuanced and powerful messages.

**Communication, dissemination and networking**

We engage in ongoing and multi-faceted networking activities, keeping the S&H community well connected and informed. Our unique position allows us to make linkages between organisations and individuals, as well encouraging and supporting champions, innovators and early career professionals.

Our efforts add significantly to the energy and momentum behind the drive to reaching the SDG 6.2 goal. We also provide more specific advice and consultation to sector colleagues – we have built up a good reputation as well as strong networks of practitioners and policy-makers over the past 10 years. The relationships are mutual: we receive help, information and advice through these networks; for example we learn of new work, research and efforts, thereby staying at the cutting edge of S&H research and programming.

We attend major national and international WASH conferences, co-convening side sessions, capacity development and sharing and learning workshops, as well as running exhibition stalls to network and disseminate our materials.

All of our communications activities aim to support relevant, timely, responsive and adaptive sharing and learning. In order to enable fast uptake of the ideas and messages we also ensure that all our work is clear, easy to access, understand and apply. Most of our outputs and publications are collaborative creations drawing together diverse viewpoints from sanitation experts and presenting case studies from the ground.
**The CLTS/Learning Hub website** is unique in the global span of its content and dedication to participatory approaches to rural and urban/peri-urban sanitation. Like our other activities, over time the website has expanded in terms of the kinds of materials available, broadening out from CLTS to now include more resources documenting other approaches and programmes. As part of our efforts to reposition/reframe our identity, a new website will be put in place that reflects our current areas of work and activities.

**The monthly newsletter**, with over 6000 subscribers is highly regarded by our stakeholders, many of whom are directly engaged as practitioners on the ground or as managers, policy-makers, consultants or researchers. We are trialling a new ‘Ground Perspectives on S&H’ quarterly newsletter to fill a perceived gap in the sector and share more directly about ground realities in a timely and responsive way.

**Early career sponsorship:** Sector capacity strengthening is a central objective of our activities. Through the sponsorship of early career professionals (both practitioners and researchers) to write papers and attend key international WASH conferences, we give them the opportunity to enter the sector, raise their profile, make connections as well as building their confidence.

“I think the Hub does great work of bringing people into the sector... from a networking perspective, meeting people and seeing what opportunities were there I think it was really valuable... Some of those people end up joining the sector.” Andrés Hueso, Acting Director, Global Policy Team WaterAid

**Moving forward**

The sector is faced by a long list of unknowns and challenges, as well as areas of opportunity. There are key areas where rapid and realistic learning about unknowns, innovations and experiences, and the incorporation of lessons into policy and practice, could yield very high payoffs. They are also mutually strengthening: learning and action on one will benefit the others. Some priority themes for the coming years are:

**Leaving no one behind – reaching the ‘last mile’**: There are large numbers of individuals and communities who are vulnerable, marginalised, excluded or actively discriminated against, experiencing inequities, inequalities, or stigma which could undermine their ability to construct, access, use, or maintain a latrine (House et al., 2017). Although many countries still have large proportions of the population without improved sanitation, so are not at the ‘last mile’ stage per se, it is essential to have strategies in place for the poorest, most marginalised and hardest to reach. It is important to consider this topic now so that these groups do not get left behind as we progress towards 2030.

**Gender:** Further exploration of gender transformative approaches is critical. Our recent study into men and boys in S&H showed how the sector often falls back on reinforcing instead of challenging gender norms/stereotypes to encourage behaviour change (Cavill et al., 2018). We are dedicated to further exploring how S&H programming and processes can be strengthened to promote transformative change in gender inequality within households, communities and within S&H programming and policy.

**Safely managed sanitation:** The SDGs force the sector to not only ensure improvements to but also the safe management of facilities. Many households and communities struggle to move up to higher rungs on the sanitation ladder. Use of basic and safely managed sanitation remains low in many countries, and some communities and support agencies stop at the seeming achievement of ODF, even where ODF criteria allow the use of unimproved and limited sanitation services.

**Strengthening supply chains:** Many market-based sanitation initiatives have failed to move the poorest households up the sanitation ladder away from the use of traditional pit latrines. The affordability of market-based sanitation goods and services by poor and disadvantaged households is still a major barrier. Few effective solutions have been found in areas where latrine construction materials are scarce.
Sanitation and hygiene and undernutrition: The neglected links between sanitation and hygiene and stunting/undernutrition will continue to be a focus of Hub activity. The persistent lack of awareness at all levels of multiple faecally transmitted infections (FTIs), especially Environmental Enteric Disorder, remains a problem and opportunity. The public at large, fieldworkers and policy-makers alike still rarely recognise in full the causes, scale and impact of stunting (undernutrition) which result from FTIs. These blind spots and ignorance are a priority gap and opportunity as a theme to keep in touch and up to date with, and to contribute to overcoming.

Handwashing: Handwashing at critical times (after defecation, cleaning a child’s bottom and/or handling child faeces, before feeding children (including breastfeeding) and before food preparation and eating) is a vital part of safe sanitation and hygiene practices. Changing handwashing behaviours is notoriously difficult and new innovative approaches need documenting and spreading.

Environmental cleanliness: The safe disposal of faeces and handwashing at key times both disrupt faecal-oral transmission, however there is growing evidence that different transmission routes need to be considered when designing and implementing WASH interventions. One emerging concern is the safe management of animal faeces (Budge et al., 2019). In addition, as households invest in higher levels of sanitation facilities, ensuring that faeces is being contained and emptied safely will become an environmental health concern.

Peri-urban and urban environments: We live in a rapidly urbanising world where 3 out of 10 people in towns and cities rely on unimproved facilities and one out of 10 practice OD. Furthermore, as programmes push for whole districts, counties and countries to become ODF, towns are often ignored. The urban and, to a lesser extent, the peri-urban context is very different from the rural context with additional layers of complexity. More research and learning on how to best assist bottom of the pyramid households to climb the sanitation ladder is required. We plan to explore timely, relevant and actionable learning for urban sanitation policy and practice.

References


