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Why shit happens: Amplifying the voices of frontline WASH professionals to reduce failure in the sector

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Background

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) endeavours regularly fail (Jones, *et al.,* 2013). Sometimes this means that entire programmes do not achieve their stated aims, sometimes these failures are setbacks which can be rectified with sufficient reflection and action (Barrington, *et al.,* 2017). This research aimed to develop an evidence base regarding how and why field-based WASH professionals in sub-Saharan Africa believe failures occur, their experiences when sharing and discussing them within their organisation, and how they believe a culture conducive to publicly sharing and learning from failures could be nurtured.

Methodology

Across four sub-Saharan countries (Malawi, South African, Tanzania and Zimbabwe), 108 frontline WASH professionals from private, public, non-governmental, and academic organisations were interviewed. Sampling and recruitment were via purposive and snowball sampling. The data collection instrument was contextualised in each country to ensure that language was appropriate to the local context. The research team prepared research memos for each transcript and identified the overarching themes. Two team members reviewed all of the memos and developed a coding framework.

Results

Preliminary results from the coding framework are shared here.

How do failures happen?

Failures in WASH projects were categorised as having six main causes:

1. Insufficient capacity – Several participants cited lack of capacity but the definition of capacity was not explored. Where participants did expand on the concept, it ranged from a lack of formal training to a lack of authority to respond to challenges.
2. Poor coordination and communication – Often seen as an issue in relationships between WASH actors, this results in confusion, and project actions being overlooked or duplicated.
3. Inadequate community engagement – Whilst participants recognised that most projects include some form of community engagement, it was acknowledged that this was often tokenistic or inadequate, resulting in the implementation of projects that are inappropriate for the context or do not address the priority needs of the community.
4. Unrealistic donor expectations – A competitive funding environment means that organisations find themselves overpromising in terms of activity and timeline and underdelivering. As failures are rarely discussed with donors, this results in unrealistic expectations of what funds can achieve.
5. Politics and bureaucracy – Participants believe there is a lack of political will to invest in WASH, that bureaucracy strangles project in red tape, and populism results in projects that "look good".

6. Idealistic project planning – Projects often have insufficient time or budget to properly conduct needs assessments, operation and maintenance, or monitoring and evaluation. The most commonly cited failure was a lack of project sustainability after initial funding had ended.

How are failures discussed and shared?

Amongst peers (professionals in similar roles in the same organisation), sharing is common. However, this sharing often does not extend to staff at higher levels within the organisation, or with staff at partner organisations. There is an assumption that blame must be apportioned for failures and the "size" of the potential blame impacts on what failures are shared, with smaller, easily rectified failures being shared more willingly than larger, more complex failures. In organisations that rely on donor funding, there is a perception that discussing failures will lead to a curtailment of funding. This reduces willingness to share failures, although it is seen that discussing 'challenges' is an acceptable and necessary part of reporting.

What changes can make the WASH sector better at sharing and learning from failure?

There was a general recognition that failures and challenges are opportunities to learn and address future problems. However, it was recognised that there needs to be a culture shift towards greater accountability, and particularly shared accountability. Three options for increased accountability were proposed:

1. Cross-organisational platforms for sharing – Participants suggested in-person organised forums for discussion of challenges and failures between organisations in a similar geographical area or with a similar project focus.
2. Improved coordination between organisations – By improving communication between partner organisations, it was suggested that greater transparency would increase the sense of shared responsibility for project outcomes, and hence increase the likelihood of failures being discussed.
3. Role of the donor – Donors have a large influence on how projects are planned and executed and should encourage flexibility in project planning to allow change in the face of failure, and encourage openness through mandating the reporting of challenges and failures.

Conclusion

Failures stem from the interaction of many actors within a complex system. Peer-to-peer support is common when discussing and learning from failures but there is a lack of trust to foster sharing between different levels within an organisation, or between organisations. It is recommended that safe spaces for discussing failures are needed, and more transparent interactions between partners. Donors can play an influential role in ensuring that the sector takes greater accountability when things go wrong.

References

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