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Improving WASH response by reinforcing sector preparedness and coordination

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**DELIVERING WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES
IN AN UNCERTAIN ENVIRONMENT**

**Improving WASH response by reinforcing sector
preparedness and coordination**

C.E. McDonald, Kenya

BRIEFING PAPER 1815

A successful WASH response relies on good coordination and preparedness. There have been global initiatives to improve emergency response, such as the humanitarian reform process, but there is still a shortfall in how coordination platforms perform. It is also reported that there is a disconnect between international and national level representatives. In 2011, a project to improve WASH humanitarian response was rolled out in six regions to help bridge this gap and to reinforce the capacity and preparedness of emergency coordination platforms (ECP) in high disaster risk countries. For the first time, regional advisors to the WASH cluster (RECA) were hosted in NGO organisations rather than in Unicef. This paper looks at this unique approach, presents some of the successes, looks at the challenges and summarises lessons learnt.

Introduction

Effective coordination of humanitarian response and disaster preparedness remains a challenge for all sectors. Since the humanitarian reform process and cluster approach was introduced, significant advances have been made, yet there still remains the need to strengthen capacity, increase strategic planning and accountability (see Box 1).

The global WASH cluster (GWC) recognised this need and developed their strategic plan which is illustrated in Figure 1. In order to implement outcome 3, funding was sought for six regional advisors who could offer direct support to emergency coordination/cluster platforms (ECPs). These positions were held by INGOs and the International Federation of the Red Cross. This was a move to increase the responsibility of cluster partners more actively in a role that had previously been undertaken by Unicef.



The principle objective of the project was to reinforce in-country WASH preparedness and emergency response capacity of WASH clusters. This was done by supporting capacity development, engaging national authorities and assisting in contingency planning.

Box 1

Humanitarian reform, the cluster approach and the transformative agenda

The humanitarian system underwent a comprehensive review in 2004 which assessed the capacities and effectiveness of the global humanitarian system as a whole. The results led to the Humanitarian Reform Process which focused on four key objectives to improve the predictability, timeliness and effectiveness of humanitarian response. The cluster approach is an important part of Humanitarian Reform whereby stakeholders are arranged in sectoral groups (eg WASH, health, education). This is to allow a more structured, accountable and professional community which can better partner with local authorities and humanitarian actors.

Although the Humanitarian Reform has strengthened emergency response capacity there are still challenges in deploying adequate leadership, putting in place appropriate coordination mechanisms and ensuring clear mutual accountabilities in humanitarian response. Based on these challenges the IASC (Inter agency standing committee) agreed a set of actions in 2011 known as the *transformative agenda* which are set to make further improvements to humanitarian response. These actions include:

- A mechanism to deploy strong, experienced, senior humanitarian leadership;
- The strengthening of leadership capacities and rapid deployment of humanitarian leaders;
- Improved strategic planning at the country level
- Enhanced accountability of members of the humanitarian country team and
- Streamlined coordination mechanisms adapted to operational requirements.

Source: <http://www.humanitarianinfo.org> IASC Transformative Agenda Chapeau and Compendium 2012

Role of RECA

The RECA project is a multi-agency initiative designed to enhance WASH preparedness and response capacity around the world. The project provides direct support in a number of countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America & the Caribbean. The project provides dedicated technical and human resources to WASH coordination platforms (ECPs), through its six Regional Emergency Cluster Advisors (RECA). The location and agency hosting each RECA is shown on Figure 2.

The focus countries where each RECA worked were selected according to the disaster risk faced by the country. An initial list of high risk countries was created using different global risk indices (World Risk Report, the ECHO Global Needs assessment vulnerability and crisis index and the OCHA Global Needs assessment). Through a consultative process of selection each RECA concentrated their work in two or three countries. A standardised baseline report was prepared for each focus country. These surveys provided a broad analysis of general in-country WASH capacity.



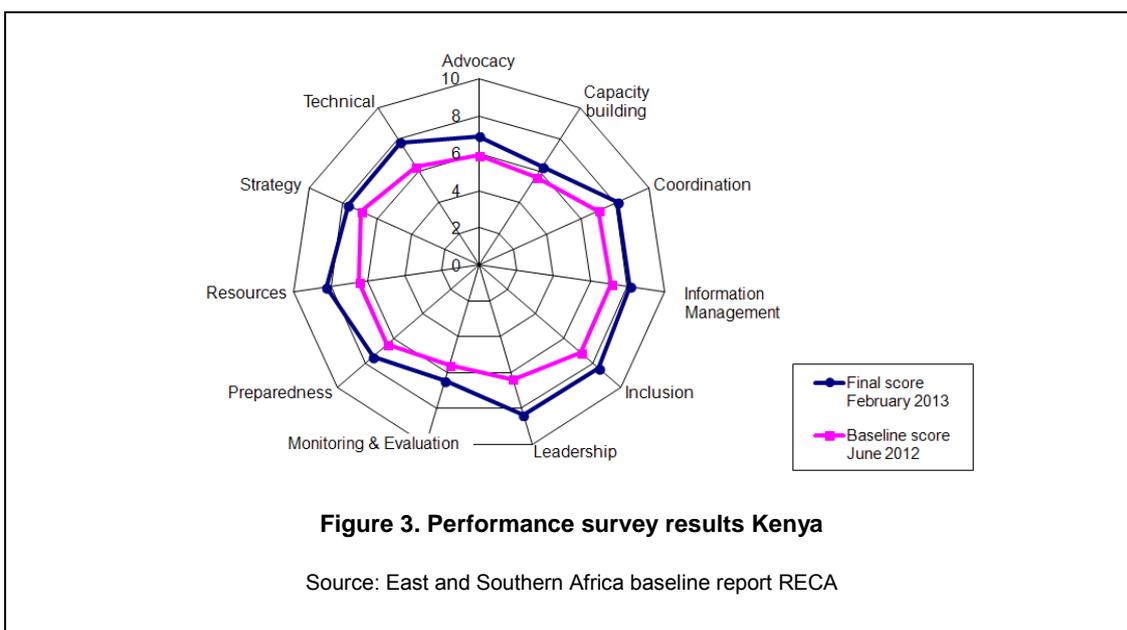
Figure 2. Regions and corresponding agencies involved in the RECA project

Source: [RECA](#) project newsletter issue 2. April 2012

RECA approach

The regional WASH coordination positions (RECA) were each hosted by INGOs which was a move away from the previous model of regional advisors who were Unicef staff. The result was that the position was seen by ECPs members as being independent and impartial. It also removed the constraint of “double hatting” which can happen when the advisor has two roles and has to balance their time between the two.

Each ECP was also assessed against performance areas which are shown in Figure 3. The survey was carried out at the start of the project and repeated before the end of the project. This was a self assessment with ECP members rating how well they felt the group performed against certain criteria. This then led to the members having a clear idea of where additional support could be given by the RECA and where the coordinator could focus their resources.



The results from the baseline were shared in a workshop style forum and the priorities for the ECP were ranked by the group to produce a joint workplan. Initially there was no funding for activities so building relations with the stakeholders was especially important.

The RECA were able to share their findings and challenges with each other and this formed an informal support group. Collectively they produced capacity building tools and workshop materials that could be shared and adapted to the different regions.

Although there were synergies between regions the RECA was also flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the countries where their work was focused. An example of this was in different ways of working with and engaging governments. In the ESA region the government involvement was strong in Kenya, weak in South Sudan and very limited in Somalia. The RECA responded to these differences by arranging a learning summit where government representatives from Kenya could meet and mentor government representatives from South Sudan.

Successes

The successes of the RECA programme were linked to the approaches explained above. Data was collected in the focus countries in a systematic manner which could then be analysed on a global level to pick up common themes. It was then possible to see if gaps were restricted to national level, regional level or in fact a global trend. This allowed the programme activities to be reviewed to make sure they would still contribute to the overall objective. Likewise, where particularly strong performance was noted in a country, analysis of the underlying reasons could be shared with countries which were under performing in a similar area.

The consultative approach gave the ECPs a sense of ownership over decision making. Using participatory techniques such as self-assessment and group ranking of ESP activities meant that those involved felt part of

the strategy and more committed to the activities. As the RECA came with no authority over how the ECP was run they relied on relationship building and supporting the ESP in its gaps rather than telling people what to do.

Support from the RECA allowed additional capacity to run workshops. For example in Kenya there was a demand for a lesson learning workshop on WASH and disaster planning. This attracted a large number of stakeholders and led to reengagement by partners, especially government, into the ECP.

In addition the RECA's were located in strategic hubs where interaction with other global initiatives such as the ECB (Emergency capacity building project) was possible. OCHA and Unicef regional offices were also co-located in RECA locations and this led to strategic synergies. For example in the WCA region there was a push for cholera preparedness from Unicef and the RECA was able to join in this initiative. Across all regions RECA's played a key role in helping the ECPs in contingency planning. This expanded, what had previously been a largely emergency focused body, into a strong platform for preparedness.

One of the actions promoted in the transformative agenda (see Box text above) was greater accountability of ECPs. This was achieved successfully in the project through publishing the results of the performance survey for all partners to see. Subsequent changes in the follow up surveys were also shared with ECPs.

Challenges

A mid-term review of the project found there was limited awareness, acceptance and functioning of ECPs. Despite on-going efforts by the IASC, the multitude of stakeholders (government, local authorities, national and international humanitarian agencies) are at various stages of awareness and acceptance and even recognising a need for a cluster approach. This ranges from complete lack of awareness, awareness but lack of interest, partial acceptance but lack of collaboration. This made improvement in the performance of ECPs difficult given the wide range of engagement of partners.

Funding for the RECA's is not indefinite; therefore there is a need to consider an exit strategy. However high turn over of staff, slow replacement of coordinators and poor leadership mean that withdrawal should be at a realistic rate. Perhaps, for continued effective coordination, the RECA project should be seen as a core function of the GWC rather than a time limited project.

Initially the project aimed to get increased uptake of global WASH cluster tools but it was found that agencies preferred their own tools and feedback was that the tools had been developed remotely, were not known about, not relevant or fit for purpose. The RECA's were at least able to feed this message back up to the global level and in some cases help adapt tools for national use.

The size and complexity of the project has tested the functioning and governance of the GWC. A recent evaluation of the project recognised the need to address the role of GWC in strategic oversight and donor relations. Further efforts will enhance the projects success in the future.

Programming was within a restricted timeframe and with initial start up delays there was a need to focus on quick-wins. This was perhaps at the expense of longer term capacity building initiatives that need an extended timeframe. Another thing that needed more time is engaging with partners that weren't participating fully in the ECP. In reality the focus was on active members.

There was varied involvement of Unicef across the different regions. In order for the project to succeed there needs to be on-going cooperation between the RECA and Unicef given their position as global cluster lead and their mandate to build government capacity.

There are benefits in the consortium approach of the project including spread of expertise, reduced risk to individual agencies and global support structures. However it is felt that these advantages have not been fully realised to date. The strong support mechanism between RECA's provides good insights into building effective partnerships going forward.

Lessons learnt

- **Demand-led approach key to success:** The participatory methods used by the RECA's was important to gain collective buy-in of ECP members. Methods used ranged from the self-assessment of the ECP, collective ranking of activities and listening to peoples needs before prescribing approaches. This helped to gain trust and good working relations with members.
- **Global analysis of regional trends:** This picked up common themes across the project and allowed RECA's to share lessons and ways of working to support other regions. It was also useful for the Global WASH cluster to review the outworking of the strategy and check if they were on target.

- **Too many tools:** Partners reported confusion and fatigue with the number of tools that they were expected to know about and use. A more focused approach to promotion and dissemination should yield a higher take up especially if the tool has been nationally adapted.
- **Be focused in scope but flexible in approach:** The RECA has a broad TOR and whilst technical areas and DRR are crucial to good humanitarian response support they should focus efforts on clear gaps and encourage the set up of technical working groups to provide support to the ECP.

The RECA project has made some clear and beneficial contributions to WASH coordination. The global nature of the project has allowed a wide range of data to be gathered and compared which is useful evidence for the GWC. It is also an example of how to make global strategy relevant to national partners and has sought to engage more fully with NGOs by placing them in regional advisory roles. The demand led approach and use of participatory approaches has been key to its success and buy in from ECP partners. As the project moves forward it still faces considerable challenges in building knowledge and capacity in WASH response and careful planning will be needed to ensure that gains are sustainable.

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Notes

ECP – Emergency cluster/coordination platform
OCHA – Office of coordination for humanitarian affairs
IASC – Interagency standing committee

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