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Capacity building and innovations through joint learning: experiences with communities of practice and learning alliances [summary of panel discussion]

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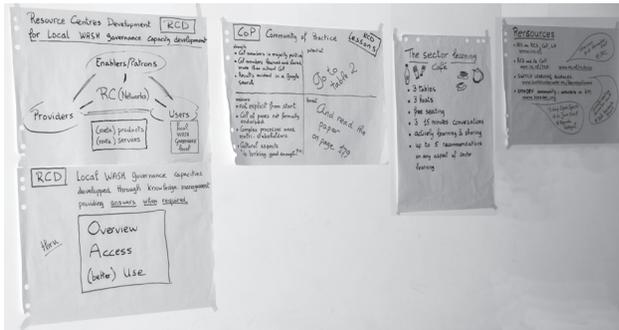
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Capacity building and innovations through joint learning: Experiences with Communities of Practice and Learning Alliances

The Sector Learning Café¹, how we learned



Photograph 1: The Sector Learning Café rules and role of resource centres in sector knowledge management

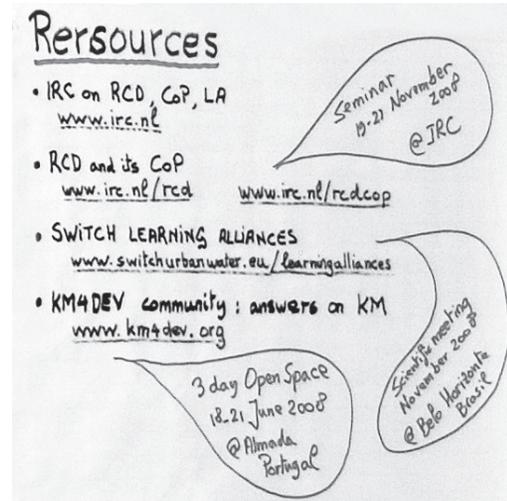
Source: the author

The session was advertised throughout the WEDC conference venue. About 25 participants joined in. The World Café method allows informal highly interactive learning among all present around a central topic, here sector learning, about a number of interlinked themes, here resource centres as ‘spiders’ promoting sector knowledge management; communities of practice to learn among peers and; the learning alliances approach enabling multi-level, multi stakeholder development of innovative approaches and scaling up.

In view of the number of participants and time allocated, three tables covered with creativity enabling table-cloths and colourful markers were provided. Participants chose at which table to start conversing and were offered the possibility to swap tables in three consecutive rounds. At each table a convenor facilitated discussion and documentation of thoughts and recommendations. The café closed with a short round of reflection.

The conference papers as source of inspiration

Two conference papers by IRC staff presented experiences with the themes of the event. The paper ‘A global community of practice: creating resource centres that build capacity in local WASH service provision’ shared 5 years of experience with a global community of practice enabling the development of (sub)national resource centres acting as ‘spiders’ or facilitators of sector knowledge management and learning.



Photograph 2: World Café pointers to relevant resources and events

Source: the author

The paper ‘Learning alliances for integrated and sustainable innovations in urban water management’ shared the concepts of the Learning Alliances approach and the initial experiences of the global 5 year SWITCH programme on multi-stakeholder action research on Integrated Urban Water Management. A SWITCH powerpoint was shown introducing the programme’s Learning Alliance based approach [forthcoming at www.switchurbanwater.eu]

As staff of the projects presented in the two papers, the convenors at each of the 3 tables offered practical insight of experiences and lessons learned to date.



Photograph 3: a World Café table with table cloth and markers

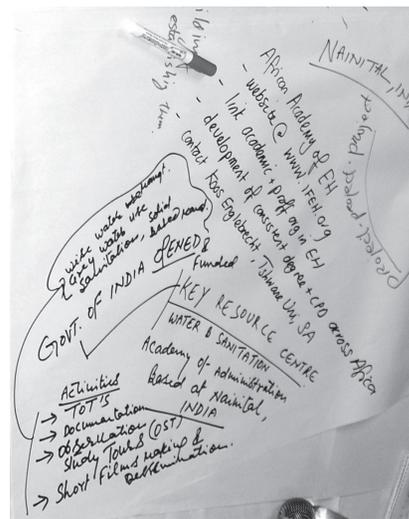
Source: the author

What happened and what came out

Though the primary purpose of the World Café method is not to formally document, but rather offer an informal and creative occasion to converse among people interested in a same topic and related themes [think football, star players, umpires, hooligans], a few highlights are provided here:

1. Only very few of the participants have hands-on experience with participating in a community of practice;
2. Unless allocated time by employer, still a rare situation, many people are reluctant to invest in 'life long learning';
3. During a discussion on whether communities of practice are individual persons based or can also be organisation based, an interesting experience of Aguasan (a Swiss community of practice) which since years is carried by a group of likeminded organizations rather than individuals. Reference <http://www.communityofpractice.ch/en/Home/Examples/Aguasan>.
4. While two participants had experiences with Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSP), similar to the Learning Alliances approach, others had never heard of this form of learning and sharing cq. innovation development and scaling up;
5. On resource centres, the following trend was mentioned: a move away from setting up new resource centres, towards assisting further development of existing resources centres, established in academic and government institutions, and facilitating and deepening linkages between these resource centres towards networked resource centres.
6. Identifying sustained funding mechanisms for resource centres and knowledge management activities remains a challenge. Despite sector wide approaches and basket funding, there still is a focus on (implementation) projects, rather than on sector capacity development. In this situation it was suggested that projects should be stimulated to take up and budget for knowledge management in their planning.

7. On learning and sharing: the tension between people wanting to hold on to information and knowledge (information and knowledge = power) and the need for sector sharing and learning was discussed. Participants recognize the need to share, in order to prevent re-invention of the wheel and to foster synergies. Reality is however that people tend to hold on to information and knowledge, in order to strengthen their position.
8. The KM4Dev community advocating the slogan 'sharing knowledge provides power' seems still very avant-garde.
9. Capacity development and advocacy for 'learning to learn together' seems useful.



Photograph 4: using the table cloth and a marker

Source: J. Verhagen, IRC

Acknowledgements

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Note

¹ Method described and discussed here <http://www.theworldcafecommunity.net/>

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rcd, community-of-practice, learning-alliances, knowledge-management, world-café, networking

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