Crossfire: Can 'admitting failure' help the WASH sector learn and improve its work?

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Two researchers in the water and sanitation field, Stephen Jones and Nicola Greene, explore whether the recent interest in admitting to failure in WASH projects is a refreshing way to open up debate and improve practice, or a way to garner good publicity without really achieving systematic change.

Dear Nic

Let's talk about the recent trend of 'admitting failure' in international development and think about what it means for the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector. The most prominent advocates of 'admitting failure' so far are Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB-Ca), who created the AdmittingFailure.com initiative, publish an annual Failure Report, and set up the Fail Forward social enterprise to advise other organizations. At the end of last year the UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP) convened a workshop to discuss what the idea of 'learning from failure' meant for us. I sensed some enthusiasm amongst the participants for the potential of using talk of failure as a way of opening up the debate, mixed with some scepticism about how much it would really change the way we do things.

As I see it, the 'admitting failure' initiatives so far focus on two possible ways of learning from failure. The first is acknowledging past failures in order to learn and adapt – this requires some sort of 'safe space' in which to have these discussions. Examples include 'blameless post-mortems' and 'Failfairs' – and perhaps workshops such as SanCoP. Admitting failure in this way makes us think about who collectively was responsible and how all the different actors involved need to take better responsibility for their roles. EWB-Ca use an example from their own work in Malawi of how they failed to transition a CLTS pilot project from NGOs to local government. EWB admitted their own failure in 'projectizing' CLTS; they had made the pilot project work by providing extra capacity and funds where needed, but this created expectations and standards that were beyond the resources of the local government. EWB have tried to promote safe spaces to discuss failures such as this in Malawi, for example through workshops, the national taskforce on promoting open-defecation free communities, and a local newsletter.

The second approach involves planning for future 'safe' failures, to promote experimentation and innovation. This means accepting from the start that not all projects will work, but we may not know in advance

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which ones. So donors could act more like venture capitalists, for example funding ten innovative projects in the knowledge that eight or nine may fail, but the future benefits from scaling up the one or two that work will outweigh this. So, can 'admitting failure' help people and organizations in the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector learn and improve their work? What do you think of these ideas?

Yours,
Steve

Dear Steve

You are right, I have heard lots about this recent trend of 'admitting failure' and, whilst I was initially convinced of its usefulness, further investigation has led to some reservations on my part. While increased transparency is typically regarded as a good thing, I have my doubts that admissions of failure from WASH sector organizations will lead to many tangible benefits.

You have categorized the two types of learning from failure well; however there are some shared and distinct issues with both. In the first example you mention, acknowledging past failures, there is potential for confusion around how WASH practitioners would determine what constituted the 'failure' of an intervention. Is it not more realistic that a typical intervention, even an intervention considered successful, consists of a series of ups and downs rather than a complete success or failure?

Even in cases where failure is evident, it would be almost impossible to establish true causality without extremely rich data, particularly when considering large-scale programmes. In the EWB-Ca Failure Report, there are many interesting examples of small, contained failures in projects with probable (but perhaps not definitive) causes; but what about entire multilateral agency programmes that don't live up to expectations? With multiple actors involved, it would be particularly difficult to identify reasons for failure and provide these 'safe spaces' for learning that you speak of. Furthermore, there is little question that 'Examples of Previous Programme Failure' is *not* a key selection criteria for donors in allocation of funds!

The second type of learning from failure you introduce, the 'safe failure', is in my opinion, the one we should encourage more of. It's classic prototyping theory – fail early, and fail often. As CASE Foundation director Jean Case explains 'the very nature of innovation requires that we try new things and take risks'. Innovation and adaption is greatly restricted in WASH due to the risk-adverse nature of the development sector as a whole. As a result most WASH projects are specified completely and rigidly before initiation. Perhaps you're right, a more flexible, pilot-study based approach should be encouraged. My concern is that while these safe failures work in other sectors, it is complicated in the WASH sector as the most prevalent problems can occur due to the specific demands of users in a wide variety of contexts.

There is also the reality that some 'failures' may have the potential to negatively impact supposed beneficiaries' lives. Whilst organizations may be willing to admit to failures which showed a demonstrable absence of impact, I think we are a long way off admitting that sometimes actual

negative impact may be caused. Edward Carr has written about this on his blog asking 'At what scale can we fail?' He suggests that to admit failures of this nature may require shifting the public image of development away from the current 'inherently do no harm effort' to the more realistic 'on the whole we improve things, but sometimes beneficiaries are worse off post-project'. He further suggests that to admit these negative impacts may call the entire development enterprise into question. There is also the risk with this type of failure of some organizations publicizing their failures and post-rationalizing them as 'safe' when they could have been predicted and avoided.

My core reservation for both of these mechanisms of learning from failure, however, is described by Marc Bellemare in his blog when he compares the role of 'admitting failure' for NGOs to that of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) for firms. His suspicion is that the first NGOs to leap on the 'admitting failure' bandwagon may do quite well out of it. Do you really think 'admitting failure' in its current state is helping the WASH sector learn and improve, or is it just as he suggests 'plain old marketing'?

Yours,
Nic

Dear Nic

I agree that there is a danger of the debate on failure becoming too much about individual projects and PR. So we need to think about other types and scales of failure too, and the many different points of view that exist within these. The Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) in India is a good example of a failure that goes far beyond a single project. Andrés Hueso Gonzalez argues from his research on the Total Sanitation Campaign that the problem was the huge gap between policy and practice. Although the programme was in principle community-led, people-centred, and demand-driven, the actual implementation was government-led, infrastructure-centred, subsidy-based, and supply-led. Real progress was much slower than what was planned, and even what was reported. This was essentially a failure of political economy: low political priority, distorted incentives for those working on the programme, vested interests, and bureaucratic inertia. Although the failure has been acknowledged by the Minister in charge and efforts have been made to revamp the campaign, the key political economy issues leading to the failure have not been fully admitted and addressed. So there is a risk in the 'admitting failure' movement that we talk about failures of small pilot projects but become distracted from bigger issues – but perhaps we have to start somewhere!

Yours,
Steve

Dear Steve

It's interesting that you note the differing viewpoints and interests involved. Thinking about different viewpoints should remind us of the most important viewpoint of all – that of the ultimate (intended) beneficiaries. As with the case you mention, a project may be community led, but the community rarely gets to be the ultimate judge of whether a project is a success or not. Despite long debates about the importance of

accountability downwards to beneficiaries, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) still tends to be mostly about upwards accountability to donors. By intertwining funding decisions with M&E, incentives for objective evaluation and learning are greatly reduced, as Ian Smillie highlights in his book, *Mastering the Machine*.

One of the most widely shared 'failures' in the WASH sector to date, happens to be one that was initially recognized by users. The Erdos eco-town project developed by the Stockholm Environment Institute's EcoSanRes programme and the local government, involved the installation of 832 urine-diversion dry toilets (UDDTs) in multi-storey apartment blocks in Dongsheng District, China (Rosemarin, 2012). User complaints about odour were ongoing from the early stages of the project. Despite the best efforts of SEI to rectify the situation, the beneficiaries lost confidence in the system and flush toilets replaced the UDDTs four years later. While dealing with failure seemed exemplary during and after this project cycle, a conclusion satisfactory to the beneficiaries still took four years to reach. In this example the users were listened to, and a satisfactory solution was slowly but eventually provided; but what happens in cases where failures don't occur for years? Or when failures do not have an associated budget to rectify them?

The overwhelming number of abandoned latrines across the world highlights the reality that WASH projects will often take much longer than the project cycle to show success or failure. Adaptation is required during the project timeframe to avoid potential pitfalls during the project cycle but M&E is typically not fast enough to provide lessons to facilitate action. Even if failure is recognized, there is not enough additional time for reflection and working out how to change.

Yours,
Nic

Dear Nic

I agree that we need to think about longer-term change. So how do we move forward, given these challenges of learning and changing by 'admitting failure'? Is it even helpful to use the words 'admitting failure' themselves? As Robert Chambers pointed out, 'admitting' has connotations of blame rather than learning, and the word 'failure' implies labelling something with a very particular negative outcome instead of a more nuanced examination of strengths and weaknesses from different perspectives. There is also the danger of focusing on the smaller issues and implying that external actors have more influence than they really do.

He suggests that 'embracing failure' would be a better way of framing the debate to avoid the connotations of guilt and blame, and to emphasize the need for openness and learning. However, I've argued before that it might be better to keep the word 'admit', but to 'admit tension' rather than failure. For example, the thousands of broken handpumps across the world do represent a massive collective failure by the water sector, but one of the biggest problems for the sustainability of water systems lies in the tension between expanding and maintaining services. In countries where coverage rates for safe drinking

water are low, it is understandable that there is a big push to build new infrastructure to increase the percentage of the population with access. However, this must be balanced with the need to maintain existing systems. This tension is inescapable and each country has to work out how to address it.

Is calling it a failure the best way to acknowledge this and open up the debate or not? Maybe using the word 'failure' helps attract attention to the problems, but is less helpful in developing realistic processes to find solutions. Perhaps whether we use the word 'failure' or not, one of the roles of external organizations could still be to get different actors round the table and help create spaces for discussion: 'convening and brokering', as Duncan Green from Oxfam puts it. He uses the example of Oxfam's role in facilitating Tajikistan's Water Supply and Sanitation Network, where the tensions really become clear once 17 government ministries and agencies are in a room with UN reps, NGOs, the media, civil society, the private sector, and MPs! Perhaps instead of a 'safe space' this is a 'safe-enough space' where anger comes out, tensions are admitted, but gradual progress can be made.

Yours,
Steve

Dear Steve

If we move towards the idea of admitting tension, increasing our ability to adapt is vital to facilitate reaction to the problems uncovered during these discussions. Currently this is inhibited by many factors: limitations of time, money, capacity and a need to stick to rigid project briefs and timeframes. An increased understanding from donors of the flexibility required during a project may help in responding to highlighted issues, but I still see weaknesses when it comes to involving the beneficiaries.

In his blog posts about experimenting with water service delivery in the Triple-S project, Patrick Moriarty suggests this may be alleviated through intensive 'socializing' of a concept in the pilot stages. Following this, Moriarty encourages us to trial our methods, and potentially fail, within a confined but 'messy-real' environment as a 'development lab'. This is quite similar to the 'safe failure' model you proposed at the start of our correspondence, but with more emphasis on rigour, evidence and adaptability, than failure. He proposes, and I agree, that the creation of these real-life 'development labs' could be an integral part of the move towards the sector becoming more adaptive. The limitation that I see in doing this stems from the reality that even at the local village level, the degree of accuracy with which we can transfer lessons from one place to another is constrained by the context-specific needs of many WASH interventions. At what level would we perform these pilots and in how many different 'labs'?

Overall I think the recent movement around 'admitting failure' helps to get some discussion going on why we're failing but also runs the risk of distracting attention from some of the more fundamental changes we need to make. Furthermore, while evidence of failure within the sector is strong, evidence of learning and improving work based on this is less good. To reflect and 'admit failure' doesn't mean that a change will happen. As the anonymous humanitarian worker

writing the 'Tales from the Hood' blog suggested: 'Admitting mistakes and changing practice based on what is learned from mistakes are not at all the same things. If admitting failure is to be more than an exercise in conspicuous organizational humility, it will be up to us to link acknowledgement of failure with positive change.'

As for the terminology, after a full day of discussions about failure in sanitation at the most recent SanCoP meeting, two-thirds of attendees concluded that they too would prefer not to use the word failure. Perhaps our preferred approach is in line with that of the great innovator Thomas Edison who is quoted as saying 'I've not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work'. Personally I don't mind what it's called as long as we see some action!

Yours,
Nic

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