

Editorial: Making a difference

Richard C. Carter

Development and humanitarian relief work, and the research, education, and funding which support them, are about making a difference to people's lives. Those of us involved in these endeavours see the unnecessary suffering, need, deprivation, and discrimination experienced by too many people in our world, and we work for change. The pithiest definition of 'development' is 'good change' (Chambers, 1997) – change that makes a real and lasting difference to those whose rights, freedoms, opportunities, and life chances are constrained.

From our limited understandings of the situations which we see, we do what makes sense. In the first major global initiative to see everyone served with adequate water and sanitation (the United Nations International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, 1981–90), we drilled wells and handed them over to be managed by the 'community', distributed latrine slabs, and educated people about the health importance of good hygiene. We (the WASH professions and organizations) did what made sense at the time. Compared with today, those were days of naivety about technology, sociology, economics, and politics.

Fast forward 30–40 years. We emphasize sustainable services for all. We believe in wide-ranging analysis of obstacles to progress, and the programmes of external agencies are increasingly guided by the concept of systems-strengthening. We have declared water and sanitation to be human rights. We use our understanding of human behaviour and human decision-making to guide our sanitation and hygiene programming. Four decades of learning have profoundly altered how we work. We can be sure that 40 years from now we will look back at the present state of the art and consider much of it to be crude, naive, and unsophisticated. But we do what makes sense, based on our current understandings.

In order to learn 'what works', we assess and evaluate programmes and projects. Sound and rigorous evaluations are absolutely necessary, but it can be too easy sometimes to conclude 'we tried X, and it didn't work'. We tried subsidizing latrine slabs, and it didn't work. We tried manual well drilling, and it didn't work. We tried community-managed water supply, and it didn't work. We tried building capacity of local government, and it didn't work. The list could be extended.

Among many possible flaws in our attempts to learn 'what works', two stand out for me. The first is that the intervention was not appropriate or a sufficiently good fit for the context. The second is that the intervention was indeed appropriate, but it was implemented poorly. Let me enlarge on these, then propose a way forward.

Some interventions are clearly only a good fit to certain contexts. Manual well drilling is best-suited to unconsolidated geological formations, not hard rock areas. Latrine subsidies are inappropriate for those with sufficient cash income, but may be necessary for the poorest households even in relatively well-off communities. Private operator models of water supply management may be a good fit in areas where population densities are high, household incomes are sufficient, and many

people aspire to reliable services. The 'wrong' intervention will not work, and that should not be surprising. It is important in our evaluation and learning that we critically question whether the intervention was appropriate in the first place. Doing the 'wrong' thing, however well, will not lead to 'good change'. The evaluation criterion 'relevance' describes this aspect of programmes and projects.

The second aspect – interventions that are badly implemented – is perhaps more widespread and more serious. There are numerous examples in the research literature of rigorously conducted impact evaluations of programmes which themselves were carried out poorly. Many WASH programmes are flawed in the quality of their implementation. This is not surprising: local governments and NGOs are working in difficult environments; communities and households have numerous challenges to contend with; but implementing agencies may also undertake mediocre or downright inadequate work. If, in the process of evaluating and learning, we fail to appreciate the weaknesses of the work actually done and its outcomes, then we may draw the wrong conclusions about the impacts of the approach applied. Doing the 'right' thing badly will not lead to 'good change'. 'Effectiveness' is a key evaluation criterion.

How can these two risks in the process of learning 'what works' be avoided?

I believe we need to focus attention on two aspects: first, we need to build up evidence of how different types of intervention match different contexts. Under what circumstances is solution X most likely to work? In which situations is that solution likely to be inappropriate? Second, we need to know what are the non-negotiable principles for doing X well in those contexts where it is a good fit.

There are dangers in how we determine the content of WASH programming. We may reject approaches such as targeted latrine subsidies, community-managed water services, and programmes aiming to educate individuals and households in hygiene and health, because poorly implemented work in the past has given such approaches a bad name. We throw out the baby with the bath water. Or we may push potentially useful approaches into situations where they simply do not fit well. We try to put square pegs into round holes.

The only way to make a difference, to stimulate 'good change', is to identify the right types of intervention for the context, and then implement them to the highest standard. Neither of these is straightforward, but both are necessary.

Richard C. Carter

Reference

Chambers, R. (1997) 'Editorial: Responsible well-being – a personal agenda for development', *World Development* 25(11): 1743–54 <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(97\)10001-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(97)10001-8)>.