



Learning Alliance Briefing Note No 1: An introduction to learning alliances

By Mike Morris, University of Greenwich (August 2006)

Introduction

The idea of Learning Alliances has emerged in response to the widespread failure of much conventional research to have significant impact. It is also in response to recognition that new products and processes are brought into use, not just by the activities of researchers, but through the activities of a number of widely different actors and organizations. This group of interconnected players typically includes public sector (e.g. line ministries, utilities, regulators, educators, research institutes), private sector (e.g. industry, financial services), and civil society players (e.g. NGOs, media, professional bodies and unions, advocacy organizations).

The activities and interactions within such groups, and the *rules* governing them, which together give rise to the development and diffusion of technologies, are referred to as an innovation system (i.e. the system-wide framework that facilitates – or inhibits – the scaling up of innovation). A learning alliance is a grouping of constituent organisations from a given system, which seeks to take relevant innovation to scale. The more representative the alliance is, the better it will capture the organisational complexities that constitute the realities of the innovation system. SWITCH aims to foster such alliances to facilitate integration and the scaling-up of innovation in urban water management.

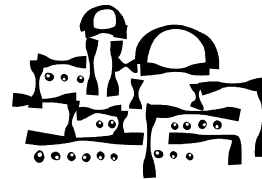
Ideas underpinning the learning alliance approach in SWITCH

- switching emphasis from researchers devising new technologies – *doing different things* – to improving how the multiple stakeholders in the innovation system work – *doing things differently* – will lead to interventions having greater impact
- innovations that are generated locally, taking all the relevant stakeholders into account, are more likely to lead to appropriate and sustainable solutions, to promote flexible and adaptive working practices, and to foster and strengthen the development capacity of local organisations and communities
- new understanding of knowledge and learning, and the emergence of learning organizations: whereas information can be generated and disseminated, knowledge is viewed as a complex, transformative process, arising less from any accumulated stock of information, and more from intra- and inter-organizational processes in which experimentation – action research – and communication feature strongly.

In dispersed or complex systems, learning alliances may be represented by sets of connected stakeholder *platforms* typically located at the different levels of administration (e.g. national, city, neighbourhood). Their structure and activities will be designed to optimize relationships, breaking down barriers to both horizontal (i.e. across platforms), and vertical (i.e. between platforms) learning.

Alliance members will share a common desire to address an underlying problem i.e. to improve urban water management. They will also share or develop common approaches – visions, strategies and tools – on how this can be achieved. Each platform will group together a range of stakeholders who capture diversity and bring together complementary skills and experiences.

Why do we need 'city' learning alliances

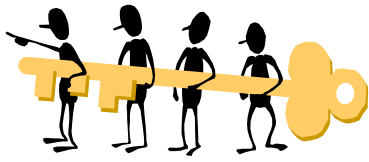


Cities around the world are facing a range of dynamic pressures including rapid urbanization and urban sprawl, industrialization, climate variability and climate change.

The ecological 'footprints' of cities are ever growing through increasing exploitation of available resources – land, water, energy, food, building materials, finance – while they produce massive streams of waste (solid, gaseous, liquid) contaminating soils, air and water. Conventional urban water management meanwhile, both North and South, is struggling to manage ever scarcer water resources, to deliver water and sanitation services and dispose of wastewater, without adversely impacting the quality of life of urban populations and the downstream environment.

Put bluntly, urban water management faces extraordinary and complex - or 'wicked' - problems, in which solutions to problems in one part of the system may create new problems elsewhere for others. The challenge to finding sustainable solutions - economic, environmental, social and institutional - to these underlying problems, is beyond the realm of conventional research approaches, and requires a new paradigm.

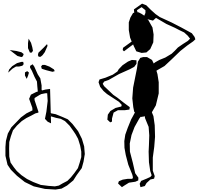
At the Rio Earth Summit (1992) *good governance* was identified as a precondition for achieving sustainable development. This was embodied in Agenda 21, the 'global action plan', which through the *Local Agenda 21* initiative urged local authorities to enter into dialogue with their citizens, local organizations and private enterprises as an initiatory step to realizing sustainable development. Although there are multiple definitions of *governance*, most acknowledge the role and importance of civil society and the private sector as well as government, and many associate *good governance* with greater accountability, participation, transparency and equity in the development processes.



As a tool or mechanism, a learning alliance can provide a key for engaging multiple stakeholders and bringing together

their diverse perspectives on a problem and its potential solutions, and enabling new ways of working to emerge.

How do we start to develop a city learning platform¹?



Learning alliances provide a means to jointly solve difficult problems, but first one has to establish that key city stakeholders agree that there are underlying problems in urban water management. They may be impacted in different ways, and believe in

different solutions, but there have to be reasons (e.g. responsibilities, mandates, potential benefits) for each to want to seek resolution of the problem.

Members of the SWITCH consortium are agreed on the widespread failings of conventional urban water management, and aspire to more integrated urban water management that is more sustainable, less risk prone and more equitable. There will be many stakeholders in each city who too seek IUWM solutions, and in some cities there will also be a focus on effecting and demonstrating solutions to specific themes or work packages (e.g. use of water for urban agriculture and other livelihood opportunities, stormwater control). These stakeholders should form the city learning alliances.



Before discussing the *recipe* to develop these alliances we first need to identify the *cook*. As with any group activity, momentum for a new enterprise is often provided by one or two key individuals, with backing from their superiors and/or organisation/s. To set up a learning alliance every city will need a coordinator – *head chef* – to champion the alliance, and a team of enthusiastic co-workers to support her or him. The coordinator can also look for support from the members of the learning alliance work package².

¹ If the system is viewed as the city then this would suggest the use of the term *learning alliance* for groupings at the city level. If the system is associated with the catchment or with IUWM in general (i.e. a conglomeration of cities) then city-level groupings might more aptly be termed *learning platforms* (i.e. one part of the wider alliance). More important than the terminology however, will be recognition of - and ultimately engagement with – key stakeholders who may be 'outside' *city levels* (e.g. at national or catchment levels), and seeking and sharing lessons between the different cities.

² At the moment, the SWITCH learning alliance workpackage involves IRC International and Water Sanitation Centre (Contact John Butterworth at butterworth@irc.nl) and University of Greenwich (Contact Alastair Sutherland at A.J.Sutherland@greenwich.ac.uk) in a supporting/ facilitating

In addition there is a need for at least one city (or national) organisation – preferably, but not necessarily, that of the coordinator – to *host* the learning platform (i.e. provide the initial support, space and resources needed by the coordinator to initiate and progress the learning alliance).

To kick off the learning alliance, the coordinator and colleagues need to identify and contact the different types of stakeholders (see box) with interests in IUWM, and particularly those associated with project themes or work packages being focused on in the city. The term *stakeholders* here refers to individuals, groups or organizations, who have an interest in, influence over, or are (or might be) affected by the issues in question and attempts to address it. Only a few will initially be interested or willing to join the learning platform, and the coordinator and new membership will subsequently have to draw up engagement strategies for building and fostering relationships with others (e.g. recruitment, influencing or *outcome mapping*).

Key stakeholder types

- Key organisations responsible for water management in each demonstration city. These include organisations who make decisions or effect changes in policy and practice (e.g. policy analysts and advisors, policy makers, municipal/local government personnel (political & bureaucratic), service providers (public, private & voluntary, regulatory authorities etc);
- People with influence with decision-makers directly (e.g. members of parliament, private sector companies);
- Civil society organisations and individuals who can bring pressure to bear on decision-makers (e.g. NGOs, unions, professional associations etc);
- Water user groups (e.g. consumer groups, irrigation groups etc);
- Local 'leading lights' (activists or champions) working to address poverty, gender, environmental issues etc;
- Those who can support, reinforce and strengthen SWITCH's activities and recommendations (e.g. training and research organisations, financial organisations etc);
- Those in the media who provide a means by which the learning alliance can reach the public; and
- The donor community, who can further finance and support SWITCH's activities.

Having scoped the stakeholder community and secured favourable responses from a sufficient number, the coordinator will need to organise a meeting to bring them together. Whether this is considered an *inception* meeting for the learning alliance, or a precursory meeting(s) to its launch, will depend on the dynamic of the local IUWM discourse and the context of the city in question. The preliminary meeting will provide the first collective opportunity for the coordinator to share the project's aims, and introduce the learning alliance and its underpinning concepts, and for the stakeholders to

role. All cities and partners should ideally join the work package, but few have yet explicitly allocated resources to do so.

critically discuss the challenges of UWM, identify potential ways forward (e.g. opportunities for action research), and indicate potential contributions (i.e. skills and resources).

More important than any particular agenda for these meetings will be the need to effect local buy-in and ownership of the process by a critical number of diverse local stakeholders. To this end the coordinator will need either to have, her or himself, significant facilitation skills, or to commission a facilitator (if in doubt, seek expert support). Local ownership here must not however be misconstrued to allow 'hijacking' of the process by an elite, and the establishment of a cartel. Learning alliances have to be *inclusive* if they are to successfully address and improve the way the UWM system works.

What are the kind of issues and activities that the learning alliance will need to consider?

Whether formally or informally constituted, the city learning alliances (or platforms), will need to agree or select and endorse the role of the coordinator and that of a small supporting secretariat or management team, who together will be charged with taking action points forward.

Issues that the membership and its management team will need to consider at an early stage will include:

- how are alliance activities to be funded, costs and benefits to be shared?
- how will the alliance communicate and share information and ideas amongst its membership (e.g. workshops, reports, e-mails, text messages etc)?
- how will the membership's capacity and training requirements be assessed and addressed (particularly in the sphere of action research and ICTs)?
- how will the comprehensive mapping of UWM stakeholders be undertaken?
- what research activities will the alliance commission, and who and how will these be undertaken?
- how will inter- and intra-organisational learning (e.g. double-loop learning) be assured?
- how will the alliance engage with influential stakeholders outside the alliance?
- how will the alliance (or management team) draw upon the SWITCH LA support team?
- how will the alliance monitor and evaluate its performance generally and the activities of the management team (and of the SWITCH LA support team)?
- how will processes be documented to ensure that lesson learning is optimised, and available to share with other city learning alliances?

How big will the alliances be and who will be involved?

Initially small (perhaps with representatives from as few as a dozen, but more likely two dozen organizations), the city learning platforms are anticipated to grow over

time, both as new stakeholders are contacted and as the activities of the alliance are undertaken and promoted. To be an effective microcosm of the wider innovation system, membership would ideally need to include representatives from diverse user groups and communities, public and private service providers, regulators, policy makers and legislators, and researchers, together with documenters and disseminators.

From a functional perspective, expertise and costs will also play a part in determining the size of particular events. Management capability and effectiveness of workshops above a certain size, for example, may be a limiting factor; although electronic networking allows for higher numbers.

Public sector and civil society organizations tend to be more readily available to attend stakeholder or participatory meetings. Poorly represented or marginalised civil society groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, poor women and children etc) may feel intimidated by the scale and activities of certain gatherings, and proactive initiatives may need to be taken to ensure their representation and fullest participation. Private sector players are typically more conscious or critical of nominally unproductive activities, and thus often more difficult to engage with. Their clearer focus on a single bottom line – profit – can however provide fresh momentum and the rationalization of alliance activities.

It is important that organizational stakeholders are represented by (the same) dynamic individuals, with decision-making potential and/or access to key decision-makers. This is particularly key for public bodies where improvements to the system will require that bureaucratic constraints are addressed.

Where do we find funding for the alliance?

The objectives of the city learning platforms will be in line with those of statutory authorities and other stakeholders (including donors) with interests in UWM. Thus through its activities the alliance will be contributing to and facilitating delivery of the responsibilities of several UWM stakeholders. This situation should allow for and encourage *quid pro quo* arrangements, and indeed membership of the alliance will be premised on joint sharing of costs (e.g. staff time, facilities and other resources) and benefits.

Direct funding opportunities might too be explored, and finances sought either for the setting up and running costs of the alliance, or for specific research activities. Commissioning action research which is to be expressly undertaken by member organisations in new partnership arrangements, is one way to actively ensure new ways of working are explored, and to provide incentives for the participation of less well resourced stakeholders (e.g. civil society organisations).

Significant expenditure is incurred during the setting-up phase of learning alliances, knowledge networks etc., which typically may take as long as 12 to 36 months.

The absence of or limited funds during this period is likely to scupper the establishment of a locally-driven, fully functioning alliance. SWITCH will endeavour to mobilise resource to prime a number of alliances and/or complement locally raised funds, and finding this funding is a key activity of the inception phase.

What support can we expect?

The SWITCH Learning Alliance Team will lend support to the city coordinators and their teams. This may be written responses to questions or instructions on specific matters (including briefing notes such as this). It might also include city visits for discussions with coordinators and the management team, and presentations to city stakeholders, if requested.

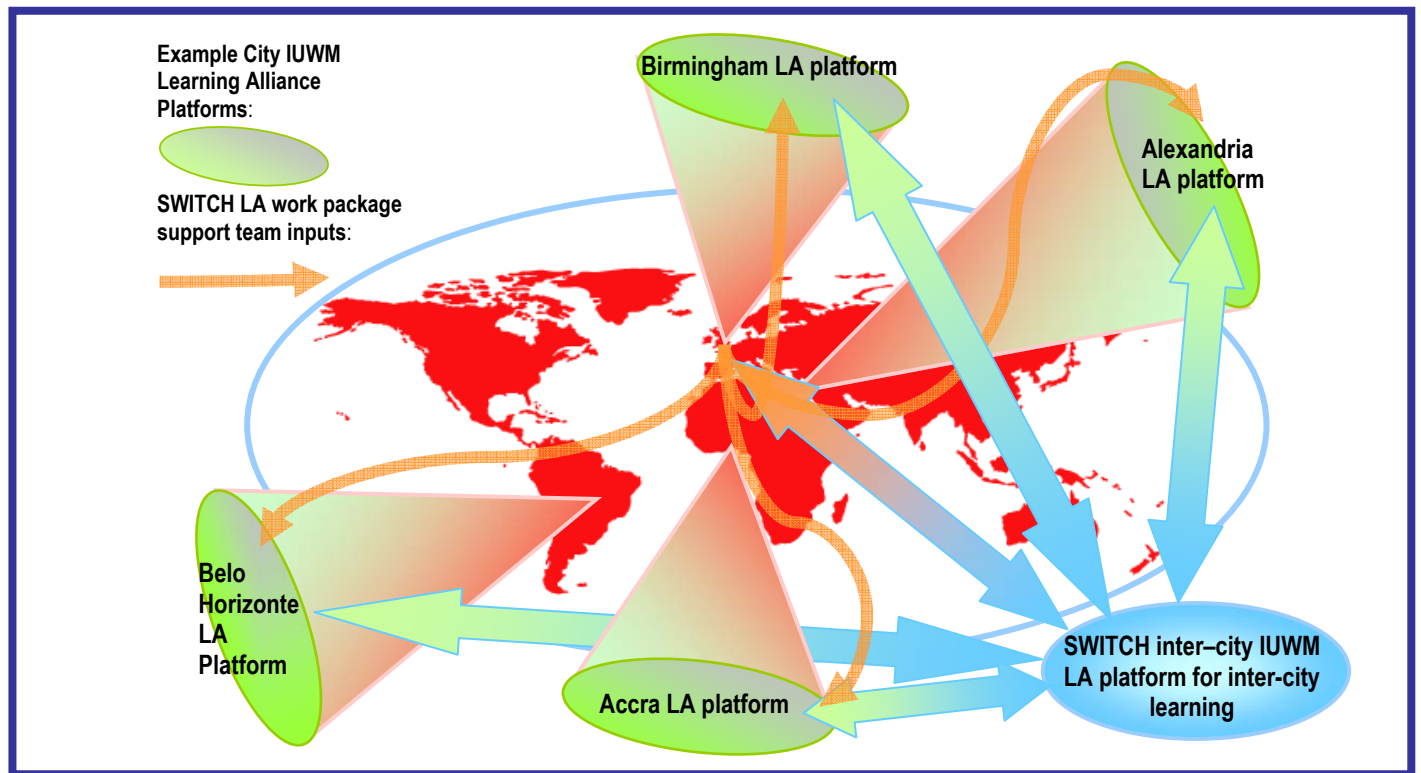
Training inputs, including training materials, might also be made available, particularly with respect to developing the skills of the management team in process documentation and extending the ICT capacity of the alliance membership.

The support team will also work closely with the city alliances to better develop understanding of the institutional learning and change processes.

What will the learning alliances look like?

After 6 months some city learning alliances will have a management team headed up by a locally endorsed coordinator, and will enjoy reasonably effective and networked communications; one or two may even have created their own website (using the SWITCH platform). Inception meetings will have been held, and funding for a number of action research projects acquired. Some of these activities will have been commissioned, and newly formed partnerships between members will be initiating this research. In-house expertise, capacities and skills of the membership will have been mapped, and posted on the website. Initial 'outcome mapping' plans will have been developed by the management team, identifying key UWM stakeholders (non-members) who the alliance will seek to influence.

After 5 years...we envision an active series of city learning alliances in all SWITCH demonstration cities (not all shown due to space) linked to a global learning alliance involving not just all the SWITCH consortium but also other cities and stakeholders working to scale-up innovations made by the SWITCH project



For more information please contact: John Butterworth, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (butterworth@irc.nl) who coordinates the learning alliance workpackage within SWITCH project, or Mike Morris, ex-University of Greenwich (MMorris@wwf.org.uk) and now at the World Wildlife Fund who prepared this briefing note and is involved in a study group within the SWITCH project to learn from experiences and promote best practice. Or visit www.switchurbanwater.eu/learningalliances