



## Learning Alliance Briefing Note No. 3: A review of our own thinking on learning alliances

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### Exploring SWITCH paradigm shifts

In this Briefing Note we will use the findings of a survey in January 2007<sup>1</sup> to reflect on the ideas underlying Learning Alliances as a central pillar of the SWITCH project (see Learning Alliance Briefing Note 1 for further background). The survey aimed to document the range of views of consortium members on developing learning alliances in SWITCH and their understanding of the concept within the project's objectives. This was a first step in documenting how SWITCH consortium members have typically worked prior to the project, exploring their understanding and how they feel about the learning alliance approach.

As an initial mapping exercise, these interviews contribute to the broader objectives of learning about learning alliances and how to stimulate the envisioned paradigm shifts that are central to the SWITCH project. The study also aims to contribute to a better understanding among the alliance members of key methodological concepts and to aid learning about the process of establishing these city partnerships. Developing a working consensus on these concepts and their practical implications is a critical part of the work of the SWITCH project<sup>2</sup>.

The interviews establish a sort of starting point or baseline of the levels of understanding of consortium members against which future changes can be assessed. To understand the process of establishing

<sup>1</sup> The interviews consisted of four open-ended questions. 18 interviews were conducted after initial piloting in Delft. Most of the interviews were conducted at the Birmingham Scientific Meeting between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2007. People were approached at random at the meeting for an interview. To ensure the survey included people from different types of organizations from different locations and with different types of involvement (management role or not) a purposeful selection followed.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews took place over a year after the project proposal was submitted. In April 2006, WorkPackage 6 provided an introductory training on learning alliances, several meetings and presentations have been held and SWITCH briefing note 1 on learning alliances was circulated.

and maintaining effective learning alliances, it will be useful to document these attitudes and opinions over time. This will help us to consolidate lessons.

### Background

Integrated urban water management (IUWM) poses extraordinary complex problems that cannot be solved by individual stakeholders. Finding consensus on what the problems are and how to solve them is a big challenge. Moreover, solutions to one problem in part of the system often create new problems elsewhere and 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. ('SWITCH start-up meeting: Report of learning alliances training' (Draft) April 2006, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, Delft, The Netherlands)*

Learning alliances were proposed in the SWITCH project to provide the necessary approach and structure to address the challenge of finding sustainable solutions in IUWM. In the box below, readers are reminded of the reasons for the SWITCH approach. As Zizimos Vergos (EU) mentioned again in the plenary session in Birmingham: 'SWITCH was not selected for the science, but for the learning alliances. We need to move beyond failures [...] I don't expect Nobel Prizes from the science. The Nobel Prize for SWITCH is in the learning alliance process.'

Why do we need learning alliances? Reasons behind learning alliances can be summarized as follows:

- *Innovation and research outcomes are infrequently consolidated in existing policy and institutional frameworks*
- *Dissemination (sharing outcomes) happens as a project after thought strategic knowledge sharing does not take place*
- *Fragmented sector with parallel planning and implementation processes*
- *Problems are so complex that they cannot be solved by individual stakeholders acting alone*

While many of SWITCH consortium members have not previously applied the learning alliance approach, the interviews, discussions and presentations at the Birmingham meeting reveal that consortium members are now familiar with the concept of learning alliances and their centrality within SWITCH. However, learning alliances also require ways of working and thinking that are not familiar to many involved. With so many people involved from different organizations and different backgrounds, differences of attitude and opinions about working with these concepts in interdisciplinary teams were also apparent.

## Study Findings

### **Q1: What do 'learning alliances' in the SWITCH project mean?**

This first question elicited a broad range of responses that will be described below, but first let's revisit the thinking behind applying the learning alliance approach in SWITCH. The SWITCH Project is about a paradigm shift towards an integrated approach to urban water management, a shift not only in frameworks for policy, planning and service delivery, but also in how diverse people, within and outside of different organizations work together in research and implementation to improve urban water cycle management.

The SWITCH paradigm shift should include processes of developing solutions for urban water management together with a range of stakeholders in order to improve scaling up of innovations and to effect widespread impact. Now let's look at some of the interview responses.

- Learning; *'The learning alliance is a place where people mix and talk and learn from each other.'*

Learning is a basic component in the learning alliance concept, but was only mentioned directly by six respondents. Learning was described as 'sharing and exchange of information' or ideas. Learning as a process and two-way learning was mentioned by four people. Different stakeholders can learn from each other; but also 'Others can learn from the process of developing learning alliances'.

- *'Learning alliances are about dissemination of research results'* More instrumental, one-way learning was also mentioned: 'knowledge transfer about IWRM'

Related quotes are: learning alliances are about 'dissemination of ideas and innovation'; 'communicating technologies to people with different levels of technical know-how'; 'a platform for awareness-raising'. We see that a distinction can be made between emphasis on learning alliances as instrument or platform for dissemination of research versus a process in which relations and learning are central.

- Partnerships, finding joint solutions, collaboration *'Learning alliances are a vehicle for establishing collaboration and the inclusion of different stakeholder groups. It is also about a process of resolving differences, bringing stakeholders together and through this process giving them [stakeholders in the cities] the confidence to take position and acquire new knowledge.'*

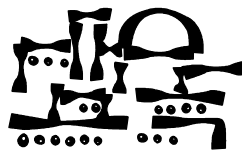
Only through the activities of a number of widely different actors and organizations can the necessary shifts take place. Developing a working learning alliance requires a process of forming alliances: 'Learning alliances are a platform for bringing on-board stakeholders so that they are part of research and dissemination from the beginning, and not bystanders.'

### **SWITCH Paradigm shifts**

- 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.

Learning alliances have been promoted within SWITCH as a vehicle for uptake of innovation in the cities and a platform for establishing common ground. At the same time, effective learning alliances aim to fundamentally change the way that key stakeholders work together. Various people mentioned the alliance building process itself and its power to transform relationships. As was described by one person, the learning alliances can function as a trading floor: an open space for face-to-face interaction and exchange.

In other words the learning alliance isn't just 'Bringing different perspectives of what is important together', but also 'A place to connect' 'a platform for engaging people'; and part of a joint process: 'Somewhere where people set indicators for SWITCH together'. Other quotes that relate to this are: 'a consensus approach to implementation'; 'all partners can influence decisions'; 'a group process to prioritize problems'; 'process for developing joint vision'; 'a process for developing a common language, common ground on problems and solutions'.



'Involving stakeholders' is central to the learning alliance concept, according to the people interviewed. But who are these stakeholders and how are they involved, and why? If

stakeholders were mentioned, after further prompting, the groups most often mentioned were researchers and policy makers. Other stakeholders, such as government ministries, planners and implementers, (developers, water companies, private sector and civil society and even schools) were mentioned three times. 'All stakeholders in the city coming together'; 'bringing people interested in IWRM issues together'; 'a place to connect all people: science, local government, education and local society'. This would also imply inclusive decision-making.

While an instrumental view is most often apparent in the answers given by respondents: learning alliances serve to ensure buy-in and as 'a tool to overcome resistance in implementation of innovations', another point of view is the '[...] moral obligation to involve stakeholders'. As one city representative and two researchers agreed: 'Learning alliances can play a role in stakeholder empowerment and ownership of the solutions found'.

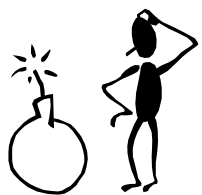
The case study on the Emscher region in Germany, presented at the January 2007 Scientific meeting illustrated well how stakeholder involvement does not always lead to uptake of innovations. Here, mayors and water companies were involved in developing new solutions, but after a collaborative process and agreements, there was still strong resistance from implementers. Stakeholder involvement is very important, but you have to know who to involve and how. 'It's not only about the high level officials. The implementers are equally important.'

This story has another clear recommendation for SWITCH: Reasons for resistance are often practical. There are no easy models and tools (for financing, administration etc) to plan for new approaches. The technical aspect is only part of the solution, and there should be equal emphasis on practical side such as the administration and financing as well as planning for innovations. Learning alliances can play an important linking-pin function to ensure technology development is more in line with this constraints.

Communication between different stakeholders involved in IUWM can be channeled and stimulated by the learning alliance structure [ learning alliances are] 'a forum for discussion'; 'a space for debate'; 'a vehicle for steering feedback', 'a platform for communicating the needs of the city'

- Impacts: *'It's a way to tap into different sources of knowledge, but also [to] find ways of securing more funding and ensuring successful application of innovations.'*

It is clear from the interviews that respondents think learning alliances are not just about building relations and learning. They are also about 'finding appropriate and adaptable solutions'; 'The agenda should be developed together from the onset. People in learning alliance [should be] thinking together how to put research into use'; 'the city learning alliance determines the agenda'. This also has consequences for the scope of innovation and sustainability



A selection of quotes that reflect this: [learning alliances are] 'for impact'; 'for dealing with the future', 'making research more effective'; 'A learning alliance can be a transformation engine for changes within institutions' 'to ensure sustainability after the end of the project'

## **Q2: How are people getting involved in Learning Alliances in specific cities?**

Only a few of the learning alliances are functioning, but all but two of the respondents had a general idea of their involvement and specific activities. A selection of answers reveals the diversity of involvement and reflects on the stage of development of the various learning alliances: 'we are planning for a visit later this year for start-up', 'I have already been involved in one meeting and presentations. I don't know if and how I will be involved again', 'I am communicating with our contacts in the city', 'I will be developing a methodology and training for the cities, I also hope to be involved in field testing and support in the cities', 'I have no interest to be involved in city alliances at this moment, perhaps later, but our budget is limited', 'My role is representing the city. I will work with the learning alliance in the city to develop scenarios and strategies.' 'I can advise the decision-makers, we are a knowledge source for innovations and technology', 'there has been a delay with my visa. I hope to be more closely involved in the city soon', 'I don't know. I am involved with my research now'.

## **Q3: What are the main challenges in developing and maintaining learning alliances within SWITCH ?**

*'How do you mobilize people around the idea of a learning alliance?' and 'It is not clear to some how to put the concept into practice.'*

Most of the challenges mentioned relate to the processes required for learning and alliance building to take place:

'The process of penetrating people's mindsets and bringing people on board takes time.' It's a matter of 'changing the way people think and overcoming fear of change'. Creating an alliance is a real challenge. And there is the issue of bringing people together who have conflicts: 'Different interests need to be addressed and be harnessed as a strength'.

Once the initial meetings have been held, there are yet more issues: How to manage the internal dynamics of the learning alliance and keep people engaged over time? How to capture the initial openness and interest of stakeholders and also bring results? And how to bridge 'different levels of technical know-how'?

Some challenges can be addressed though attention from the beginning to stakeholder analysis and gathering information from local stakeholders: 'Understanding the environment and how stakeholders are linked. For this you are dependent on a local partner, but you don't want to burden them.' 'Selecting the right people [to be involved in the learning alliance] those who can catalyze change, but also those who could block change and also finding the right balance for the group.' Establishing organizational commitment, will determine if the learning alliance can be effective: 'Is it just a SWITCH thing or does it continue after

SWITCH and even if some committed individuals leave?’

There were also practical issues mentioned, such as language barriers in communication, but also as one person mentioned, between different kinds of language: ‘technical/scientific’ versus language of people who are not technically oriented. There are also budget restrictions on researchers traveling to demonstration cities, and limited budgets for activities in the cities (according to one person, allocating budget is also required in the city for making learning alliance to be seen as important).

‘Methods and skills to engage people are lacking’ This is something perhaps the learning alliance training could address. It would also be useful if learning alliance facilitators could share experiences and learn from each other. ‘It is not a challenge, we already have an active and good learning alliance and have established cooperation.’ Other learning alliances could benefit from lessons learnt elsewhere.

Only one person interviewed said outright that coordinating communications and bringing an alliance together was too ambitious a task: ‘it’s too big and complex and there are too many stakeholders’. This remark does relate to other more general critical issues of the SWITCH project design: a tension between the thematic focus of SWITCH and how to integrate that in the cities. ‘So far, in SWITCH, there has been a large investment in research, but less on responsiveness. There isn’t much room for change in the course of research.’ ‘Cities’ presence in SWITCH isn’t so strong yet. ‘there is a lack of consensus on the philosophy behind learning alliance’, ‘How do we assess success? Indicators should be defined together’. Understanding the context of the cities is central to a ‘demand-led’ approach: ‘Connecting to existing technologies and possibilities and the level integration [with research and innovation] is important to the success of a learning alliance approach in practice’

While most of the people seem to have a certain degree of appreciation for the concept of learning alliances, there is also confusion and skepticism; ‘It’s new to me’. ‘I’m not sure how it is different from the public participation programs already in place in municipalities’ ‘I’m not so interested in it yet. I prefer to do my research and let other people give training to the stakeholders’; ‘To be innovative, the technologies should be leading, now it’s more like the dog wagging the tail.’ ‘Existing cities are difficult to change [...] SWITCH is about cities of the future, we should focus on building new cities so that innovations can be more effective from the beginning’.

#### **Q4: Are there better ways of scaling up research and reaching implementers and policy makers?**

This question was not easily answered. Most people didn’t identify scaling up as an objective of the learning alliance approach. Three people mentioned that there are similar structures in place already at various levels.

One person suggested using complementary approaches such as involving schools and seeking publicity through local media and internet.

Methods that respondents were familiar with were: dissemination, conferences, workshops, bringing experts in to talk to the public (in collaboration with policy makers), 1 on 1 communications, publications, contacts with industry, and public awareness campaigns.

#### **Concluding remarks and next steps**

Out of the interviews and informal discussions at the Birmingham meeting, it is possible to identify some key issues for further discussion. Answering these will help us to clarify the learning alliance concept and its application in SWITCH

##### *What do we mean by stakeholders?*

Where does the stakeholder group involved in a city learning alliance end? Who are the important stakeholders to involve? How do we want to involve them and why?

##### *What makes the learning alliance approach different from other ways of involving different groups in research?*

In discussions at the meeting, four people brought up the fact that there already were already platforms and participatory planning in place. How are they different from the learning alliance approach? As one person pointed out: ‘information isn’t enough. Stakeholders need to be able to identify key issues and provide support, so that they can be part of the solution.’ Some key questions for establishing learning alliance were suggested and could serve as guidance:

- What effects do we want?
- How will we reach these effects?
- Who is crucial for achieving effect?
- What relationships need to be forged?

Is learning alliance simply old wine in new bottles or a fundamental paradigm shift? If learning alliances in SWITCH are to become more than conventional dissemination fora, there has to be a clear focus on learning and on finding new ways to work together to stimulate uptake of innovations. It needs to be more clear how the learning alliance approach and its goals are different from how many researchers (and implementers, planners and other stakeholders) have worked in the past.

This leads to the question: *what kind of paradigm shifts are learning alliances aimed to reach in terms of relationships and learning?* This has been outlined in the briefing note and presentations, but needs to be translated by practical actions and embraced by the SWITCH consortium as well as the city partners.

### *What about different names for 'Learning Alliances'?*

What's in a name? Is knowledge community something different from a learning alliance? And why is there resistance to the label 'learning alliance'? Language and status/ political priority are important issues that impact on individual and organizational commitment to the learning alliance. The learning alliance in Tel Aviv has been labeled a 'water club'. Several suggestions for other names for learning alliances were given, such as 'scientific advisory committee to the government'. The answer to question 4 should give us some guidance on how to promote the concept and whether another name would capture the principles and aims of the learning alliance.

This small survey has brought out various issues around using learning alliances in SWITCH. Several suggestions were made in the previous sections in relation to clarifying and 'selling' the learning alliance concept and its key aims. This is important both within SWITCH, to ensure integration, learning and demand-driven approaches, but also to people in the demonstration cities and outside of the project. Within SWITCH, creating opportunities for sharing and facilitating the exchange of practical lessons among learning alliance facilitators is key.

Finally, documenting the process and not just the outcomes of this project can be seen as a tool for a learning and a way to increase effectiveness. Consideration should be given to a more detailed survey and interviews at a later date. Learning alliances should be stimulated to document their own process of making this approach work in their cities. This would shed more light on what obstacles they encounter, but also how change can be achieved and innovations can benefit people in cities across the world.

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