



## Learning Alliance Briefing Note 8: Revisiting SWITCH consortium thinking on learning alliances (draft)

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### **Introduction: assessing the evolving understanding of the Learning Alliance concept**

This briefing note provides an update to the snapshot of SWITCH consortium members understanding of learning alliances that was documented by Carmen de Silva (2007). Just over 10 months after SWITCH held its first “Scientific Meeting” held in Birmingham in January 2007, consortium members met in Tel Aviv in November 2007 for the second ‘Science and Integration’ meeting to report on the progress with their various research packages. This was a useful opportunity to interview a cross-section of the project consortium members to investigate their evolving understanding and views of the learning alliance concept. Alongside the interviews the some of the researchers presentations and discussions made reference to experiences and expectations of learning alliances. The final session of the Scientific meeting focused on hearing researchers expectations of learning alliances, and learning alliance expectations of research.

The interviews undertaken covered experiences of learning alliances in all the SWITCH cities. They did not cover the aspects of learning across the project, sometimes referred to as the “global learning alliance” of SWITCH which to date has received limited attention.

While SWITCH learning alliances are composed of a cross-section of stakeholders, the 2nd scientific meeting was attended largely by researchers from the consortium and from other interested research and consultancy organisations. With this in mind, a purposive sampling approach ensured that experiences of Learning Alliances in all SWITCH cities were collected and that the few non-researchers attending the meeting were also included. Hence in a sample of 12 interviews, nine of those interviewed were undertaking research as part of SWITCH. Two of this nine were also learning alliance facilitators. The remaining three people interviewed included a learning alliance facilitator, a city department manager, and a member of SWITCH’s training documentation team. Seven interviewees came from SWITCH demonstration

cities, while five came from European-based research institutes working in the cities. In terms of institutional representation, nine of the 12 interviewed came from universities. In terms of familiarity with the learning alliance concept, 11 out of the 12 interviewed said they had read about the learning alliance concept, while three had also attended learning alliance training events. Five of the sample were very directly involved with learning alliances, either as facilitators or as City coordinators, while the others were involved as researchers, and in one case as a city operator.

The findings from these interviews suggest that consortium member’s understanding and appreciation of the importance of learning alliances has developed significantly in the 10 months since the first interviews were held in Birmingham. Most notable is a greater clarity of thinking and a growing sense of realism about what might be achieved through learning alliances, as well as the implications of not having functional learning alliances in cities. The responses emphasise an appreciation of the central and strategic role of learning alliances in SWITCH in order to address its over-arching objective of more integrated water management in the participant cities, as well as more specific aims such as a demand driven research agenda and city level demonstrations.

Four questions were asked:

How do you see learning alliances operating in the SWITCH project (their objectives, functions, membership, and costs and benefits)?

1. How have you been involved in learning alliances in specific cities?
2. What do you see as the main challenges in developing learning alliances in the cities, and,
3. Are there other ways of scaling up research and reaching implementers and policy makers?
4. Some of the results are presented according to the extent of assumed involvement with a learning alliance; those “closely involved” being the facilitators and city coordinators, and those “less involved” being “others”.

### **Findings from the interviews**

*Q1 ‘How do you see learning alliances operating in the SWITCH project (their objectives, functions, membership, and costs and benefits)?’*

Interviewees were guided to answer this general question in relation to the specific aspects of city learning alliances: objectives, functions, membership, and costs and benefits.

*City Learning Alliance Objectives:* A strong emphasis from the less-involved respondents was the perceived role of learning alliances in shaping SWITCH’s research agenda, as captured in phrases such as; “to assist with the identification of research needs at an earlier stage, a step in the right direction”, “to ensure that demand-led

research is relevant to the city” and “at an early stage express the city needs to the project”.

The more closely involved respondents emphasised the integrative role of learning alliances, as: “To enable working together, as water is both multi-sectoral and cross-sectoral”, “to engage stakeholders with research and work together”, and “to work towards finding a vision, scenario and strategies to find a way together in Integrated Urban Water Management”.

As implied by the final quotation, a third area of emphasis was the value of learning alliances in looking to the future. “Drawing attention to problems that are not attended to on a daily basis”, “Design and build the process, and understanding of processes, to deliver integrated water management into the future” and “to get water into the City vision” are phrases which encapsulate this longer term view.

A fourth area, emphasised also in the January 2007 survey, related to the application or uptake of research expressed as “a vehicle to take ideas for implementation in the cities”, “Later to absorb useful parts of the research” and “to facilitate implementation of research results”.

While the responses suggest clear ideas about the objectives of learning alliances, in two cases respondents noted that these objectives could be difficult to implement in practice, one noting “the objectives are very clear but I am not sure if the idea works for all cities”. This person elaborated that in cities where democracies are not well developed, decision making is top-down and not consultative, and researchers also are not experienced in responding to demand, then the idea of a multi-stakeholder learning platform is too new and challenging for it to be accepted as a way forward by the key stakeholders.

*Functions of City Learning Alliances:* While a few distinguished between the objectives and functions of learning alliances, most respondents listed functions after outlining what they saw as the more strategic objectives of a learning alliance. The functions identified were learning alliances providing a focal point or forum and processes that enable strategic objectives to be addressed. The processes included direct communication, knowledge sharing, awareness raising, joint exploration and debate, building linkages, gaining support and consensus building. Examples included statements such as:

- “Face to face interaction - nothing can replace this”
- “Meeting point for key people "without the learning alliance key people would not meet each other".
- “Communication and debate forum.”
- “To provide link between the city and SWITCH”
- ““A meeting point for key people; without the learning alliance key people would not meet each other”
- “Provision of knowledge, steerage and expansion of activities,”

- “Discussion of issues of interest, models and a platform for demonstrations”
- “Multi-disciplinary discussion,”
- “Forum for understanding issues”
- “Three-way discussion;; research, operators and inhabitants,”
- ““Interaction, sharing of knowledge, experience, views, expectations and concerns – past, present and future in relation to Integrated urban water management.”
- “Forum for long-term thinking.”

This list of functions, taken alongside the substantial objectives spelt out earlier, imply that not only are city learning alliances seen to be central to SWITCH achieving its objectives by the respondents, but also that most of the respondents have high expectations in terms of what learning alliances might achieve in terms of IUWM.

#### *Who should be in Learning Alliances?*

Responses suggest that city learning alliances are seen as multi-stakeholder platforms. Stakeholders listed included: local government, decision makers, operators, planners, regulatory bodies, experts, developers/investors, ministry representatives, press, researchers, NGOs and community representatives.

Reflecting on the composition of their city learning alliances, one respondent noted “At first I thought representation should be broad to include various organisations not directly involved in water management. I later came back to the view that the learning alliance should cover mainly water management, urban planning and ecological actors as the most important ones. During the scoping these water related actors were defined, and then the learning alliance was enlarged to include actors beyond the municipality, due to different responsibilities for different rivers”. This reflection suggests that learning alliances are to some extent open-ended associations, and at the same time that their membership should focus on the areas defined as priorities for the city and not attempt to include all actors or address all issues relevant to IUWM.

A number of respondents noted that some stakeholders were more difficult to include in the city learning alliance, particularly community representatives, developers and NGOs; “NGOs need to be more prominent but there are not many in the city who are involved with water and environmental issues.” Balance was also emphasised as being important; “broad representation, not too much from government, a few researchers, NGOs and concerned citizens.”

A further important point noted about learning alliance membership was that “stakeholders, have different interests; municipal operators, utilities, urban planners, civil society representatives, housing associations, environmental groups, developers, social groups, flood defence people, housing groups, professional associations of engineers and scientists.” While

different interests are an expected part of any multi-stakeholder forum, one respondent noted that achieving a high level of openness in discussion is difficult in such a context, and that often there is a feeling that representatives of higher level authorities and interests are not as forthcoming as they could be in sharing information during meetings.

*Costs and Benefits of Learning Alliances:* On costs, the main cost mentioned was people's time to attend. A few respondents also mentioned the costs associated with organising meetings. Asked about costs, one researcher (who was not an learning alliance facilitator or city coordinator) stated "Learning Alliances should continue to be funded to the end of SWITCH."<sup>1</sup>

Those general benefits listed were largely consistent with the stated objectives and functions of a city LA, including:

- "providing a forum for discussion"
- "solving problems together instead of trying to solve them separately"
- "buy-in into research and demonstrations, solutions that are acceptable, demonstrations for policy"
- "bringing stakeholders together to monitor progress and the problems being addressed"
- "research more relevant, better chance of using results, solving real issues"

More specific benefits noted were:

- "getting water into the city vision"
- "getting the experience of other cities through hosting training"
- "exposure to various communication and training tools"
- "linkages with other organisations in the same field"
- "innovative ideas"
- "stakeholder integration through a flat structure"

A respondent noted that benefits "need to be clearly defined to get buy-in". The most sceptical view reported was "they might work".

*Other comments on learning alliances:* Respondents gave other views on learning alliances in SWITCH. One related to the need for the city learning alliances to lead the process of applying research, "The learning alliance is a unique process which makes SWITCH non-regular research as it is a combination of research and demonstration cities, which is led by the learning alliance."

Two related to the limits of learning alliances responsibilities:

- "learning alliances should not be decision making bodies."

- "The learning alliance is not a management body, time and effort is in short supply and we really need more time and effort to make the learning alliance successful."

Others noted challenges making the city learning alliances more effective.

- "Meetings need to be active, places to exchange ideas and not just lectures, opportunities for exchange of ideas."
- "Its like chipping away at a big boulder"

The conditions needed for establishing learning alliances were noted to be critical: "It's a good idea but depends on the local political situation, including the level of democratisation."

*Q2: How have you been involved in Learning Alliances in specific cities?*

The responses to this question related to the the respondent's relationship to the SWITCH project. The three learning alliance facilitators and the two city coordinators noted their roles in initiating the learning alliance in their city and also in keeping the learning alliance process moving. One facilitator noted their role "involves a lot of reporting and workshop preparation, and the stakeholder analysis took a lot of time. There is a trade-off between reporting and documenting on the one hand and in organising communication and the face-to-face interaction with the various members, which is very important, on the other. Even the website takes time in putting the information into it, and one wonders if it will ever be used. Perhaps there could be more visual ways of presenting information on the website?"

Others who did not have specific organising responsibilities described their involvement in the learning alliances as:

- "Participate in meetings and in anything else that is going on,
- "Attend meetings in China"
- "Two visits to liaise between theme 1 (on IUWM and planning) and the learning alliance, Two students working on internship and numerous communications
- "Attended all Birmingham meetings, and also went to Lodz and Bello Horizonte conferences.

*Q3: What do you see as the main challenges in developing and maintaining learning alliances within SWITCH?*

Establishment of learning alliances was a challenge during the first year of SWITCH, particularly because project resources had not been allocated for this task at the outset. A decision was taken to allocate resources specifically for engaging learning alliance facilitators in early 2007. The January survey was undertaken just before learning alliance facilitators had been identified, and later trained. The evidence to date suggests that in cities where these facilitators were carefully selected,

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<sup>1</sup> Currently city learning alliance operating costs are not funded beyond July 2009.

attended the training provided, and took their task seriously, learning alliances have become functional. In cities where this was not the case, then the learning alliances have not become functional. The comments on challenges with learning alliance largely relate to the situation in cities that have functional multi-stakeholder platforms namely; Accra, Alexandria, Belo Horizonte, Birmingham, Hamburg, Lodz and Tel Aviv<sup>2</sup>. In Beijing and Zaragoza learning alliances appear not to have got off the ground for various reasons.

The remarks largely reflect where the individual learning alliance facilitators, city coordinators, and others see their city learning alliance as having reached, and the range of experience of learning alliances so far in SWITCH. Comments suggest a measure of satisfaction and desire to continue to improve at one end of the scale, to doubts about the cultural relevance of the learning alliance concept and frustration about lack of funding for a learning alliance facilitator at the other. Responses are presented according to the respondent's responsibilities:

*LA facilitators:*

"Firstly, it was a challenge for me and others to understand the idea, secondly it was a challenge to believe that it can work and see the potential benefits, thirdly convincing learning alliance members was a challenge (this will be easier now that we have a well defined objective). Fourthly getting information and ideas from other cities to feed into the learning alliance meetings is a challenge. In this respect not having a budget to travel does not help, and the website is not easy to use either. If I cannot find the information I need within a minute or so then I will not use a website again. The SWITCH website is very inaccessible."

"Institutionalising the links with local government and with operators is still largely based on individuals rather than through their offices. Also I felt proud at first in terms of the progress we made, but now after seeing what other cities are doing I feel challenged by the progress being made in other cities. Sustaining the learning alliance process will be a challenge. I feel this can be helped by sharing and comparing between the learning alliances in the SWITCH cities."

"Keeping the learning alliance members on board; they don't have much time."

*City coordinators:*

"The learning alliances seem isolated from the other work packages. The learning alliance approach is the philosophy and cornerstone of the SWITCH project, but it is not shared by all of the Work Packages."

"The Learning alliances were set-up after consultation with stakeholders about research areas during project

formulation, The challenge now is to transfer from the current activities to those activities that are wholly owned by the learning alliance. Broad learning alliances have broad agendas and therefore limited scope in how much progress can be made in each aspect."

*City operator*

"Communication, particularly between different levels of hierarchy within the city administration is difficult. Also working out common ways of working remains a challenge. That is shared decision making with regard to planning and strategising, as we have different visions at the moment."

*Others*

"Getting buy-in from cities, communicating the benefits, inclusion issues."

"Keeping up the momentum, not all participants are open about their interests and are artificial. Learning alliances can be used as forums for promotion of interests by municipalities."

"Dialogue with the municipality on the learning alliance process. Local participation is good, but engagement at a higher institutional level is more challenging."

"Communication, sustaining the interest and enthusiasm"

"Overcoming political and social issues in bringing different groups together. Empowerment of marginalised groups within the city so they can also participate"

"The cultural concept of a learning alliance in a command and control situation; Learning alliances are a cultural implant in this city".

"Getting a funded learning alliance facilitator is a challenge. This is not the case in this city, and so the learning alliance is not working."

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

As with the January survey, this was a difficult question for most to respond to in terms of providing concrete alternatives to Learning Alliances as a means to getting research into use in the SWITCH cities. Two respondents did see other ways of disseminating research results: "Training, internet, newsletters, use of SWITCH results to influence State and Federal Policies".and "Events such as workshops etc."

One commented: "A success story is needed for many people to get involved - if there is a success it has many fathers". While another who felt learning alliances were not right for China noted "in China Authorities make decisions, such as the Ministry of Construction, which might link with City Departments of Construction. In general there is a hunger for ideas and knowledge on how to address water management issues, including ideas from Europe." This suggests a desire to learn about the technical aspects of integrated water management, but not a readiness to seriously consider

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<sup>2</sup> Cali and Lima have also developed learning alliances to some extent.

multi-stakeholder platforms as a mechanism for addressing IUWM.

The others did not think there would be a viable alternative to learning alliances noting:

- “LAs are the strategy”
- “No there are no alternatives. The LA will be essential to my workpackage”
- “It would be very difficult any other way, this communication platform is very important.”
- “Without the learning alliance the key people would not meet each other.”
- “Not really, because the learning alliance is about everyone working together for the common good. The policy and legislation aspect is crucial, For example Sustainable urban drainage systems, to be implemented, need us to bring policy makers into meetings with the regulators. Meetings are very valuable if they are of the right kind and constructive.”

#### *Other Views expressed on SWITCH and the learning alliances*

At the close of the meeting scientific presentation part of the conference in Tel Aviv, attending scientific reviewers along with the EU representative attending were invited to give their comments. While one of the reviewers expressed uncertainty about the departure from more conventional research approaches, another emphasised the need for the various disciplines and actors within SWITCH to regularly communicate and spend time to understand each others points of view and disciplinary languages. The EU representative noted that SWITCH was at a point where it needed to decide a clear direction; either continuing with the research it has started in a conventional way, or working on getting existing research into practice through the learning alliances (the unstated implication being that it would be difficult to follow both directions and succeed).

#### *Exchanging expectations relating to Learning Alliances*

On Wednesday morning, the final session of the Scientific Conference in Tel Aviv, entitled “Learning Alliance approach at the heart of SWITCH, Ideas for improvement” provided a useful opportunity for the various participants to exchange their plans and share expectations. Participatory mapping of activities, ongoing and intended, in the various cities created interesting discussions, in particular raising issues about communication between the various actors within SWITCH. The final exercise, “We are all in the same boat” focused on interaction requirements by city team learning alliance representatives and researchers needing to further engage with the city learning alliances. The exercise was structured to reflect that researchers and work package leaders not based in the SWITCH cities planned to undertake research in them, while some city team representatives expressed various needs in relation to enabling SWITCH to function more effectively. Researchers present were invited to list on

cards what they “require from city teams” and the city team representatives present invited to list what they “require from researchers”.

The type of expectations listed suggest an emerging interdependence in some cities: city learning alliance members are identifying research, training and information inputs needed, while researchers are seeking feedback, data, collaboration and information on research needs. A cross-section of the type of requirements from researchers and city teams are listed below. Some requirements from city learning alliance team representatives and facilitators were:

- Better information about, and dissemination of, research work, and interacting on ongoing research work
- Researchers to involve learning alliances more in their work in the city
- Better information about training opportunities
- Resources (money and time) to collect data requested by researchers
- Policy briefs on IUWM and Social Inclusion
- Produce more briefing notes on all SWITCH components: what real solutions can various work packages offer to cities
- Timely and interactive start of testing and applying tools and technologies
- Real life testing of research in cities
- Better integration among research themes activities in cities
- More on site interaction between work package coordinators and city teams
- Help from work package to solve problems identified by the city teams together with the learning alliance.
- A clear SWITCH vision from research

Some requirements from researchers were:

- SWITCH vision from the cities
- Articulation of information and training needs
- Details of learning alliances members (name, position, organisation, email) and their interests, so we can pro-actively target interested people
- Know key people (learning alliance coordinator and facilitator) and their specific roles
- City learning alliance facilitators to contact theme leaders if current research needs are not being met
- Feedback on research proposals and research itself
- Information on what is going on in cities
- Better mobilization of local actors
- Access to data
- To ourselves: work with the city and not in the city
- Staff time for SWITCH activities

#### *Concluding remarks and next steps*

The comments from a cross-section of researchers and other participants at the meeting clearly indicate that the concept of city learning alliances has not only gained broad acceptance, but also is seen as playing an

important strategic role within SWITCH at city level. At the same time, there is clearly room for significant improvements and developments, particularly with respect to communication, sharing of information and resources, capacity strengthening and further serious exploration of collaborative activities that span the traditional gap between research and implementation in the water sector of SWITCH cities.

A number of researchers demonstrated a sense of realism about the performance of learning alliances 6-9 months into their initiation, both in relation to the sequencing of SWITCH activities, and the socio-political context for learning and innovation. Many researchers were clear that without a learning alliance it would be very difficult to engage the important players within a city with a view to getting their research into practice. In a few cases it was acknowledged that the design of the project implied learning alliances could not play a strong role in formulating research priorities, because the learning alliance was established after research activities had been defined and initiated. In other cities it was acknowledged that the idea of a learning alliance might be problematic because political and professional cultures might not be congruent with the norms underpinning the learning alliance concept. In such cities it may be unrealistic to expect strong influence through horizontal linkages between agencies, collaborative learning, a strong link between research, learning and policy, and strong city governance of water related issues.

In terms of the interface between researchers and other stakeholders within a learning alliance, gaps were acknowledged. This should not be a surprise in the context of both sets of stakeholders entering into relatively new form of engagement and way of thinking about research, planning and implementation. However, to consolidate progress made and further explore the potential of city learning alliances, further steps are clearly needed including:

- Given that learning alliances are starting to prove their value, and alternative mechanisms for addressing SWITCH's objectives are lacking, the continuation of funding for learning alliances within SWITCH seems imperative beyond July 2008,
- The gap within SWITCH between researchers on the one hand and process facilitators and capacity builders on the other needs to be bridged more effectively. This may require further thought to how city teams, and perhaps "sub-teams" are formed and communicate with each other as areas of intervention become clearer,
- Related to this, mechanisms for negotiation about project resources will need to be further explored in relation to emerging priorities and activities on the ground in cities. This is important because project resources are largely in the hands of the consortium members providing research and training services, which the various city stakeholders who are key to

SWITCH achieving its over objective have limited say in how project resources are employed.

- Ongoing review of the learning alliance "story", and ongoing learning about how to make the concept work better, will need to continue to the end of SWITCH. This paper aims to partly document that story to date.

#### *Links and resources*

Da Silva Wells, C. 2007. *A review of our own thinking on learning alliances*. Learning Alliance Briefing Note No. 3 [online] Available at [www.switchurbanwater.eu/page/1840](http://www.switchurbanwater.eu/page/1840)

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