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the
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Rapid Action Learning for Sanitation and Hygiene Programming

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Institute of Development Studies



About The Sanitation Learning Hub

For over ten years, IDS's Sanitation Learning Hub (SLH, previously the CLTS Knowledge Hub) has been supporting learning and sharing across the international sanitation and hygiene (S&H) sector. The SLH uses innovative participatory approaches to engage with both practitioners, policy-makers and the communities they wish to serve.

We believe that achieving safely managed sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030 requires timely, relevant and actionable learning. The speed of implementation and change needed means that rapidly learning about what is needed, what works and what does not, filling gaps in knowledge, and finding answers that provide practical ideas for policy and practice, can have exceptionally widespread impact.

Our mission is to enable the S&H sector to innovate, adapt and collaborate in a rapidly evolving landscape, feeding learning into policies and practice. Our vision is that everyone is able to realise their right to safely managed sanitation and hygiene, making sure no one is left behind in the drive to end open defecation for good.

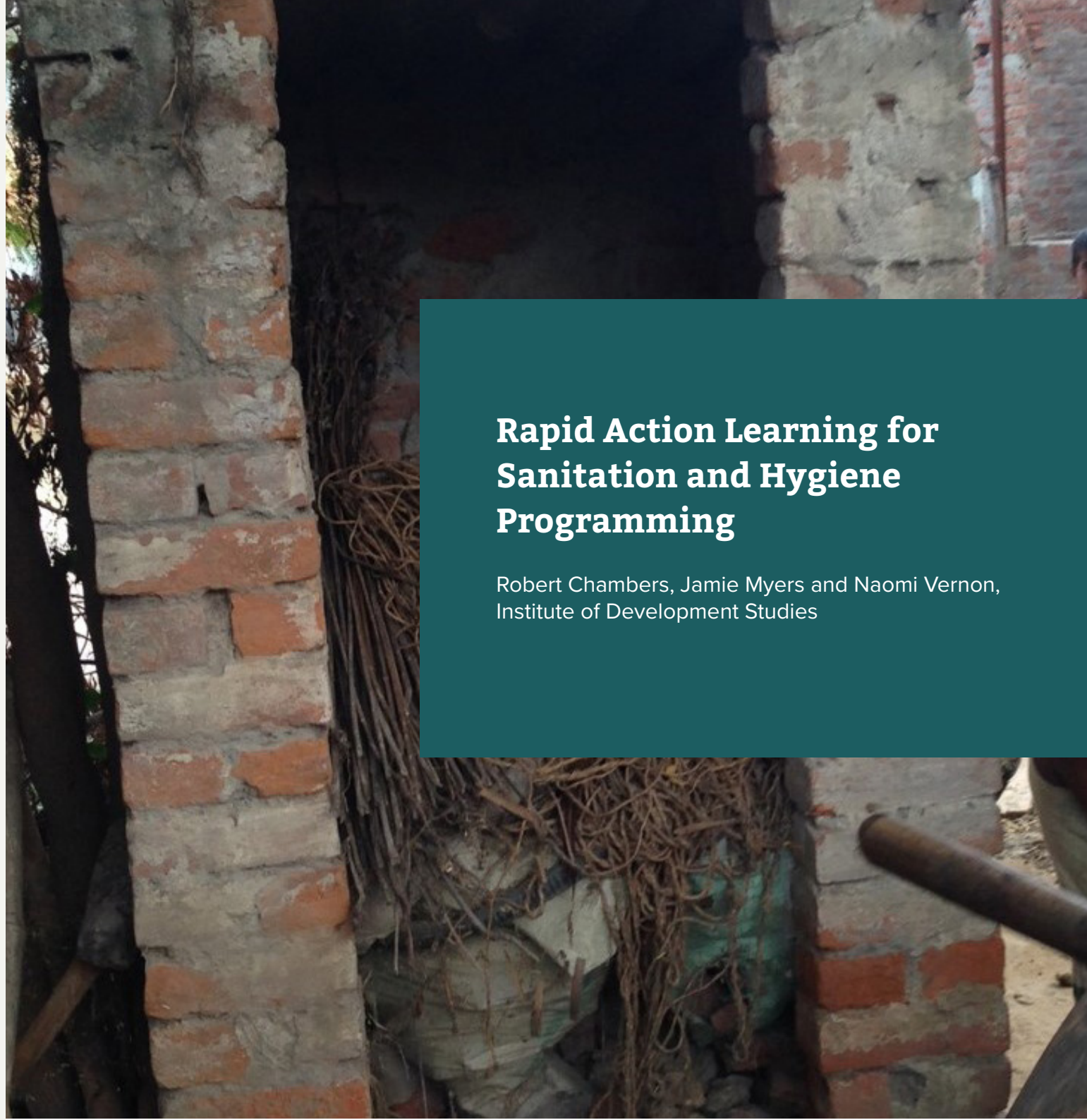
Front cover and inside cover images

Front cover and page 1: South Asia Region Rapid Action Learning Workshop, Negombo, Sri Lanka, December 2019. *Credit: Pushkar Ralu*

Inside cover: In a large-scale rapidly implemented government programme, a toilet without door and used as a store, poses questions crying out for timely, relevant and actionable learning. *Credit: Robert Chambers*

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Context and need

In October 2019, a group of leading organisations in the sanitation and hygiene (S&H) sector – Plan International, SNV, UNICEF, WaterAid, the World Bank and World Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) – published a call to action.¹ This stressed renewing commitment and stepping up ambitions and investments to rural S&H and called for evidence-based and adaptive implementation.

There are many reasons for these priorities. The links between open defecation (OD) and child undernutrition are understood as never before (World Health Organization (WHO) 2018); the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set the target for all countries to achieve 'safely managed' sanitation for all by 2030' but many countries are off-target or even regressing; despite efforts to 'leave no one behind', the poorest and most marginalised are often not being reached; donor expenditure for sanitation has been declining since 2015 (World Bank Group *et al.* 2019); and globally, COVID-19 and climate change accentuate the need for adaptability in S&H programmes. These factors interact with the systemic difficulties already experienced by those in organisations' headquarters when they seek to be in touch and up-to-date with rapidly changing field realities.

At the same time, large-scale urgent campaigns to accelerate progress towards the SDG targets have been mounted by Governments supported by civil society such as the Swachh Bharat (Clean India) Mission in India, NyumbaNiChoo in Tanzania, Clean Nigeria, Clean Green Pakistan, *Sanitasi Total Berbasis Masyarakat (STBM)* in Indonesia and the Nepalese government's WASH Master Plan, and others may follow suit. In campaigns like these, and in smaller programmes and projects, it is vital to be in touch and up-to-date with field realities and to identify what works and what does not. In these contexts, filling gaps in knowledge, and finding answers that provide practical ideas for policy and practice can have exceptionally widespread impact – **provided they are timely, relevant, and actionable.**

¹ The Call to Action can be found here: https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxooof256/files/delivering-rural-sanitation-programs-at-scale-with-equity-and-sustainability-rising-up-to-the-sanitation-ambition_1.pdf

Challenges faced by programmes and campaigns

Common, persistent and significant challenges S&H programmes and campaigns face include:

- **Equity and inclusion:** Although there has been some success in improving services amongst disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised groups, on the whole equity with scale remains a challenge (Kohlitz *et al.* 2019; House *et al.* 2017).
- **Challenging contexts:** Further work is needed to identify different ways forward to effectively reach and work with households and communities in different challenging contexts to meet their needs and their human right to sanitation.
- **Sustainability of outcomes:** Reversion to OD are central concerns with limited evidence on how slippage can be reversed (Chambers and Myers 2016; Hickling 2019). Many interventions stop after open defecation free (ODF) status is achieved and additional interventions are needed to support households reach higher rungs of the sanitation ladder.
- **Climate crisis:** Climate change adversely impacts S&H and worsens the existing sanitation crisis, exacerbated even further for people with pre-existing vulnerabilities.
- **Monitoring systems:** National monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems are often not reliable or fast enough and rarely capture data on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, or communities that are not easily reached. Data collected are rarely well utilised, with limited timely feedback into policy and implementation, and little systematic analysis of what is working and what is not. Furthermore, data collected are often reliant on things that are easily measured like infrastructure, rather than changes in behaviour or long-term operation and maintenance of sanitation services.

Limitations of conventionally rigorous research

The widespread need for timely, relevant and actionable learning and its feedback to policy and practice is rarely met by conventional, traditional scientifically rigorous and academic research. This is due to a multitude of reasons, including the disconnect between research and practice, the format that research is

delivered in being inaccessible (journal articles requiring payment to access, long reports), and time-scales being vastly different between researchers and practitioners. In addition, time is spent negotiating funding and partnerships, interacting with funding and partner agencies, recruiting staff, setting up field work, pilot testing methods, training investigators, analysing data, and writing a report or related output. This process means it can take months or years before findings are available for use. In the meantime, realities, priorities and learning needs evolve, especially in the context of a vigorous national campaign, making it challenging for research to be relevant.

Randomised Control Trials (RCTs, see Box 1) have long been considered the gold standard for reliable and rigorous research, with a high value placed on accuracy, replicability, standardisation and external validity rather than timeliness or relevance. Participatory and engaged forms of research (e.g. inquiries carried out by groups of practitioners themselves) can be assessed in terms of their validity more than replicability: this requires ‘broadening the bandwidth’ of understandings of research rigour to encompass ethics and ‘a concern for engagement, dialogue, pragmatic outcomes and an emergent, reflexive sense of what is important’ (Bradbury and Reason 2006: 343). We argue that a focus on grounding in local realities, development of a deep understanding of the context and remaining open to adaptation, evolution and complexity enhances rigour (Burns 2018).

Box 1: Randomised Control Trials

RCTs are an example of a research method where ‘subjects are randomly assigned to one of two groups: one (the experimental group) receiving the intervention that is being tested, and the other (the comparison group or control) receiving an alternative (conventional) treatment’ (Kendall 2003: 164). While RCTs are important in specific instances, especially those where an experimental methodology is appropriate, ethically and methodologically, and statistical significance can be achieved. However, due to the large scale and intensive nature of RCTs, and the need for them to be well designed (Kendall 2003) they often postpone learning by taking two or more years for results to be known, have limited scope, are costly, and are rigid once launched. RCTs also have challenges related to bias (due to errors

in methodology); confounding (an aspect that is related both to the outcome and the intervention – and mistaking associations when they might be instead a result of a different factor altogether (Braga et al. 2012); and chance (a random error appearing to cause an association between an intervention and an outcome (Kendall 2003: 164). Given the challenges of controlling social environments, they can also produce results that are not always helpful for improving policy and practice once results are finally released. Three recent WASH related RCTs (Luby et al. 2018; Null et al. 2018; Humphrey et al. 2019) found the interventions tested had no impact on childhood stunting, and mixed impacts on diarrhoea. This has led to confusing messaging about how to move forward and leading some to question the value of investing in WASH interventions altogether. This is despite widespread evidence and acceptance of the links between WASH and nutrition amongst experts globally (WHO 2018; Cumming et al. 2019).

Considering this, innovative research and learning approaches which are win-win – maintaining rigour while producing timely findings, which are relevant to policy and practice, which identify people who are at risk of being left behind, enable their voices to be heard, and which can be acted upon – are needed. Such approaches present new tools for policy-makers and practitioners to be in-touch, engaged and up-to-date with realities in the field, accessing spaces for reflection and learning and enable them to make evidence-based decisions. We call this ‘Rapid Action Learning’ (RAL).

Defining Rapid Action Learning

By RAL we mean learning and research activities that produce findings that are timely, relevant and actionable (see Table 1 below). It is following in the tradition of other action-orientated methodologies such as Rapid Rural Appraisal, Participatory Learning and Action, Rapid Epidemiological Assessments, and Participatory Action Research (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Chambers 2008).

Table 1: Key elements of Rapid Action Learning (RAL)

TIMELY	RELEVANT	ACTIONABLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speed of research, learning, and sharing is increased with rapid feedback to policy and practice. Methods and activities are designed to support rapid analysis and feedback loops. Seizing opportune moments. Mix of both formal and informal research to enable learning and feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In touch and up-to-date. Context-specific adaptive to fit local conditions. Adapted for and with the people we are working with. Emergent and reflective of the needs of the sector. Inclusive of various social groups. Open to complexity and multiple causation – not assuming change occurs because of one factor or input, but seeking for an understanding of the way different factors intersect with and compound each other. Conscious learning of lessons from mistakes, failures and successes. Partners (both from government and civil society) are actively involved in methodology development, data collection and analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific recommendations proposed – and aimed for from the start. Practical, usable and achievable. Evidence-based. Accessible for adoption and/or adaptation. Flexible. Actionable because timely and relevant!

Source: Authors own.

Barriers to learning and adaptation

The barriers to RAL and change are numerous and complex, with organisational-level barriers, such as restrictive budgets or donor reporting models, and staff-level barriers, such as a lack of time to prioritise learning and adopt new ways of working. Table 2 describes these barriers – some are shared by all research and learning activities while others are more specific for timely, relevant and actionable knowledge creation. These barriers have been kept in mind when developing and refining the RAL methods outlined in this issue.

Table 2: Barriers to learning and adaptation in the WASH sector

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION
Time constraints	Learning activities and space for reflection are not included in workplans or dedicated time is not factored in. This leads to learning activities often being dropped for other operational tasks.
Incentives	Both individual and organisational incentives do not prioritise learning and reflection. People are often unwilling to share challenges, mistakes and failures, with knowledge management efforts seen as a way to sell organisations/policies rather than honest reflection and analysis of ground realities.
Organisational culture	Research and learning activities are unlikely to take place unless it is driven by the leadership who respect and prioritise learning, reflection and change.
Budgets/funding	Limited budgets for learning – especially for local government staff.
Monitoring, evaluation and learning	Complex programme monitoring systems often do not capture data that can easily be used by programme staff for learning and change. The process is for upward reporting, often focussed on reporting to management/donors.

Mind-sets and attitudes (RAL specific barrier)

RAL processes require a particular mind-set and attitude which is hard to teach to those who have graduated from more traditional research training courses. Some people still view certain methods, especially quantitative methods, as providing ‘better’ evidence than others – criteria being external validity, the extent to which the results of a study can be applied to the wider world, rather than usefulness. Furthermore, elite knowledge at management level is often prioritised over knowledge of those on the front line and in communities. This can lead to both the narrative of the problem and solutions being reductive of community centric issues and more infrastructure and technology driven.

Lack of capacity and confidence (RAL specific barrier)

The capacity and confidence of facilitators and trainers varies, including in the facilitation of participatory techniques and the documentation of learning. There are not a large pool of facilitators, trainers and researchers with skills and experience needed for RAL processes.

Traditional definitions of rigour (RAL specific barrier)

Rigour in research is usually used to describe work with ‘strict canons of statistical procedures’ (Chambers 2015). The same argument others have proposed about a new definition for rigour for qualitative research and participatory practice (see e.g. Bradbury and Reason 2006; Tracy 2010) is also relevant for RAL methods. The rules for rigour when dealing with complex human and socio-ecological systems should be: pluralistic; improvised and innovated; open to evolution and adaption; triangulated; inclusive and drawing on a broad range of perspectives. To work effectively in this way, researchers need to be open, alert and inquisitive (Chambers 2017).

Source: Based on interviews with key informants, House 2020, Grant *et al.* 2016 and the authors own experience and reflections.

Practices and innovations

This issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* confronts this formidable list of limitations and challenges by presenting recent innovations and insights IDS and partners in India have been working on, into how to be in touch and up-to-date with grounded realities of both communities and implementers. The practices and methods which follow were implemented and evolved in India during phase one of the Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin (SBM-G) (see Box 2).

Box 2: The Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin (Clean India Campaign)

The SBM-G was a country-wide campaign to eliminate OD across India. The first phase ran between 2014 and 2019 and aimed to change the sanitation habits of over 600 million people who practiced OD. The unprecedented scale and speed of the SBM-G demanded learning from what was working and what was not, creating conditions in which field realities could be presented, and the identification and spread of successful innovations enabled.

The following section presents four examples of RAL methods:

1. The unofficial visit
2. Immersive research
3. Rapid Action Learning (RAL) workshops
4. Rapid Topic Explorations

Some of these approaches place more emphasis on data collection and uncovering ground realities of communities (1, 2 and 4) while others focus on sharing knowledge, analysis, reflection and the generation of action (3). Though presented separately here, they have often been used in coordination with one another. For example, Rapid Topic Explorations and immersive research have been shared at RAL workshops, while topics for Rapid Topic Explorations have been selected based on findings from unofficial visits, immersive research and discussions in RAL workshops

1. The unofficial visit

The ‘unofficial visit’ involves visiting a community at random, unannounced, and with a friendly and relaxed manner to talk to community members about their lives and any perceived changes and observe. Most rural visits are planned and accompanied by government or NGO staff. They are subject to many well-known biases and tend to reinforce official (including NGO and international agency) narratives and perceptions (Chambers 1983 and 2018). Around urban centres there tends to be an archipelago of often-visited atypical villages, which generate biased perceptions of rural realities. The ‘unofficial visit’ systematically reverses such biases and often leads to surprising and memorable experiences and findings.

To carry out a ‘debiasing’ visit, block off a whole day – two or three villages can be visited without rushing. Use an unmarked vehicle (not a government or NGO branded one). Keep numbers down – a driver, yourself and one other, and an interpreter if necessary, are enough. Spatial and special village biases can be offset by driving 15-20km out of an urban centre, turning off onto a minor road for 5km or so, turning off again, and then stopping or choosing a nearby village.

Once you arrive:

- wander around on foot;
- meet people;
- explain who you are and what you are interested in learning about;
- be friendly and interested;
- observe and show curiosity;
- chat;
- ask questions;
- listen non-judgementally;
- ask what people would like to show you;
- tea shops can be an excellent source of insights, but beware male bias;
- explore broadly and try and ideally meet people of different ages, gender, class, caste within the community.

Benefits

- Though impossible to completely remove bias, this approach offers a way to explore and challenge the official narrative and meet and listen to people who may be out of sight on official visits.
- The experience is often striking and memorable and providing visitors with special credibility.
- If the same community is visited after a year or two, a sense of change, or lack of it, can be gained (Chambers 2018).

Challenges

- Safety issues need to be taken into consideration, the context/area, social and cultural norms assessed in advance. Safeguarding processes need to be undertaken to ensure visitors do not put themselves, or others, at risk (see Box 7 for further details).
- Some researchers and NGO/INGO staff and donor staff may have organisational restrictions which prohibit this kind of unofficial visit.



Toilet constructed on a raised mound in an area vulnerable to flooding. The notice painted on the back wall certifies that the government subsidy of Indian Rupees 12,000 had been spent on the toilet. None had doors, roofs nor, hidden from sight, pits. Smell and sight indicated that some were used for urination. **Credit: Robert Chambers**



Waste pipe adding to the faecal matter in an open drain, running through a village to the village pond (background). The drain was already contaminated by overflows from many septic tanks, bringing open defecation to the front door and the streets. 6 years earlier villagers had been bathing in the pond. Now farmers were pumping the water out for fertiliser. **Credit: Robert Chambers**

2. Immersive research

An immersive research approach involves researchers staying in communities for a number of days and nights, immersing themselves in the everyday life of a household and a community.

Two initiatives informed the development of an immersive research approach. The first, the Reality Check Approach,² has now been applied in at least eight countries. The second was a week-long process with a questionnaire conducted by 630 students of the Indian Institute of Management, Indore, who stayed in 137 villages across 13 Districts in Madhya Pradesh, to assess if the villages had achieved ODF status.

Three immersive research processes have now been conducted by:

1. Praxis, IDS and WaterAid India (2017a) – 8 villages.
2. University of Delhi, IDS and WSSCC (2019) – 58 villages, across 14 Indian States carried out by 53 students.
3. WaterAid India and IDS (forthcoming) – 9 villages.

The approach: After a two-day training, researchers live with community members in selected communities, typically for three to five days and nights, and then meet together to compare findings. Atypical villages are avoided and those selected are ones that are neither the best or worst performing.

While immersed, researchers learn open-endedly from lived experience, observation and conversations. There are no questionnaires or interview schedules. Meeting times and places are decided as per people's convenience. Researchers participate in household tasks, such as cooking and collecting water, wander around and observe, have unplanned and open-ended conversations, are open to surprises and follow-up flexibly on whatever is new and relevant. Relationships of trust are sought – researchers may be encouraged not to discuss WASH on the first day. Deliberate efforts are made to offset elite bias³ and to seek-out those who are marginalised, very poor or living on the edges of the communities, and also children, youth, women, girls, people with disabilities and older people.

Box 3: Immersive research attitude and behaviours

- Listen actively and learn from the community.
- Build rapport – introduce yourself, set an example of openness about yourself. This includes being open to answering any questions you are asked.
- Be conscious of the limited means available to host families – we recommend reimbursing households for any additional costs they have incurred. This should be discussed in advance with the organisation facilitating the visit.
- Be aware of and respect local culture and customs.
- Find times suitable for those you want to hold conversations with, in ways that are compatible with people's daily activities.
- Listen to anyone who wants to talk – you can be approached by anyone at odd hours – and do not put pressure on those who do not want to meet and talk.
- Seek out minorities, those living on the fringes and outliers – a map (drawn or from the internet) and/or a list of social groups will help ensure inclusion.
- Avoid taking notes during conversations but possibly use cards to note down discussion points visibly for respondents (these can be pictorial for those unable to read).
- Only take photographs after seeking consent and, if possible, send physical prints back to the community.
- Do not talk about sensitive issues in any public forum.
- Have daily team meetings with village team members where you can reflect on the process and learning so far and design the following day accordingly.
- Ensure the names of households and villages are anonymised in any reports or presentations.

Source: Abraham *et al.* 2018

The process to date:

- **Two-day planning meeting and orientation.** Prior to entering communities, researchers meet to discuss research ethics, attitudes and behaviours (see Box 3 above) and agree the approach and process, e.g. potential topics and issues to explore, and methods that can be used (e.g. mappings, transect walks, focus group discussions, observation, etc.).
- **Three- to five-day immersion.** Households are selected in advance, facilitated by partners already working in the selected communities. Mixed gender teams of two or three researchers visit the same village. Female researchers are usually able to have more open discussions with women and girls while male researchers are able to have more honest discussions with men and boys. Criteria for household selection can vary – efforts are made to select families that are not very affluent, influential or are from a dominant group within the community. Prior to leaving villages, feedback should be given to communities.
- **Two- or three-day debriefing workshop for sharing, reflecting, analysis and consolidating, and report writing.** There is no set way this has been done, and each process has followed a different approach. With large numbers, brainstorming topics, finding champions for topics, and then hunter-gathering (see Box 4) and writing-up proved effective.
- **Feeding back to relevant actors.** Though an official report may take longer to finalise and publish due to a multitude of reasons, such as getting organisational sign-off, efforts have been made to report back informally to relevant government and non-government actors almost immediately following the debriefing workshop.

Benefits

- Findings are in touch with people's realities, up-to-date and unpack some of the real-life complexities and dynamics involved in S&H programming.
- Findings from the process have been used to raise an agenda for action, investigation and research as well as providing nuanced insights with implications for policy and practice.
- The process can be beneficial for both researchers, practitioners and

government staff to get a better grasp of the barriers to maintaining improved sanitation behaviours.

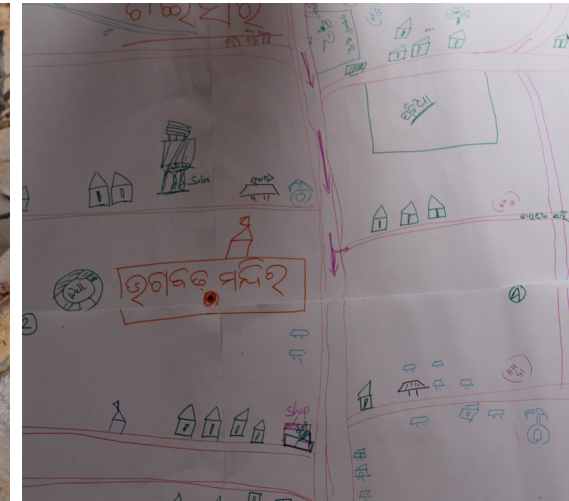
- This approach allows for meeting and discussions with those often missing in research, for example, older people, young children, people with disabilities, marginalised households, women, migrants, and those living on the outskirts of communities and enable a better understanding of who may be being missed out from interventions.
- Direct observation plays an important part revealing the unexpected and confirming or correcting information previously collected.
- Time and space is available to triangulate information and to gather different viewpoints from a range of people in the communities. Unlike day visits, there is plenty of time for discussions in the early morning and especially after dark, when people who are busy during the day are available.
- Meetings are arranged to feedback to relevant stakeholders almost immediately.

Challenges

- The household you stay with will shape your view of the community. Furthermore, you will be associated with the household you stay with, affecting how others in the community are likely to respond to you.
- If your trip is arranged through an S&H organisation, researchers may be seen as toilet inspectors. This can be addressed through a thorough briefing with local partners and researchers.
- There is a vast and diverse range of information being shared, so certain levels of contextual and subject knowledge are required to capture nuanced details and decide which conversations need to be probed further.
- The approach is intense, time consuming and may often be uncomfortable (though a rewarding personal experience!).
- Immersive research is an in-depth inquiry. Though efforts are made to select 'typical' villages to eliminate bias, the findings cannot be generalised or taken as representative on a wide scale.
- Interpreters will likely be needed, especially if communities speak a local

language or dialect meaning nuances may be lost in translation, and conversations will not flow as easily as in the same language.

- Though recommended, individual village feedback has not consistently been provided before researchers leave. Furthermore, the consolidated findings across the different villages have not been presented to community member.



Cooking at home (top image); Disused toilet (bottom image). Credit: Jamie Myers

Community mapping exercises during immersions. Credit: (top image): Jamie Myers; (bottom image): Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices

3. Rapid Action Learning workshops

Rapid Action Learning (RAL) workshops are horizontal learning exchanges. Participants rapidly learn, reflect and analyse the work of peers, adopting and adapting them to develop practical, usable and achievable action plans.

Since 2014, RAL workshops have been co-convened by the Government of India, WSSCC and IDS - two at the national level, six at regional level, and three at district⁴ level. These have brought together almost exclusively government staff working on the SBM-G to share and learn from each other and plan for next steps. In addition, the SACOSAN⁵ Regional Centre for Sanitation, with support from WSSCC and IDS, hosted a multi-lateral South Asia Region RAL workshop with government and non-government actors from eight countries in December 2019.

The aims of these workshops are:

1. To provide national and sub-national level actors (state/province, county, districts, villages, etc.) with ideas and means to accelerate progress towards sustainable and equitable ODF status.
2. To learn from successful experiences and to provide opportunities for sharing insights, innovations and successful practices, including methods, processes and approaches developed by peers in other districts.
3. To make these accessible for adoption and/or adaptation by other districts.
4. For area-wide teams to review practical lessons learnt and to integrate that learning into district-specific actions.

RAL workshops have evolved over time – emphasis is placed on peer-to-peer horizontal sharing and learning of innovations, experiences and good practices, with area (at country or different subnational level) teams spending time reflecting and considering changes they can immediately make to their plans using what has been learnt. A practical and action-orientated four-page report is produced and disseminated two days immediately following the event, to ensure momentum generated is maintained and key learnings can spread beyond the original participants.

⁴ An administrative division below a State.

⁵ South Asian Conference on Sanitation.

The approach

The workshops are:

- Designed and facilitated to be participatory, informal, enjoyable and useful. Most interactions are sideways not top-down. Senior staff are in a listening not lecturing mode.
- Designed to enable participants to pick up ideas from one another and reflect how these could be used in their own work.
- Planned to ensure that these reflections and discussions contribute towards identifying programmatic activities that are immediately actionable.
- Concerned with practical actions which can be taken to scale, i.e. area, state and/or country-wide.

Prior to the workshop: The organising team collect successful and promising approaches that are being used in the field. Preparation is a critical part of their success and participants need to come prepared to contribute (Jones, forthcoming).

The three-day workshop agenda:

On Day One participants share experiences through a mix of plenary and group activities such as hunter-gatherings (see Box 4). On Day Two a field trip is recommended if possible. On Day Three District teams finalise actions plans to strengthen their sanitation programmes. District leaders are invited on the final day to meet their teams who present and proposal actions. Action plans are then shared in plenary.

Throughout the three-day workshop time is built in for review, reflection and analysis.

Immediately after the workshop: A short, punchy, action-orientated report is completed within 48 hours and shared with all participants.



Pakistan team developing an action plan. South Asia Region Rapid Action Learning Workshop, Negombo, Sri Lanka, December 2019. *Credit: Pushkar Ralu*

Box 4: Hunter-gathering

Hunter-gathering is a participatory process of rapidly collecting and collating information, experiences and contributions. It is highly recommended as a way to facilitate horizontal learning between individuals and groups.

Each group sets up its stall staffed by team members who are well informed about the experiences and innovations that the group has to contribute. These experiences and innovations are advertised clearly for other participants to see – this can be done both verbally in plenary before hunter-gathering begins, and written on flipchart paper at each stall where pre-made posters can also be displayed. *Hunters* then visit stalls they are most interested in learning about, *gathering* the information that is most useful to them and their team. These sessions can take place in rounds so participants hosting the stalls can also become hunters.

At the end of each session, groups reassemble to share and consolidate what they have learnt and reflect on the applicability of the knowledge gained for their own work.

Hunter-gathering can take place over a session, a day or multiple days. It is important that time and space is given for group discussion and reflection after. Teams also need space and time for further interaction in case follow-up on particular points is needed.

Benefits

- It can help capture information about new innovative practices happening in the field that has not yet been documented (see Box 5).
- It enables those directly involved with one another to learn from their peers and to reflect and design actions.
- They can help unpack some of the nuts and bolts challenges large-scale campaigns are likely to face.

- Peers are likely to have a better understanding of the day-to-day realities of other participants.
- These workshops have been attended almost exclusively by government staff working on the SBM-G campaign.

Box 5: Evaluations of RAL workshops

Two independent evaluations of RAL workshops have been commissioned, one by IDS and the other by WSSCC:

The workshops 'have shown great success in engaging state government officials and community leaders sharing information through the highly engaging "hunter-gatherer" activity and, most importantly, the development of achievable action plans. These have augmented the national Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G) to great effect' (Murray and Majale 2019).

The workshops 'have demonstrated that through well facilitated participatory approaches, knowledge can be effectively shared between peers and are a strong mechanism for cross district learning. The learning that has been documented in the RAL workshop reports, clearly demonstrates that the approach is effective at identifying best practice and innovations' (Jones forthcoming).

Challenges

- Ensuring a gender balance. Men have hugely outnumbered women.
- The event is vulnerable to turning into a competition with only best practices shared without acknowledgement of challenges and mistakes made along the way. It is important to foster a safe environment where failures/lessons learned are also shared.
- Sharing bad practices as good practice – facilitators should be prepared to interject into discussions if this is found to be happening. Collecting information about what is to be shared in advance helps to minimise the risk of this taking place.
- Monitoring of action plans has to-date been weak and requires strong institutional buy-in from a department that can oversee this.

4. Rapid Topic Explorations

Rapid Topic Explorations are a time-bound but an otherwise flexible approach to finding out about a priority topic where knowledge has yet to be summarised for a particular context. The topics tackled often span disciplines. They are treated holistically, highlighting insights with immediate relevance. Many explorations have included 'ground-truthing'⁶ to understand field realities.

Topics have been generated in consultation with the government and development partners. Researchers are required to assess the current state of knowledge and to seek insights and innovations from the field. Reviews triangulate from different sources including academic and grey literature, key informant interviews, preliminary insights from on-going research on progress and rapid and informal field investigations.

Conditions for these reviews are (1) methods used to collect data must be clearly explained, (2) recommendations for practice and policy are provided and (3) work is completed in a set number of days (usually 20). Outputs are written and disseminated quickly so immediate relevant and timely actions can be taken.

Box 6: The topics and headline findings in 2017 – 2019

Twin-leach pits: It was found that there was a lack of knowledge on technical aspects of costs and construction and technical information on the designs and functions of twin-leach pit toilet (Bejjanki 2017).

Septic tanks and rural faecal sludge management: There was huge variation in the number of septic tanks in each State. Faulty construction and careless treatment of faecal sludge were second generation challenges that needed attention (Ganesan 2017).

Men and OD: Many campaigns had focussed on women, leaving men's OD as a major unsolved problem. Examples of national and local efforts to stop men openly defecating were shared (Satyavada 2017).

⁶ Information collected directly from the field either through direct observation or discussions.

Sanitation coverage, usage and health: Studies on coverage used different methods and figures on partial usage, unsurprisingly, varied. However, current knowledge points to the need for a high coverage and usage to achieve major benefits in health and nutrition (Viswanathan 2017).

Water for toilets: Key deterrents in sustained use of toilets included: absence of water in latrines, purity and sanitation rituals, and the extra work associated with latrine use, particularly by women who shoulder the responsibility of fetching water (Satyavada 2019).

Retrofitting: Retrofitting was needed for both substructures and superstructures. In some cases retrofitting will not be possible and construction will need to be started from scratch with locally appropriate technologies (Srivastava 2019).

The methods utilised included:

- All but one review mixed field visits, key information interviews, reviews of policies, grey and academic literature and research currently being conducted.
- Observations, interviews with masons and faecal sludge management service providers and interviews and focus group discussions with community members were also conducted.
- Telephone, Skype and face-to-face interviews.
- One researcher used professional and personal contacts to organise interviews – asking her parents and friends to collect telephone numbers of local masons that she could follow-up with (Ganesan 2017).

Benefits

- These experiences demonstrated that rapid synthesis of knowledge can be coupled with field investigations to generate insights and actionable knowledge in a short period.

- Key conditions for success were having original, flexible and innovative researchers, and freedom for them to use whatever methods and approaches they decide or improvise under pressure.
- The use of multiple methods allows researchers to triangulate data generated by the different parts of the process (Taket and White 1997).

Challenges

- Some topics may not be appropriate to explore in this way.
- Difficulties in finding researchers open to exploration, being flexible, changing approaches or tack when necessary and adapting and innovating.
- There is an element of risk here – both with identifying the right researchers and the right topics. Two reports were unable to be published.



Reflections and lessons learnt

Synergies and trade-offs with timeliness. A common academic view is that rigour generally requires more rather than less time, and that less time means less rigour. However, the quality and depth of insights that result from these rapid approaches have their own rigour, through quick triangulation, being in touch and up to date, and through reflection, deliberation, and cross-learning (Bradbury and Reason 2006). The speed of having to find out fast drives exploration, innovation and successive approximation. In sum, done well, the synergies of timeliness can often be a win-win.

Rapid reporting and actionable feedback. A key lesson is the importance of rapid reporting and informal feedback. Delays can be counteracted by planning for immediate informal feedback to policy and practice. By planning this in advance and alerting decision- and policy-makers, they may be more engaged in wanting to know what has been learnt. At the same time, this is a significant commitment for researchers and should be an incentive to seek useful findings, thus increasing the focus of their attention on actionable issues and outcomes.

Recruiting capable people for recording, analysis and write-up of research activities, and allocating adequate resources for this. For example, in a RAL workshop, those recording proceedings should be well versed in the subject, and committed in advance to staying for two days immediately after the workshop to complete a short and final report. Shortage of time forces brevity and prioritisation of the main actionable points. Receiving an actionable report so soon can inform and reinforce workshop participants, while the memory and relevance of insights, outcomes and commitments are hot, set a standard for prompt action, and give them material and ammunition to use with colleagues and their seniors.

Identifying and recruiting people with the right mind-sets, attitudes and skills. Finding facilitators and researchers with appropriate attitudes, behaviours and mind-sets is crucial. Good facilitators of RAL workshops have skills and experience that are not easy to find and when found, require training and mentoring. Researchers for immersive research and rapid topic explorations are likely to require special training or orientation, including training in attitudes and behaviour change, and as well as an orientation to participatory methods.



Rapid Topic Exploration of ‘water for toilets’ in rural India. Metal buckets or old used plastic paint buckets are used for flushing toilets. *Credit: Aravinda Satyavada*



Rapid Topic Exploration of ‘water for toilets’ in rural India. Rainwater collection tanks dry up and water levels in wells recede during summer in Rajasthan. *Credit: Aravinda Satyavada*

Direct involvement of senior policy-makers. Senior policy-makers often gain misleading views of field realities on visits arranged and stage managed by field staff, who may want to show them a favourable perspective (for example, selecting the best performing sites). The importance of engaging senior policy-makers in direct personal learning from unbiased field exposure cannot be exaggerated. This can be through staying in communities or through unplanned field visits without accompanying staff. Direct experience both for personal learning and to set an example can also be powerful as when all State Principal Secretaries (those managing the SBM-G at State level) entered mature twin pits and dug out manure themselves.

High-level support and promotion. The value and scale of RAL depend on demand by government and agencies. Ideally, this will be part of an action learning culture in which promising innovations are identified and spread, and challenges identified and worked on. The identification and reporting on what does not work or what may be going wrong is not always welcome, but is as necessary for better performance as is the identification and spread of good practices.

Safeguarding. Some of the approaches listed above require working closely with vulnerable people. This means those using these methods must be confident that researchers engaged in activities do not pose a risk to the people they may engage, and are not at risk themselves. Risk mitigation strategies need to be considered at the start as part of the ethical research plan. As these methods develop, so too do the safeguarding measures to accompany them. See Box 7 for further details.

RAL will not be appropriate to answer every research question. For example, if changes in gender norms have occurred in a community over a period of several years. However, RAL can be used in a complementary way – where smaller changes can be observed and responded to in real time, and larger scale and longer-timeframe studies can be conducted once an appropriate period of time has passed. Just like participatory action research has been proposed as a discipline that complements more conventional social science (Bradbury-Huang 2010), RAL processes both supplement and challenge conventional research methods typically employed in the S&H sector.

Practical implications

In a complex and rapidly transforming world, a different way of thinking about learning, sharing and communicating is needed. This section outlines recommendations for integrating RAL into programming and research:

For everyone

- Reflect if your ongoing or planned learning and research methods and processes meet criteria for timely, relevant and actionable knowledge creation. If not, why? Are there changes that can be made?
- Draw upon and adapt the methods presented here – guides are available for:
 - ◆ RAL workshops (Government of India, IDS and WSSCC).⁷
 - ◆ Immersions (Abraham *et al.* 2018; Praxis *et al.* 2017b).⁸
- Document and share processes that meet the timely, relevant and actionable criteria for others to use them.
- Challenge and question traditional notions of rigour.
- Build capacity of those who can facilitate or utilise RAL approaches.
- Explore ways to capture complexity and learn from the field level realities of those living in extreme poverty – giving time and space to learn from their lived realities.
- Develop clear safeguarding processes and Do No Harm principles at the outset (see Box 7).

⁷ See <https://sanitationlearninghub.org/resource/convening-and-facilitating-rapid-action-learning-workshops-for-the-swachh-bharat-mission-gramin-sbm-g/>

⁸ See https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15354/SBM_immersive_research_methodology_note.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y and <https://wedc-knowledge.lboro.ac.uk/resources/conference/41/Abraham-2866.pdf>

Box 7: Safeguarding and ethical considerations

A number of these methods involve working closely with vulnerable people. As with all research methods, clear safeguarding and ethics processes need to be in place to protect community members and researchers, with potential ethical risks identified, understood and resolved or mitigated. Safeguarding has expanded beyond those traditionally considered at risk, with the broader remit now encompassing protecting people from harm generally, including neglect, sexual or emotional abuse or exploitation, bullying or harassment and other abuses of power (IDS 2018). Prior to undertaking any research:

- Share your proposed study with an ethics board where appropriate, identifying risks and potential safeguarding issues. Where a board is not available, share the study proposal with ethics experts and people experienced in undertaking the method.
- Carry out necessary risk assessments for your work and take action to reduce risks.
- Power dynamics between researcher and participants or community members need to be identified and considered. There will likely be disparities between wealth, power, access to information, political interest, and status, and unintended negative consequences are a potential outcome (ACFID and RDI Network 2017).
- When staying in community members homes, a clear process outlining the aims of the research, the purpose of the stay, with expectations and potential benefits and risks made clear beforehand. Researchers should not stay on their own and rigorous child protection measures need to be put in place (see ACFID and RDI Network 2017).
- Arrange training for teams to outline a Code of Conduct to ensure everyone is clear on what is expected, minimum standards and behaviours that are required, and the potential risks they may be exposed to. It needs to be made clear that they do not need to

do anything they are not comfortable with and what to do if they encounter certain scenarios (e.g. reporting channels if they come across domestic abuse).

- Informed consent (verbal, written or audio/video recording) should be sought from participants.
- Commitment to participant welfare over and above research goals is essential. Be aware of the social customs and dynamics of the community to avoid unintentionally reinforcing existing unjust social relationships, triggering conflict within a community, or putting individuals at risk. Researchers need to have a good understanding of the culture, political situation, history and values in the relevant country and local context. Working with experienced local researchers is important (ACFID and RDI Network 2017).
- When exploring difficult, taboo topics this adds further ethical dimensions to consider.
- Findings should be discussed with the participants, or made accessible to participants in a timely, clear manner (ACFID and RDI Network 2017). However, care needs to be taken when sharing findings which may be taken as controversial by communities.

Key resources to refer to when developing ethical and safeguarding processes:

Principles and Guidelines for Ethical Research and Evaluation, (ACFID and RDI Network 2017) https://rdinetwork.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/G2321_ACFID-RDI_PG2017_WEB_compressed.pdf

UKCDR Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/guidance-on-safeguarding-in-international-development-research/>

Those planning and conducting research and learning activities

Developing and implementing learning agendas and activities

- Engage policy-makers, practitioners and communities throughout the process. This should start from the development of the questions and/or learning agenda.
- Methods and questions should evolve over time, and learning objectives and outputs must be clear, focused and measurable.
- Flexibility – trial new methods and don't be afraid to innovate and improvise.
- Conduct research that aligns to the needs and timelines of government and programme implementers and does not produce findings too late to be of use.
- Consider methodologies and activities which allow researchers and practitioners to work together.
- Learning should be emergent and reflective of the needs of a project/programme/sector – research questions and lines of enquiry need to be co-created with relevant stakeholders.
- Do not narrow in too early (or ideally not at all!) – consider complexity and multiple causation.
- Recommendations and innovations which emerge need to be adaptable according to context and trialled in a number of contexts. Again, these should be discussed and co-created with relevant stakeholders.

Sharing findings and lessons learned

- Build key junctions into ongoing research efforts to share findings with key stakeholders, including communities – this is especially important where delays to publishing are anticipated.
- Carry out and publish concise outputs with key findings within 48 hours of a learning event or research study, so they can be fed back into programmes and maintain momentum – a longer and more polished report can always follow.

- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for documentation and report writing to avoid delays.
- Undertake informal immediate feedback of key recommendations and innovations following events/field research to policy and decision-makers.
- Be open to sharing and learning from both successes and failures, both are essential to successful adaptive programming.
- Consider usefulness/actionability of findings. Ensure recommendations are practical and achievable within existing constraints (time, money, etc.), so they can be easily fed into programmes and national systems and changes can take place.

Those commissioning and using findings

Creating an enabling environment for learning

- Get involved.
- Seek out and value staff with RAL skills.
- Embed learning into day-to-day work of staff, write into job descriptions and personal development plans (Cranston and Chandak 2016). Make time for learning and reflection in each meeting. Consider how to share this more broadly within your organisation.
- Incentivise learning through competitions and awards which are judged by peers, and create safe spaces for sharing where people are encouraged and praised for sharing both successes and failures.
- Create budgets for learning processes, training, reflection, dissemination and acting upon recommendations.
- Sponsor, trial, test and innovate with RAL approaches that can complement and support ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Designing policies and adaptive programmes

- Discuss and co-create recommendations and innovations which emerge to help ensure they are adaptable according to context and trialled in a number of contexts.
- Build flexibility into programmes to allow for adaptation and adjustments at regular intervals.
- Integrate learning objectives and outputs into programme designs, and regular points in which programmes can reflect upon and adjust course based on learning.

Monitoring and sharing progress

- Use monitoring systems that capture data that can be disaggregated across different categories of potential vulnerability, allow for analysis of negative progress/slippage, and have quick reporting/data visualisation to enable rapid feedback and use of data.
- Be open to sharing and learning from both successes and failures - both are essential to successful adaptive programming.
- Sponsor, trial, test and innovate with RAL approaches that can complement and support ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts.

For those funding learning and research activities

- Fund and support the development of timely, relevant and actionable research methodologies.
- Fund and support flexibility in programmes to allow for adaptation and adjustments at regular intervals.
- Encourage and support the development of collaborative relationships with grantees, where learning and change and acknowledgement of failure is positive.
- Encourage use, documentation and sharing of RAL processes.
- Incentivise sharing and learning from both successes and failures, both are essential to successful adaptive programmes.

Summary conclusions

For many contexts a change in the criteria for rigour is needed. This is a challenge to researchers. There is a glaring gap and compelling need for approaches and methods that realign to this new rigour through timeliness, cost-effectiveness, relevance and being actionable.

Our experience is that practitioners only rarely recognise the originality and significance of their practice. We hope that this issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* will provoke and inspire others to act and contribute to improving WASH practice, in summary to:

1. Reflect on what for you constitutes rigour.
2. Adopt and adapt those of the four approaches that fit your context and needs.
3. Innovate. Develop your own approaches.
4. Record your experiences and lessons learnt.
5. Take the time to share your experiences with others. You can do this via the Sanitation Learning Hub website: <https://sanitationlearninghub.org/connect-share-learn/>, or email slh@ids.ac.uk

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Robert Chambers, Jamie Myers and Naomi Vernon have worked together at IDS for a number of years, firstly at the CLTS Knowledge Hub, and then collectively creating the Sanitation Learning Hub with the rest of the team. We're passionate about seeking for participatory ways of learning to reach SDG 6.2 and improving policy and practice in the WASH sector.

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Rapid Action Learning for Sanitation and Hygiene Programming

This issue of *Frontiers of Sanitation* describes four Rapid Action Learning approaches that have been developed and tested in India by IDS and partners to support the Swachh Bharat Mission – Gramin, and encourages others to use them, to innovate other approaches, and to share their experiences. The four approaches are the unofficial visit, immersive research, rapid action learning (RAL) workshops and rapid topic explorations. These demonstrate the practical rigour of learning, which is timely, relevant and actionable.

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