Looking Beyond Water Service Delivery Statistics Through The Sensemaker Lense

There are lots of different 'stories' from so many Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector sources that are sometimes difficult to understand. Putting together these stories from sources such as water users, water professionals, policy documents, videos and photographs to make one complete story that can help facilitate quality service delivery can be most daunting and deterrent.

The Sensemaker Approach may therefore be the wonderful tool that sector stakeholders have been awaiting to assist them tell one complete story by piecing together so many scenarios from diverse sources. Stakeholders who participated in the 23rd edition of the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) had the opportunity to be introduced to the Sensemaker Approach.

NLLAP 23 came off in Accra at the behest of the Resource Centre Network Ghana (RCNG), in collaboration with the Ministry of Water Resources, Works and Housing (MWRWH). It was on the theme: "Beyond the statistics about water service delivery in Ghana: The SenseMaker Approach." The anchor for the day was Mr Patrick Apoya, a WASH consultant but the floor actually belonged to Esinu Abbey (IT Coordinator, CWSA) and Prosper Dzansi (Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Expert at Triple-S) whose respective presentation on 'The SenseMaker Approach' and "The application perspective of SenseMaker" enlightened participants about the new tool. Prior to their presentations, Miss Ida Coleman of RCN Ghana walked participants through an evaluation of the NLLAP series of 2011 while Mr Abu Wumbei, also of RCN Ghana took participants through the various themes for the NLLAP series of 2011 and the institutions which appeared at the series to lead discussions. In addition, the presentations followed by questions and answers, as well as, group work. In this brief, you will find the most burning issues brought up during the meeting.

SenseMaker FAQs

In her presentation, Ms Esinu Abbey devoted time to explain the concept of Sensemaker Appraoch, providing substantial answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). She defined Sensemaker as a software suite developed by Cognitive Edge to help find patterns among stories. It is also a tool for capturing story based data and acts as an evaluation tool. In more simple terms, it is a tool that helps to capture data in a formalized form. Its real essence is that it allows the service provider to identify a particular story that is behind a set of numbers.

According to the presenter, the rationale for using Sensemaker is the need to ADAPT to changes. Specifically, Sensemaker is employed because dynamic contexts need an adaptive programme; it responds to emerging needs; it understands diversity of perspectives; and focuses on values and people's experiences, with quantification.

Essentially, Sensemaker provides an approach to making sense of different fragments of information about a complex change process or about a dynamic context and can help view patterns that are emerging in the context of planning a project's next steps. The bottom line is that rather than the individual stories, the patterns direct us to find out what a cluster of people are saying and helps in forming themes. So, "SenseMaker is the software to help find patterns among the stories but people need to make sense of it and decide on action," the presenter stated.

Quite instructively, the Sensemaker is not designed to operate strictly as a "stand alone approach." Thus, it allows the building-in of other evaluation frameworks, Ms Abbey stressed.

Sensemaker Process & Methodology

Continuing, Ms Abbey, explained the Sensemaker application process and methodology. In terms of process, Sensemaker traverses question to action. Its cycle involves a starting point or prompting question stage followed by story capture, self-signification, visualization of patterns, making sense out of the patterns and acting on the signals. The process can always be repeated through the same cycle.

In terms of methodology, the starting point is NGOs finding scribes. They proceed from there to train the scribes who in turn engage in story collection. A coordinator then meets with groups made of the scribes and story tellers. From there, the data is transcribed, analysed and visualised to allow for feedback meetings to be held and take reaction from the NGOs.

"In this process there are more questions than answers because we keep asking questions; there is also the aspect of seeking surprise and confirm the known," Ms Abbey told participants.

Triple-S experience with SenseMaker

Taking the presentation baton, Mr Prosper Dzansi explained to participants why and how the Sensemaker tool had been employed in the Triple-S project. According to him, the reasons for the use of Sensemaker in the Triple-S project were that it was imperative to: respond to emerging needs such as flexible funding for new ideas; cater for diversity of perspectives – especially users and professionals; get beyond statistics about water points and policy intentions to people's lived experiences in the water sector; and monitor water users satisfaction of the services they were receiving.

The tool was applied in the Triple-S project in consonance with the project's underpinning principles of using narratives as a means of monitoring and evaluation. In this regard, the project was interested in two narrative scenarios, namely: a narrative that tells the story about sector change towards sustainability (changes in discourse, new ideas emerging, changing practices and policies) and the narrative that tells the story of the process to enable this change.

Project implementers proceeded to collect stories at two levels comprising users at water facility level in the Akatsi, East Gonja, and Sunyani West District Assemblies, and Water Professionals consisting of

Government and NGO staff at Central and Decentralized level.

Mr. Dzansi told NLLAP 23 participants that as of the time, 1,256 stories had been collected. These consisted of 842 stories from water users and 414 from water professionals. But at the pilot stage 300 stories had been collected.

As part of the exercise, 22 story tellers were recruited and trained. These were made up of young unemployed graduates and national service personnel, teachers, assemblymen, environmental health officers, community development officers and social welfare officers. These collected stories from users through interviews and from water professionals through interviews in their offices and sector events as well as by e-based collector website. Incentives for the collectors included lunch and transportation allowances as well as the use of feedback sessions as a motivating platform.

"From the perspective of users there were negative stories with respect to access and functionality. With the design, we can extract exactly what they are saying from the system: for instance on water professionals, about 500 stories out of 842 said professionals focused on people in need," Mr Dzansi said.

Discussions and Recommendations

General discussions as well as group works were receptive to the Sensemaker approach. However, issues regarding quality control, Sensemaker's complementarity to traditional monitoring and evaluation system were grey areas for discussants.

Nonetheless, there were not many recommendations save for the suggestion that in subsequent discussions, the presenters should break down the approach and use more demonstrations in order to simplify and deepen understanding.

The NLLAP is a WASH sector multi stakeholder platform with the overall goal of improving sector learning and dialogue. It is hosted by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN). The platform offers learning and sharing opportunity for sector players as one of the practical approaches to improving sector engagements/sharing with the long term aim of achieving a knowledge driven WASH sector that delivers quality and sustainable services in Ghana. NLLAP meetings take place on the last Thursday of every month and opened to all interested parties. The discussions of each NLLAP meeting are summarized and shared with the wider WASH community. The topics of upcoming meetings are decided on by the RCN secretariat and a list of upcoming meetings can be found on the RCN website **www.washghana.net.**

If you are interested to propose a topic for a meeting please contact us on,
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