RCN Ghana
Resource Centre Network Ghana

No need to puzzle over differences in Wash data

Participants at the 6th National Level Learning Alliance were told not to get confused over differences in WASH data as those differences are bound to exist. What is necessary is rather for the sector to fill the various data gaps identified within each data set and between different data sets.

The sixth National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP) took place on Thursday 29th April 2010 on the theme, "The data puzzle in the WASH Sector in Ghana: Causes and Way forward". The platform hosted the Water and Sanitation Monitoring Platform (WSMP), which aimed to create awareness and understanding of the various data sets used in the sector in Ghana; why there are data disparities between different data sets and how they can and should be used. This communiqué is intended to share the issues brought up during the meeting with the wider WASH community. All presentations mentioned in this communiqué can be found online at www.ghana.watsan.net

The data puzzle in the WASH sector

According to the WSMP, who made a presentation on "the Data puzzle in Ghana's water and sanitation sector" during the meeting, much unnecessary confusion is caused in Ghana by the failure to understand that every data generation agency has a purpose for the kind of data it generates – and that because these purposes are different so too is the data produced.

A distinction was made between 'service provider data' and 'user data'. Examples of the former include data from the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) and Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL). As the name implies, provider data comes from the service providers themselves and are closely linked to monitoring of their service delivery infrastructure. That is, both GWCL and CWSA monitor the water delivery systems (be it hand pumps or household connection) and then make assumptions about the number of people using these services.

On the other hand, user data such as that collected by the Ghana Statistical Services - and used as the basis of the international WHO/UNICEF JMP coverage estimates is based on the type of service that users report they have access to. User data like this typically comes from sample based surveys that are carried out every few years.

Because of their different sources and reasons for being collected it is not possible to compare directly any of the main data sets. User and provider data are based on different definitions of

access and service level, indeed the two main provider data sets (GWCL and CWSA) are not directly comparable because of differences in how services are defined. Nonetheless, each of these different data sets is useful in serving the purpose for which it is generated and to a great extent that is what matters.

For instance, even though data from the Ghana Statistical Service is the basis for the WHO/UNICEF JMP figures and is used to monitor MDG progress for WASH, neither the CWSA nor the GWCL can plan effectively with it since it is not sufficiently detailed to help them assess access according to nationally agreed Ghanaian standards. On the other hand, data from CWSA and GWCL cannot be used to monitor MDG progress since they are provider-based and focussed on infrastructure delivery. They only estimate the actual access to the service provided by the infrastructure based on design populations using each type of service.

Causes of the data puzzle

According to the WSMP, the confusion stems from the attempt to mix nationally defined targets for service delivery with the internationally defined MDGs. So what happens is that we see those who monitor the UN MDG saying we are on target while local institutions insist we are off track - each of them supporting their claims with different data sets.

Participants were therefore advised to understand that there should be a clear distinction between the internationally agreed UN MDG targets on the one hand; and on the other, local targets, which are

set at the subsector level. Hence GWCL has a target for urban coverage of 85% by 2015, while CWSA also has its own target of 76% by 2015: both of these are based on own definitions of coverage and service level.

Discussions

While these explanations were welcomed by participants, it was felt that they did not go all the way to satisfying everyone present. For example, the user based figures provided by GSS were criticised as providing an unrealistically up-beat figure for coverage, mainly due to the fact that only data on type of service used is gathered and reported on, ignoring factors such as distance from facility, time used in obtaining service, sustainability of the service and in the case of water the amount of water obtained per head per day.

However, it was also discovered that CWSA themselves are unable to factor distance into access figures even though the National Community Water and Sanitation Programme (NCWSP) is supposed to measure distance as a major factor in determining access. This is basically due to the difficulty of clearly delineating the boundaries of (scattered) communities.

It was therefore proposed that all coverage statistics should endeavour to include the elements of distance, time, quantity and sustainability.   And that all coverage statistics should aim to include at least some data on actual use (not just relying on simple assumptions about numbers of user per water point).

The way forward

There was general agreement that stakeholders should concentrate primarily on local targets if that is what would help the country better in terms of provision of drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services to the people.

While accepting that some data is collected by different actors for different purposes, there was nonetheless a call for intensification of efforts in harmonizing and making widely known a minimum set of definitions so that at least actors can properly understand the data coming out of different agencies. There was also agreement on the urgent need to set up a sector Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system to support effective planning and decision-making.

Participants also proposed that for the sector to have accurate and more realistic coverage data for planning and administration purposes, there would be the need to advocate for a special survey on WASH preferably to be conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service. This survey should be able to cater for the gaps identified with each data type and serve as a more credible national source of user based information.

Finally, participants again proposed higher level discussions on the issues relating to the data puzzle and the need for a sector specific survey and suggested more involvement of development partners and government officials in the discourse.

In conclusion, the 6th national learning and sharing forum was quite successful as participants were impressed with the participatory approach in being educated and informed on the entire data challenges/puzzle in Ghana.

The NLLAP is a WASH sector multi stakeholder platform with the overall goal of improving sector learning and dialogue.   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 are hosted and facilitated by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN), and take place on the last Thursday of every month. This is open to all interested parties. The discussions of each NLLAP meeting are summarized and shared with the wider WASH community in the form of a communiqué after the meeting. 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.ghana.watsan.net.**

If you are interested to propose a topic for the platform, please contact us rcnghana@gmail.com