



## Learning from failure: lessons for the sanitation sector

Discussion Paper – UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the idea of learning from failure in the sanitation sector. The recent trend of 'admitting failure' in aid and development forces sanitation practitioners, researchers and policy-makers to ask if we can and should address failure more openly in order to improve our work. The ideas in this paper developed from discussions at a workshop on 'learning from failure' convened by the UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP) designed to kickstart this debate.

We first discuss the concept of failure itself and identify different approaches to learning from failure relating to sanitation. These include acknowledging past failures in order to learn and adapt, and planning for 'safe' future failures through deliberate experimentation and innovation. We also argue that a series of further steps are required: understanding relevant previous approaches to learning from failure in the sector; recognizing different types of failure; seeking different actors' perspectives on failure; and framing the debate about failure constructively rather than negatively.

In the second part of the paper we examine different practical examples of how actors in the sanitation sector have tried to learn from failure, to assess how this happened and what changes resulted. In the final section of the paper we conclude with suggestions for how individuals and organisations working in sanitation and international development more widely can learn from failure. We also propose the UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP) itself as one example of a 'safe space' in which people can meet to discuss and learn from failure.

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### Background to SanCoP

The UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP) is an initiative convened by BPD Water and Sanitation, the Water and Engineering Development Centre at Loughborough University (WEDC) and the International Water Association (IWA).

More information can be found at [www.iwawaterwiki.org/xwiki/bin/view/WorkGroup\\_SanCop/](http://www.iwawaterwiki.org/xwiki/bin/view/WorkGroup_SanCop/) or by contacting [sancop.uk@gmail.com](mailto:sancop.uk@gmail.com).

**The views in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent the views of any of the SanCoP convening organisations, their members or associates.**

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## 1. Introduction

### *The debate so far: ways of learning from failure*

'Admitting failure' appears to be a growing trend amongst international development organisations. The most vocal promoters of 'admitting failure' to date are Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB-Ca), who have created the AdmittingFailure.com initiative, publish an annual Failure Report, and set up the Fail Forward social enterprise to advise other organizations. In November 2012, the UK Sanitation Community of Practice (SanCoP) convened a workshop to start discussions about what this trend means for the sanitation sector, and how 'learning from failure' could improve the work of those working on sanitation issues.

The current 'admitting failure' initiatives focus on two key ways of using failure as a way of learning. The first of these is acknowledging past failures in order to learn from these and adapt and improve the approaches used. EWB-Ca suggests that this process requires a 'safe space' to enable these honest discussions about failure. These safe spaces include blameless post-mortems, Failfares and other workshops such as the one hosted by SanCop itself.

The second approach to learning from failure is to plan for future 'safe' failures in order to promote innovation through experimentation and trial-and-error – but in ways where the consequences of the errors are not harmful. The rationale for such a method is that in many cases it is not possible to know in advance which projects or methods will work. Under this approach, organisations working in international development, especially donors, could operate more like venture capitalists do in the private sector. For example, they could fund or implement a selection of innovative projects, accepting that perhaps eight or nine out of ten of these will fail. The anticipated end result would be that the future positive impact gained in learning from the approaches that do work will outweigh the costs of those that failed.

### *What else to think about: types of failure, different perspectives, framing the debate*

We welcome this debate about learning from failure in general, but suggest further issues which need to be considered to ensure this idea has genuine potential to help improve the sanitation sector's work, rather than being just a trend which rebrands old debates while skirting around more fundamental questions. This requires understanding how the sanitation sector has previously dealt with learning from failure, prior to the more recent specific 'admitting failure' initiatives. We address this point in more detail in the next section.

Our next key suggestion is to distinguish between different types of failure. In particular, we argue that it is important to consider the scale of failure, and whether the failure could (and should) in fact have been avoided. It is also crucial to consider if the failure is really due just to the immediate factors identified in the process of 'admitting failure', or if it in fact reflects wider challenges in the political economy of the sector context, or an original approach which was too narrow in focus.

For example, the factor of scale means being clear about whether the failure refers to a local-level project, a national programme or an international policy, and to what extent there were partial failures or successes within these. Most interventions, at any level, will involve some elements of both success and failure rather than being one or the other outright. The issue of whether the failure could actually have been predicted and therefore avoided involves critically assessing if the failure is just being labelled part of an approach of adaptation or innovation in hindsight, instead of acknowledging the possibility that additional research beforehand could have revealed the same lesson from other similar experiences. Finally, it is important to understand examples of 'admitting

failure' within broader issues of political economy: does talking about particular instances of failure help highlight wider questions for the sanitation sector to address, or does it distract attention from these? We must avoid the risk that 'learning from failure' remains within too narrow a perspective that might miss broader points.

Related to all these issues is the question of who gets to call something a failure (or not). Any example of failure is likely to involve multiple actors and perspectives. It is important to remember Robert Chambers' (1997) question "Whose reality counts?" 'Admitting failure' may be useful if it can be another way of helping promote the voice of the ultimate intended beneficiaries. However it is likely to be less effective if it is only implementing organisations who get to decide what is labelled a failure or not. In some cases, a project seen as successful in the eyes of the donor or implementer may have failed in the eyes of the intended beneficiaries (or vice versa). There may also be different opinions and levels of willingness to talk about failure within the same organisation. The reasons identified for a failure are also likely to be dependent on different viewpoints; establishing causality is often difficult and contested.

Finally, it is important to pay attention to the influence of the language we use. The idea of "admitting" failure may inhibit openness if it is associated too much with blame, and especially with sanctions (such as loss of funding from donors). Using the word "failure" may also be over-dramatic in some cases; acknowledging the politics, complexity and inherent tensions in most work on sanitation may be more useful than trying to label certain projects as failures.

Overall we argue that these different steps – understanding relevant previous approaches; recognizing different types of failure; seeking different actors' perspectives; framing the debate constructively – are vital if learning from failure is actually going to happen in either of the two key ways suggested in the current debate. As the anonymous humanitarian worker on the Tales from the Hood blog suggested in an online debate about failure: "admitting mistakes and changing practice based on what is learned from mistakes are not at all the same things. If admitting failure is to be more than an exercise in conspicuous organizational humility, it will be up to us to link acknowledgement of failure with positive change."

## **2. How the development and sanitation sectors have tried to learn from failure before**

With the emergence of initiatives that focus on the role 'admitting failure' plays in the development and sanitation sectors, it is important to review how these sectors have previously tried to learn from failure. This section draws on previous debates about the role of monitoring and evaluation in the two types of failure we identified in section 1, learning and adapting from past experiences, and approaches for promoting future adaptation and innovation towards successful outcomes.

### ***Monitoring and evaluation for learning from past failures***

We see three key challenges to using failure as a way of learning in typical practices of monitoring and evaluation. The first of these relates to the direction of accountability, and whether monitoring and evaluation is focused on compliance or learning. The second is the issue of timing, and whether typical M&E permits failures to be identified in sufficient time to enable approaches to change as a result. The third is the challenge of understanding complex processes and the causes of failures.

In response to the first challenge, there have long been debates about the importance of accountability downwards to beneficiaries. However, M&E still tends to be mostly about upwards

accountability to donors. This poses problems for learning from failure, if ‘admitting failure’ results in financial punishment for the organisation and personal or professional costs for individuals (Lindenberg and Bryant 2001). Smilie (1997) argues that donor evaluation processes must have some tolerance for failure if learning is to be encouraged, both by the implementing organisation and others. Relationships between recipient organisations and donors based solely on funding are likely to encourage hiding failure (Edwards 1997). Recent debates on the ‘results agenda’ (for example, the Big Push Forward initiative) highlight that this challenge still persists, and may be worsening given the focus on particular ways of quantifying impact. Furthermore, examples of failures which have been identified through M&E typically describe situations where the difference between the “before and after” scenario is zero, i.e. no positive impact occurred but no harm was caused. It may in fact be the reality in many cases that intended beneficiaries are worse off post-intervention, a finding that is even less likely to be admitted.

The second issue is that of timing and the scope for adaptation. Assuming monitoring takes place throughout the implementation of a project, it could ideally generate some learning to be fed back in order to adjust the approach taken as it proceeds. However, if as discussed above monitoring focuses on compliance, then the scope for contributing useful lessons to the overall approach (as opposed to just questions of whether activities are being carried out as planned) is limited. Of course, in many cases it may be difficult to identify failures while activities are still ongoing. This is why end-of-project evaluation is used. However, this encounters a different problem: the effect of many interventions cannot be observed until much later, but most evaluations take place immediately after the project is completed. The WASH sector is clearly aware of these challenges and there are ongoing debates about how best to monitor water, sanitation and hygiene services in the long-term. For example, Water for People and WaterAid have both committed to post-implementation monitoring of their interventions going back up to 10 years. These initiatives also relate to questions about where the responsibility lies for adapting if failure is identified, and the debates about sustainability checks, clauses and compacts.

The third challenge in addressing failure under existing M&E practices is that of identifying causality, attribution and mechanisms, especially as complex processes are concerned. The recent rise in the use of randomised controlled trials and other so-called “rigorous” impact evaluation techniques has been designed to counter the widespread practice of crude “before and after” comparisons (Pritchett et al. 2012). However, this does not help explain the detailed mechanisms underlying why an intervention succeeded or failed, which is likely to require far richer qualitative datasets as well.

### ***Promoting innovation and safe failures***

We now turn to the second way of using failure for learning that we introduced in Section One: planning for some safe failures as a way of experimenting, innovating and adapting towards solutions which are not known in advance. One way of promoting risk-taking and innovation is through the use of competitions, such as the Reinvent the Toilet initiative funded by the Gates Foundation, and the Sanitation Hackathons that have taken place worldwide with the support of the World Bank. These approaches implicitly promote the idea of ‘safe’ failures by encouraging multiple innovations at an experimental – often lab-based – stage before trying a few products out in real-life which seem to show more potential. However, these examples could also be criticised for starting from the flawed perspective of an over-technical focus: they risk prioritising the search for hardware ‘magic bullets’ rather than deeper engagement with the complex social issues concerned.

An argument could also be made that results-based financing approaches such as output-based aid are ways of promoting adaptation and experimentation, because they specify in advance the desired outputs of the programme but not the exact mechanisms used to achieve the results. The use of

results-based financing for sanitation is therefore an option to consider in situations where it is currently unclear in advance how best to use funds (Trémolet 2011). However, the application of RBF to the sanitation sector has been limited and results mixed to date (Trémolet and Evans 2010). Furthermore, there may be a conflict in results-based financing approaches with the idea of allowing 'safe' failures; RBF is designed not to reward failure!

### ***Summary of key issues to address***

This brief review of how existing practices in the sanitation sector deal with failure suggest that if 'admitting failure' is to help organisations learn and change, it must firstly overcome the challenge that M&E has faced of being used for compliance rather than learning. The potential of 'admitting failure' is that it emphasises and promotes tolerance for failure to try to address this problem. However, particular attention must also be paid to how failure actually leads to adaptation and over what timescale this can realistically happen, a second issue that M&E practices have historically struggled to address.

In the next section we discuss recent case studies of failure in sanitation to assess if the 'admitting failure' initiative and other examples of failures can help the sanitation sector overcome these challenges, and what limitations still remain. We also analyse the case studies to see if they are processes of learning from past failures or were specifically set up as planned 'safe' failures.

## **3. The state of current failure debates and their potential for improving practice**

In this section we analyse a selection of the publicly available case studies of failures in sanitation. Some of these are explicitly part of the recent 'admitting failure' trend and have been publicised as such. Others have been labelled as failures, but not directly as part of the 'admitting failure' movement. This selection is not intended to be a full representation of all instances of admitting failure, but does provide a range of examples from which we can draw useful analysis.

For each case study, we discuss the original aims and eventual failure that occurred, and how this fits into the different types of failure identified in Section One. This includes whether the case study was part of a specific approach for learning from failure, either as a process of acknowledging and adapting based on past failure, or as part of deliberate experiments to promote innovation by learning from 'safe' failures. It also involves considering the failures in light of the other issues discussed earlier: the scale of the failures, whether they could have been avoided, and how they fit into the surrounding political economy context. We also examine who identified each intervention as a failure and how this was publicised and shared, for example whether it was by one of the implementing organisations involved, the intended beneficiaries, or external evaluators or researchers. Most importantly, we assess the evidence for positive learning and changed practice resulting from each example of failure given.

Four examples are chosen, involving a range of scales and actors. The first two are NGO-led projects in Malawi: a community-led total sanitation project by EWB-Canada and a sanitation marketing initiative by Water for People. The third case study is the Erdos Eco-Town Project in Inner Mongolia, an urban ecosan project developed by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Dongsheng District Government. The final example is at the scale of a national programme rather than an individual project: the Government of India's rural Total Sanitation Campaign. The key elements of each of the four case studies are summarised in Table 1. Further analysis and discussion follows the table.

Table 1. Four case studies of admitting failure in the sanitation sector.

Project	Original aim and resulting failure	Reason(s) for failure	How the failure was identified and shared	Evidence of learning and change
<p><b>Transitioning Community-Led Total Sanitation administration and monitoring to local government</b></p> <p>EWB- Canada, Malawi</p>	<p>EWB-Ca and its local NGO partner designed a CLTS pilot project, hoping that local government could take over the administration and monitoring of CLTS after a two month handover period.</p> <p>Despite enthusiasm from local government staff, the local government budget was insufficient for the rewards for ODF status that communities expected to receive, the per diems that extension staff wanted, or the fuel needed for monitoring activities.</p>	<p>EWB-Ca admitted that they had “projectised” CLTS: injecting extra capacity and funds to make the pilot project work in an artificial short-term way, while creating expectations that the local government could not match in the long-term.</p>	<p>EWB-Ca recognised the failure as part of their “admitting failure” initiative and shared the example through workshops, Malawi’s ODF taskforce and a local newsletter to try to discourage other actors from over-funding aspects of CLTS.</p>	<p>EWB-Ca has recognised that the organisation should not make the same mistakes in future. However the wider challenge remains for all organisations of developing approaches which can be scaled-up with local government funds.</p>
<p><b>Promoting rural Sanitation Marketing through sanitation entrepreneurs</b></p> <p>Water for People, Malawi</p>	<p>The project aimed to create sustainable rural sanitation through market-based solutions. From 2008-2011, 70 sanitation entrepreneurs were trained and given a start-up package with latrine slab construction materials as seed capital.</p> <p>However although there was an uptake of 84% on slabs, 96% were not fully paid for, threatening the viability of the business model (Water for People Malawi 2012).</p>	<p>The market subsidies created community resistance to paying for slabs because people knew that masons had received free materials. There was also a history of other NGOs providing free slabs to households in the area.</p>	<p>Water for People identified the failure through a Rapid Market Assessment in 2011, and publicised it in its Malawi Annual Report, through the Admitting Failure website and others, linked to advocacy for reducing the use of sanitation subsidies in Malawi.</p>	<p>Water for People aims to shift from NGO subsidies to business development services, but the organisation acknowledges that the general problem of low consumer demand persists.</p>

Project	Original aim and resulting failure	Reason(s) for failure	How the failure was identified and shared	Evidence of learning and change
<p><b>Developing urban ecosan in the Erdos Eco-Town Project</b></p> <p>Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and Dongsheng District, Erdos, Inner Mongolia</p>	<p>The Erdos Eco-Town Project, completed in 2006, was the world's largest trial of urban ecosan. The project consisted of the installation of urine-diversion dry toilets (UDDTs) in 832 apartments in multi-storey buildings, together with a greywater treatment facility and an eco-station for waste composting.</p> <p>However, user complaints about bad odours and the inconvenience toilet emerged early in the project. Despite attempts to rectify the problems, users lost confidence and flush toilets replaced the UDDTs four years later.</p>	<p>Key problems were poor construction supervision, a failure to fully introduce residents to proper usage and maintenance, and missing links in the project's institutional arrangements. There was also a mismatch of expectations: the original idea was focused on R&amp;D but became more ambitious in its implementation aims.</p>	<p>Project partners identified the failure and have shared lessons through workshops, blogs and a book (Rosemarin et al. 2012), with the key message that failure of this project does not mean failure of urban ecosan in general.</p>	<p>Alterations were made during the project following complaints about smell, eventually resulting in flush toilets being installed instead. It is too early to say what longer-term changes may result in other projects as a result of this example.</p>
<p><b>Improving rural sanitation nationwide with the Total Sanitation Campaign</b></p> <p>Government of India, India</p>	<p>The Total Sanitation Campaign was designed as a community-led, demand-driven programme to address the rural sanitation crisis.</p> <p>However, policy failed to translate into practice and outcomes were poor. Census data showed 31% coverage in 2011 (up from 22% in 2001), far below the 68% reported by government (Gol 2012). Progress slowed and the number of rural households without latrines increased by 8.3 million in the decade.</p>	<p>The reasons behind the gap between policy and practice included low political priority, flawed monitoring, distorted accountability and career incentives, bureaucratic inertia and corruption. Therefore the failure was due to issues of political economy.</p>	<p>Independent studies identifying the failure include those by WaterAid (2008) and Hueso and Bell (forthcoming). The failure has also been acknowledged by the Minister.</p>	<p>The sanitation campaign has subsequently been modified to include a stronger focus on generating demand. However the changes do not address the key political economy challenges.</p>



We now analyse common issues emerging from the case studies, especially the scale of the failures, whether they could have been avoided, who was responsible for identifying the failures, and what evidence there is for subsequent learning and change.

### ***The scale of failure, and when is a 'pilot project' not really a pilot?***

As suggested when introducing the case studies, the first key point of discussion is the issue of scale, both of the actual examples of 'admitting failure' themselves and how each case study fits into its wider context. The first two examples we presented are small NGO-led projects, both of which were trying to think of how the approach could be scaled up and sustained, in one case by local government, in the other by the private sector. However, both interventions were constrained by the surrounding context, especially instances of other NGOs in the area providing greater subsidies, whether to CLTS celebrations or latrine construction.

Could (or should) these projects have been more aware of such wider challenges beforehand and done more to address them? After all, such issues are not unusual in the sector. For example, a study of the political economy of rural sanitation in Vietnam, designed to answer why innovative donor-led pilot projects were not scaled up by the government or others, displayed similar challenges (Harris et al. 2011). In the Vietnam case, donors did not plan for what the full recurrent costs of scaling up would be, in order to understand the real feasibility of government taking over when projects were not backed by additional NGO funds. A further reason – similar to one of the challenges to India's Total Sanitation Campaign – was that CLTS and sanitation marketing were seen as less attractive by government because of the lack of subsidies involved. This is related to the vested interests of politicians and bureaucrats, ranging from rent-seeking to political patronage, which are better protected if funds such as subsidies remain part of programmes.

These examples suggest that there is a danger in the 'admitting failure' trend of post-rationalising some failures as 'safe' innovative pilots which unfortunately did not scale up and become self-sustaining, even if some of the key barriers to scaling up could have been foreseen based on previous experience and – at least partially - addressed in advance. On the other hand, even if the challenges in the two examples from Malawi might have been predicted, the use of the case studies and emphasising them as failures does at least help feed into the debate in-country about how to tackle the wider issues that affected these projects.

The Erdos ecosan case study was also at the scale of an individual project, but is more justified in being framed as an innovative pilot because it was the world's largest urban ecosan project at the time. Although it was not designed as a potential 'safe' failure in the venture capitalist sense described earlier, the failure that emerged was 'safe' in the sense that user satisfaction was inadequate, but there were no adverse health impacts. Furthermore, adaptation by the implementers (to resolve the problem and eventually provide flush toilets instead) was slow, but at least the changes did happen and resources were available to do this. However, this case could also be considered a failure of the original guiding perspective (or paradigm, as Robert Chambers discusses): the failure was partly due to focusing too much on technology instead of engaging with the population in order to see what they really wanted and whether they were interested in ecosan.

The example of India's Total Sanitation Campaign clearly represents a very different kind of case study – instead of one pilot project we are talking about a nationwide programme in the second most populous country in the world. This obviously has huge implications for the process of 'admitting failure'. In each of the other case studies, the majority of the key stakeholders could all meet in one room to discuss the failure and possible ways forward. But as Hueso and Bell (forthcoming) point out, the scale of the TSC means that even if those setting policy at higher levels

- in this case the Minister responsible – have admitted the failure, the gap between policy and practice persists due to a clash with the interests of actors involved and the lack of political courage to address them.

### ***Identifying, publicising and learning from the failures***

The next issue concerns who identified and publicised the examples of failure, how this was done, and what learning and changes resulted. A key question, relating back to the issues of scale and politics discussed above, is whether the approaches to admitting failure distract attention from or draw attention to wider issues of political economy. That is to say, do the examples of admitting failure go beyond the small-scale to discuss deeper implications and challenges, and how the organisations involved might engage with these?

The first two case studies presented, from EWB-Canada and Water for People, have both been publicised by their organisations as part of the ‘admitting failure’ trend internationally, as well as through avenues in Malawi such as local workshops and newsletters. The blogger Marc Bellemare has argued that the current ways of using AdmittingFailure.com and publicising failure in annual reports such as this are predominantly for the purposes of NGO marketing, highlighting parallels with corporate social responsibility approaches by the private sector. There may be some short-term costs - especially for first-movers - in terms of loss of some donors, but these are outweighed by the longer-term publicity benefits. The EWB-Canada and Water for People examples of ‘admitting failure’ could be criticised on these grounds, although it is clear that in both cases the organisations have made efforts to feed the lessons into their work in Malawi, as well as presenting them as part of the ‘admitting failure’ trend internationally.

The Erdos Ecosan project has not specifically been identified as part of specific ‘admitting failure’ initiatives. However, it has been well-publicised through papers and a book describing the challenges (Rosemarin et al. 2012) and admitting that it was a failure because the UDDTs eventually had to be replaced by flush toilets. It remains to be seen what impact this may have on longer-term learning for ecosan projects elsewhere. Finally, as discussed above, the failure of India’s Total Sanitation Campaign was recognised by the Minister in charge, but because of the political nature of the challenge it is doubtful that significant positive changes will be forthcoming.

## **4. Conclusions and ways forward**

The trend of ‘admitting failure’ is seen by some as a transformative way for the international aid sector to improve its effectiveness, and by others as merely an irrelevant fad. In this paper we have analysed examples of ‘admitting failure’ in the sanitation sector and argue in favour of taking a position between these two extremes. While admitting failure is no magic bullet, we do believe it has some potential to facilitate discussion and learning. Any initiative which may help increase the humility, clarity and communication within the sanitation sector should not be immediately dismissed. However, we argue that certain key steps are needed to ensure that learning actually happens: recognizing different types of failure, seeking different actors’ perspectives, and framing the debate in a constructive manner.

Admitting failure is not likely to be simple. One stakeholder may have a very different view to another about whether a project was a failure, and how. Establishing causality and mechanisms of failure may be a time-consuming and data-intensive task. There is also the real risk of analysing superficial technical failures while continuing to ignore deeper underlying failures of narrow perspectives or political economy challenges which affect the entire sector. However, at least

getting some failures – even if a touch superficial - out in the open for discussion may help lead to a wider change in culture which sees a greater focus on learning from failure throughout the sector.

Some may argue that this is already happening in the sanitation sector and that we are well aware of our own failures. Even if this is so, we need to be more open about these failures and work out how they can feed into learning and change within our own organisations and others. Many mistakes are made and some are publicised, but unless we take the time to consider, understand and learn from them, these failures and admissions are not useful. Perhaps our focus going forward should be better communication about the inherent complexities and tensions in our work, greater flexibility to adapt within and beyond project cycles, increased use of 'safe failures' as ways of innovating, and more 'safe spaces' for promoting honest discussion and sharing. We hope that future SanCoP meetings can be one small way of providing such spaces for openness and learning.

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