



Horizontal learning: a new way to achieve sustainability

Horizontal Learning Program in Bangladesh

The Horizontal Learning Program (HLP) is a peer-to-peer learning initiative enabling local governments to identify, share, and replicate the good practices of their peers. This strengthens the accountability of local governments to their citizens. Local governments enjoy the freedom to prioritize the knowledge and skills they want to share as well as those they wish to acquire. This includes deciding what they want to learn, from whom, and how. The HLP is a tool for fostering collaborative networks as well as boosting confidence in governing bodies at the grassroots level. The program is based on the assumption that capacities already exist and that networking among peers around good practices can enable those capacities to be identified and replicated to guide policies. One of the key developments from appreciation-connection-adaptation/replication is a greater awareness of the benefits and behavioral change from the grassroots level.

The HLP was initiated in November 2007 as a one-year pilot program by the Local Government Division (LGD) of the Bangladesh Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives with support from six development partners (DPs). The HL process was designed by the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) of the World Bank. As other local governments heard about these exchanges and showed interest in participating, the LGD, with support from the WSP and other DPs, has formalized the program.

Today, the HLP in Bangladesh continues to be facilitated by the LGD with support from 32 DPs. By December 2012, the HLP had expanded from the original 66 Union Parishads (UPs) in six subdistricts to 383 UPs in 37 subdistricts in 24 districts, covering almost 10.2 million people. The HL process is now either being integrated or initiated in: national basic capacity building framework for UPs; community clinics under the Ministry of Health; community radio networks by the Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication; and primary education under the Ministry of Primary Education.

Expanding the HL process to IR Iran via the APO

Attracted by reports of the success of the HLP in Bangladesh, in 2012 the National Iranian Productivity Organization (NIPO) requested Technical Expert Services of the APO to replicate the efforts in IR Iran. Subsequently, the Network for Learning Good Practices was launched by the Rural Women's Affairs Bureau (RWAB), Ministry of Jihad-e-Agriculture (MJA), in November 2012. A four-day workshop was organized to discuss and design the HLP of the RWAB with support from the APO in collaboration with NIPO. The HLP started in three districts in IR Iran under the RWAB, with assistance from the MJA and NIPO.

HL initiative in India and plans for expansion

The Local Governance Initiative South Asia of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has supported the Resource and Support Centre for Development and Mahila Rajsatta Andolan in Maharashtra, India, to launch a similar HL process. It commenced in early 2013 among elected

women representatives in 25 districts of Maharashtra. Another process also started in December 2013 in the Kutch district of Gujarat. The Centre on Rural Development for Asian and the Pacific (CIRDAP) is also in dialogue with the Government of India for an HL initiative focusing on youth in the country. By forging HL links, CIRDAP is also planning to expand HL in its 15 member countries to create local platforms for south-south learning.

So far, HL efforts in Maharashtra have involved a women's health anemia campaign, village natural resource audits, making banking services available to women, education on welcoming the birth of girls, participatory water allocation schemes, schools for sugarcane cutters' children, a seed bank, and 22 other topics. The diversity of these schemes, all of which directly or indirectly benefit women and children, indicate that the HL process is sufficiently flexible and practical to apply in almost every field of community development.

Value added and limitations of HL

HL complements top-down capacity building by reinforcing the confidence of local practitioners collectively as teachers and learners build on the good practices of their peers. The replication of good practices encourages the reform of policies and rebuilding of institutions of governance from the bottom up. The key limitation of horizontal learning is that external agents cannot impose anything (that is, best practices are determined by peers and policies are formulated by the peer-to-peer collective).

Replication of the HL process

The HLP is considered to be an effective, relevant tool in helping communities to capitalize on their own expertise to devise solutions customized to their specific needs. Bangladesh was the pioneer in HL, with remarkable results. Countries like India (Maharashtra and Gujarat) and IR Iran have started their own HL programs with assistance from the HLP in Bangladesh, with support from DP agencies. Other countries such as Pakistan, the Philippines, Lao PDR, and Honduras are now consulting with HLP partners in Bangladesh to implement similar programs for their own target groups (for example, elected women representatives, local rural and urban government institutions, youth, etc.). The adaptations those other countries bring to the HL process will in turn help programs already in place to become even more relevant as knowledge and innovations accumulate.

By simply facilitating tacit knowledge-sharing and peer connections on a larger scale, the HLP has the potential to scale up good practices rapidly. This can be done across local government institutions, NGOs, the private sector, or any other organization wishing to address issues of efficiency and effectiveness. Apart from the direct development outcomes, through the replication of good local practices the HLP has the potential to build a groundswell movement for governance reform.

Sustainability of HL

One of the most important features of HLP is that participants allocate their

own resources for replicating good practices. If they lack funds, they tend to select low-cost options. This develops greater reactivity. In Bangladesh in the past five years, local governments have allocated more than US\$7 million to replicate 57 good practices. This is a major paradigm shift away from externally funded service improvement programs. The HLP therefore has vast potential to be applied, adopted, and replicated for the spread and sustainability of good practices in a wide range of contexts. 🌀



M. Eng. Santanu Lahiri is an Indian citizen with over 25 years of development experience in Asia. He currently serves as Senior Decentralization Specialist (International Consultant) for the WSP of the World Bank, while consulting for the APO and other organizations. His work focuses on decentralization approaches, institutional strengthening, capacity building (including HL), improving services, and learning institutionalization.