



USAID/E3 Water Communications and Knowledge Management (CKM) Project

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

[Darren Saywell on Community-Led Total Sanitation](#)

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Global Waters Radio: You are tuned in to Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the United States Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting-edge research from around the world.

This week on the podcast, Dr. Darren Saywell, Senior Director for Water, Sanitation and Health Practice (WASH) at Plan International. Over the past four years, they have partnered with the Water Institute at the University of North Carolina to conduct an in-depth analysis of community-led total sanitation, or CLTS. This work has taken the team to 10 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where they have sought out hard evidence proving CLTS is an effective means for achieving large-scale sanitation behavior change.

Dr. Saywell, to start things off, there are a lot of approaches out there for improving sanitation—why focus on CLTS?

Darren Saywell: Sure, so you know the project has as its primary focus an examination of the effectiveness of local actors, other than NGO staff, to drive and sustain behavior change in communities around the issues of open defecation and latrine coverage. It's a deliberate focus on CLTS as a methodology for several reasons.

I think the first of those is CLTS is an approach that is being adopted and adapted widely in sanitation behavior change across the world. As such, it has received a lot of attention but not a lot of critical review. And I think one of the things that the Gates Foundation wanted to do was to work with one of the prime implementers of CLTS, but to see how best we could do a critical review of what's working and not working, and to try to understand the reasons behind that.

I think that the second reason for that focus on CLTS has been because one of the things that we know about trying to reach the Sustainable Development Goals is that we need to look for facilitators for change or agents of change who are more

homegrown; i.e. they emerge within the community, or they are connected to the community. Rather than working traditionally through NGO staff or through government staff, we need to innovate, we need to find those local catalysts of change if we're really going to address the problem at the scale at which it is already happening. The Foundation really wanted to sort of examine CLTS' effectiveness working with us, but trying to innovate around local actors as the agents of change.

I think the last thing to say about the project, which was a departure for Plan, is that it was based on a very rigorous research design and implementation schedule, and that required us to work hand in the glove, so to speak, with the Water Institute at the University of North Carolina, and they were involved in helping to co-create that research design, in developing a robust methodology, in doing all of the data collection and data analysis based on the implementation work that we did. And I think that was important because it has given us some separation between ourselves, as an implementing organization with a large vested interest in CLTS, and the needs of the sector as a whole, which wants a stronger evidence base behind important programming approaches.

GWR: Right. Well Dr. Saywell, four years into this project, can you share with our listeners some of the key findings to date, and also maybe put them in context—how do you see these findings contributing more generally to the advancement of CLTS?

DS: Sure, I think there are several key findings here, and they have associated implications both in policy and in practice. I think there are five that I'll try to focus on.

So, the first is a positive message: the first is, CLTS works as a methodology. More generally, in a field that is really lacking rigor and data, I think that the work that we've been doing with the Gates Foundation and UNC shows evidence of the positive effects of CLTS and local actors on latrine coverage and on reducing open defecation rates. In Ghana, for instance, we saw a 19 percent reduction in open defecation rates in communities that where natural leaders led the process, as compared to those communities where we did a more conventional NGO staff-led process. That's a significant reduction of open defecation rates—a significant sign of success. Likewise, in Ethiopia, we saw similar outcomes—not as pronounced as in Ghana—where teachers led to something like a 13 percent reduction in open defecation rates in the communities where they led the process, as compared to our conventional approaches. So I think these are significant in terms of results from a programming perspective, but they are also our first in the sense that this is all very hard-headed data, it's all statistically significant, and that's really a first for the WASH sector. So my first message there is: CLTS works, and we have strong evidence for it, rather than just anecdotes.

The second message I would have is that the costs behind programming CLTS are completely misunderstood. And I think that for the first time, this study has identified and measured the relative costs of CLTS, distinguishing between the sort of backroom

programmatic costs and the frontline local costs for this as a methodology. And I think again that is based on 18 months of tracking of data that NGOs generally don't track.

I think that the third finding is that local actors—like natural leaders, teachers, and government staff—they are overburdened, but they have proven to be effective as catalysts of change. And the examples from Ghana and Ethiopia draw that out.

I think the last message is that while CLTS works, it generally operates more effectively under known conditions or, as we've been terming it between UNC and ourselves, within a "performance envelope." And that there are cost inefficiencies in applying that approach if you go beyond those preconditions.

And then I think that the last thing to say is that significant funds and resources for sanitation were successfully leveraged by those local actors, either at the community or local government level, and we have good examples of this sort of multiplier effect that has been achieved by using those local actors, both in terms of leveraging time or in leveraging hard cash, hard resources, which the community then invests in their own sanitation facilities.

GWR: And the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has been funding this work, has recently extended the project for another two years. Is that correct?

DS: That is right, and we will be shortly doing a series of national workshops in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ghana in order to essentially launch this second phase. And that second phase is going to do a little bit more data analysis, particularly around the sustainability of the outcomes both in Ghana and in Ethiopia.

But the other thing that it's going to do is to focus on the degree to which the findings that are relevant for each of those countries were actually taken up, and to what extent have those findings been used, and how can we measure that use in one way or another. So, has it flowed up into policy? Or is it leading to change in practice, either within Plan, on the ground, or within other implementing organizations? So there is going to be a deliberate tracking of use and uptake of the knowledge and the results that have been generated, and we will try to derive some lessons learned from that about how organizations like the Gates Foundation should incentivize knowledge use, and how organizations like Plan should be thinking about the application of that knowledge.

GWR: If you're interested in learning more about this research, you can find policy briefings, implementation guides, videos, and other materials at the website of the Water Institute at the University of North Carolina, or at www.planusa.org. And if you have any topics you'd like to see covered, contact us at waterteam@usaid.gov.

This is Global Waters Radio.