



‘Brilliant Mistakes’ in Sustainable Water Fund projects

A narrative-based pilot study

The Hague, 8 April 2019

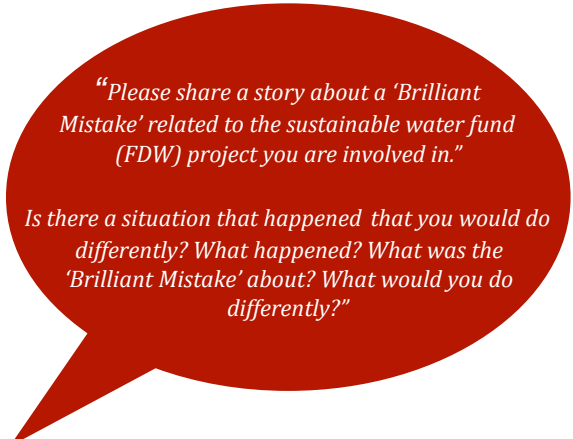
There is a wealth of lessons we can learn by sharing the mistakes we have made, the ways we have dealt with them, and by articulating the things we would have done differently in hindsight. In the complex world of today, learning from ‘Brilliant Mistakes’ can spark innovative solutions and new routes to knowledge generation.

To stimulate this, RVO in collaboration with Perspectivity, initiated a pilot to collect stories on ‘Brilliant Mistakes’ from people involved in Sustainable Water Fund (FDW) projects, i.e. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Integrated Water Management (IWM) or Water Efficiency projects. Eighteen respondents from various projects shared their brilliant mistake stories during this pilot and reflected on their experience.

From this experiment we may conclude that interesting themes emerged from the collected data, as is elaborated below. The pilot delivers promising results and would justify a more extensive study to strengthen the knowledge base supporting the emerging patterns. This document provides a brief analysis and interpretation of the stories shared. To read all the stories and view emerging patterns, please take a look at the [Sprockler interactive report](#)¹.

Can you share a story...

In total 18 respondents shared a story on a brilliant mistake. All respondents are involved in a FDW project, but come from very different backgrounds service providers, (local) government, NGOs and institutes. It is recommended to have a minimum of 50 respondents per stakeholder group to conclude more defining patterns, therefore this summary and the Sprockler interactive report demonstrate initial results and the first emerging patterns.



Occurrence of brilliant mistakes

A majority of respondents report that the kind of mistake that they are reporting happens rather frequently by others as well, and a good number of these mistakes has a significant impact on the project (see bubble plot on page 2). Hence, it might be concluded that **facilitating the shared learning from mistakes is a worthwhile effort** to continue after this pilot. The settings wherein the mistakes happen are far from simple, and by nature provide conditions for mistakes to happen. Hence, this provides ample opportunities for adaptive learning!

¹ Sprockler report: <https://visualizer.sprockler.com/en/open/Brilliantmistakes>

Emerging themes

Once an issue is described in more than one story, be it in different ways, it can be defined as an 'emerging theme'. Of course the data set for this pilot is limited, but the themes are nevertheless relevant in itself.

The eight themes that have emerged from the shared stories are highlighted below. These emerging themes are indicative for dynamics in complex settings. The findings below are typical challenges in complex environments. Complex settings are situations wherein multiple actors and factors influence the process simultaneously, which leads to high degrees of unpredictability regarding outcomes. This requires strong process design which the themes demonstrate.

Each emerging theme is complemented with one or more quotes from a story to give a small glimpse of the described mistake. For full accounts of stories the readers are referred to the interactive Sprockler report.

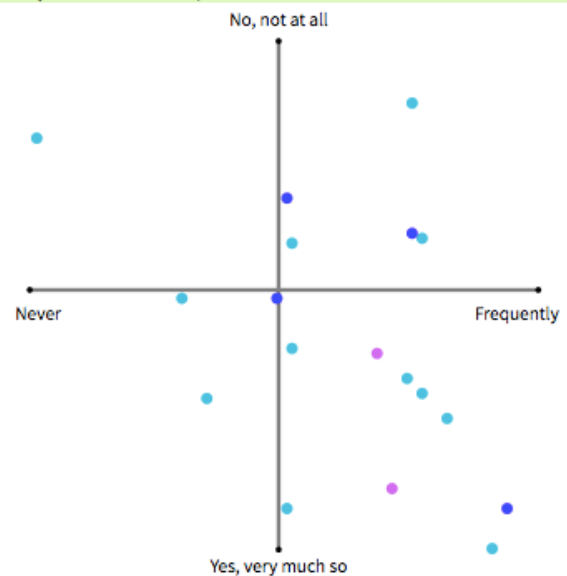
The recommendations are based on the analysis of both the mistakes, the mitigation of these mistakes during the project (in case this happened!) and the mentioned lessons learned.

1. Engage local communities: right from the start!

"If they (...hydrologists, engineers...) had relied on local knowledge or grassroots wisdom of his people, the women and children would not be going through this drudgery today."

"Consult the local people...their knowledge and wisdom where appropriate and whenever necessary. It's crucial for successful project implementation."

Seeing others making similar mistakes (x) and whether your mistake affected project implementation (...)



Bubble plot: seeing others making similar mistakes (x) and whether your mistake affected project implementation (y).

Light blue = NGO/knowledge institute

Dark blue = local authority/ government

Purple = supplier/business service provider

It is rather common practice to involve local communities in water projects. However, there is insufficient reliance on the wisdom they hold, specifically about local habits, concerns, practices and geographical details. Some of the stories demonstrate that local communities (especially women and children) have not always been involved, leading to a construction of a waterpump in a difficult to reach area for example. Getting their voices heard at an early stage (including their perspectives, concerns and ideas about relevant issues in a safe and respectful manner) and by organising participatory community-wide meetings, could be beneficial for the project design and implementation (tapping into local knowledge), as well as, overall process (enhancing local ownership).

2. Sense the urgency

"We must sensitise, train, organise and most important of all accompany the community in their processes so that they become part of them, respect them, apply them, conserve them, become part of their daily life and feel the importance of actions that do."

Several mistakes concern engagement or commitment of stakeholders. Some stories point out that the 'sense of urgency' was insufficiently checked. In such cases, stakeholders merely seem 'interested' (this different from feeling a real urgency) in the project. This has been indicated to be insufficient to make them strongly committed. Mistakes were mitigated when people or parties with a *real high* stake were involved. They have the greatest urgency, therefore the will to drastically change the situation.

A respondent mentioned that working with commercial well-established banks proved less effective than working with local banks that have direct links and commitments to local communities. In other words, it might be worth to consider your market segments carefully. Don't jump to obvious solutions and be certain about who feels the real urgency (rather than who expresses interest). Otherwise building the sense of urgency could be part of the project design.

3. Involve 'the whole system': facilitate 'whole systems' processes

"Segment the market you are targeting and identify suitable solutions for every segment."

"Private, NGO and government interests differ, which challenges partnership and sustainability of interventions"

Several stories point to the need for whole systems thinking, i.e. facilitating the dialogue between all parties that hold a stake in the outcomes. While stakeholders are usually consulted or actively participate, the struggles to have them all aboard and committed is evident in a number of cases. Government, business and NGOs have different -

sometimes competing - interests. These undermine the sustainability of implementing projects. Using methodologies to build shared visions and common ground among them can help creating a shared base among all key stakeholders prior to and during project implementation. I.e. innovative and well-proven participatory processes - such as Future Search to make this happen.

4. Adaptive learning: take nothing for granted!

"If I were to do this again, I would enquire more about - regional policies. Some of the best people got transferred immediately after the surveys. They have left with the institutional memory..."

"Don't assume you know the solution, but take your time to find out."

"I felt very disappointed knowing that I could have saved the situation by not 'assuming' that the IT Officers would equally know the importance of giving out the community list to the enumerators."

"Never copy/paste from one location (or project in general) to another, without being fully aware of the different context."

Various stories point to the 'being caught by surprise' phenomenon: successes in one context does not necessarily mean that this approach/solution works in a different setting. There are no blueprint solutions in the complex environments wherein [RVO.nl](#) supported projects are executed. By using contextualised sense-making methods (such as narrative based research) and intensive stakeholder engagement² (active stakeholder participation in designing implementation plans), this phenomenon can be mitigated.

In addition, clear and two-way communications help to enhance mutual understanding. Some stories point to instructions that were thought to be clear enough but weren't. The devil is in the detail and sending a message does not mean that it is also received.

5. Safe to fail: complete experimentation cycle before scaling up

“Different (reporting) requirements and timelines by RVO, World Bank and Government of Ghana eventually resulted in not being able to fully incorporate the results of the experiment in subsequent rounds of data collection before the end of the project.”

“...it became clear that we needed a pump with a higher capacity and a new control panel (..a huge deviation in the bill..). This could have been avoided had we done testing during the feasibility and design stage.”

Theme five connects to the previous theme: conduct ‘safe to fail’ experiments or pilots before scaling up. Ensure that the learning is maximised in the piloting stage, so that adaptation of implementation plans can happen. Some stories are about moving too quick to scale-up. This has been due to various reasons (need for technical experimentation, time pressure, donor requirements, lack of checking assumptions, skipping stakeholder engagement). Therefore, it could be argued from some of the stories that continuous learning should be explicitly part of intervention trajectory. Flexibility, short-cycled learning and adaptive implementation are key in complex settings.

6. Build trust and actively address feelings

Some stories point to stakeholders being resistant or

“Trust, transparency and accountability are the cornerstone of social enterprises.”

“We did not trust the area mechanics and designed a system to bypass them, but that ultimately failed..... Now we are implementing a transparent system that still places the Area mechanic in the lead of the processes to report and repair broken boreholes.... A positive outcome of this is a whopping 85% increase in sales during the 3rd and 4th years of the project compared to the first two years. The mistake was costly, but in the end, it has offered us a very useful lesson about the importance of placing trust when working with different partners.”

confused, like the area mechanics or the community members that felt bypassed during project design and implementation (see quotes). While many interventions might be well-designed from a technical and rational perspective, it is the question if enough space was given to the feelings of those affected by the project. Due to the changes, some people are going to win and others might lose or perceive to lose. Rational solutions are no guarantee for success. Trust building is instrumental and needs to be explicitly part of any intervention. This could be strengthened by including this in the design by hearing people’s voices and making active use of participatory dialogue methods (such as the aforementioned ‘future search’ or other large-scale interventions methods).



7. Consortium building

"... because the development sector continues to evolve...partnerships evolve, and change in direction and focus."

"...After a very intensive process of consortium development, co-creating a PPP intervention and writing a proposal, doing the business case etc., it feels exhausting to have partners step out after a final approval.... You need to know your partners well!.."

Several stories indicated that strong consortium partnerships are key for success (see tripole on the right). However, sometimes consortia are quickly established to win a tender, hence on pragmatic terms. Such ad-hoc constructions are risky, as parties might turn out not to be the best match that they need to be. If not, they might win a tender, but it could backfire during project implementation, when they jointly need to address wicked (complex) problems. The factor of consortium-building is underestimated and ought to be explicitly part of the process, so that mutual trust-building and understanding, exploring stakes and interests, and working towards solid commitments can happen.

8. Build expertise and balance the process

"The skills they have acquired have resulted in me seeing real quality systems (just imagine the amount of money saved!) as a result of the trainings and their skills being requested for in neighbouring countries too making their personal development one of the great achievements."

"... the tool became the central focus.... This however led to less focus on the other challenges such as the institutional dynamics, subtle conflicts and to make the data readily available for use. Once the tool and the protocols were finalised, the project was coming to a close We missed the opportunity to make it cheaper, to hand it over to the user group and simplify the process for accessing the data."



Tripole: respondents indicated which factor(s) played a key role in their mistake - resources, ownership/cooperation (engagement) and planning or organisation.

*Light blue = NGO/knowledge institute
Dark blue = local authority/ government
Purple = supplier/business service provider*

"Mistakes are part of the learning curve. We should embrace them and keep an open mind to learn from them."

Having expertise on board helps! Some mistakes happened because it has been assumed that the right decision was made or the right skills were present. However, in reality certain expertise was lacking, i.e. community-based expertise. Building extensive local capacity has been shown to be a great investment in several cases.

Ensure that expertise doesn't take over the process. Some stories indicated that tools (e.g. softwares) were too much in the driver's seat, while they needed to play a supporting role. It might be advised to clean up systems, procedures and mechanisms (e.g. through business process redesign), and have the tool be tailored accordingly.

Addressing brilliant mistakes

It seems positive that in most described cases the mistakes could be corrected, partly or completely. Yet this has been at the cost of time, money or people. Moreover, stories also demonstrate that the learning seems limited to the individual projects; Respondents say that they see similar mistakes frequently occurring elsewhere, which indicates that others might benefit from their “brilliant mistake” (and vice versa).

Respondents indicate that having the freedom to make mistakes, the encouragement to report them, and collaborating and learning from them are all important elements for capitalising brilliant mistakes (see tripole on the right). Cooperation to learn from and address mistakes has been especially emphasised by half of the respondents. This may point towards a need to structurally organise learning from mistakes.

Even though respondents indicate that they feel fairly free to make a mistake, it is uncertain whether this also applies to people that have not responded to this inquiry and might be worthy of further investigation.

To capitalise on our “Brilliant Mistakes”, what we need or the sector needs more of is (role):



Tripole: to capitalise on our mistakes the sector needs more of is: freedom to make mistakes, courage to report mistakes and cooperation to learn from and address mistakes.

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