What is PHAST?

**P**articipatory

**H**ygiene

**A**nd

**S**anitation

**T**ransformation

... is an innovative approach to promoting hygiene, sanitation and community management of water and sanitation facilities. It is an adaptation of the SARAR \(^1\) methodology of participatory learning, which builds on people’s innate ability to address and resolve their own problems. It aims to empower communities to manage their water and to control sanitation-related diseases, and it does so by promoting *health awareness and understanding* which, in turn, lead to environmental and behavioural improvements.

PHAST uses methods and materials that stimulate the participation of women, men and children in the development process. It relies heavily both on the training of extension workers and on the development of graphic materials (sets of which are called 'tools kits’) that are modified and adapted to reflect the actual cultural and physical characteristics of communities in a particular area. The production of PHAST materials therefore requires trained artists as well as trained extension workers.

---

\(^1\) SARAR stands for self-esteem, Associative strengths, Resourcefulness, Action-planning, and responsibility. It was developed during the 1970s and 1880s by Dr Lyra Srinivasan and colleagues for a variety of development purposes. The major work describing the methodology for the water and sanitation sector is entitled *Tools for Community Participation, A manual for Training Trainers in Participatory Techniques*. PROWESS/UNDP Technical series involving Women in Water and Sanitation, New York, 1990.
Health awareness and understanding - a basic premise

An underlying principle of the PHAST initiative is that no lasting change in people’s behaviour will occur without health awareness and understanding. People must believe that better hygiene and sanitation will lead to better health and better living.

It is often argued that people will not change their water, sanitation and hygiene behaviour as a result of health awareness. Some argue that people who have never heard that germs cause disease cannot understand the connection between their behaviour and subsequent illness. Even if they are taught, the argument goes, they will not care. It is said that such people have traditional beliefs about the causes of disease and that these will prevail no matter what is taught. Others argue that people may understand health messages but they will change only through a desire to acquire status, prestige, convenience or privacy, and that hygiene and sanitation should be promoted only on these bases.

The PHAST initiative challenges this view. Firstly, it does not deny that people have traditional beliefs about the causes of disease. Some of these may be consistent with modern scientific theory, some not. Others may be found to be valid if scientifically tested. People everywhere do rely on traditional beliefs to explain the causes of cures for diseases, but are not incapable of also understanding other explanations. Secondly, people may be persuaded to change a habit or build a facility for reasons other than health (such as status or privacy), but the idea of improved health may also be a motivation. The PHAST initiative recognizes that much of the great shift in health-related behaviour in the last century has been due to education and a recognition of the relationship between public and private sanitation facilities, behaviour and disease transmission routes. There is no reason to believe that people everywhere cannot acquire the same knowledge and act upon it. Thus PHAST has proceeded on the premise that people can understand and that behaviour will only meaningfully change and be sustained when people understand and believe in health concepts. Belief underlies all enduring behaviour change and, without it, changes soon fall back into old behaviour patterns. If this is the case, then why have health education messages largely failed to result in behaviour change? The practitioners of PHAST have observed that conventional health education messages are widely known and largely understood, but that these messages do not enable people to implement change. In fact, there are few messages on how to create a credit scheme, how to convince your husband that he must help carry more water to the home, or how to persuade your mother-in-law that you need to attend a planning meeting. The objective of PHAST is not only to teach hygiene and sanitation concepts (where needed) but, more importantly, to enable people to
overcome constraints to change. It aims to do this by involving all members of society – young and old, female and male, higher and lower status – in a participatory process involving: assessing their own knowledge base; investigating their own environmental situation; visualizing a future scenario; analysing constraints to change; planning for change; and finally implementing change.

Community members working together using a PHAST activity to stimulate discussion and the exchange of ideas

Health – related community development principles of PHAST

The main underlying health-related community development principles of PHAST are as follows:

- Communities can and should determine their own priorities for disease prevention.

- People within a community collectively possess an enormous depth and breadth of health-related experience and knowledge. Within most African (and developing world) communities there already exists a rich knowledge base that includes both traditional and modern wisdom.

- Communities are capable of arriving at a consensus regarding the hygiene behaviours and sanitation systems most appropriate to their specific ecological and cultural environment.

- When people understand why improved sanitation is to their advantage, they will act.

- All people, regardless of their educational backgrounds, are capable of understanding that faeces carry disease and can be harmful, and can
learn to trace and describe the faecal-oral route of this disease transmission within their own environment.

- There is a manageable set of barriers that can help to block this transmission. Communities can identify appropriate barriers, based on their own perception of effectiveness and according to local resources (cost).

These principles are derived from the collective experience of the authors and close colleagues who have worked with communities around the world, some using participatory methods for development and others carrying out anthropological studies.

**New principles on hygiene and sanitation promotion**

The PHAST initiative has also built on some of the more recently developed principles on how to promote sanitation more effectively. Some of these were expressed in WHO Informal Consultations held in 1992 and 1993, and have since been expressed and affirmed elsewhere. The promotional principles built into the PHAST methodology are as follows:

- Any sustainable improvement in hygiene and sanitation must be based on a new awareness of the complex interaction between behavioural and technological elements.

- The best way to achieve sustainable improvement is to take an incremental approach, starting with the existing situation in a community and building up a series of changes.

- Improvement in hygiene behaviour alone has been shown to have a positive health impact whereas improvement in sanitation facilities alone may not bring health benefits. Therefore, greater emphasis needs to be put on improving hygiene behaviour, but the ideal situation would be one where improvement in both behaviour and facilities can take place simultaneously.

**SARAR – the underlying methodology**

The PHAST initiative uses SARAR as its underlying participatory methodology. A basic principle of SARAR is the recognition and affirmation of people’s innate abilities. The system aims to help people recognize these talents within themselves and to use them. Two main principles are:

- People will solve their own problems best in a participatory group process.
- The group collectively will have enough information and experience to begin to address its own problems.

Other important principles of SARAR include:

**Principles on learning**

- Sustainable learning best takes place in a group context, which helps to produce a normative shift and, eventually, a change in behaviour that is sustainable because it is socially accepted or endorsed.

- An appropriate learning environment can provide opportunity for a group to make a collective review of existing information and experience, thereby arriving at a deeper level of understanding and a clear course of action.

- Concept-based learning is more effective in bringing about sustainable change than message-based teaching.

- Compared to the message-based approach, new concepts allow more new information to be assimilated and processed.

- The clustering of concepts provides the basis for a normative shift, which becomes a model for future behaviour.

- literacy, formal schooling and hygiene and sanitation messages are not prerequisites to making effective decisions.

---


Principles on decision-making

- The people closest to a problem are those best able to find the solution (this applies equally in programme and community contexts).

- Those who create decisions will be committed to following them through – hence sustainability.

- The community understands its own situation best. Their involvement will result in a higher level of effectiveness and sustainability than could be expected from externally imposed solutions.

- Communities are capable of accurately describing their present situation and problems and of visualizing possible future improvements.

- The more of their own material and financial resources people invest in change, the greater will be their commitment to following it through.

- Self-esteem is a prerequisite to decision-making and follow-through.

Principles on mechanisms for information exchange and discovery

- Information exchange and discovery raises individual and group self-confidence.

- When people know that they are responsible for finding a solution they start to demand information. Such demand opens the way for information exchange and dialogue.

- By helping people to learn from each other, communities come to recognize their own knowledge base.

- Through a creative learning approach based on active discovery, individuals can evaluate and change their own behaviour, and communities can choose and initiate their own development.

- Technical information is best provided in response to needs identified by the community, following its own process of problem identification and analysis. External intervention with technical information and support too early interrupts the process and has a negative effect.

- Applying SARAR at both community and institutional levels releases creative energy, which will help sustain programme momentum and stimulate thinking about new goals and aspirations.
**Key factors needed for effective participation**

The participatory process will work only if there exists: respect for people’s knowledge and ideas, with clear recognition of collective inputs; faith in the creative potential of people and in the synergy of the participatory process; a minimum of structure, a maximum of participation; loyalty to the group; and a commitment to creating opportunities for people to express themselves.

To sum up, SARAR is a growth-orientated (rather than a top-down, message-focused) approach. It is an individual-centred learning approach which systematically seeks to draw on deep-seated human capacities for self-motivated creative change and to channel these transformational forces through group processes.

In order to assure maximum success, these basic principles of empowerment should be applied consistently, fairly and *at all levels*. Where this does not happen there is a significant chance of not achieving the original objectives or a danger of having the process degenerate along the way. Thus, it is important to identify the factors that enhance effective participation, as well as to recognize and avoid those factors that inhibit it.

The PHAST initiative has been able to put these principles into operation at international, inter-country, national and community levels.