9th WEDC Conference: Sanitation and water for development in Africa: HARARE: 1983

COMMUNICATION SUPPORT IN SANITATION DEVELOPMENT

by E P W Cross

1. INTRODUCTION

"Listen you ... fools, it's a simple problem. Let us engineers solve it and come back with what we've been able to do ... But don't bring up these goddamn silly questions about politics and local psychology" (Ref 1).

The starting point of the paper is this quote from an exasperated fictional American water engineer struggling to mount a rural water supply project in South East Asia in the 1950's. The paper's premise is precisely the reverse to that of the Ugly American: local involvement in project planning and implementation, and considering the cultural context and the villagers' viewpoint are essential preconditions for success in the sector. Technological solutions and educational campaigns which neglect the user and community viewpoint court disaster. In the past the failure to consider this perspective has been one of the primary reasons for the poor performance of sectoral programmes in Africa. Examples of socially inappropriate programmes in the sector are spread the breadth of the continent, from the banks of the Nile to the squatter camps in the Cape Flats.

Two years into the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade the importance of the viewpoint is more widely recognised. The technical literature is now interspersed with pledges to social appropriateness, community participation, "bottom-up planning", the integration of "hardware" and "software" components, communications support, etc. Despite the development of this new language in public health planning, few African countries have transformed such concepts into practical proposals for programme design. The aim of this paper is to outline activities and methods for establishing socially sound sanitation programmes in Africa.

2. PRINCIPAL SOCIOLOGICAL ISSUES

The sociological issues that need to be addressed in sanitation development are a piecemeal collection of factors and are not derived from one coherent theory of social change. A useful distinction is that between cultural and social issues. Cultural factors refer to local understandings, values, beliefs, preferences and customs affecting technology adoption and usage, and the transmission of water- and excreta-related diseases. The social issues refer to the social organisation and local level management of the projects.

Cultural factors

Like other human activities, human excreta disposal is culture bound. The act of defecation is both a physiological process and a social fact, and preferences in defecation differ between social and cultural groups. Failure to take into consideration cultural preferences will lead to misuse and under-usage of latrines.

Some of these cultural preferences are obvious: most rural African communities do not cleanse themselves with water after defecation; the majority of the rural population (except in Southern Africa) prefer to squat; privacy of access is important; and the use of human faeces is culturally unacceptable in much of Africa. Other preferences are less obvious: communities may have preferred locations for latrines which need not necessarily agree with optimum technical choices; the use of latrines may be subject to avoidance rules and preferences in sharing arrangements which may, for example, prohibit sharing between social categories. Mundane local preferences in building styles and materials may also be important. Defecation training is moreover a fundamental activity in personality development and even a minor change in cultural habits may be difficult to achieve. The topic of human excreta disposal is highly sensitive in many cultures and in general it is a difficult area in which to attempt behavioural change.

There are essentially two basic approaches to ensure that sanitation technologies are culturally acceptable:

a. adapt local behaviour to technologies by health education;
b. adapt the technology to local preferences

Health education: In the past the problem has been approached with a simple deductive logic: if the technology fails then the fault must lie with the user. Despite the failure of unimaginative and paternalistic

health education programmes, clearly educative components are essential supplements in sanitation development. There is a lack of expressed demand for sanitation in comparison with other sectors and the health benefits of sanitation are not immediately apparent.

Socio-technical design: The other approach is to design sanitation technologies in the knowledge of local preferences. Since health education has at best a limited effect on behaviour change a socially sound technology is a vital component of sanitation development.

Social factors

Despite its importance cultural appropriateness in technical design constitutes the more manageable part of the spectrum of sociological problems in the sector. Like other developmental activities, sanitation development implies a change in systems of management and control, in other words a change in social organisation. The sociological consequences of a Government's benevolence in implementing a sanitation programme may be quite different from that expected. Whereas administrators may see the supply in terms of services and benefits it is also likely to be seen by rural communities in the context of local dynamics of prestige, authority and alliance. Even where project implementation does not directly require a change in the structure of local authority, it can add to the influence of those in control, and shift the balance of power in a community precipitating local resentments, political disputes, non contribution to communal projects, or even, in some instances, sabotage of projects. The principal sociological tasks in the sector are: to generate user enthusiasm for a project; to develop and sustain real community dialogue and support; to establish an effective system of project management; to ensure that maintenance is carried out; and that facilities remain in use in the long term.

3. COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT IN SANITATION DEVELOPMENT

How can administrators and sector planners concern themselves with these sociological issues?

One approach is for technical units implementing sanitation programmes to be complemented by units of communication support. Communication support activities have been defined as those concerned with sociological and educational aspects of sanitation development during programme planning and implementation. A communication support unit would ideally contain personnel with skills in design, implementation and analysis of sociological studies; design and implementation of promotional and educational programmes; community liaison and administration. The unit would service and support cadres of field workers. Principal communication support responsibilities are:

a. Pre-planning and pilot project assessment of socio-cultural data;
b. Socio-technical design;
c. Local level management design;
d. Planning and implementing sanitation promotion, education for construction, maintenance and use, and hygiene education;
e. Managing community participation;
f. Monitoring and evaluation.

The following paragraphs outline recommended methodologies employed in undertaking communication support activities for sanitation development.

Data Collection

Sociological data is generally necessary for the following aspects of programme design: general programme design; socio-technical design; local-level management design; and the design of promotional/educational programmes. General points to be considered in data collection are: limit the scope of data collection since the information is invariably needed rapidly and in a form that is easily digested by planning authorities; where possible integrate data collection into pilot implementation; alongside objective sociological measures the beneficiaries themselves should be brought into the data collection and planning process.

The socio-cultural data required in sanitation planning necessitates a variety of data gathering techniques. The following mix is recommended: field observation studies are important to investigate beyond normative behaviour to understand what people actually do as opposed to what they say they do; in-depth interviews of key informants is especially useful for gathering information on culturally sensitive issues; open-ended questionnaires can provide a mixture of quantitative and qualitative information in a short space of time; closed questionnaire surveys are easy to administer and can validate results over a large population, but careful design is necessary and questionnaires are generally poorly suited to the collection of attitudinal data; community meetings or workshops can be a means of involving a community in programme design as well as checking information obtained from other sources.

Promotion and Education

A promotional or educational component may be necessary to promote sanitation adoption; to explain methods of construction; to achieve effective local level project management and maintenance; to ensure usage; to improve hygiene or change behaviours transmitting water and excreta-related disease; or to educate regarding disease transmission.

A great range of media, materials and techniques are available for promotional and educational activities. Categories of approaches include mass media activities (radio, newspapers, cinema, wall-paintings and billboards, etc) community based activities (public meetings, group discussions, role-playing, home visits, etc) and a variety of other media and materials (including leaflets, slides, flannelboard, flip charts, models and exhibitions etc) (ref 2).

An effective promotional and educational component will combine several of these methods. Optimum combinations will differ according to circumstance. General considerations in planning a promotional or educational programme include the following points.

Mass media generally reach an audience wider than programme beneficiaries and are best used to pave the way for more specific approaches. Mass media are difficult to co-ordinate precisely with construction schedules, if used in the initial stages of programme development may create expectations which cannot be fulfilled, and are unlikely to effect specific behaviour changes, especially in diverse cultural environments where a single message will have limited relevance.

Community based approaches in contrast are more flexible and direct. Several techniques are available which assist extension workers in the field. Traditional methods of communications in specific cultures (such as songs, stories or drama) may also be adapted for sanitation development.

Keep plan simple Institutional arrangements in low cost sanitation development are often in a formative stage, are already spread across several departments and are unable to undertake a managerially complex task. Simpler educational strategies are more likely to work.

Timing of promotional activities needs careful integration with other programme components to achieve maximum impact without raising expectations which may not be met.

Focus on Action not Knowledge An initial focus on affecting action by whatever means, is likely to be more effective than teaching the medical model of health knowledge. The desire for comfort, privacy and status are far more potent forces in sanitation promotion than are knowledge of the transmission routes of excreta-related diseases.

Identify specific behavioural risks User education is most effective when a short list of specific behaviours are identified as target issues.

Use existing communication networks The design of culturally-specific promotional or educational component needs to be based on a detailed knowledge of local communication methods and networks. Where appropriate the desired behaviour change should be expressed within the context of local knowledge.

Monitoring

Monitoring is the regular collection and interpretation of data carried out by programme staff. The purpose of monitoring is not only the control of project activities but also the provision of information on the basis of which improvements can be made. Monitoring is an especially important though often neglected activity in communication support, since there is a need for regular information on the impact as well as the execution of project activities. While the workload is especially high in pilot stages of project implementation, the function continues through the life of a project, and is of particular importance in projects involving community participation, in which the technology is not fully developed, and which are undertaken in culturally diverse societies.

Generally speaking the following issues require monitoring by communications support staff: the social soundness of technical design; the effectiveness of promotional and educational activities; procedures in community liaison and project implementation; local-level project management; and latrine usage.

Two types of data need to be collected: information on project activities, such as staff movements, the scope of communications support activities etc, and information on community response to the project. Monitoring community response can become a complicated and time-consuming task without

careful planning. One method involves annual rapid appraisals, using a mix of data collection techniques to collect different types of information. These 'objective' mini-studies are interpreted alongside information gathered in a community data file recording minutes from community meetings, site visits etc.

4. CONCLUSION

The social, cultural and educational issues in sanitation development constitute a diverse field, multidisciplinary and often difficult to classify. Activities addressing these issues are defined as communications support. Communications support in sanitation development remains a neglected area and one which demands considerably more attention if the goals of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade are to be met.

The paper has outlined the role of communications support in sanitation development, defined project functions and suggested methods for carrying out some of these functions.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on the author's experience as a consultant sociologist advising on aspects of sanitation development in several African countries. The author wishes to acknowledge the financial and moral support of the Technology Advisory Group (TAG, implementing UNDP Project INT/81/ 047, "Development and Implementation of Low-cost Sanitation Investment Projects" and excecuted by the World Bank) and the International Reference Centre for Waste Disposal (IRCWD), Dübendorf. The data and opinions presented above were developed while working under the auspices of these organisations. Aspects of the paper have benefited from draft documents in preparation by other TAG consultants. The responsibility for the views presented here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of TAG or IRCWD.

6. REFERENCES

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