



## Challenges and prospects of community management in Ghana

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AFTER MANY YEARS of the failure of top down or centralized planning for development in Developing countries to make meaningful impact, the emphasis since the 1970s has shifted to decentralized, community-oriented or bottom-up oriented programmes. Community participation was consequently adopted as one of the key strategies of the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade which spanned the 1981 - 90 period (Chauhan, 1983). Later, it was realized that community participation in water programmes was being limited to mobilization of self-help labour or the organization of local groups to ratify decisions made by project planners outside the community. Since this narrow conception has very serious inherent limitations to successful implementation of rural water programmes, the emphasis was again shifted to community management in the early 1980s. Community management, as distinguished from community participation, is taken to mean that the beneficiaries of rural water supply and sanitation services have responsibility, authority and control over the development of such service, sustainability being the point of emphasis (Mc Commen et. al, 1990)

Although community management of rural water systems appears to hold the key to the success of such schemes, it is best with hydra-headed problems which this writer classifies into two broad groups - internal and external constraints. Internal constraints are constraints within the rural setting e.g. rural poverty, strong traditions, misplaced priorities and unfavourable settlement patterns. External constraints come from outside the rural communities and over which rural communities have little control e.g. time constraints, non-viability of private spare parts operators and sectoral development plans by External Support Agencies. (ESAs).

### Internal constraints

One of the basic constraints to successful implementation of community management of water programmes is the issue of rural poverty. Research reveals that about 70% of the poor people are found in the rural areas of Ghana who live in communities of less than 1,500. (Republic of Ghana & UNICEF, 1990). These are mostly small-scale subsistence farmers whose incomes are so low that it becomes difficult for them to operate and maintain water projects brought to their doorsteps e.g. handpumps on boreholes or hand-dug wells.

Another constraint is the traditional role that rural communities have been playing in the past with regard to

development projects; they have always been on the receiving end and have therefore become spectators of their own development. This approach with its long history in Ghana, makes it difficult for rural communities to accept the concept of community management particularly with respect to ownership and hence responsibility for the system. In other cases, some rural communities have had bitter experiences of misappropriation of public funds by locals in the few attempts made of some rural communities in southern Ghana who were given some boreholes fitted with handpumps, thought to be free which later on turned to huge debts in a Ghana - German Technical Assistance programme has left a sour taste in the mouths of rural folk, making it difficult for them to cooperate with outside agencies intending to undertake similar water projects. Rural communities have serious inhibitions when they have to adapt new strategy from outside.

There is also the issue of misplaced priorities by rural communities when they have had to make decisions for water supply services vis-a-vis other projects like electricity supply, schools, roads etc. It has even been found out that most rural citizens are more prepared to spend their limited resources on elaborate funerals and festivals than on water. This is a disincentive to community management of rural water supply.

Settlement patterns in parts of rural Ghana make it difficult for the successful implementations of community management of water systems. Issues of land availability, land acquisition and tenure arrangements offer opportunities for small ethnic groups of people to travel far and wide (away from their areas of origin) to settle somewhere for farming purposes. Since the settler farmers do not regard the farming areas as their home areas, they are not prepared to pay much attention to the development of such areas e.g.. ownership and management of water systems. In a recent survey done in two districts in southern Ghana, about 75% of 150 communities covered were found to be migrant farmers. In other cases, the nature of land-sharing results in dispersed or linear settlement patterns of clans and families on the 'foreign' lands making it difficult to exploit groundwater resources to them since they would end up as point sources which best serve nucleated settlements.

### External constraints

One of the most basic constraints of community management of water supply programmes is often the short time

made available to projects from External Support Agencies who fund the projects. The time is often too short to allow the beneficiaries to learn to take absolute responsibility, control and authority of their own system. This is also accentuated by the fact that, community management, being a new concept, has a number of grey areas with few very clear guidelines for projects (Livingstone & McPherson, 1993).

Another external constraint lies in the non-viability of private operators in the area of spare parts supply for handpumps. Until recently in Ghana, there were no less than six different handpumps on the 7,000 boreholes and hand-dug wells in the country owing to lack of standardization. This implies that a private operator is not likely to be interested in investing in the spare parts of few handpumps whose breakdown might not be frequent.

The attempts at improving the health of rural people has led to the formation recently of a number of committees at the community level, leading to conflicts. Village Health Committees (mooted by the Ministry of Health), Water and Sanitation Committees (suggested by the Ghana Water Sewerage Cooperation) School Health Committees (pursued by the Ministry of Education) almost all coexisting with officials of the Environmental Health Division also of the Ministry of Health have affected unity of purpose and co-operation needed at the local level for community management to take off. Sometimes the conflicts are with traditional authorities who may have been sidelined during the introduction of the scheme because they are regarded as blockheads, ignorant, illiterate and daft who do not know what is good for them. This disregard for traditional authority can sometimes spell the doom for the success of community management.

## Proposals

Since there is government backing for the promotion of community management of water systems in the country and the creation of a Community Water and Sanitation Division within the Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation, it would be ideal to strive towards standardization of handpumps in the country to make private operation of spare parts supply more viable, to negotiate for longer lives of externally - funded projects to enable rural com-

munities to be sufficiently animated and sensitized and for a change in attitude of ESAs towards rural dwellers as partners in development. There is need for co-ordination of the activities of health and water agencies at least at the regional and district levels to streamline issues before taking them to the rural communities to avoid conflicts at the local level.

With the recognition given to the crucial role of women as agents of change in the water sector, groups such as the National Council on Women and Development and the 31st December Women's Movement should be encouraged and assisted to be more active in the rural areas where women still lack the knowledge, awareness and power (in terms of resources) to enable them to take their rightful place as managers of water.

It is also suggested that the approach to community management of water supply be made gradual, flexible and adaptive such that in the process of execution, modifications can be made to suit the sociocultural milieu of the beneficiaries while maintaining the broad goals and objectives of community management.

With these the future of community management appears bright since even in its embryonic stages, issues of non-use and misuse of water systems appear to have gone down drastically.

## References

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