



Community management – lessons from Rwanda

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DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES continue to think of community management as the solution to the sustainability of rural water supplies despite the fact that successful examples are rare. Progress has been made, but it has been painfully slow. At the beginning of the Decade, communities were expected to manage new water supplies after only a few hours or days training. Nowadays many projects have 'community management' components which work with the community to train them to manage their water supply. But even so, there are very few rural water supplies which, two or three years after the departure of the development agency, are still running. The "soft" components of projects are given insufficient priority. Lessons learnt are insufficiently documented and insufficiently disseminated with the result that mistakes continue to be repeated and millions of aid dollars continue to be wasted. It is time to ask the question: Is community management a viable option. If so, what conditions are necessary for it to work? The aim of this paper is to share the experience of community management of rural water supply in Rwanda.

Community management in Rwanda

Rural water supplies in Rwanda are managed by water associations, as set out in a presidential decree, developed by a team of local and expatriate experts in the early 1980's. The decree sets out that each water point should have an elected committee of three people: a fee collector, a hygienist and a chairman. Each commune (around 50,000 people) has its own water association composed of all potable water users. Users are represented by the chairman of the water committees who form the "Committee" of the water association, which meets every quarter at commune level. From the committee are elected three representatives forming the "Board" of the water association (a president, a vice-president/secretary and a treasurer) who are responsible for the management of the water supplies. Water committee members are volunteers and the members of the Board receive a small sum of money for days worked to compensate for their loss of income.

Each water association have two water technicians paid by and responsible to the Board. They are equipped with an office, a stock of spare parts and a bicycle and have the arduous task of organising and carrying out the maintenance of around 100 water points (from gravity supplies and protected springs) over mountainous areas of over 100km². The technicians receive regular training,

but this depends on the commune and whether a development agency is present.

Water fees are paid annually and are the same for all households, whether they are served by protected springs or by gravity systems. Fees are calculated to enable maintenance but not replacement, as the latter would make the fees too expensive. Ability and willingness to pay are measured using focus group discussions. The annual water fee per household is equivalent to the cost of five bottles of local beer. Fees can be paid at any time of year to the collector who in turn has to take them to the treasurer at commune level. Water association accounts are audited by accountants from the commune authority.

For construction, during the one-party system, the beneficiaries contributed their labour once a week as part of the "required" communal development effort. They also helped decide the position of the water points. The commune authorities provided all local materials and their transport. Once a system is constructed, an official ceremony is held to hand the system over to the community. A fine or prison were the penalty for anyone who refused to contribute labour or did not pay water fees.

Lessons learnt

The rural water management policy had been designed under one-party rule, and under its authority, "community management" appeared to have a good chance of sustainability. People participated in water meetings, in construction and paid their water fees. But with the arrival of multi-party politics, the situation changed drastically. People no longer obeyed the commune authorities. Taxes stopped being paid and communal labour became a thing of the past. Water fee payment dropped from 80% to 10%. Hardly anyone came to meetings and many water committees ceased to function. It became obvious that most people did not feel a sense of ownership for the water supply or a responsibility to keep it going. On the contrary, they feel that they have done their bit and that the maintenance is the responsibility of the organisation which built the water supply, the government or God. Thus if a water point breaks down people return to their old polluted sources until it is repaired. People do not think that they themselves are capable of managing and maintaining the water supply without external help.

So why did the water association system break down once the people had free choice? Community management was taken very seriously in the rural water sector

and usually accounted for around 25% of project budgets. Communities participated in construction and in siting the water points. The technology is reliable and well appreciated. Water fees are low. Water association members and technicians are well trained and equipped and have proved over time that they are capable of managing and maintaining the systems. The beneficiaries show a good knowledge of the risks and costs associated with the use of polluted water.

An analysis of the situation was carried out by the CARE Water Project in cooperation with its local partners, representatives of the beneficiaries, staff of similar projects and the Ministry of Water. A series of discussions and workshops were held and evaluations carried out using focus group discussions with the beneficiaries. A separate study was carried out to find out the position of women regarding water supply as well as ways of facilitating their participation. The following conclusions were drawn:

- The reason behind the failure of community management of rural water supply in Rwanda must be that the beneficiaries had not been involved in decision making. Their participation in construction and in the siting of the water points had not been voluntary or self-motivated, despite their having agreed that they had a need for a potable water supply.
- Water supply projects were following their own objectives without regard for those of the beneficiaries. The aim of projects was to provide potable water in order to reduce disease, whereas the beneficiaries are interested in reducing the distance to the water source. (with the Rwandan hills and the dispersed habitat it was difficult to bring potable water closer than the original polluted sources.) As the objectives were not the same, projects then went about trying to change those of the beneficiaries using hygiene education and social marketing. However, as we know, this kind of change takes many years to achieve. The beneficiaries were this being asked to manage and pay for a service which did not meet their needs and whose benefits were not a priority to them. This was manifested once they were given free choice.
- Without the strong directorship of the one-party system, the notion of “community” no longer really existed. In Rwanda there is no history of even small groups of people pulling together towards a common aim, no strong institutions or cooperatives. People are very individualistic. Water associations were grouping together communities of around 50,000 people who had no existing ties and lived over a vast area. The whole system of community management was thus built on very shaky foundations and not on existing structures.
- The beneficiaries were being asked to manage the water supply but had no say in how they managed it. The water association structure was alien to them and

they did not feel that it represented their interests. Water committees were supposed to work on a voluntary basis, which given free choice, no-one was prepared to do. The board was composed of subsistence farmers with no education or training and their leadership was usually weak. They had to run an institution of over 50 water committees involving 150 people. Water fees were stolen at every level and this discouraged people from paying. No provision was made to facilitate the participation of women. Also, as the systems were relatively new, people had not seen the water technician do much work and wondered what all their money was being used for. The users of the protected springs were particularly unhappy to be paying the same amount of people with a “proper” water point.

- Construction of water systems with the community takes much longer and is considerably more expensive than if the project were to do it alone. It takes many hours of extension time to explain and organise participation. Construction is delayed (with overhead costs ticking away) whilst waiting for the community to become ready, and once they were ready, more time was lost when people failed to turn up. The productivity of community labour was extremely low, in addition to which, the work had to be corrected due to its poor quality. Much debate was held on this subject. Should projects do all the work in order to reduce costs? Would this decrease the sense of ownership of the beneficiaries?
- Simple encouragement of women to participate in the water supply programme is not enough and does not work. Work must be done to understand the obstacles that women face and how they may be overcome.

New approach

In response to the new sociopolitical situation, the CARE Water Project, its beneficiaries and local partners developed a new approach to community water supply. For new construction, the first step is for the community to the project with a request. A detailed investigation is then held with the community (based on focus group discussions) to discuss with them their reasons for wanting water, their proposition for its management and maintenance etc. If the project is convinced of their need and of their willingness and capability to manage and maintain the system, a detailed feasibility study is then carried out by the project on the various options. Capital and maintenance costs of each option are explained in detail to the community. Once the community decides on a system, an agreement setting out responsibilities is signed by all partners (representatives of the community, CARE, the local authority and the Ministry of Water). The project provides all non-local materials, technical assistance and training. The local authority provides local materials and the Ministry would be responsible for training and super-

vision and for arranging legal aspects. The community has to raise an initial lump sum equivalent to the annual water fee per household and no work is started until the money is collected. The community also has to provide all labour within their sector.

The management of water supplies was also to be revolutionised. A pilot study was undertaken to test a new approach where the users themselves would decide how they wished to manage their water point. The users of each water point would be responsible for deciding how they would manage it. The Water Association would lease the water point for an annual sum. It would be up to the users to decide how this sum was to be raised and from whom. A representative from each water point would, as before form part of the water association committee, from which would be elected the board. It would be up to the users to decide how they would be elected the board. It would be up to the users to decide how they would be remunerated. Water technicians would initially continue to be payed by the water association. If the users at a certain water point did not want to take responsibility for it then it would be closed.

All meetings were held in duplicate - for men and women separately. Women's meetings were held at a local level at a time when women were free. Children were welcomed. Jobs were offered to women on the

construction sites and female water technicians were trained. Work was beginning with the community to investigate possibilities of rearranging the water association structure to make participation by women more feasible.

Conclusion

The Rwandan experience shows that success of community management in guaranteeing sustainability should not be taken for granted, even when it is given priority.

The success of community management of water supplies depends on whether it meets a felt need and whether this need is such a priority that the people are prepared to manage it and pay for it. Hygiene education and social marketing during the life of a project can not be relied on to create a need and a willingness to manage that is not already there. The community must be involved in all decision making from the start. The opinions of the community must be treated with the utmost respect, even when they differ from those of the "experts". They must be allowed to chose how to organise construction and management of the water supply. In-depth participatory research must also be done to find out the problems which women face in participating and how these may be overcome.