



Partnership changes in rural water supply

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IF THE ESTIMATED one billion people in developing countries who lack access to a safe and reliable water supply are to be provided with systems that they themselves have the capacity to manage by the year 2000 then the issue of partnership will be a crucial one in the years to come.

Partnerships in rural water supply are not new as providers of improved water supplies have tried to form some sort of partnership with beneficiaries since colonial times. But the nature of these partnership arrangements have changed and evolved over the years and as communities are not static but are in a continuing process of change, partnerships will also be subject to evolution as the new millennium approaches.

This paper will examine the ways in which partnerships have changed over the last 20 years or so with particular reference to rural water supply schemes undertaken by governments using external support.

What is partnership?

First, it is helpful to define what we mean by partnership. It can be defined as a situation where two groups join together in a working relationship to share resources and responsibilities on an equitable and sustainable basis, so that each party benefits positively from the arrangement.

Reasons for partnerships

There are many reasons for establishing partnerships when undertaking rural water supply schemes. Where partnerships have been successfully formed, the following benefits have been noted:

- Water systems have been more sustainable.
- Both sides, beneficiaries and providers, understand each others roles and responsibilities better.
- Each side assists the other in achieving project objectives.
- One sides' areas of strength are often the other sides' areas of weakness so an effective partnership leads to a strengthening of each of the partners.

Who are the partners?

There are many players in the field of rural water supply and each can enter into some sort of partnership, be it formal or informal, with one or more of the others. The usual partnership is between the provider (government department or NGO) and the community. But there are also partnerships between NGOs and government depart-

ments, between government departments and the private sector and between user groups and private maintenance technicians.

Partnership criteria

For a partnership to work, certain criteria need to be fulfilled:

- Both sides must be willing to enter into a partnership.
- Both sides must trust one another and be willing to work together in a spirit of cooperation.
- Both sides must understand the advantages and disadvantages of a partnership.
- There should be a written, legally binding partnership document signed by both sides.
- Neither side should dominate the other in implementing the agreement.

Government-community partnerships

In order to illustrate how partnerships evolve over time, specific examples from Tanzania and Ethiopia where the author has had first hand experience will now be discussed.

One of the largest bilateral rural water supply projects in Tanzania is the DANIDA-Maji Water Project which started in the regions of Iringa, Mbeya and Ruvuma in 1979. Since then 379 villages have been served by gravity and handpump systems benefiting approximately 770,000 people, although the design capacity is for 1.2 million.

When the schemes were built the project signed agreements with the various Village Governments which spelled out each sides' roles and responsibilities in the construction and management of the schemes. On completion, the schemes were handed over to the communities so that they could manage them themselves.

During construction Scheme Attendants were trained to maintain the systems and Village Water Committees were formed to look after the management of the schemes.

In the Third Phase of the project, a Village Follow Up Program was initiated to monitor community management and assist VWCs to run their systems efficiently.

The field staff who run the VFUP were drawn from the Department of Community Development.

Although some systems are working well, a recent evaluation has shown that the management of a significant number of schemes has fallen short of expectations. (Reidmiller 1996).

Killer assumptions

The project made some basic assumptions when designing the Third Phase which have not been sustained in practice. These assumptions concerned the link between the project and the communities. The basis of this all-important link was a partnership arrangement between the project on the one hand and Village Governments on the other. One of these assumptions was that Village Governments and Village Water Committees would be democratically elected representatives of the village community who would sustainably manage operation and maintenance for the common good, particularly financial management.

Another assumption was that civil servants working for the Department of Community Development would be available in sufficient numbers and that they would be committed grassroot level workers, living with villagers and sharing their lot.

However, it has been found that Village Governments are not democratically elected by their constituents and further more they are not accountable to the water users for the water funds that villagers have to pay for the use of the systems. Village Governments are in fact the lowest rung of the state machinery so members tend to have to be members of the ruling party (CCM). Villagers had no real choice when it came to voting for candidates to represent them on Village Governments. Most of the Village Water Committee members were not elected either, but rather appointed by the VGs.

This has led to a situation whereby the peoples' representatives are by no means accountable to the water users. This has in turn led to a breakdown in the management system in that people are fed up with paying their contribution to the Water Fund because they have come to see that the money is not used for what it was intended i.e. to repair the water system. In many cases the funds have been siphoned off either into the government coffers or individuals pockets.

This is an example of a partnership which looked good on paper but has proved not as effective in practice because wrong assumptions were made.

The other assumption, that Ward Facilitators working for the Department of Community Development would be available in sufficient numbers and would be willing to live and work at grass roots level helping VWCs to better manage the schemes, has also proved to be a false assumption. Here, some Ward Facilitators have been lured away to work for other donors by higher allowances/per diems.

They also failed to blow the whistle on corrupt officials in VGs and VWCs for various reasons. This is another example of how the partnership between the community and the project broke down.

Solutions to partnership problems

The project has learned from these shortcomings. Water users too have adapted their own strategy and have in some cases established informal partnerships either with project

trained Scheme Attendants or with private fundis to keep their water systems working.

The project is now encouraging the formation of informal Water User Groups around water points who will and already are managing the maintenance of the water point. In effect, the official government structures have been bypassed. When the system fails, the WUG organizes a collection of money to buy needed spare parts. The local Scheme Attendant is engaged to go and buy the parts and carry out the necessary repair, often assisted by consumers. In this way, because the group is very localized and elected by the community who use the water point, there is greater accountability and less room for corrupt practices. Money is not kept in a bank account where it could be misappropriated, but is only collected when the need arises.

Although there is no formal written agreement, this sort of partnership arrangement is working effectively in some communities.

Larger schemes

For larger gravity schemes like the Isimani Scheme which serves 22 villages in Iringa Region with an 80km transmission line, the project had a different approach. This scheme has had management problems in the past as the Group Scheme Committee and at least some of the VWCs were not functioning. The project has been reorganizing this scheme to come up with more workable partnership arrangement. The reorganization involved giving water users certain options for how the system should be managed. These included forming: a Limited Company; a Sole Corporation; a Cooperative Society or a Water Users Association.

After a series of consultations in which the pros and cons of each option were discussed, the last option was chosen and the registration of a Water Users Association is now underway. A Manual on the Methodology of Group Scheme Reorganization is now available (Gwimile, 1996).

The Tanzanian Government has recognized the need to give more power to water users in rural areas by amending the Water Policy: "to allow large schemes to be handed over to beneficiaries to be operated through legally recognized institutions which would be formed with the beneficiaries consent." (GoT 1995).

Ownership

The success of government-community partnerships often boils down to who actually owns the systems. In Ethiopia the Ministry of Water Resources Guidelines says that upon completion rural water systems are to be handed over to the community. But there is no legal process for this to happen. In effect the government still maintains control of the systems. Although the government is promoting privatization in many sectors of the economy including that of water supply, in practice it is still illegal for a private operator to repair a government-built water system. But

informally some communities, for example in the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Regional State, are calling on private individuals to repair their systems after the government water agency has failed to come to do the job in time.

There will have to be further developments in the legal system in many African countries to accommodate the needs of a rapidly expanding civil society and to allow for the formation of more demand-driven management structures.

One example is the East Kilimanjaro Water Supply project in Tanzania which has established a private company, Kiliwater, which sells shares to householders and is controlled by a Board of Directors formed by representatives of users and the District Water Engineers office.

Another problem is that although there may be a Water Policy on paper, it is often not well known in the districts, from local government officials down to consumers. Innovative partnership arrangements may well be sanctioned at central government level, but down at the grassroots, the old policies of state control are still being promoted. This may be through ignorance or because local government officials are benefiting from outdated policies.

Nowadays most project documents contain lots of rhetoric about community management and demand driven approaches. But still there is a reluctance to cede power or ownership to the users; to come up with innovative partnership arrangements. This is because donors still want to be in the driving seat. But as we approach the next millennium this paternalistic approach will have to change if the millions of people on the planet who are still without safe water are to enjoy that most basic of human needs; a safe, sustainable water supply.

References

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