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SANITATION AND WATER FOR ALL

Mainstreaming gender in rural water supply

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IN THE 1990S the Dublin-Rio principles have emphasized the need a) to manage water at the lowest appropriate level and b) involve women as managers in order to achieve sustainable water resource management. Throughout the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, many development agencies carrying out water supply and sanitation projects have initiated programs to involve women users more efficiently. In Sri Lanka, mainly in the rural sector these donor-initiated programs have had a long term, sustainable impact on enhancing efficiency in O&M through supporting gender participation and influenced formulation of national policy on community participation.

Background

The majority of Sri Lankans live in the rural sector (80 per cent) The available sources of rural water supply are rivers, streams and springs, dug wells and irrigation reservoirs; later with rural water sector projects, hand pumps, boreholes and gravity schemes were provided. While some of these sources are privately owned by more affluent families, the majority poor make use of public wells and hand pumps which are sometimes built by the state, donor projects or local government authorities called Pradeshiya Sabhas (PSs). Due to the interventions of the Water Decade, the rural sector is now seen as having 49 per cent coverage (Wardrop, 1997).

Major developments in community participation in rural water supply and sanitation sector sources took place in the eighties by the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) of Sri Lanka with donor assisted projects - in selected districts of Matale, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura districts with DANIDA, in Kandy with FINNIDA and Kurunegala with GTZ. These initiatives focussed on low cost technologies such as hand pumps and piped water supply schemes involving community and PS participation. The collective impact of participatory strategies fostered by DANIDA, FINNIDA and GTZ projects was especially acknowledged by the NWSDB for its significant contribution though other donors e.g. UNICEF too had worked in this sector. Though these interventions have had a wide, strategic impact nationally this paper confines itself to observations of gender sensitive interventions in the NWSDB Central Region where these projects were initially experimented with and continue to be modified according to circumstances (National Water Supply & Drainage Board).

In rural Sri Lanka there was a long standing tradition of community participation in maintenance of common property. Led by the traditional leaders of the community the water supply sources were cleaned and maintained regularly. With Independence the role played by village headmen went to paid, transferable government servants. The influence of the traditional community leadership waned and gradually the community's sense of ownership of common assets such as the well, the bathing place, the irrigation tank/anicut and the paddy fields declined. The community now looked to the state and elected leaders to provide those services which were hitherto looked after by the community itself and dependency on the state services became established. Community services were yet carried out by Shramadana (Donations of Labour) campaigns usually spearheaded by NGOs and CBOs. But it became increasingly difficult to mobilize communities.

Gender participation in the rural sector is governed by traditional norms which are not static but rather dynamic evolving and changing, impacted upon by modernization and high literacy levels in post Independence Sri Lanka. Participation of women in community level development activities varies according to sector; it is extremely high in the savings and credit as compared to the water sector. It is higher in the water supply sector than in irrigation.

In the rural water sector, the traditional role of manager and provider of household water falls on women for whom fetching water accounts for a sizeable time slot of household tasks. However where longer distances are traversed in search of water there is an increasing tendency of men to partially take on the role of water carriers usually with a bicycle, hand tractor or scooter with trailer attachment. There is less community criticism attached as gender norms are being circumvented due to necessity and increased modernization.

Gender in community water supply management

Early projects involving provision of water through hand pumps failed to build in appropriate measures for O&M. Some attempts were made to handover the hand pumps to local authorities who lacked the financial and technical capacity to carry out this task satisfactorily. The WSS projects in the NWSDB Central Region experimented with differing modes of stakeholder participation necessitating a community - agency interaction. Community participation for O&M for both standposts and hand pumps was

institutionalized through the setting up of Consumer Societies (CSs) registered with the NWSDB. The Water Decade also saw major institutional changes in the NWSDB. An USAID sponsored Institutional Development Project led to the regionalization of the agency with the setting up of Regional Service Centres with increased autonomy (Jayasiriwardene and Shanthasiri, 1996). In response to donor requests the NWSDB also recruited sociologists to strengthen the community-agency interface in the O&M programs. These two factors regional autonomy and the means of building up a community interaction, are seen as having a positive influence on facilitating gender participation.

The institutionalization of community participation in O&M through CSs was therefore not easy operationalize for the community mobilizers of the projects. Provision of water was seen as a duty of the state; the access to domestic water supplied by the standposts and hand pumps was a citizen's right. In many instances when the CSs were first initiated the level of community participation was poor. O&M was seen as the duty of the agency or the local authorities. Many CSs became dysfunctional in mobilizing the community in collecting the O&M fees; AGMs were not held and there was no change of office bearers; the CSs became dominated by the village elite and the marginalized poverty and low caste groups found problems of access to reliable sources of water; many male caretakers trained in maintenance either failed to carry out their work or left the community. Many wells faced problems of maintenance and families had to faced difficulties in obtaining clean water.

Gender participation in the O&M program derived from the interest of the NWSDB and the donor agencies in fostering community participation. As it became apparent that the community O&M sector needed rethinking, the importance of involving women first as users and then as managers and address their needs were increasingly recognized the projects. Women were targeted in awareness sessions by the community mobilizers, sometimes in exclusive women only groups where there were cultural constraints in attending joint meetings. They were encouraged to join, attend and increasingly take up office in the CSs; now agency personnel try to ensure 50 per cent participation by women in the CSs. They were also in some instances trained as hand pump caretakers. Pioneered by a Sri Lankan NGO, later emulated by the projects they also received technical training in maintenance, hitherto a non-traditional area of skills training for women. As the young educated women thus trained tended to leave the community after marriage, the older married women settled in the community were trained to take their place (Athukorala, 1996).

At present there is a high level of participation in the Central Region of women as caretakers of hand pumps.

Gender analysis of hand pump caretakers in Central Region

District	Total	Male	Female
Kandy	2381	1050	1331
Matale	1625	900	725
Nuwaraeliya	25*	16	14

- some hand pumps have not been handed over; others have dual caretakers (source: Central Region Support Centre, NWSDB)

In planning new water supply schemes the agency found it useful to hand over tasks to women in the community as they had a greater incentive to ensure convenient and reliable water supply; they were involved in recording flow measurements for feasibility studies. At the construction of piped water supply scheme, where the community is supposed to provide all labour for standpost construction, women provided the bulk of volunteer labour for excavations and construction. In selection of locations for standposts and hand pumps, the agency made it a point of consulting with the women as it was seen that men were not necessarily the sole authority or the most appropriate source of information (Jayasiriwardene and Shanthasiri, 1998).

It was seen that the women showed, in spite of their greater involvement in domestic work and often in productive labour, a willingness to contribute time and labour and bear the transactional costs as they have to take on final responsibility in order to ensure reliable supply. It was also seen that for reasons which are not clear women had more success in community mobilization for O&M though it has been attributed to better networking skills.

Conclusions

The Sri Lankan experience provides an interesting case study of a dynamic process leading to mainstreaming gender to increase community capacity in O&M and thereby facilitate reliability of supplies. In this process the following factors may be observed.

Strengths

A policy of building on available strengths. a high level of literacy, a previously strong tradition of community service, gender based responsibility for ensuring adequate supplies of clean water and socially compatible interventions which worked with and recognition of culture-bound norms were used to enhance community participation, efficient O&M as well as improved access to the marginalized groups. The parallel development of policy changes in the

agency are seen as having provided the enabling environment for these processes to be tested and institutionalized. The importance of the agency willingness to embark on a learning process and switch from a wholly technocentric view to a more community centered vision.

Opportunities

The management structure changes in the agency and the strong donor emphasis on community managed systems and involvement of women provided a window of opportunity to strengthen the O&M program. As the agency lost its narrowly technocratic vision and became aware of the social realities of its environment.

Imperatives

The female headed households are seen to have escalated dramatically in the 90's and was estimated in 1994 to have reached 21.4 per cent from 18.8 in 1992 (Department of Census and Statistics, 1995). The current percentage of defacto and dejure female headed households may be more. When about a quarter of the population is seen as affected there is a strong need to move away from gender neutral systems to gender sensitive interventions.

Weaknesses

Positive discrimination in gender staffing to encourage involvement of women in agency management especially at the levels which interact with communities is indicated. The present lack of systematically collected gender disaggregated data makes it difficult to analyze the impact of the gender sensitive interventions. The maintenance of such a data base would help the agency in monitoring and evaluation is strongly indicated. Agencies must also recognize that poor women who most often are users of community sources are already overburdened with work. Lastly gender-based analysis should not be seen as an add-on but needs be integrated at design stage of new projects, based on the principle that men and women have differential use, perceptions and access to water.

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