



DWWDA: From water fetching towards managing

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DWWDA IS AN acronym for Dalocha Women Water Development Association. It is the body in charge of managing a huge water project, which supplies water to a population of above 67,000 people, in Dalocha Wereda, Guraghe zone. The water project is a large scheme embodying a reservoir system (two reservoirs with a capacity of 300m³ each and five small break pressure reservoirs of 50m³ each) linked to a 70kms pipeline network which operates on cost recovery basis.

When one thinks of water, one usually sees women in their role of water fetchers. In Dalocha, women have gone beyond water fetching to managing a water project. How did these women come about to manage a water project of such huge magnitude? How are the women coping with their new role and responsibilities? What set backs do they face?

This short paper, which is based on qualitative information obtained from the field, examines DWWDA's performance as a managing body, and the issues arising from the short experience gained so far.

Methodology

Focus group discussions were held with representatives of selected Peasant Association Water Committee Members, Water Kiosk Keepers, DWWDA Board members and community members including elders and men, and the chair person of the Wereda Council.



How did DWWDA originate?

Water has been the most pressing need of the Dalocha society for generations. A drop of water, irrespective of its cleanliness, was valued more than anything else, especially at the peak of the dry season. Women, who are responsible for taking care of their families, had to endure the hardship of travelling 6-7 hours to the Diyo River, the only source of water during the dry season. The amount of water collected daily was not sufficient enough, both in terms of quality and quantity, to satisfy family needs. This intolerable situation forced the community at large and women in particular to put resolute demands to ActionAid Ethiopia to facilitate the construction and provision of clean water.

The decision to have a water scheme constructed brought forth issues pertaining to management, ownership, and sustainability. Intensive community consultations finally led to the decision of handing over the responsibility and ownership to women. The choice rested on the fact that women, being bearers of the burden of water fetching

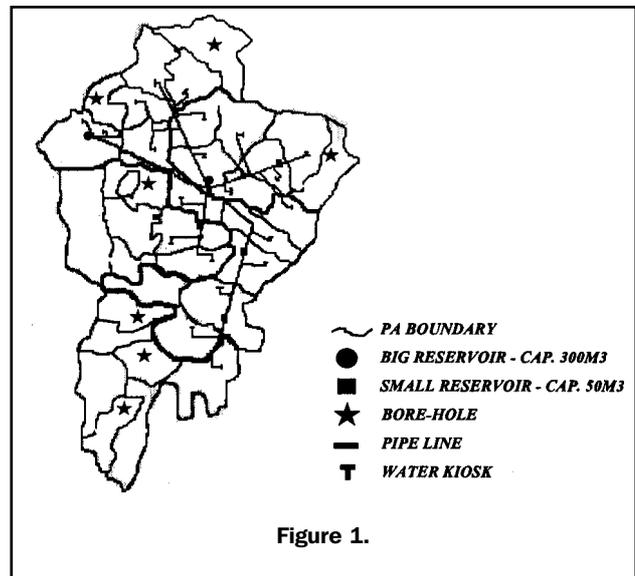


Figure 1.

would be more concerned for its proper functioning and sustainability, and the belief that giving the chance to exercise decision making power would contribute to changing the negatively biased attitude towards women.

DWWDA came into being at the end of 1996 through an election process which involved all community members. It consists of a General Assembly with 178 women and an Executive Board comprising of 16 women drawn from the general assembly, representing the 16 Water Committees who are responsible for managing day to day matters. The Board is supported by an Advisory Committee comprising of representatives from the Wereda Council, Wereda line offices, Women's Affairs Office and ActionAid Ethiopia.

Capacity building: a means to an end

Capacity building was a priority task, given the fact that all DWWDA members were illiterate rural women with no

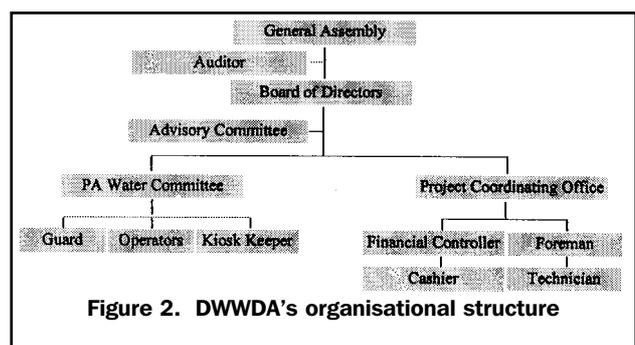


Figure 2. DWWDA's organisational structure

exposure or past experience in handling community matters and in decision making. Hence, parallel to the construction of the scheme, capacity building through continuous skills and leadership training, and literacy and numeracy classes, were conducted for the last two years. At present, all DWWDA members can read and write, though they still need to work more especially on computation. The training have contributed towards boosting their self confidence.

Responsibilities of caring for their families and working in farms with their husbands have not kept these women from attending DWWDA meetings and the various training programs. Though, one can't deny that their new responsibility in some way has added to their burden, this is a fact of life that will live with them as long as mechanisms which help to relieve them of these responsibilities are found. At present, the women fulfil their reproductive tasks, in the evenings either by themselves or assisted by their daughters. Though there were some objections, at the beginning, from their husbands including beatings, for working on the Water Committees, things seem to be changing for the better. In some cases, some husbands have even been found to be invidious of their wives becoming literate.

Meeting with challenges

It is now well over a year since the water project became operational and DWWDA assumed its responsibility. DWWDA as an institution still being at its early age of development has to travel a long way before it overcomes its challenges. It is currently operating in an environment filled with vagaries - a male dominated society which perceives women as inferior and good at nothing outside the reproductive domain, and trying to catch up with new developments (technical, administrative, etc) alien to them so far. To fill this gap, a Project Co-ordinating Unit (PCU), led by a staff seconded by ActionAid Ethiopia, composed of five staff has been established, that is accountable to the Board of DWWDA. The PCU manages the day to day transactions of the water scheme and is responsible for maintenance. It also presents periodic progress and financial reports on monthly basis to the Board. However at this stage it is very difficult to acknowledge that DWWDA is capable of monitoring and controlling the activities of the Unit. The belief is that this situation will change for the better in the future as the capacity of the Board increases.

However, this should not give the feeling or imply that DWWDA has no role even now; Board and PA Water Committee members supervise the kiosk keepers under its employ, to facilitate the distribution of water to the community at the 32 water points. Water Committee members take daily turns to check on whether the distribution is done properly and according to the daily time schedule. They also oversee that no damage occurs to the pipeline system. They report immediately if any mishaps or failure related to the system occur to Board members and the PCU, or the PA Administration and Wereda Council, as found appropri-



Figure 3

ate. Water Committees have intervened several times to initiate the investigation and follow up of suspects who had caused damage to some sections of the water scheme. DWWDA being a legally registered body, with the Bureau of Justice of the Southern Nations Nationalities Peoples Region, has the power to sue anyone who contravenes its working procedures or the proper use of the scheme.

The other major aspect worth mentioning is the issue of financial sustainability. The scheme is designed in such a way that financial sustainability is ensured through cost recovery. DWWDA is responsible for ensuring this since the management also encompasses depreciation, maintenance, and replacement. Hence, the income earned from the water scheme is expected to cover the day to day running costs, maintenance and replacement. The price of water, 15 cents for 40 litres, was fixed based on cost calculations and consultations with the community. In the beginning, most community members hesitated to forgo 15 cents in exchange for free available water from traditional sources. For the first seven months in 1998 only 11 per cent of the total population (67582 people) collected water from the water kiosks (Jemal, 1998). However in 1999, some changes have been observed. Comparing the revenue for the months of January, February, March in 1998, which was Birr 5102 to that of the same period in 1999, Birr 44,316 shows that there is a marked increase in the number of people using the water kiosks (DWWDA, 1999). This is also confirmed from the information collected during the field discussions in which community members have expressed their awareness of the benefits of its cleanliness, its palatability and contribution to their good health. In few years time, it is evident that the whole population will gradually use the water from the scheme.

Conclusion

At the beginning, and after its establishment, some community members, both men and women, were doubtful that women would be able to handle such a complex project. Though, this fear, given the practice in Dalocha, where men hold the upper hand in every aspect of life (community matters, production and ownership of assets and decision making) had some ground, the present experience being

built by DWWDA has shown that given the opportunities, women can prove to be capable of managing tasks beyond their traditional tasks. Although at its infancy and with many challenges to face, DWWDA has the potential of being an exemplary project. However, still many challenges will remain: will DWWDA be able to cover its cost and achieve financial sustainability? will it survive the consecutive elections of new members every two years? would it be able to cope up with the maintenance and replacement of such a technically complex scheme? would it be able to secure continued support from government and the community at large?

References

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