



From systems to service: scaling up community management

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COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF water supplies can be described as a situation whereby water users take responsibility for the sustainable management of their water supplies. They feel and are, formally, responsible for sustaining or even improving the water supply service level. Over the last eight years IRC and partners (in Nepal, Pakistan, Cameroon, Kenya, Guatemala and Colombia) have been involved in a process of action research into and dissemination of results from experiences into community management of water supply systems. This paper draws on one of the major conclusions of this process: that to be efficient in meeting the challenge of large scale replication of community management there is a need for community management to become 'institutionalised' within the 'intermediate' levels of government and society. The necessary effective decentralised support structures and mechanisms, needed to make community management work, are not yet in place. This has already caused the failure and malfunctioning of many systems and puts the sustainability of many more at stake. Subsequently the paper looks at the implications of this statement and at the way forward.

The challenge

1.5 billion people remain without access to a safe and reliable water supply. Over the last decade much effort has been put into improving this situation by embracing "community management". Research and pilot projects have developed participatory methodologies to facilitate improved community management. Many projects using these methods are being implemented with the objective of communities operating, maintaining, and eventually replacing their systems after completion of the capital works.

While there have been undoubted and widespread successes at the level of individual communities, community management has failed to achieve its full potential on two major counts. Firstly, there is the problem of long term sustainability. Following 'hand over', communities are frequently left entirely on their own; the assumption being that the capacity building work undertaken during the project period has left them with the necessary skills and institutions to manage their systems indefinitely. However, there is increasing recognition that community management institutions and rules are often as vulnerable as the water supply technology itself. Community management institutions are susceptible to conflicts, abuse of resources, or external interference. In addition 'external' factors such as population growth, illegal settlements or diminishing

water resources may also put heavy pressure on the community management rules and institutions.

The second failure of community management is in terms of coverage. Community management has only recently become mainstreamed to the point that it is being implemented as part of large-scale WATSAN projects. Far too often efforts to bring about community management remain ad-hoc and piecemeal, carried out by (I)NGOs and donors on a 'project' basis that often ignores or parallels government structures and policies. Because of their limited time frame projects are incapable of guaranteeing long-term support and thus sustainability of community management institutions and systems. In addition, governments lack the resources, the capacities or the political will to create a support structure for communities left on their own after 'hand over'.

Implications of community management for the "intermediate level"¹

Sustainable community management requires a partnership allowing scope for shared responsibilities between the local management organization of the community on the one hand and the public and/or private sector and/or local NGOs on the other. The functions to be performed in such a partnership by the users or their local management organization can vary considerably, depending upon the agreed division of tasks and responsibilities between the actors. The different actors or their representatives have to come to an agreement on what the specific contributions and responsibilities will be over time. This requires informed decision making by community members from the earliest stages of system selection and construction, with particular emphasis on the expected service level and the long-term management of the system. Such an approach implies a shift from the piecemeal implementation of projects towards the creation of a water service institutional structure of which project implementation will be a part.

However, there are quite a few constraints towards such broadening of focus for agencies, public or private, as well as for communities. As indicated above, WATSAN sector agencies have a strong tradition of focussing on the technical (and more recently institutional) aspects of water supply systems provision and management. They construct and 'hand over' systems without putting sufficient emphasis or effort into the establishment of management capacity, which is frequently little more than the half-hearted

training of a caretaker and a bookkeeper. In cases where adequate management capacities have been built, these are frequently left unsupported after project conclusion, as there is no legal or policy environment that offers a framework for sustainable community management. The example from Guatemala illustrates how support can go beyond a mere training of a caretaker and a bookkeeper.

In **Guatemala** the project team supported the committee of APAGUA in Aguacatan to prepare an action plan to improve the system. Some priorities were technical, others administrative, such as the regulation of the uses of water. Others related to capacity building, such as meetings for plumbers from different communities to exchange experiences, and to get to know about basics of rural hydraulics, such as interpreting plans, understanding material specifications, inventories of materials, etc. The committee of APAGUA also negotiated a contract with a regional development corporation to start a programme of reforestation both for water conservation and to reduce soil erosion. The coordination of activities between the different water systems in the area has been one of the biggest successes.

However, even where good support exists, many agencies' natural preference is to work in parallel to government in the name of greater 'efficiency'.

If governments and agencies acknowledge the crucial role of communities in maintaining a sustainable rural water service, then support structures should be built that backstop and support the communities own management efforts.

There are a number of basic requirements for long-term, sustainable water management by communities, the most important of which are listed in the box below.

Monitoring

An issue often overlooked is monitoring and the development of simple monitoring tools for community water management. If they are provided at all, most monitoring

tools are reporting forms aimed at assessing the implementing agency's achievement of performance targets, and not tools that help communities to identify potential problem areas and that initiate and stimulate action. Monitoring should help to tackle the technical, financial and managerial problems related to the performance of the system. Communities or their local management organisations need to be supported in the development of indicators for potential problem issues and ways to collect information. Monitoring in (dispersed) rural communities can often only be done effectively by the communities themselves. They will do so if this indeed leads to problem solving by the community itself or, if needed, by the support agency. This does not imply that problem solving can and should always be undertaken by communities. Good monitoring in a service structure based on partnerships not only reveals the problems in management or system performance, it also indicates which actor is responsible and capable to provide the solution.

Some concluding remarks

Currently in most countries, community management of rural water supply systems is fast becoming the accepted national policy. However, political will is needed to transform policy into practice. Communities are usually not treated as future managers in the sense of responsible people who can make their own choices from a range of options. Nor do they get sufficient opportunity to learn the required management skills for the options with which they are provided. This and the lack of back-up support for problems arising after 'hand over' are important reasons for the sub-standard performance of many systems. This will continue to be the case, unless governments and agencies start the creation of an effective service structure for community managed water supplies. Such a service

Table 1. Basic requirements for management by the community

- Advocacy leading to political will and resource allocation to transform new concepts, such as community management into action.
- Legislation, regulating ownership of source and system as well as the responsibilities and roles of the different stakeholders: government, private sector, NGOs, communities, customers, local government, agencies etc.
- Long-term partnerships between communities and agencies, in which perceptions of problems and solutions can be discussed on the basis of equity and respect, valuing both agency and community knowledge in the same way.
- Co-ordination among agencies to avoid contradictory approaches.
- Creation of an impartial institution that has the power of authority and the skills to mediate between the local management organisation and the users in case of important differences of opinion.
- Choice of technology linked to O&M as well as management requirements.
- A level of service responding to a realistic demand of the community.
- Transparent decision-making; ensuring that communities can make informed choices.
- Clarity on what management structure is required both at the local level and in terms of back up by private sector or government.
- Improved capacities and attitude of agency staff working with communities on improved water supply (not only system management!): participatory, demand responsive, gender sensitive.
- Agencies acknowledging that gender as well as wealth differences need to be addressed.
- Good monitoring and adaptive management, not only during the project cycle, but also after 'handing over'.
- Improved capacities of communities to manage their water supplies related to organisation, committees, involvement of women, rules for water use and distribution, financial management and cost recovery, operation and maintenance of the system, monitoring etc.

structure should respect the heterogeneity of community settings, but should at the same time standardise rules and guidelines for the sake of effective support.

Fortunately, new learning approaches are emerging and are gradually being adopted, where community knowledge and institutional knowledge are equally valued and people start to respect each other's views.

The partnership approach is neither more nor less than accepting the fact that different actors have different tasks and responsibilities in maintaining a sustainable water supply service. These tasks and responsibilities are complementary. What a community can do, should not be done by a government at the district or national level. On the other hand, solutions to problems that cannot be tackled by the single community should be guided and regulated by support structures at the district or by the national level. Everybody has his or her role to play: the user, the water committee, the district agency, local government or the ministry in the capital city. That is the quintessence of an effective and sustainable water service.

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- A series of publications on community management by IRC is forthcoming. These publications address field staff, managers and policy makers.
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