



Backup support for sustainable RWS in Sri Lanka

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In Sri Lanka, during the last few decades, many sector projects launched under international donor assistance have provided drinking water facilities in rural areas. Projects implemented at the beginning have concentrated on providing the facilities, with less emphasis on sustainability and no clear policy about the management responsibility. This saw the facilities provided becoming dilapidated or abandoned, making them ineffective in achieving ultimate objectives. It was also evident that when the communities served are dispersed, remote and relatively small, management by a central body is difficult. Hence, emphasis has lately been given to sustainability aspects, such as adopting demand driven approaches, making beneficiary communities responsible for management of facilities and recognising and empowering Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

The policy adopted in RWS at present is that the management should be at the technically competent and appropriate level closest to the beneficiaries, i.e.:

- individual facilities (dug wells, rain water harvesting tanks) - managed by individual consumer households;
- simple common facilities such as common shallow wells and tube wells with hand pumps - managed by a group of households;
- simple pipe-borne water supply systems - managed by Community Based Organisations (CBOs) or CBO-hired private sector; and
- more complex pipe-borne water supply systems - managed by Local Authorities (LAs) or the private sector.

However the majority of CBOs and LAs lack the capacity and resources to ensure the sustainability of the facilities provided by the projects once the project support is withdrawn. Under this situation, political and social obligations compel central agencies, especially National Water Supply & Drainage Board (NWSDB), which is the national authority on drinking water supply, to take over and manage such schemes. Similarly, LAs are compelled to manage small schemes, which are intended to be managed by the CBOs. This situation not only creates extra financial commitments by these organisations and strains their capacities, but also leads to expensive and less effective management systems involving high overheads.

In order to avoid this situation, CBOs, as well as LAs need continual backup support, especially in solving technical issues and certain management issues. Further, it shows

that back up support needs to be institutionalised in order to ensure sustainability.

Backup support arrangement

The management responsibility of newly constructed RWS schemes rests with CBOs (or LAs, if the scheme is complicated). The backup support arrangement involves LAs, Provincial Council (PC), NWSDB, Divisional Secretary's (DS) Office, NGOs and Private Sector. This is outlined in Figure 1.

Sri Lankan case study

Study methodology

The above system is being established on a pilot basis in the Third Water Supply and Sanitation Project currently being implemented with ADB/NORAD assistance covering six districts in Sri Lanka.

In order to ascertain the capacity building needs for establishing this back up support system, assessments were made on a sample basis on the institutional capacity of the existing CBOs, Local Authorities and NWSDB offices.

This was conducted in several ways:

- Project officials visiting 26 Local Authorities and holding discussions with relevant officials;
- Administering a questionnaire to be completed by those 26 local authorities;
- A consultant making visits to selected CBOs and LAs (6 and 10 respectively) to assess their experience with scheme management, shortcomings, improvements to be made, training to be provided and the need for other capacity building measures.
- Visiting the District Engineer's offices of the NWSDB in the project area (6 nos.) to obtain the views of the relevant officers about establishing a backup support system, and assessing their capacity and the need for improvement.

The above assessments were conducted during a period of approximately 8 months in 2001.

Findings of the study

From these assessments, it was found that a considerable training and capacity building will be needed to establish a strong and sustainable RWS backup support system.

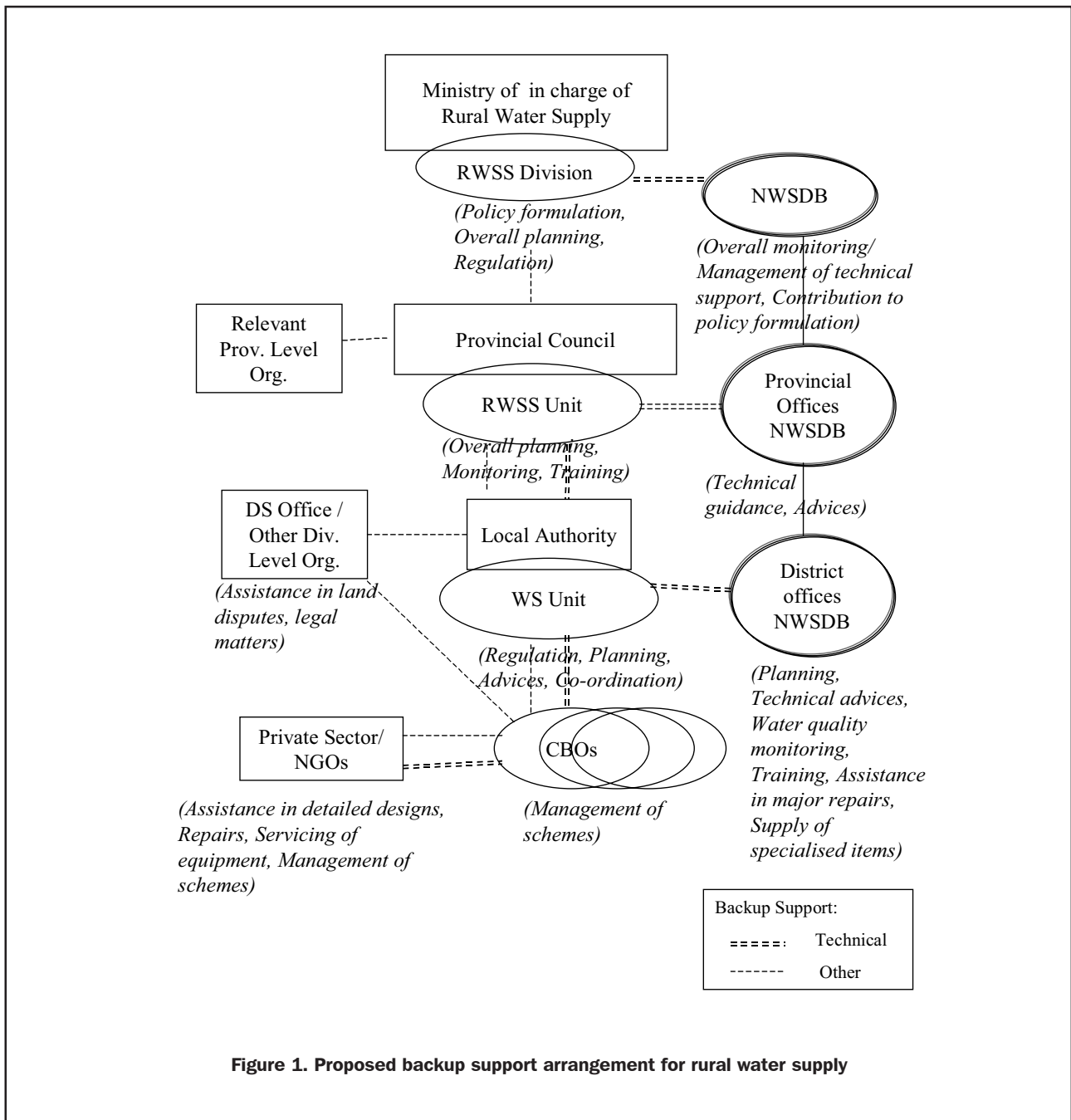


Figure 1. Proposed backup support arrangement for rural water supply

In particular, there are certain challenges in implementing this backup support system. These include:

- Lack of resources, - manpower, physical and financial - in Local Authorities;
- Too many and diverse responsibilities of LAs;
- Lack of LA motivation to pay attention to water supply;
- Need for more effort to train CBOs to develop their capacity;
- Lack of commitment of NWSDB to support RWS (The Board has hitherto addressed mainly the urban sector), and to allocate resources required for setting up the backup support units;
- Reluctance in accepting the concept of (PSP) by the authorities, and a dearth of strong and adequately competent private sector organisations in rural areas;
- Need for developing the private sector for the expected tasks;
- Actions by LAs with political motivation, which could adversely affect the proper management of the Water Supply.

Actions taken by the project

The Project has taken steps to address these challenges. The main ones are mentioned below:

Regarding the *lack of human resources*, the Project has requested the relevant Ministry and other national level authorities to increase the cadre provisions and to allocate adequate resources to the Local Authorities. Further, as a long-term solution, the project has also taken steps to include aspects related to the rural water supply in the curricula for middle level technical personnel in the national technical institutes.

The Project is also in the process of *establishing Water Supply Units* within Local Authorities and *providing physical resources* enabling them to provide the required backup support to the CBOs and also to run their own water supply schemes more efficiently.

In order to *establish systems* for managing the schemes, reporting, monitoring and requests for support, the Project has prepared two Water Supply Management Manuals aimed at CBOs and Local Authorities.

Another step being taken is *providing required training to CBOs and LAs* on scheme management aspects. To make this a sustainable process, by *institutionalising* the delivery of this training to LAs, it is arranged through their own training organisations. For training the CBOs competent resource personnel have been identified in each district and pools of resource personnel have been established.

The Project is also *providing necessary physical resources to the NWSDB district offices* and is *establishing systems* in order to make the backup support system functional.

Conducting awareness sessions and training for the NWSDB district staff has also been programmed, as it is recognised that the commitment of the relevant staff is a major factor for success.

A programme is being formulated *for identifying and providing necessary support to the local manufacturing and service sector*, and for promoting their involvement in rural water supply.

Apart from the above, in order to make the CBOs – the main stakeholder – as strong and independent as possible, several steps are being taken. The legal authority to maintain their own water supply schemes, which has been recognised as a vital factor for sustainability, will be provided through the legal provisions of the Local Authority Act. The necessary By Laws for this purpose have been formulated, and will be introduced to the Local Authorities for adoption. Formation of CBO federations is another step, so that they can raise a louder voice. Arrangements have been made for the CBOs to be represented at local level regular meetings of government officials.

Challenges ahead

Although the Project is taking the above steps within its limitations, there are more challenges ahead, which will take further measures if they are to be overcome, with the involvement of other national level organisations.

One major challenge is the **ensuring of availability of financial resources to the CBOs** for improvements and expansions of their water supply schemes or in the event of disasters. Although ideally, the tariff collections should allow a component for such purposes, in the practical sense, this will make the tariff unaffordable for the poor, who are the majority in the rural areas. Could there be a fund established at provincial or district level which is accessible to the CBOs on soft repayment terms? How should such a fund be built up? Could the government contribute annually to build up this fund? Could donor-assisted development projects allocate a percentage of their funds for this purpose?

Another challenge is to **ensure the sustainability of the backup system** itself without collapsing. Funds are needed at various levels to keep this financially viable. Although charging for certain services is proposed at cost-recovery basis from CBOs (eg. making repairs or supplying spare parts, etc.), the serving organisation will have to bear the overhead costs involved. Further, there are expected free services too, such as providing guidance, monitoring or regulating. Will the LAs and NWSDB continue eternally to inject their own funds for providing such services and to cover up the overheads? Will their other priorities eclipse this back up support system? Could it be solved by promoting the development of efficient private sector service organisations, so that services will be cheaper? On the other hand, will this lead to monopolies and exploitation and make the services eventually unaffordable? If so, could the Local Authorities and NWSDB play the role of regulator to solve this situation?

A concern emerging lately is the **possible change in the political and administrative set-up**. Will the Provincial Councils be changed? What role will the new organisation play? Will there be changes in LAs too? Further, will there be changes in NWSDB, such as privatisation or private management contracts? If so, will it continue to provide this back up support to the rural sector, which obviously is not a financially attractive venture?

Although the list of questions is long and difficult to answer, concerted effort is needed to solve them in order to make the rural water supply really sustainable.

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