



Promoting rural sanitation through subsidy

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ECHOES FROM THE last World Water summit in Johannesburg seem to confirm the very low priority given to sanitation in terms of construction of latrines. Evidently, the global statistics on access to good sanitation¹ facilities especially among the poor is very low.

The reason for this is not very far fetched. First and foremost, most people give low priority to construction of latrines even within the context of integrated water and sanitation project. Although water is said to be life, it could also mean death if compromised through poor sanitary and hygiene practices. Whereas communities place high demand for the provision of safe drinking water, they often do not see the need to build latrines. The second reason for the low coverage is the inability of communities to afford the cost of construction.

In the course of working in Nigeria to support poor people to have access to effective sanitation, WaterAid designed and implemented different subsidy strategies, which are specific to the context of the project locations and beneficiaries.

WaterAid works in Bauchi, Benue and Plateau states with different categories of partners including Local Government and NGO partners. Programme implementation in the three states adopts different levels of subsidy and different methods of administration. These are aimed at promoting construction and use of effective low cost latrines.

In the Benue State Programme, where WaterAid works with Local Government Partners, block subsidy of 50% is provided for communities to aid household latrines. This subsidy is administered by the community level project management organ, the water and sanitation committee (WASCOM) based on the wealth status of the different households as indicated in the community household wealth ranking. This means that the more prosperous households augment the cost for the poorer ones to enable them own their own latrines.

Whereas the subsidy in Benue is essentially cash, the Bauchi and Plateau Programmes where partnership is with local NGOs, adopt a non-cash subsidy. From WaterAid's experience, the use of subsidy has obviously helped project beneficiaries to continue to build latrines. However, the concern has been how to ensure effective use of the latrines and also to sustain the continuous construction and use of latrine beyond WaterAid assistance.

As part of the process of ascertaining the validity or otherwise of this concern WaterAid carried out a participatory assessment of subsidy in latrine construction and use.

This paper aims at discussing the findings of the lessons learnt from the subsidy approach of WaterAid partners with a view to adapting the lessons to future approach in subsidy administration.

General

Sanitation issues are household and community issues and require recognition of specific situational social and cultural factors. In Nigeria, the picture of the situation of sanitation is not very different from what obtains globally as figures for sanitation coverage are put at 44% and 75% for rural and urban areas respectively and could even be found to be much lower on investigation because it has been observed that some communities do not own even a single latrine. Even the National Water Supply and Sanitation Policy had only two paragraphs on sanitation! Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) studies conducted in 1999² indicate that the need for latrines ranks very low in the priority list of most rural communities. Sanitation is therefore a major issue in Nigeria as it is in most developing countries.

In trying to tackle issues of sanitation, several organizations have employed the use of subsidy. Subsidy refers mainly to any form of measure put in place to enable access to one form of service or the other. Subsidy has been employed in various forms to enhance latrine promotion, which is the first step to achieving sustainable behaviour change in terms of improved sanitation.

For the purpose of this study, a total of 24 communities were used-Dindima, Garin Abare, Birnin Ganye, Gik, Gaukaka Lasauya and Mwalang Buli in Bauchi state, Kazuk, Munok, Goktok Kaler, Pil Gani, Nacha and Zamgwar in Plateau state and Ijokwe (+ sanicentre³), Obijago, Ibika-Irabi (+independent sanicentre), Iyabor, Odubwo, Oyiwo, Igbekum (+independent sanicentre), Eja (+independent sanicentre) Okpekwo-Oju, Ukpila (+independent sanicentre), Oyinyi and Ochimohaha in Benue state.

The study was designed with a participatory approach in mind. It adopted the Method for Participatory Evaluation (MPA) and involved the community members at various levels in the three states.

Subsidy administration

The subsidy given by WaterAid partners is on the slab. The three Programmes employ different approaches to subsidy implementation in their various states.

The Benue Programme, which is the oldest of the three, employs a form of subsidy administration. The systems and processes have evolved over the years through series of stages. It started with total capital cost coverage for latrine construction, went on to certain percentage of the capital cost. This is still the practice but now graduated based on the assessed wealth of each household: Rich, medium and poor. All members of any project community enjoy some level of subsidy albeit differently.

The subsidy arrangement involves the use of voucher whose face value is complimented by cash contribution by the beneficiary (householder). The voucher is later presented to the Water and Sanitation Unit (WASU) who redeems the voucher value to the service providers, the sanitation centers. The sanicentres are used to stock and supply the materials needed for construction or the ready-made slab.

The quantity of subsidy to be administered is based on the inferred number of latrines calculated from the number of households for which the Programme undertakes to fund 50%. The WASCOMs allocate the subsidy due to each household based on wealth ranking/vulnerability. For instance when the cost of Latrine slab was N600, the subsidy enjoyed by householders in the different wealth classes; poor, medium and rich were N500, N250 and N150 respectively. The voucher is coded in three colours, with each depicting the different wealth class. It is worthy of note that the community members themselves do the wealth ranking facilitated by WASU. In the Bauchi Programme, the subsidy is material and is enjoyed by every household in the community. It includes half a bag of cement for latrines that do not need lining and 2 bags per household for latrines where lining of the pit is required. In such cases, ½ a bag goes into slab construction, 1 bag is used for block making and ½ a bag for lining. The implementing partner at the community level carries out trainings on slab construction and block making for lining the pits. Thereafter, the WASCOMs in the various communities manage these projects. Cement is provided as the communities indicate the need, which is always channeled through the WASCOM.

The latrine owner is responsible for the sand, gravel, water and the manual labour involved in digging the latrine pit as well as the superstructure. These materials are readily available and obtainable at no capital cost to the community members.

The WaterAid partners in Plateau State also operate a material subsidy with the household owner also providing sand, gravel, wood, thatch, mud, water, supply of hand washing facility and labour. There is a slight difference in the system operated by one of the partners, BOLDA where beneficiaries also pay a token of N100 per bag of cement.

The unit cost of subsidy is not known, as the calculated subsidy is on the slab only. What goes into the administration of this subsidy or the trainings carried out is not included in the cost.

Findings of the study

Impact/benefits

With subsidy, there has been an evident increase in the number of latrines construction. Everybody will build latrines if given subsidy. The issue is whether the increased number of latrines also amounts to increased or effective usage. The rate of construction is good judging from the resources available.

Measuring benefits is a bit more tricky because there is the temptation of trying to judge benefits from the viewpoint of the one carrying out the study who has a set of "standard" indicators which he is trying to seek out for instance health benefits resulting perhaps in disease reduction. Some other benefits are not so obvious to the onlooker but is perceived by the beneficiary as a benefit for instance the case of someone reporting that he had gotten so used to using a latrine now that when he traveled to another community in which there was no latrine, he found it difficult to eat with the people and did not defecate for the period of two weeks that he was there. This addresses the issue of behaviour change, which should be very interesting, but how do you measure that? An arguably unverifiable benefit you might say.

Willingness to pay

Willingness to pay was determined through oral interviews and discussions with community members since apart from the Benue Programme and in BOLDA communities; there was no cash contribution from the community members. The total cost of having an unlined latrine was calculated to amount to N5000 and that for a lined pit amounted to N7000⁵.

A large number of the beneficiaries spoken with expressed the willingness to pay for latrines if asked to, having seen the need for the latrines. People expressed willingness to pay between N100 to N200 cash (translating to 2- 4% of the amount needed for a completed latrine) depending on the household wealth class. It was however observed that the beneficiaries did not know the total cost of a completed latrine so would not know how much of the cost they were willing to bear. That made their enthusiasm at being so sure that they could continue without subsidy seem a bit over ambitious.

Effective use

A total of about 2000 latrines have been constructed. Even though there is an increase in the number of latrines and continuous construction as long as the subsidy is ongoing, the question of effective use is an entirely different issue that needs to be understood. The study team discovered that coverage was not the big issue as it was discovered that in some cases, latrines were being put to other uses apart from those that they had been meant for. Such uses included storing of bicycles and grains in some places. The question was why would a latrine that had constructed not be used for what it was originally meant for. The answer to that

perhaps lies in a number of reasons that were not difficult to arrive at. Some of the difficulties arising had to do with the strategy for latrine promotion.

In some cases, people built latrines as water point conditionality since the project was using an integrated approach and would not provide funds for a water point unless latrines were accepted and constructions underway. Suffice to say that the fact is that the beneficiaries themselves had not perceived latrine as a need but water, which had served as an entry point for the organization to introduce latrines. Another reason why this was also happening was the communication between the organization and the communities and this is tied to the technology options being promoted. The question here was who made the choice of the technology most appropriate for the end users and decided what subsidy should be applied? Some of the answers put forward by the community members showed that a lot of the decisions were made not by them but communicated to them and currently some users were not satisfied with the latrines they had. A lot also would have to do with the temptation of placing emphasis on the sanitation hardware.

In analyzing this, we could ask; has subsidy worked? Yes, it has and is working in terms of increased coverage and usage. Usage however is not synonymous with coverage as such, the need for promotion of latrines to be complemented with emphasis on hygiene promotion as it was obvious from the study that people were willing to participate fully only in what they saw the need for.

Implementation of subsidy needs to have a well-planned process and system in context and content put in place with a lot of consultation with the end beneficiaries who are the primary stakeholders in this case.

Lessons

People will build latrines when offered subsidy and especially when it is a conditionality for a water point. Making it a project conditionality is just one way of promoting latrines but it could lead to the trap of having sanitation hardware in place and measuring progress by coverage, which could be misleading.

Subsidy even though meant to target poverty with an end to alleviating it could become a trap both for the beneficiary and the giver especially if not well managed. The beneficiaries may not be able to continue without it. This can be addressed if a good exit strategy is built in right from the onset of the project. Everyone feels that he or she is entitled to enjoy subsidy and this underscores the problem of trap.

Points of decision must move closer to the end beneficiaries if any project targeting sanitation is to succeed.

Conclusion

Subsidy is working but if we are to meet our set targets for improved sanitation and behaviour change, emphasis must be laid on the software and the indicators for improved access must shift from numbers or coverage in terms of latrines to effective use and behaviour change. This is by no means a very simple task as it would require more time and effort but it would give a better picture in terms of where we are and what progress is being made. Subsidy though meant to alleviate poverty could become a trap as the beneficiaries could become poverty dependent on it. Strategies must be put in place at the onset of subsidy administration to ensure that it is empowering rather than enslaving.

Notes

¹Sanitation in the context of this paper refers to safe excreta disposal.

³WaterAid adopts the Unicef-style sanicentre to provide materials to the community.

⁴Lining of latrines is done with cement blocks and mortar.

References

²Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Studies, UNICEF, 1999.

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