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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, WATER SUPPLY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

**Decentralization as a tool to enhance sustainability**

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*All major rural water supply projects implemented in Sri Lanka during last few decades were centrally managed by a Project Management Unit with their own Project Implementation Units at district levels for service delivery. With the winding up of these projects, sustainability of facilities constructed remain solely in the hands of beneficiary communities, risking long term benefits of the investment in the absence of proper back up support mechanism. The Government, taking this important matter into consideration has embarked on a significant sector reform program through decentralized implementation arrangements involving Provincial Councils (PCs) and Local Authorities (LAs) as key stakeholders in the implementation process. Although some reluctance was evident at the beginning due to lack of human and other resources, participating PCs/LAs have undertaken the task of RWSS project implementation successfully. Lesson learnt is that with clear strategies and commitment of participating stakeholders, inherent weaknesses in the public sector can be overcome*

**Introduction**

Sri Lanka, a tropical island in the Indian Ocean, has a population of 19 million of which 78 percent live in rural areas. As a result of the high priority accorded by successive governments for the development of Water Supply and Sanitation (WSS) Sector, the country has been able to reach its present water supply coverage of 70 percent. However, some rural areas, especially those in the dry zone of the country, still lack safe drinking water supply and adequate sanitation facilities. Realizing the importance of well being of the people in social and economic development and in keeping with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the government has set an ambitious target of providing safe drinking water and basic sanitation to 85 percent of the population by year 2015 and 100 percent by year 2025.

Extensive demand created by existence of deteriorated village WSS facilities prompted responsible bodies to develop strategies to overcome seemingly inherent problems in village service delivery. Among different approaches attempted over the past decades, the ‘Demand Driven’, ‘Community Centered’ and ‘Community Managed and Owned’ approaches were found to be the best for actively involving communities in project implementation, thereby improving the potential for sustainability while reaching the MDGs.

All major rural water supply projects implemented in Sri Lanka during last few decades were centrally managed by a Project Management Unit (PMU) with their own Project Implementation Units (PIUs) at district levels for service delivery to needy communities at village level. This arrangement proved to be highly successful for RWSS project planning and construction. Nevertheless, main drawbacks in this mechanism are;

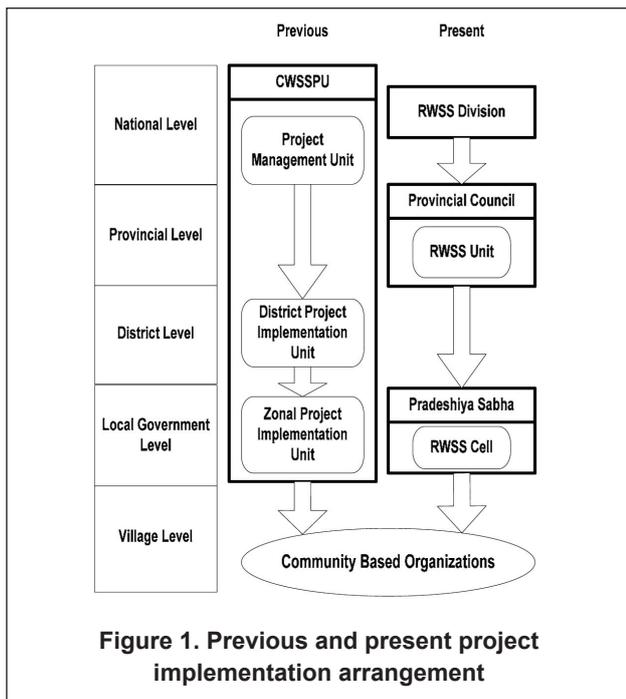
- Little or no back up support during operation and maintenance (O&M) stage by the project implementation agency due to non existence of proper back-up support mechanism after scheme commissioning,
- Little or no opportunity for Local Authorities which are legally entrusted to provide public services to communities, to develop their capacities for back-up support and to undertake future WSS projects.

With the winding up of these projects, sustainability of facilities constructed remain solely in the hands of beneficiary communities, risking long term benefits of the investment in the absence of proper back up support mechanism. The Government, taking this important matter into consideration has embarked on a significant sector reform program aimed at improving long term sustainability of rural water supply and sanitation investments. The reforms aimed at mainstream community-based RWSS through decentralized implementation arrangements involving Provincial Councils (PCs) and Local Authorities (LAs) as key stakeholders in the implementation process.

In Sri Lanka, PCs and LAs (which are operating under PCs) are the main public institutions serving community under the decentralized administrative set up introduced in late 80’s. During the last two and a half decades, this set up has made a substantial progress by undertaking the provision of number of key services such as education, health, small and medium level irrigation systems and roads etc.

Due to diversified focus on various prioritized services and availability of limited resources, exposure to rural water supply sector by PCs and LAs was considered a challenging task.

The importance of local government involvement in the



provision of RWSS facilities has been addressed under both governments' sector reform program and the National RWSS Policy formulated in 2001, as a key responsibility for PCs and LAs. In order to streamline the sector activities, the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Division (RWSSD) was established within the line Ministry, at National level. Sector development activities, policy implementation, monitoring and overall RWSS sector project management etc. were sighted as key functions of the RWSS Division. (See Figure 1).

In 2002, RWSSD with the World Bank support, initiated the Second Community Water Supply and Sanitation Project (2nd CWSSP) embracing the National RWSS Policy. The project has set up a target of providing safe water supply and adequate sanitation for 1.4 million people in approximately 1,100 rural villages through decentralized project implementation mechanism. This is the country's first ever effort to assign Local Authorities with the responsibility of the provision of RWSS services to rural communities under a major donor funded project.

## 2nd CWSSP – Expected benefits and implementation mechanism

The project's main expected benefits are:

- time saving in accessing water for drinking and domestic purposes.
- public health benefits from improved water services, sanitation coverage, hygiene practices and environmental preservative measures.
- a more equitable, sustainable and transparent framework for government assistance.
- strengthened private and public sector involvement and improved, efficient service delivery
- sustainability through transfer of RWSS management

responsibilities to beneficiary communities.

- key roles and responsibilities for project management and cash disbursement are devolved to PCs and LAs.

Participating PCs have established and staffed permanent RWSS Units to support project implementation and to undertake sector development activities. Similarly, participating LAs have also established RWSS Cells.

Village communities, formed in to Community Based Organizations (CBOs) take the full responsibility including planning, designing and construction of their water supply and sanitation facilities while contributing a minimum of 20% towards the capital cost. Local Authorities, with the assistance of NGOs contracted as partner organizations provide the villagers with technical and community development guidance and support while allowing the communities to take independent decisions on all project matters. Assets created remain in the hands of the communities who ensure the management and O&M of facilities.

## Progress on decentralization

The biggest challenge faced in decentralized project implementation is that it adds more links to the service delivery chain making it more complex.

Centralization would allow a sizeable investment within a short period of time with stronger links among deferent project implementation layers. Time to come, with vested interests within central agencies, it may hamper the project implementation while slowing down the pace of it.

Therefore, it was decided to support more comprehensive and aggressive decentralization of functions and responsibilities to limit the risk of nonperformance associated with the lack of capacity at PC and LA level.

The 2nd CWSSP completed its first Batch on pilot basis, in December 2004, implementing RWSS facilities in 30 villages. Batch 1 provided useful experience on this innovative approach and Batch 2 was expanded to cover 150 villages with the confidence of achieving success. After assessing the performance under Batch 1 and 2, the project planned to expand 3rd, 4th and 5th Batches to 280, 280 and 200 villages respectively.

This is the first attempt to involve PCs and LAs in RWSS implementation in Sri Lanka. All previous projects were centrally managed with little or no coordination at PC and LA levels. In line with the project's demand responsive principles, those PCs that agreed to contribute the highest percentage towards the capital cost were given priority to participate in the project.

The two PCs selected have shown their strong commitment by;

- establishing and staffing a PC RWSS Unit,
- providing 5% contribution towards capital cost for water supply facility construction
- supporting project implementation.

With decision making is now lying at the provincial level, efficiency and transparency of service delivery have greatly enhanced.

Roles and responsibilities entrusted to LA make it respon-

sible for guiding and supervising village CBOs in project implementation, while contributing 5% of the capital cost of water supply scheme. Rather than implementing village schemes as in the past, LAs now act as facilitators and capital cost contributors. This turn has influenced the success of the project. LA facilitates the selection of most deserving villages for project implementation, in addition to settling water and land right issues, providing backup support to CBOs and coordinating among stakeholders.

Under the 2nd CWSSP, participating PCs and LAs have contributed to the success of Batch -I. It has also provided them with much-needed exposure to the participatory development process.

Having experiencing the encouraging results, other rural development agencies at provincial level are now in the process of adopting the community based participatory approach in their development activities as well.

Full responsibility for procurement of construction materials has been entrusted to communities with adequate funds, guidance and simplified procurement procedures. This exercise has proven to be highly successful. As the communities construct the facilities for their own use, they ensure the high quality of work.

Under the 2nd CWSSP, the task of project implementation has effectively been delegated to PCs and LAs, allowing the RWSS Division to concentrate on their primary tasks including sector planning, policy development and project management.

### **Constrains in decentralization**

The main constrain faced, in decentralization was the difficulty in changing attitude of PCs and LAs, from “Project Oriented Approach” to “Process Oriented Approach”. With the decentralization of RWSS activities to PCs and LAs, the “project” concept is slowly disappearing and RWSS sector activities are becoming part and parcel of their routing activities. However, this is a slow transformation with some resistance from staff attached to PCs and LAs due to extra work load assigned under the project. Other noticeable challenge is to identify the provision of water and sanitation as a priority for these public sector institutions, which were used to have other priorities up to now.

At PCs and LAs, lack of manpower, technical know-how and financial resources slow down the progress. However, the Project has foreseen these issues and has taken substantial remedial measures such as deploying consultancy staff for initial phase of project implementation, encouraging and supporting PCs/LAs to fill their staff vacancies and conducting capacity development/training programs etc.

Generally, Public Sector in Sri Lanka is not attuned to innovative participatory approaches. They are governed with pre-structured government rules and regulations. As such, they have to perform within the prescribed framework without much flexibility. The 2nd CWSSP’s forward-looking principles and procedures are specifically designed to counteract constraints associated with public institutions by introducing community participation and empowerment,

devolution of authority to the local level, contemporary administrative, management and financial systems and a culture of service to rural communities.

With the introduction of CWSSP involving various public service institutions at National and local levels, paved the way to demonstrate the effect of participatory development approaches. During project implementation, public sector institutions such as Health, Irrigation, Education, Forest, Land Departments and Divisional and District administrative officers were actively involved. They were given orientation training on project implementation procedures and their roles in achieving the set targets of the project.

This new stand for RWSS has been enthusiastically embraced at provincial and local levels. It is further stressed when seen the positive impact on beneficiary communities. Indications are that, that the PCs and LAs, having experienced this new approach, will undoubtedly sustain them through self-interest. Successes of the 2nd CWSSP in mobilizing rural communities, changing personal hygiene behavior, equity and transparency in selection process etc. have prompted the provincial and local governments to adopt this approach to other rural development interventions as well.

As the project scales up, this new rural development model will spread across more than 60 LAs in 3 PC areas, transferring its benefits geographically, reinforcing its sustainability, and strengthening it as a powerful force for positive change in the Sri Lankan public service.

### **Conclusion**

Compared to centralized, project oriented approach, decentralization of project implementation is a slow process which needs more effort and resources at the initial stages. PCs and LAs are generally constrained by lack of resources and manpower and often work under pressure to fulfill their obligations to the constituents. A project of this nature adds more pressure to those institutions. However, benefits derived by decentralization of RWSS implementation to PC and LA are considered immense. Substantial focus on water and sanitation is a prime consideration among number of other benefits such as enhanced ability to handle future RWSS projects with own expertise and resources, faster decision making process and conflict resolution ability etc. are inevitable due to PC/LA involvement. Although some reluctance was evident at the beginning due to lack of human and other resources, participating PCs/LAs have undertaken the task of RWSS project implementation successfully. Lesson learnt is that with clear strategies and commitment of participating stakeholders, inherent weaknesses in the public sector can be overcome.

There was a risk of experiencing political interference at the time of decentralizing the project implementation to local levels, since the PCs and LAs are under political leadership. However, the project received substantial support from political leadership. There was very little or no political interference was observed during project implementation. Clear and transparent policies, timely and systematic project awareness programs and effective coordination at

all levels of project implementation have contributed to this achievement.

Rural communities were able to learn the procurement process within a short period of time and procured high valued construction materials including PVC pipes and fittings at relatively low prices, compared to conventional procurement procedures by public enterprises. It was further stressed that the community based procurement was successful and private sector enterprises including large scale PVC manufacturers have recognized the CBOs as potential customers.

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