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Decentralised intersectoral rural water supply and sanitation provision: Lessons learned from Zambia

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The integrated, inter-sectoral approach to rural water supply and sanitation provision adopted under Zambia's Water, Sanitation and Health/Hygiene Education (WASHE) strategy has had limited success in delivering sustainable services. Given this context, the Government of the Republic of Zambia has recently proposed a new institutional structure and strategy under the National Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme. While the new strategy has significant potential for better planning, implementation and performance monitoring, it is heavily dependent on effective decentralisation, which is moving very slowly. It also threatens to undo the positive gains established by a widespread understanding of the need for an interdisciplinary approach to water, sanitation and hygiene provision.

Introduction

The promotion of decentralisation has been prevalent throughout low-income countries, as is clearly apparent from a brief analysis of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in Africa which reveals that local governance is a key area within the good governance agenda (ODI, 2002). Furthermore, the ODI Water Policy Brief on PRSPs highlights that "the local governance agenda is central to the critical issues of decentralized service-delivery, grass-root accountability and the newer focus on regeneration of local economies through relevant partnerships amongst local government bodies, CBOs, NGOs, private sector and central government agencies". There is also increased promotion of inter-sectoral approaches at a global level which improves common understanding among stakeholders and "strengthens structures for decentralised decision making".

As part of the launch of the Water and Sanitation Sector Reforms in 1993 and the adoption of the National Water Policy in 1994 the government of the Republic of Zambia adopted the Water, Sanitation and Health/Hygiene Education (WASHE) strategy in all activities related to the provision of rural water supply and sanitation services. It is a people oriented, inter-sectoral and integrated approach to planning, implementation, operation and maintenance.

The basic principles of WASHE can be summarised as:

1. Integration of water, sanitation and health/hygiene education (this implies giving all the three components equal emphasis and priority);
2. Promotion of collaboration and coordination among actors;
3. Promotion of community management of water supply and sanitation; and
4. Promotion of gender equity and management of facilities.

The main elements of the strategy were:

- establishment and development of intersectoral district committees popularly known as D-WASHEs; and
- formation and training of village water committees, called V-WASHEs.

Under the WASHE strategy the D-WASHE committee, a sub-committee of the District Development Coordination Committee (DDCC), performs the function of providing rural water supply and sanitation services. The Council Secretary or the Town Clerk is the chairperson, and the Director of Works and the District Planning Officer are members. Other members include the heads of the following line ministry departments: Education, Health, Community Development, Water Affairs and Agriculture. In addition, NGO representatives and one other relevant district official are invited.

The future institutional framework for rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) was formally adopted by the Government in November 2004 and sets out the institutional basis for the National Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (NRWSSP) 2006-2015. The framework devolves water supply functions to local authorities in accordance with the 1991 Local Government Act, the 1994 National Water Policy, the 1997 Water and Sanitation Act, and the Decentralization Policy of 2002. Under this new institutional framework, responsibility for delivery of water and sanitation services, as well as the necessary funding, will be devolved from central government to the local authorities. Overall district rural water supply and sanitation priorities will be set by elected representatives (Councilors) and the RWSS Unit of the district council will replace the D-WASHE when decentralization is completed. The management of the NRWSSP is anchored on the successful operationalisation of the institutional framework.

Overall objectives of this paper

- To evaluate the successes and limitations of the inter-sectoral and integrated approach adopted in rural water supply and sanitation provision in Zambia based on the UNICEF's experience throughout the country.
- To compare the D-WASHE arrangement and newly adopted institutional setup and to identify the opportunities and threats posed by the latter.
- To draw conclusions and make recommendations in relation to the Zambia experience that may be relevant to other low-income countries.

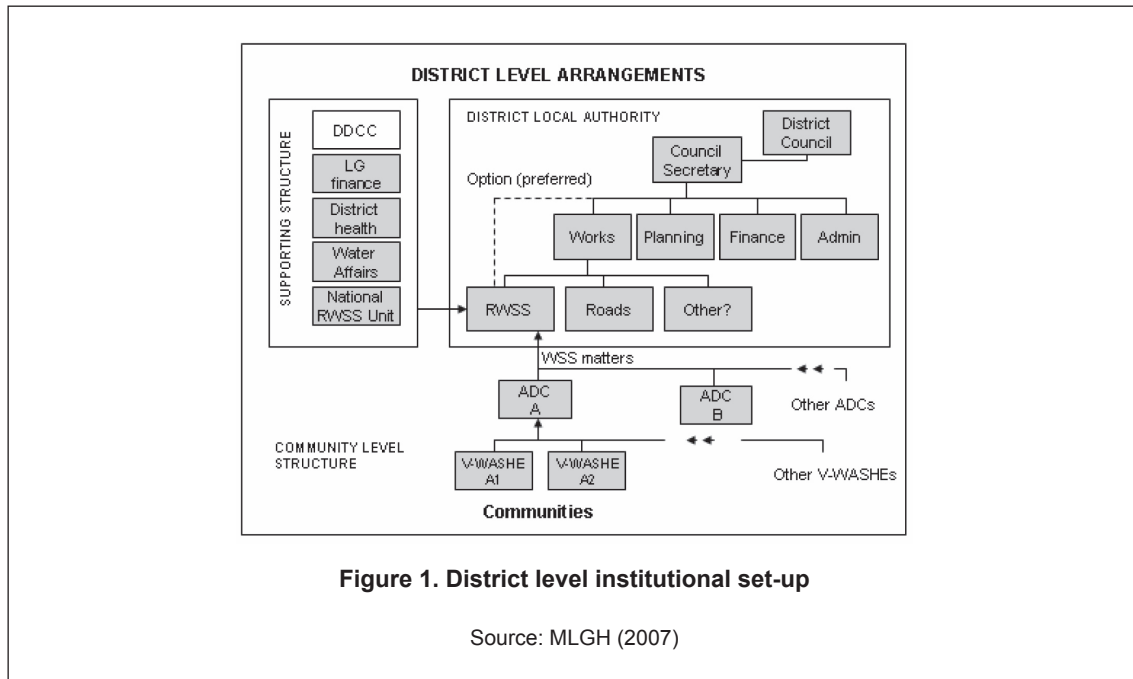
Successes and limitations of the inter-sectoral, integrated approach

The inter-sectoral, integrated approach's foremost success is the increased collaboration stemming from the multi-departmental membership of the D-WASHE committees, which minimizes competition, conflict and duplication of efforts among stakeholders. The leveraging of financial and structural resources, experiences and information creates synergies that invariably increase efficiency and effectiveness of interventions. However, the very advantages of this approach assumed a cohesive and systematic stage for stakeholders to conduct their business of delivering rural water supply and sanitation services. Coordination of stakeholders proved to be a major challenge and continues to be a challenge at all levels ranging from community, sub-district, district, provincial and national levels.

The lack of proper coordination and collaboration between the line ministries at national and provincial level does little to provide a unified platform for meaningful collaboration at district level. Members of the D-WASHE committee owe their allegiance and first call of duty to their respective line ministry departments and their supervisors. The town clerk, the district planner and the council treasurer have little or no control over the members. The council secretaries, although given the mandate to be custodians of the programme at district level, lack the institutional and legal backing to do this effectively as both the D-WASHE and District Development Co-ordination Committee (DDCC) are not legal entities. The committee is more often than not a loosely coordinated body, thereby losing most of the intended benefits described in the preceding paragraph. This means that the assumed leveraging of resources does not develop synergies to their potential. Worse still, lack of capacity in the RWSS Unit of the Ministry of Local Government Housing (MLGH) to coordinate, supervise and monitor the D-WASHE often resulted in failure to account and report on the use of project funds and sometimes in misapplication and embezzlement of project funds and materials. Under the current arrangement, therefore, the D-WASHE is not in general an ineffective vehicle for delivering water and sanitation services to rural communities.

Comparative analysis of the current and future strategy

The proposed institutional framework stipulated by the NRWSSP devolves water supply functions to local authorities in accordance with the 1991 Local Government Act, the 1994 National Water Policy, the 1997 Water and Sanitation Act, and the Decentralization Policy of 2002. Under this new institutional framework, service provision as well as the necessary funding, will be devolved from central government to the local authorities. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed institutional set-up at district level. Planning and budgeting will be based on a bottom up and demand driven system originating in village development committees. Effective management of the NRWSSP is dependent on the successful operationalisation of this institutional framework, yet it will take a long time before decentralization can be completed. At present most local authorities do not have a department or unit for rural water supply and sanitation. In the interim, it's proposed that the D-WASHE should continue assisting the local authorities in the management of their rural water supply and sanitation services.



The main constraints of the current D-WASHE arrangement are the difficulties in co-ordination and accountability, as described above. However, the proposed arrangement under the NRWSSP offers a more formal approach for service provision in the sub-sector. For all its propositions, meaningful decentralization is key to the successful operationalisation of the NRWSSP. However, the decentralisation process is moving very slowly, and the delegation of responsibilities for the provision of water supply and sanitation to local authorities needs to be accompanied with the proportionate allocation of resources to enable the local authorities to build capacities and deliver services. The policy clearly highlights this need and it remains to be seen if government and cooperating partners (CPs) will remain committed to fund the local authorities and that this will be done in a timely and consistent manner. When decentralization is completed, the line ministry departments will become integral parts of the local authority from which the RWSS Unit will draw its membership. Basically, the core technical staff will now belong to the local authority which will improve coordination, control and supervision.

Theme/Issue	Current (D-WASHE)		Future (RWSS)	
	Positive (+)	Negative (-)	Positive (+)	Negative (-)
Institutional	Inter-sectoral	Weak coordination	Decentralised	Resistance to change Institutional vacuum (sector responsibilities not clarified or met)
Technology	Handpump standardization for spare parts	Unaffordable to communities O&M of India MkII is cumbersome	Research & Development for alternative technologies	Funding towards R&D and time it takes to test new technologies
Community Involvement	Ownership encouraged through participation	Fragmented approaches by various facilitators in the sector	Clear guidelines for community participation (NRWSSP)	Uncertain commitment to implement the guidelines
Finance	Funds for water and sanitation clearly separated from other local authority funds for inter-sectoral use	Poor accountability of D-WASHE and financial misappropriation commonplace	Investment plan exists through the NRWSSP, with clear accountability for District Councils	CPs & Govt may not be able to raise & disburse funds as planned
Monitoring	Links with education, health etc.	Inconsistent and dependent on pro-active D-WASHE members	National IMS co-ordinated and consistent approach	Govt and CP commitment to implement IMS uncertain

Table 1 summarises the key negative and positive aspects of the two strategies. The proposed strategy under the NRWSSP has significant potential to lead to more effective rural water supply and sanitation provision in Zambia. This should, at least in theory, lead to better financial management and accountability. The development of a unified monitoring system and the development of indicators to be used by all actors, as stipulated by the NRWSSP, coupled with the capacity building activities for districts, should also lead to better planning, implementation and measurement of achievements. However, this will only be realized if government, and indeed the cooperating partners, follow through with commitments to make resources available to finalise the Information Management System (IMS) and to ensure its sustained operation. Perhaps the greatest threats of the new RWSS strategy are that it reduces the emphasis on hygiene and health education, which is inherent in the D-WASHE strategy but less apparent under RWSS; and it demotes the importance of an integrated, inter-sectoral approach to water supply and sanitation.

Conclusions

The WASHE strategy has had limited effectiveness, primarily due to poor co-ordination and lack of legal status. While the new strategy proposed under the NRWSSP has much potential to lead to better planning, implementation and monitoring or performance, it is heavily dependent on effective decentralisation and sufficient capacity at national level to support this process, both of which are currently lacking. It also threatens to reduce the importance of hygiene and negate the advantages of inter-sectoral programming. If other countries are to successfully implement integrated, inter-sectoral rural water, sanitation and hygiene provision it is essential that multi-department planning bodies have clear legal status and accountability.

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