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**TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
AND RESILIENT WASH SERVICES**

**Impact of curbing political interference in community
water supply services, Blantyre, Malawi**

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Many quarters of development sections are increasingly calling for developmental participation of local people and community organisations in the design and implementation of service delivery models. The school of thought has shifted from the conventional “need based” endeavours to more “asset based” approach that try to understand how best to leverage the existing social and material capital for development and social change. The process of establishing a Water Users Association as a community management model for local water service delivery in low income area of Ndirande-Malabada, turned to be a challenge due to political interference on kiosk management. However through the application of various strategies it helped to form a WUA which is yielding significant results like improving water level of service from 54% to 98% within a period 18 months. This paper illustrates the strategies applied and the short-term results being realised through the WUA model in Ndirande-Blantyre, Malawi.

Introduction

For several decades, participatory development (commonly referred to as Community Participation) has been the staple of development theory and practice. More quarters of the development sector are increasingly calling for greater participation of local people and community organisations in the design and implementation of service delivery models that directly affect the well-being of the communities, (White, 2002). Based on increasing recognition that top down, technocrats’ forms of development imposed on diverse local realities often result in failures, a new and inspirational philosophy has emerged in its place which purports that local people understand their own needs and what is likely to work and not work.

The schools of thought have shifted the conversation from the “need based “endeavours to more “asset based” approaches that try first to understand how best to leverage the existing social and material capital for developmental and social change. This way of involving local people is often considered cost-effective in terms of reduced capital costs, increased investment in operations and maintenance and thus greater sustainability; and finally, that poor people can then have what every donor funded project has been trying to provide for years in the power to direct their course of their own economic and social development, (White,2002).

Despite the success stories of the WUA model in other parts of Malawi, one big challenge emerged in Ndirande-Malabada to initiate a WUA due to heavy political interference in the management of communal water kiosks. The malpractice delayed the formation of the WUA in the area to empower locals on operation and maintenance of water kiosks for over 7 years.

Therefore, this paper briefly outline Water for People’s experiences on local strategies of curbing political interference at community water supply services and further shares the short-term results and key lessons learnt through the processed.

Background information

Blantyre is the commercial city of Malawi with an estimated population of about 1,000,000 people with growth rate of 3.8% per annum (NSO, 2008). Over 70 % of the city residents are found in the informal

settlement areas also known as Low Income Areas (LIA) characterised by lack of planning and poor provision of basic services. Communal water kiosks remain the main source of safe water to the LIA residents as many do not have their own taps. Though historically there were kiosks serving in the 21 LIAs of Blantyre, many problems were observed due to no proper management models for the communal water kiosks. Until 2009, the communal water kiosks were being managed by different operators ranging from political party leaders/committees, influential community leaders and NGOs. Ndirande-Malabada was one of the LIAs which was planned to have a WUA as proper management model in 2009, however due to political interference it proved to be a challenge through several attempts. The party committees were directly managing the communal water kiosks and were using the funds from water sales to sponsor party activities at grass root level. The location has a population of about 90,000 people and majority of them are tenants who cannot afford own water connection hence rely on communal water kiosks for safe water supply.

Between 2009 and 2014, Water for People-Malawi in partnership with Blantyre Water Board (BWB) and with financial support from European Union (EU) and European Investment Bank (EIB) implemented a Water Supply and Sanitation Project targeting the LIAs of Blantyre. One key component of the project was to facilitate the formation of the sustainable management model for communal water kiosks to cover all the informal settlement areas. During this period, 9 Water Users Associations (WUA) were successfully established across 20 LIAs to manage water kiosks; A WUA is delegated management model entrusted with the responsibility of operating and maintaining communal water kiosks for the benefit of the whole community (Malawi Government 2009).

However, the process failed upon several attempts to form a WUA in Ndirande-Malabada from 2009 till 2016 due to heavy political interference and strong resistance from the grassroots party leaders. As a result, a number of challenges were observed in the location due to the absence of a formal communal water kiosks management model as follows;

- Unregulated water tariff at communal water kiosks as kiosks were being managed by different operators (political party committees/traditional local leader committees); And some operators were charging high tariff, forcing some communities to be collecting water from unprotected sources (Water for People Baseline Report,2009)
- Increased non-functionality of communal water kiosks due to non-payment of water bills to the service authority (BWB); About 41% of the 73-communal water kiosk had problems/disconnected (Water for People Annual FLOW Results,2014)
- Accumulated water bills to the service authority of more than 18,000USD from 2009 to 2015
- Vandalism of communal water kiosks to due poor community participation in kiosk management.

Social movement

In a bid to solve the communal water kiosk management crisis in Ndirande-Malabada LIA, Water for People in partnership with BWB and Consumer Rights Group (CAMA) with financial support from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) implemented a governance project aimed at strengthening transparency and accountability in water supply service in WUAs of peri urban Blantyre and in addition to set up a formal management model for kiosk management in Ndirande-Malabada from 2012 to 2014. The project used different methods to bring sanity in the management of communal water kiosks in Ndirande-Malabada through the application of Political Economy Analysis (PEA) which helped to analyse the key actors in the change resistance to WUA formation and their interest. The following were the key strategies;

Use of media advocacy/investigative journalism

The project partnered with electronic and print media houses to help sensitise the communities on the need to have a WUA in the area as a proper model for improved water supply service delivery. The media houses were also used to expose the malpractice of party politicisation of kiosk management through articles aired/printed in newspapers. The approach named and shamed the key political party leaders behind the malpractice which meant loss of popularity of the party and bad image at national and international level.

Information sharing/development of clear IEC materials

The project noted that the communities were deprived of key information about the WUA model and its advantages if allowed to be applied in the area hence could not exert pressure to the politicians to provide

equal opportunity to other stakeholders in operation and management of kiosks in the area. The development of Information Education and Communication (IEC) materials with strong messages on dangers of politicising water services helped to empower the local people and started demanding for a change in the management model.

Networking and partnerships

Through the collaboration and networking with the consumer rights group (CAMA), the project helped the community members to eliminate unjust hierarchies of knowledge, power and economic distribution. This perspective identifies the goal of participation as an empowering process for people to handle challenges and influence direction of their own lives.

Continuous engagement of local politicians

Despite the non-responsiveness from the politicians on the call to enable locals participate in the management of communal water supply services in the area, the project continued to engage them as a key stakeholder in the change process. Both formal and informal meetings have been organised for the past 7 years where information was being shared on the need to have a neutral manager for the water kiosks which also helped in the gradual process of changing the mind set and behaviour of the local politicians towards instituting a sustainable communal water kiosk management model in the area. The meetings also involved other key stakeholders like religious leaders and traditional leaders who represent the needs of the locals.

In May 2016, A WUA model was finally accepted and formed in Ndirande-Malabada constituency to oversee the daily operations of all the communal water kiosks in the area

Monitoring progress of Water Service Delivery

Monitoring is a cornerstone of sustainable service delivery and is a vital tool for improvements and innovations at all levels. Water for People collects data annually at community level to review progress at both macro and micro level, process lessons learned and identify trends.

One key component that is measured is water Level of Service (LoS); Measuring the extent to which the existence of an improved water point is meeting government standards.

While traditionally water coverage metrics have been characterised as simply the presence or absence of an improved or unimproved water point (Based primarily on the criteria established by the Joint Monitoring Programme). At Water for People we go beyond this to assess other contributing factors which can affect access to safe water in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

It is against this background that Water for People has also been measuring progress on the LoS in Ndirande-Malabada during pre-WUA era and post-WUA era to gauge the effectiveness of the delegated management model after eliminating party politicisation on water service delivery.

There are 8 core indicators which are weighed to measure progress towards LoS at communal water kiosks;

Table 1. Level of service /water point/system possible point		
1.	Water Point/System is improved	1
2.	The source of the water point/System is protected	1
3.	The water point/System is good physical condition and is functional	1
4.	Number of users meet standards	1
5.	Water is available on the day of visit	1
6.	Water point/System not out of service for 1 day or less A month in the last year	1
7.	Water point/System has adequate quantity	1
8.	Water Point has adequate water quality	1
TOTAL		8

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The analysed indicators are presented on a weighted scale of 0 to 8 representing the LoS being provided by the water points/systems in an area as outlined below;

- 0 = No improved water point/system, 1=Inadequate water Level of Service, 2-5= Basic Water Level of Service, 6-7=Intermediate Water Level of Service and 8=High Water Level of Service.

Methodology

Data is collected with support from well-trained extension workers who work as enumerators.

Research design and data collection

The primary data is collected through the use of mobile phones with an app called **AKVO FLOW** on which survey questions are installed units.

Monitoring results

The results have been displayed in 2 folds before a WUA was instituted (political interference era) and after WUA (non-political interference era) was instituted;

- In 2014 (only 49%) of the total water points found in Ndirande-Malabada were in good physical condition and in 2017 (97 %) of the water points were found to be in good physical condition as the WUA prioritise maintenance of the system using the funds realised from water sales
- In 2014 about 82% of the water points were meeting government standards (Number of users per system) and in 2017 all the improved water points were meeting government standards as the number of functional kiosks has increased after WUA formation.
- In 2014 (53.8%) of the water points had water the time we visited them and in 2017 (59%) had water.
- Overall Level of services has improved from 53.8% in 2014 to 98.6% in 2017

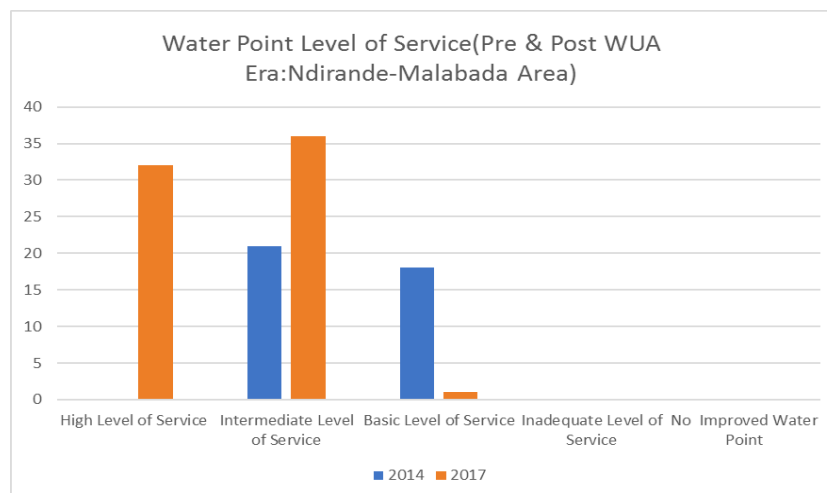


Figure 1. Water Point Level of Service in Ndirande-Malabada

Source: Water for People AKVO FLOW Results-2014 and 2017

Results and discussions

In 2017, the FLOW monitoring results reveals that 97% of the water points were now in good physical condition and functional as opposed to the pre-WUA era (2014) when only 49% were in good physical condition. One of the key responsibility of a WUA is to make sure that they maintain all the communal water kiosks to be in good condition and not compromise on service delivery. During the pre-WUA era, when politicians were managing the kiosks no attention was made towards the maintenance of the kiosks as the money meant for kiosk maintenance was used to sponsor party activities. Furthermore, the elimination of

the politicisation of the management of kiosks meant increased inclusion of all stakeholders hence reduced cases of kiosk vandalism due to increased participation of community people.

In 2014, the monitoring results indicated that 82% of the water points were not meeting government standards in many aspects ranging from the number of users per point to the distance that one is supposed to walk to access water from an improved water source. Before a WUA was formed in the area not many kiosks were in good physical condition and functional hence the few kiosks which were in good condition and functional were being used by many more users. The improvements that the WUA has made in maintaining the water kiosks has translated in the improvements of the water point meeting government standards.

Overall, LoS has greatly improved in the area from 53.8% (2014) to 98.6% (2017) within a period of about 18 months after a WUA took over the management of communal water kiosks. In 2017, Ndirande-Malabada was also got the highest score in terms of LoS among all the 10 WUAs operating in Blantyre (Water for People FLOW monitoring results, 2017).

Before the WUA took over the management of communal water kiosks in the area, the previous political party committee operators accumulated a lot of unpaid bills with the service authority. Agreements with the water service authority stipulates that when a WUA is formed to manage communal water kiosks in a certain jurisdiction the WUA shall also settle all the areas' unpaid bills. Ndirande-Malabada inherited bill arrears amounting to 18,000 USD which they managed to settle within a period of 18 months. This is a result of increased transparency and accountability as a WUA management model promotes the involvement of a variety of stakeholders at community level hence minimal chances of public resources mismanagement.

Furthermore, the WUA has also provided formal employment to the residents who are working as water sellers, plumbers and book keepers. In total, there are 116 employees in the Ndirande-Malabada WUA and 95% are women, hence the elimination of party politicisation of water kiosk operation has also helped to economically empower women.

Conclusion

The elimination of political interference in the management of communal water kiosks promotes sustainable management of water systems as it enhances transparency and accountability in the utilisation of public resources. Furthermore, the short-term results realised from the arrangement enhances community cohesion as each stakeholder would want to be associated with the positives results realised from the approach. Water for People in collaboration with other WASH players will utilise the results to completely eliminate political interference in water services in Blantyre.

Lessons learnt

- Mindset change/community transformation in WASH interventions requires more than just classroom training
- Governance changes in WASH cannot be measured within a short-term project period and requires massive investment as well.
- Strategic networks in WASH are key to successful project implementation

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