



Sustaining supplies

Supporting community-based providers of rural water

Service providers and the challenges they face

In rural areas, non-state providers of rural water services typically consist of civil society organizations, who in turn support community-based management by others. Most are volunteers supporting all components of service delivery, from design to minor handpump repairs. Local government agencies or small private entrepreneurs may also provide specific support services, such as operating and maintaining standpipes, water kiosks, tankers and handpumps.

There is much debate over the effectiveness and sustainability of community-based management, although there is often no alternative. Most community-based providers can only effectively manage their water supply services with some form of external assistance.

Key factors challenging community-based services providers are:

- limitations within the community – including political or social conflict, limited capacity to manage technical and financial aspects, low revenue from tariffs, lack of financial transparency; and
- constraints external to the community – including political interference, poor design and implementation, limited availability of spares, weak policy and legal frameworks.

A significant constraint to community-based management is the failure to support communities in dealing with major system repairs, extension and upgrading, or social conflicts.

Headline facts

- When the State fails to deliver, the rural poor typically receive water supply services with the help of civil society organizations, often relying on community-based forms of management.
- Community-based providers struggle to effectively manage and sustain their services without external support. Such support is required both at system level (for example providing technical assistance, training and monitoring) and beyond (such as ensuring an enabling policy framework, or protecting water resources).
- In rural Ghana, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe, experience has shown that effective support requires joint agency planning and implementation, not only at national level but also at the operational level. This is particularly important in decentralized government structures.
- As countries strive towards achieving MDG targets, construction of rural water supply systems is likely to accelerate. Mechanisms and capacities to support provision of these systems are essential, if investments are to be sustainable.



Ongoing support increases the impact of interventions

A WaterAid study of 48 community organizations managing their own water supplies (ranging from handpumps to piped supplies), revealed that continued and on-going external support generally increased the impact of interventions and their sustainability over time. In at least one case, support also helped to sustain hygiene behaviour improvements.

System-level Support to Community-based Service Providers

Community-based providers (committees, operators and managers) need direct support to perform effectively. In many countries this is the responsibility of municipal or district government, often provided by ‘circuit riders’, promoters, extension workers, or technical advisors. A range of typical areas of support and associated roles is given in Table 1.

Conflict resolution often proves to be the main area requiring external support. Addressing challenges to a local committee’s authority, elite capture of system management, or disputes over ownership and pollution of water resources, requires a supporter with strong facilitation skills and the trust of the community, ideally backed-up by regulation and local byelaws.

Whole life cycle support

Rural water service provision is much more than designing and constructing a water system, training a committee and an operator. System operation and maintenance, extension, upgrading and eventual replacement are all key components of ensuring a water supply that is technically and institutionally sustainable. Community-based providers need to be involved in the whole service delivery cycle, enabled by support mechanisms.

Governance in provision

Service provision also includes good financial management; to make budgets, establish a tariff system, collect fees and keep financial records. It requires byelaws that stipulate rights and responsibilities of users and committees. Decisions about extending or upgrading service levels are required, ideally the responsibility of a water committee. Effective and transparent service provision requires a clear separation of function between those who govern (such as a water committee) and those who provide (an operator) the service: both will require external support to ensure that the full service delivery cycle is maintained.

Complementary, flexible support

Support to community-based providers should complement their roles, not replace them. This means that the roles and responsibilities of community-based providers and other support institutions are clearly defined and agreed – ideally being included in national policy and legal frameworks.

Support must also be flexible, both in form and duration, to suit the technology, level of service, size and complexity of the management system, capacity of those managing, national standards and social dynamics in the community.

Pre- and post-construction support

Support in the design and construction of water systems, typically provided by projects, is usually successful. To ensure ongoing sustainability of rural water systems, more attention is now focused on pre- and post-construction support, which include water users in participatory planning and decision making. Strategies and programmes should consider the full service delivery cycle, from design and construction through to O&M, extension and replacement.

Table 1. Areas and functions of support¹

Thematic area Roles and functions	Technical	Administrative and financial	Legal	Organization and management	Sanitation and health	Environment
Technical assistance	Assist in design, maintenance, repairs, system expansion, upgrading.	Assist in budgets, accounting, setting water tariffs. Check auditors accounts.	Advise community on legal issues, norms and standards.	Arbitration and conflict resolution. Advice on (re)construction of the water committee.	Assist in the implementation of latrines.	Advise on water source protection and reforestation of micro-watershed.
Training	O&M training for caretakers.	Training book-keepers and treasurers.	Training municipal governments in legislation and system ownership	Training water committees in management, planning, running meetings and general assemblies.	Hygiene promotion training.	Training in reforestation of micro-watershed.
Monitoring and information collection	Monitoring system performance.	Monitoring financial management.	Monitoring the water committee’s legal status.	Monitoring status and performance of the water committee.	Collecting information on hygienic practices.	Collecting information on household solid waste disposal
External co-ordination and facilitation	Advise on private companies who can provide reliable services.	Advise on loan applications. Organize community fund-raising events.	Assist with legal status of community organizations.	Encourage and increase confidence of the water committee.	Seek specific advice on health concerns.	Connect the community with the forestry department, to reforest the watershed.

¹ The table combines support offered to water supply, sanitation and hygiene interventions. At system level in rural settings, this may prove to be more effective than providing discrete support to separate interventions.

Support Beyond System Level

Community-based providers typically operate in isolation from the external environment. Providers, and those giving external support, will operate most effectively within a responsive and enabling political, legal and institutional environment – with service provision linked, for example, to policy reform and decentralization processes. The overall process should be led by central government, in collaboration with donors, NGOs, the private sector and associations representing civil society groups.

Forms of engagement

Community-based service providers are often recognized – albeit informally – as the provider of rural water services. To stimulate the enabling environment, simple recognition is not enough. Other forms of government engagement can support increasing levels of support. For community-based service providers, forms of engagement may include the following:

- recognition: formal recognition of the right of community-service providers to provide services;
- dialogue: between government and representatives of community-based service providers, identifying methods and systems for participation of community-based institutions in service delivery;
- collaboration: longer term agreements between government and community-based service providers, such as MoUs and approaches to scaling-up services;
- contracting: longer term contracts for service provision, with adequate incentives; and
- regulation: setting minimum standards of service quality and performance of the service provider; supporting self-regulation, informing and empowering consumers.

Examples of such forms of engagement can be found in Sansom (2006).

Policy and legal frameworks

To effectively support community-based service providers, rural water policy should define the typical roles, responsibilities, rights and obligations of the providers themselves, as well as the role of the support agency in relation to providers. Supporting policy documents can more generally stipulate norms and standards for water supply provision; considering for example cost recovery, technical options, water quality, supply chains and specific support mechanisms for community service.

Governments are often willing for communities to operate and maintain rural water services, but are reluctant to legalize water committees and acknowledge them as partners in service delivery. Legal status not only gives community service providers recognition and credibility, that also allows them to engage in contracts, apply for loans and have their performance regulated.

Recognized role of village-level representatives, Zimbabwe

Under a decentralized form of government in Zimbabwe, management of rural water supplies is, in theory if not in practice, the responsibility of Rural District Councils (RDCs). These RDCs are tasked with establishing district-level water and sanitation councils, to which the village-level Water Point Committee reports. All reporting is to pass back, through district- and provincial-level systems, to the national body responsible for coordination of the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme.

Financing Support Services

Support services need to be paid for. Resolving issues such as who pays for which aspects of the support, cost-sharing options, revenue mechanisms and the regulation of prices, all need to be accounted for and designed-in, to ensure sustainable financial systems.

Financial sustainability is often jeopardized by the fact that not all costs are taken into account. A project approach to rural water supply tends to account for direct costs (such as spares and repairs), while ignoring costs associated with creating and sustaining an enabling environment for ongoing support services. Community-based providers, reluctant to charge realistic costs, may seek to minimize expenditure, even to the extent of limiting maintenance and ultimately the ability to upgrade, extend and repair systems. Increasing donor harmonization may go some way to ensure that adequate funds are allocated to support services, as part of SWAps (Sector Wide Approaches) or basket funding.

Technical Sustainability

Broken down water pumps are a familiar sight across parts of rural Africa and Asia. Poor maintenance, limited finances to carry out minor repairs or skills to resolve major problems, and no access to spares, are just some of the causes of failure. Communities often become reliant on another donor to rehabilitate the failed system or, more commonly, construct a new one. Overcoming such dependency requires the right choice of technology (simple, affordable, locally maintainable) initially, backed-up by systems that ensure availability of spares when needed, with well trained and resourced mechanics.

Area mechanics, Ghana

Ghana's national Community Water and Sanitation Agency supports training of area mechanics. While community-based caretakers deal with minor repairs and periodic maintenance, these area mechanics support in providing spares and carrying out major repairs. To limit the number of trained mechanics leaving the area, CWSA provides them with periodic re-training.

A Framework for Monitoring

Effective support to community-based rural water providers requires adequate monitoring, both of the state of the service and the performance of the service provider. Monitoring should enable local-level decision making and action. Findings should also feed into national or regional management information systems, for data analysis and to enable appropriate long-term planning and investment. In reality, monitoring is one of the most difficult activities to undertake; requiring appropriate procedures (ideally standardized), together with regulatory capacity and competence to take action.

Financial monitoring at the local level, Honduras

In Honduras, one model of independent support service providers (Técnico de Operación y Mantenimiento, TOM) helps the water board calculate tariffs, and audits the accounts. These annual audits both check accuracy in book-keeping and encourage financial transparency and accountability. Community members also gain confidence in the system of tariff collection and expenditure.

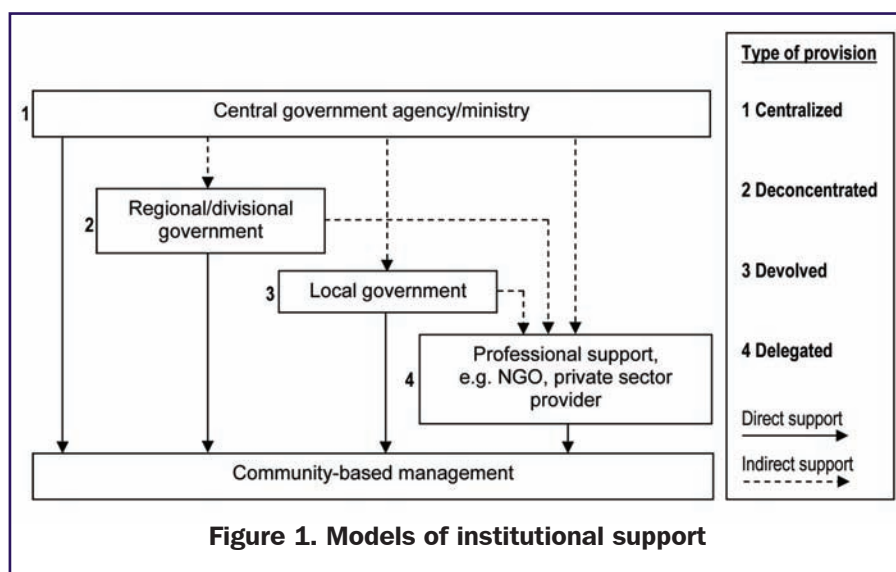
Key Lessons

The need to support community-based providers is well recognized and many of the required systems, capacities, institutions and regulations are known. Putting support into practice remains the challenge, requiring more attention on shared processes, to introduce and implement the support effectively.

Support should be a two-way process. Service providers also need to articulate their demands and strengthen their negotiating position with governments and the private sector. Water committees can enhance their capacity with greater access to information and by joining associations who represent their interests.

To deal with the lack of capacity at community level, good professional support should be more readily available. This could be in the form of NGOs supporting community groups, or using the local private sector for major repairs. See Figure 1.

Scaling up community-based management requires a programmatic approach, in place of a project-based approach. In aiming for comprehensive water services, this approach seeks to provide total coverage to an area, that will be sustainable indefinitely. Such services look beyond implementation to long-term support and wide-ranging assistance, complementing the role of the community-based providers.



This briefing note considers the challenges facing community-managed provision of rural water services. It identifies areas and functions of effective external support to enhance the sustainability of water services supplied by these providers.

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