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Communication within multi-stakeholder platforms in water resource management: Ethiopian case study

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Despite Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) being advocated as a sustainable approach to water resource management, it is not clear how to implement it. Participatory management has been advocated by scholars and leading agencies, but apart some tools that can address involvement in a single sector (e.g. irrigation), models to implement a multi-stakeholder approach are still under development. Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) seem to be a potential candidate for an organizational structure which could support this challenge. This paper analyses if there is the capacity among stakeholders to handle water-related information, in order to support a meaningful participation within the MSPs, by investigating the Ethiopian context as a case study.

Introduction

The Global Water Partnership (GWP), defined IWRM as '*a process which promotes the co-ordinated development and management of water, land and related resources in order to maximise the resultant economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems*', emphasizing that water should be managed in a '*basin-wide context*', with principles of good governance and public participation (Jønch-Clausen, 2004). Sound IWRM needs the involvement of different stakeholders, from the community to governments, but it is not clear how this involvement should occur. For example, stakeholder involvement in decision making is one of the UK government targets, but it is not easy to achieve in practice (De Garis et al., 2003). During consultation in water resource planning in the Thames catchment, despite identifying stakeholders and holding meetings, there was a lack of participation. The lack of interest was due to considerable ignorance of the complexity and importance of the water-resource situation and '*difficulty in communicating technical complex arguments*' (ibid).

This is even more challenging in developing countries, where the water market is characterised by a huge number of small and informal stakeholders, centralised governments and high transaction costs (IWMI 2007). Weak governance is a common obstacle for IWRM, alongside different ethnic groups causing barriers for communication, a low sense of community and willingness to participate (IWMI, 2006). Tools, such as SARAR, PHAST, PRA etc (DWAF, 2001), are generally used in water, sanitation or agricultural projects to support community involvement, but are mostly sector oriented and do not sustain a broad stakeholder involvement, with a 'horizontal' multi-sector stakeholder view and a 'vertical' one with the participation of governments and water users. Among the participatory guidelines, an organizational structure appears to have potential for stakeholders' involvement: Multi-Stakeholders Platforms (MSPs).

Methodology

The research aimed at analysing the understanding water resource management concepts by stakeholders to enable effective participation and took place in Ethiopia, in 2007. Informants were selected on their importance and influence (though perspectives changed during the fieldwork) and to have a multi-sector sample, within the practical constraints of availability of people and travel during the rainy season. The data and analysis were cross checked by using a variety of tools, by asking interviewees to confirm the interview notes and by a focus group made up of 30% of the interviewees discussing the results.

Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSP)

The International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) defines a MSP as a '*negotiation and/or decision making body (voluntary or statutory) comprising different stakeholders who perceive the same resource management problem and realize their interdependence in solving it*' (Moriarty et al, 2005). Faysse (2006), emphasises that MSPs should be seen more as a negotiation body rather than an ideal communication process. Simpunge (2006) carried out an evaluation of the MSPs in South Africa and he wonders if the formation of the '*MSPs is a virtuous act that people will feel pleased to see or a pure political process which rotate around matters of choice and legitimacy*?'

  Faysse summarises two ways of thinking: a 'dialogue' and a 'critical' vision. The first one states that negotiation and discussion is prevented by lack of 'genuine communication', while the second one states that the negotiation process within the platform can lead to negative results, because weaker groups might be forced to accept decisions imposed by more powerful actors, and this would be worse than no participation, because the decision appears as shared consensus. Weaker groups could fear to participate in the platforms, losing the opportunity to express their opinions (Faysse, 2006). It is not clear at what extent the facilitator can participate actively in supporting weak groups as this could lead to a fuzzy facilitator-participant role. Moreover Warner (2005) stresses the concept that MSPs are not the panacea for participatory IWRM, in fact he states that '*MSPs are a beast to which almost mystical powers tend to be attributed, often appearing in policy tales, but as yet rarely spotted in broad daylight. Without a mandate, there is no obligation to do anything with the outcome of all the talk. Without an audience, MSPs are dialogues of the deaf*'.

  In conclusion, from the literature review it is quite clear that there is not a 'best' model for stakeholder involvement in IWRM, but solutions should be shaped on the context. The MSPs seem to be, in any case, the only potential 'candidate', despite weaknesses and criticisms.

Case study

The study focuses on the Berki catchment; the Berki River is shared between two rural *Woredas* (districts): Atsbi-Womberta, (Atsbi) and Kilite-Awlalo (Wukro). Water resources are managed by regional authorities of Tigray with two smaller departments in Atsbi and Wukro.

  GWP established the Ethiopia Country Water Partnership (ECWP) in 2003 to promote and implement IWRM (ECWP, 2005). A Federal Level Steering Committee is composed of government authorities from different sectors such as water, environment, agriculture and regional officers, UN agencies, NGOs (local and international), academic institutions and private sector. Different fora were established at regional, watershed, *Woreda* (district) and *Tabia* (sub-district) levels (ECWP 2005a). A regional technical team was appointed, a multi-sector operational body composed of members of the different regional bureaus and *Woredas* government staff working in different sectors; this is the operational task force at regional and *Woreda* levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Steering Committees (ECWP, 2007)	
Level	**Members of the Steering Committee**
Regional level	Government Authorities from different sectors (Finance, Water, Mines and Energy, Agriculture, Health, Environment, Gender); Academic institutions and research centres; NGOs
Technical Team	Government Authorities from different sectors (e.g. Bureau of Water, Mines and Energy, BoWME); Academic institutions and research centres
Woreda	Government Authorities from different sectors; NGOs
Tabia	Water Users Associations (WUAs); Development Agents (who work directly with the community and then give feedback to the Woredas); Community representatives

Capacity to participate meaningfully to the communication process

Interviewees were asked to express their opinions about strengths and weaknesses of the communication process within the MSP and the clarity of the information content. The interviews results were based on more than 30 interviewees conducted through different methods. Each question was asked to all participants and in turn each person expressed its opinion. Sometimes after an open discussion an agreement was found.

The multi-sector and multi-disciplinary characteristic of these groups helped to get different perspectives and to achieve a common point of view. People appeared willing to participate in the discussion and happy to express their opinions, but people were often unwilling to say if they did not understand particular issues.

Research included open interviews at federal level with government officials and semi-structured interviews with private sector, NGO, government officials and ECWP. At a regional level, there was an open interview with a government official, a semi-structured interview technical team member, a focus group with technical team staff (this was used as a validation tool) and observation of a meeting of seven technical team members (to see the communication process in action.). At the Woreda level, there were two focus groups and two semi-structured interviews with government officials and an open interview with a journalist. The Woreda focus group showed different levels of stakeholder influence to that seen at federal level, even though most topics people thought were relevant were the same at all levels, with a slight preference for theoretical issues at federal level and practical issues locally. One example of differing stakeholder influence was the authority of the Church, where the community, encouraged by the priest, refused to get drinking water from a holy spring, and officials looked for another water source.

Table 2. Perceptions of the communication process within the MSP	
Strengths/ benefits	**Weaknesses/ constraints**
Federal level ▪ Sharing responsibilities ▪ Giving decision power to the community ▪ Getting more information ▪ Improving knowledge about IWRM ▪ Multi-stakeholder contribution ▪ Good because it is based on basin boundaries ▪ All levels are involved (from Federal to the community)	▪ Difficult to gather a huge number of stakeholders/ weak attendance ▪ Weak link between federal and regional level ▪ Short time to dedicate to Berki project (daily activities have higher priorities) ▪ Weak willingness to participate ▪ Institutional discrepancy (water is managed at federal level while land is managed at regional level) ▪ Lack of resources/ lack of time ▪ Lack of water technical experts among Development Agents ▪ Communication is weak – no established formal communication process ▪ Some stakeholders have more power than others ▪ Limitation of technology at Woreda level ▪ Some associations are not institutionalised as Water User Associations (WUA)
Regional and Woreda level ▪ Multi-stakeholder contribution brings a comprehensive picture and better solutions ▪ It encourages discussion ▪ It helps to solve problems in time/ fast and smooth information flow ▪ Technically assists the farmers ▪ Opportunity to exercise PRA tools ▪ Increases stakeholders' capacity/ experience ▪ It easily to reach agreements ▪ Coordination among different sectors ▪ It provides favourable conditions for final users to suggest their alternatives and express concerns ▪ It addresses all stakeholders at all levels: federal, regional, Woredas, Tabias and community ▪ It helps to enhance the implementing capacities of the different committees ▪ Create good opportunities for transparency	▪ Need of more information & education among people to create awareness ▪ Low expansion of infrastructure (roads can be blocked due to rainy season, places no always accessible) ▪ Poor transport availability ▪ The experience in sharing is not very strong, it takes time ▪ Sometimes there is difficulty in understanding the approach and technical issues ▪ Weak trust between Woredas on the use of scarce water resources ▪ Initially low acceptance from the different stakeholders, but not long lasting ▪ Weak regulations and laws ▪ Lack of telephones ▪ No shared work plan with the Regional Level (unexpected visits from the Regional officers) ▪ Difficult to gather all stakeholders at once and consider different needs of the different beneficiaries ▪ Time consuming to reach agreements ▪ Gaps in understanding IWRM within the different committees ▪ Some stakeholders have more influence than others (specifically BoWME and BoARD) ▪ Delays in reporting ▪ In some case willingness to participate is low
Tabia level ▪ It uses local/ traditional communication channels ▪ All the stakeholders are quite satisfied of the existing communication strategy	▪ Communication process is weak and slow ▪ The perceived structure stops at Woreda level - there is no awareness of what happens above ▪ Development Agents are very agriculture-oriented (difficult to communicate other water relates issues) ▪ Content of information often difficult

Catchment as a water resource management unit

During a focus group with representatives from regional and *Woreda* levels, the interviewees perceived 'content' as one of the limits of communication, stating that this is often unclear. To understand how stakeholders perceive IWRM, the author asked if water should be managed at basin level or not and what social and political constraints they could foresee if water resources were managed at basin level. At federal level and regional level most stakeholders (80%) recognise the difficulty harmonising administrative and hydro-geological boundaries, then the rest mentioned lack of expertise, lack of baseline data on water resources and lack of financial resources.

At Woreda and Tabia levels the author was ready to ask the same question with the community, using a picture, enriched with some small images such as the church, the diversion, etc so people could recognise familiar elements. During the focus group different stakeholders from the regional technical committee said the community does not understand the concept of a catchment area, even with pictures. So one basic concept of IWRM is too difficult to be understood locally; how does it affect the communication process?

Conclusions

MSPs can support stakeholder involvement, but it is not sufficient. IWRM is very broad and this characteristic represents its strength and weakness at the same time. In Berki catchment people have difficulty in communicating about technical issues. Also a basic concept of IWRM (the catchment as the water resource management unit) is complicated to understand.

The difficulty of handling technical concepts has been revealed at community and federal level as well. In order to have a genuine participation there is the need to increase awareness and knowledge among stakeholders. But should all stakeholders have an awareness of all the aspects of water resource management? It seems quite a challenging aim. To what extent people should participate?

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