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Community management - sustainability: myth or reality?

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Community management - sustainability: myth or reality?

Grace Waako and May Mwaka, Uganda

It has always been believed and preached that management of facilities and projects by beneficiary communities would instill a sense of ownership and thus ensure their sustainability. To this end over the past decades all project implementers, local governments and NGOs during the course of implementation try to ensure community participation right from project identification through to implementation. They ensure the establishment of community structures, train them to take on this responsibility and facilitate them to manage the schemes on their own after implementation. Participation is achieved in various ways; formation of project management committees, community contributions – financial & physical, and training to instill ownership and responsibility. Statistics in Uganda however show functionality rates below 30% within a year of construction and after. This sets off alarm bells that maybe community management jeopardizes the very sustainability we all seek to achieve. Could this be correct?

Community management here means that beneficiaries of water supply and sanitation services have *responsibility*, *authority* and *control* over the development of these services. *Responsibility* implies that the community takes ownership of the system with all its attendant requirements. The term *authority* means that the community has the legitimate right to make decisions about the systems. By *control*, it means that the community has the power to implement its decisions regarding the system.

Participation of SNV and its role towards sustainability

To that end, an enabling environment for the effective community management of water and environmental sanitation (WES) services has been put in place. National policies and guidelines to ensure this have been enacted, i.e.

- The Water statute (1995) allows for the establishment and gives mandate to community structures at water source level and community level to plan for and manage their water and sanitation facilities
- National water policy (1999) defines responsibility for water resources management and stresses the need for full cost recovery and community management of water supplies
- The more recent rural water and sanitation sector review reaffirms users responsibility for operation and maintenance of water facilities

SNV, in partnership with the European Union, the Government of Uganda (GOU) and districts, are implementing an integrated gravity water and sanitation program within 13 districts of Uganda. The program has 5 major components, namely; capacity building of districts and sub counties, water development, sanitation, gender integration and environment protection within the catchment area. A key role of SNV in the programme is capacity building of partners at the district and the sub-county levels for enhanced performance and sustainability.

SNV's specific roles towards the establishment of functional and sustainable O&M systems are; to develop guidelines for establishment of functional structures from district to beneficiary levels, and develop guidelines for committee selection – composition and representation. SNV is also responsible to produce training manuals, materials and curricula for training of committees in planning, monitoring and O&M, develop formats for verification and monitoring of O&M structures and systems put in place, to be used by the communities as well as the districts. This is done hand in hand with the district officials as part of the capacity building component.

Achievements

In our efforts to facilitate local governments and the communities in our project area we have compiled and developed various options for O&M financing and management structures, which are discussed with the communities during implementation, before projects are handed over. Participatory planning for O&M is now part of the project feasibility and design process as spelt out in terms of reference for the exercise. Thus each project proposal should have a well-detailed O&M plan and procedure for its establishment and operation. Also through joint facilitation and on-the-job training of district water officers, the latter have acquired skills in O&M planning, as well as monitoring.

Challenges

These joint efforts to promote community management have not been easy and the systems put in place not sustainable. They have been characterized by non-functional committees, slow to address problems and repairs. User fee collection dwindles to nothing over a short period. There are no meetings held and no records maintained. Water source areas become bushy and broken taps not replaced; water is continuously flowing.

Case Study: Nganiko Gravity Flow scheme

The scheme is set in Nganiko parish, Nyabbani Sub County of Kamwenge district in western Uganda. Targeted number of beneficiaries is 2,880. The scheme was commissioned and handed over to beneficiaries in September 1999. The scheme is 3.9km with a 50 c.c. reservoir serving 11 taps, including one at the Primary school.

The management structure is composed of a central committee of 13 members, all representatives of the beneficiary community. This committee is responsible for overall management and maintenance of the scheme. At the tap stand level, a committee of five members ensures maintenance of the tap and collection of O&M funds. The central committee reports to the sub-county council.

A major source of funds is user fees that are set at 300/- (17 cents) per household per month. Funds are collected by the tap stand committees, who then submit collections to the scheme treasurer to deposit into the central account. Signatories to the account are the chairperson, secretary and treasurer of the committee

Tap stand committees are also responsible for preventive maintenance at the tap stand. Two scheme attendants/caretakers are employed to carry out preventive maintenance at the source and curative maintenance for the rest of the scheme.

Currently

- The intake area is bushy because the source attendant is never paid
- There is very low user fee collection
- No meetings are held among tap committees, or with communities
- Irregular meetings occur at scheme level
- O&M account balance is at 110,000/- (\$ 65)
- Spares for taps and valves are available at the nearest town about 15km away. Others are available in Fort Portal about 60km from Nganiko
- A minimum of two weeks between break down and repair; for even a tap
- Community members are aware of the need for O&M payment
- Community members' knowledge of use of the funds is low

It has been proved over time that "voluntarism" is not sustainable. This has been the case with management committees under community management systems. They do not receive any basic remuneration for what they do yet they spend long hours and harassment / abuses when collecting user fees. This greatly affects their morale, performance and eventually their functionality.

Other problems with community management systems are the lack of transparency and accountability to the beneficiaries and the lack of effective authority to enforce set bylaws and regulations. In some cases systems constructed are too big and complicated for the community to manage; as they lack the required skills. Follow-up and monitoring of these committees by local governments - who could have provided the back up support - is weak.

Other challenges to this approach are external to the community, such as the different approaches by different donors within the same district/ project area on community contribution and O&M approach. This creates confusion among the beneficiary community. Political interference has continued to be a problem, especially as times for change of office and elections draw nearer and unrealistic promises/assertions are made

"I shall give you water"

"The government has a lot of money for water; when I am elected to office I shall ensure that you stop paying for water"

Design approaches and methodologies whereby more emphasis is placed on an estimation of the willingness to pay rather than the actual capacity to pay eventually defies sustainability. In some cases gravity projects, too big to be run by community-managed systems, make full cost recovery impossible.

Emergencies arising out of political instabilities render communities unable to fulfill their pledges towards community management. With the ADF rebel insurgencies in Western Uganda, communities formerly resident in the mountainous areas have been displaced and temporarily resettled in internally displaced people's camps. Here they have no source of income, as well as causing undue pressures on existing systems.

But there is no blue print for O&M, likewise for community management, that works or does not work. It has to be put into the context of the society of beneficiaries and adopted to fit their own identified special needs.

Lessons Learnt

Community management is usually successful when dealing with small sized schemes serving a close community who have close ties and lines of authority and responsibility well spelt out. The bigger the scheme, the more diverse the community and weaker the binding ties. Here joint responsibility and unity is hard to ensure and also costs of maintenance are higher and systems more technically complicated. Lower unit costs are easier to voluntarily contribute.

Without the means of enforcing bylaws and governing regulations, this kind of management can only be sustained if there is effective support from the local leaders who have the greater mandate.

Success of community management also depends on the transparency and accountability in management and administrative dealings as shown by the committees. This instills confidence and trust in the users, consultative management systems and open communication lines between management and beneficiaries. Refresher training and orientation of new committees also maintains skill levels and morale.

Follow-up and support from local leaders at sub county and district level technically, financially and in community sensitization and mobilization is vital.

Management can also be improved with the institutionalization of up-front payment of one year's O&M payment in all schemes before implementation kicks off, to create a buffer that can be accessed by the management in lean times.

Nevertheless, there are other options and approaches that can be tried out;

- There is now an increased tendency to use the private sector in the management and maintenance of water systems. Here the entire system or parts of it can be tendered out to individuals, or companies, who collect the funds and take care of all maintenance needs. The success of this depends on the level of development of the community; access to cash as well as non-existence of other water sources with alternate management systems in the area.
- Another approach could be the establishment of an operation and maintenance tax. This could be computed and paid in addition to the graduated tax paid annually by individuals. The advantage here is that the system for collection of funds and apprehension of defaulters is already in place. Successful in areas of high water coverage and where over 50% effective tax payments is achieved.
- Loan schemes, revolving funds and other income generating activities can be established in the beneficiary community during project implementation. If these go directly to beneficiaries, any interest accruing to these loans can be put aside for O&M. These schemes generally boost income levels in the community and thus create a source for O&M.

Conclusion

In conclusion there is no single method that will ensure sustainability of services. Different circumstances require varying approaches; they should be adaptable to fit. It is time for us to freely explore other options and scenarios for O&M. Community management, if well implemented and

adhered to, can ensure sustainability - but it is only appropriate in certain conditions.

All stakeholders should strive to guide users on the various options possible, continuously monitor, share experiences, document best practices and share them in various fora nationally and regionally.

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