

triple-s

Professionalising community-based management for rural water services

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POINTS FOR ACTION

→ For Governments

- Formally recognise and support community-based management (CBM) in legislation and policy, including the option for delegation of functions to private sector providers
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of service providers (e.g. CBM, public, and private operators) and service authorities (e.g. local governments), using transparent and enforceable contracts
- Provide on-going support to CBM to improve capacity to operate and maintain systems

→ For NGOs implementing rural water supply interventions

- Working within national policy and sector guidelines, establish pilot projects to increase professionalism, e.g. local private sector capacity building
- Establish self-support associations of service providers

→ For Donors and Development Partners

- Support national policy reform and learning that promotes professionalisation
- Provide technical support for strengthening capacity and accountability of service providers

→ For International Financial Institutions

- Provide loans and investment only where professionalisation is supported in post-construction and capacity support

Community-based management has long been established as the principal service delivery model for providing water to rural populations in developing countries. But this model has limitations: voluntary water committees are responsible for maintaining water systems, but lack legal recognition, skills, and accountability to do so.

The professionalisation of community based-management means moving away from the voluntary provision of water services towards a philosophy of service provision, and working to agreed standards, with greater transparency, accountability and efficiency.



Photo: IRC

Community-based management has traditionally been based on voluntary principles and has operated without legal status or clear contracts. As part of the move towards professionalisation, community-based management must be embedded in and supported by policy, legal and regulatory frameworks, and support services. This approach, sometimes also referred to as 'community management plus' (Moriarty and Verdemato, 2010; Bauman, 2006), can be used with larger and more complex piped networks often found in rural growth centres and small towns, as well as in the management of rural handpump committees.

This briefing note is based on a multi-country study (Lockwood and Smits, 2011), which was carried out by IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre as part of the Triple-S initiative. The study of 13 countries¹ looks at the evidence for greater professionalisation of rural water provision as an effective means of improving performance.

WHY PROFESSIONALISE?

The community-based management model for water services has been promoted in many countries to give communities greater control and ownership over their water supplies. But the model has its problems: in many places the community, and especially the water committee, find themselves isolated once the infrastructure is in place and the original programme implementers move on (see Box 1). Some of the founding principles of community-based management, such as community cohesion, participation for the common good and informal accountability to a water committee, have proved more idealistic than practical in many cases. An overwhelming reliance on voluntary management arrangements results in committee members lacking relevant skills and being subject to insufficient accountability. The absence of support and monitoring leads to inadequate technical, financial and managerial capacities, and ultimately system breakdowns and service failures.

Despite the challenges and limitations, in many countries – including those at the more developed end of the spectrum, such as Thailand and the USA – community-based management is still an important mechanism for addressing the needs of rural populations. However, it is apparent that the conventional notion of community-based management, where communities do everything themselves through 'volunteerism', needs to be rethought.

BOX 1 COMMON PROBLEMS IN COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT

- Informal community-based management structures are not recognised under local government by-laws and national legislation and policy
- An absence of clear contracting arrangements means contracts are unenforceable
- Water committees' informal legal position leaves them unable to run water systems effectively (for example, through an inability to access credit and legally contract support services)
- Committees' capacity to run and manage water systems lacks continuity, as trained volunteers leave the area, forget their initial training or no longer have time or willingness to undertake management on a voluntary basis

WHAT DOES PROFESSIONALISING MEAN?

Professionalising can mean hiring professional staff or outsourcing some functions to private sector providers, but it can also refer to actions taken to operate to agreed standards with greater transparency, accountability and efficiency. Characteristics of professionalising community-based management include:

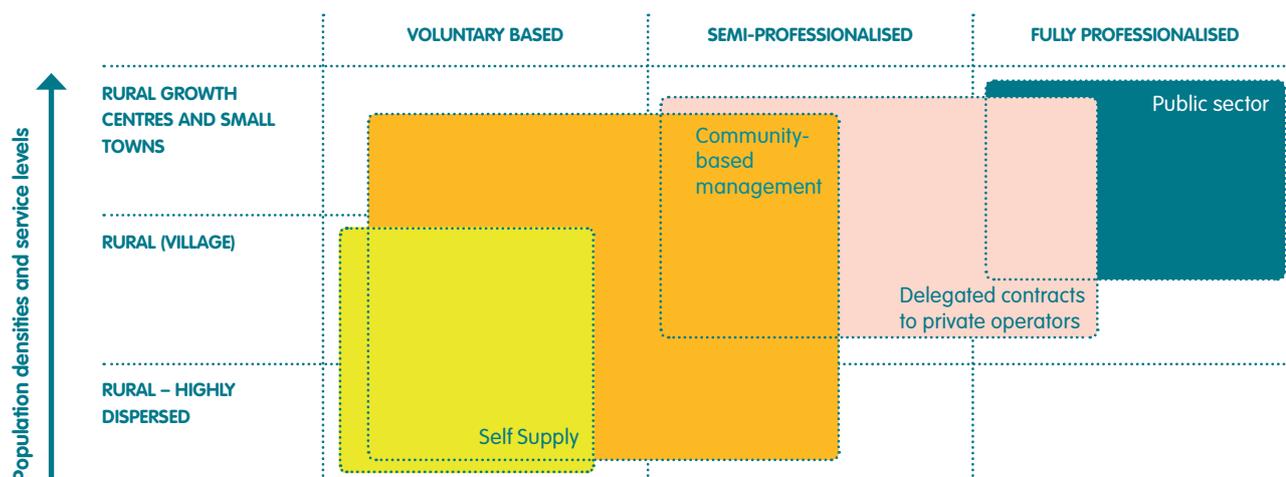
- Separation of service functions from operational functions. Communities, through their elected representatives in local government or community-based organisations such as water boards, may retain the ultimate management and decision-making power but are able to separate out specific tasks or all of the operation and administration of a system, and delegate this to individual entrepreneurs or local companies.
- A change in philosophy from volunteerism towards service provision. Communities become clients for management services, rather than providers of the services themselves.
- Strengthening the capacity of service providers to implement performance-based management and adopt good business practices, including improving tariff collection by providing agreed levels of service to consumers.

PROFESSIONALISATION DRIVERS

Small communities and countries with low levels of water coverage, such as Ethiopia and Mozambique, tend to have more basic forms of community-based

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Honduras, India (Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu), Mozambique, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda, USA

FIGURE 1 SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS AND TYPES OF SETTLEMENT



Source: Lockwood and Smits, 2011

management. As communities increase in size, and where piped networks are the norm, community committees more commonly contract out the more specialist functions, such as plumbing or bill collection, as seen in Uganda, Burkina Faso and Benin. This transition from a more voluntary approach to a more professional service appears to be associated with a number of factors. These include the growing number of larger rural communities, growth centres and small towns; increasing system complexity; and individuals’ demands for higher levels of service and ultimately household connections.

Thus, professionalisation of services and service providers becomes more likely in growth centres as

coverage increases, potential tariff bases grow and more skilled workforces are available (as shown in Figure 1). Although many of these factors do not apply in small, low-density rural villages, traditional community-based management can also benefit significantly from incorporating elements of professionalisation. For example, private service providers can manage and maintain a number of simple point source systems through area-based contracting.

Community-based management may remain in place, even where major functions are out-sourced. In Ghana, community-based management entities rely on different degrees of outside support depending on population (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 DEGREES OF OUTSIDE SUPPORT TO COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT ENTITIES, GHANA

COM management model	Degrees of outside support	Population size	System
WATSAN committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by area mechanic. 	<2000	Point source
Direct Water and Sanitation Development Board (WSDB) management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by skilled artisans from within the community, whose services may be procured when necessary on a retainer basis (“option 1” in the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) Small Towns O&M guidelines). 	2,000–5,000	Non-mechanised systems (e.g. gravity water schemes)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by certified/reputable firm to carry out specialised functions as and when needed (“option 2” in the CWSA Small Towns O&M guidelines). Supported by a contract with a firm or firms to perform specialised functions on a periodic basis (“option 3” in the CWSA Small Towns O&M guidelines). 	5,001–10,000	Simple boreholes, gravity or slow sand filtration based piped systems
WSDB with a management contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported by a management contract with a private operator to completely operate and maintain the water supply system (“option 4” in the CWSA Small Towns O&M guidelines). 	> 10,000	Communities served with complex Water Supply Systems

Source: IRC and Aguaconsult, 2011

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS OF PROFESSIONALISATION

Clear institutional responsibilities and a separation of functions

Where community-based management is in place, water committees are effectively the lowest form of local government, yet real decision-making powers are rarely conferred. Decisions about service levels, technology types, resource allocation and contracting are often not delegated down, resulting in limited ownership at the community level. Committees generally do not have legal recognition, institutional responsibilities are unclear and there are few requirements for accountability. Where management has been delegated to the private sector, the need for clarity in roles and responsibilities is, of course, also present. Irrespective of the type of service provider, a first step towards professionalising water services lies in the clarification of institutional roles, responsibilities and functions between water committees and other actors.

In some countries, such as Colombia, South Africa and Thailand, roles and functions have been clearly delineated as part of decentralisation and reform processes. A clear separation exists between the service authority (commonly the district or local government), service providers (public or private) and operators, who may be individuals or private entities hired to carry out day-to-day tasks.

In other countries, roles and responsibilities are less clear. In Uganda, despite broad clarity on roles and functions, inadequate definition of responsibilities at the village level, between community water committees and village councils, has left the process open to political interference. In Ghana, the District Assemblies are formally responsible for planning, decision-making and delivery of water services, but the same functions are sometimes performed by other actors, such as regional offices of the Community Water and Sanitation Agency. In such situations, attempts to professionalise service delivery can be severely undermined.

Post-construction support and capacity support

Multiple-levels of support are needed to professionalise community-based management (see Figure 2). There is what is known as post-construction support, provided directly to the community-based management entities (or other form of service provider) often but not always by local government staff (i.e. service authorities). It may include elements such as technical backstopping and advice, administrative and financial support, auditing of accounts, and water quality monitoring. And then there is capacity support to the service authorities themselves

BOX 2 PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP IN RURAL SENEGAL

In 1998 a pilot project, Réforme de la Gestion des Forages Motorisés Ruraux (REGEFOR), was established covering 80 boreholes that supplied around 240,000 rural people. The project introduced private maintenance contracts, as well as water user associations; it charged for water by volume and ensured the water user associations had access to bank accounts. Functionality rates in the pilot region were increased to 98%, compared to the national average of 80%; repair times were reduced from four days to less than 48 hours, and average savings were made of US\$10,000 per water user association. This form of public-private partnership improved functionality, access to services (increased number of connections), financial performance, participation of users and opportunities for monitoring, and also provided jobs (WSP, 2010).

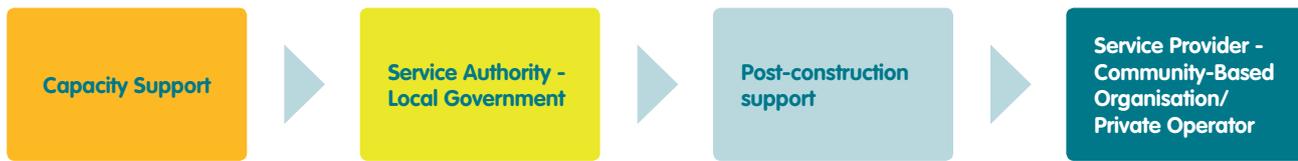
There are now over 1,000 boreholes supplying piped water networks in rural Senegal, with an average of 7.5 villages per borehole. Of these 7,500 villages, 68% have fewer than 500 inhabitants. Professionalisation is being achieved through a phased approach: water user associations start by managing small networks with standposts, then gradually extend the systems and increase house connections. More active members of the water user association are remunerated, while technical and some commercial functions are delegated to the private sector.

The ministry in charge of water manages three regional maintenance centres and a national training centre for pump attendants, who are required to undergo a six month training course. In some regions, federations of associations are established that act as platforms for dialogue with government, while some have also set up revolving funds for major breakdowns or replacements (WSP et al., 2010).



Photo: Audrey van Soest, IRC

FIGURE 2 AN EXAMPLE CHAIN OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT (AS IS THE CASE IN UGANDA AND GHANA)



or ‘support to the supporters’, which is typically provided by central ministries or deconcentrated agencies of such ministries operating at regional or provincial level. In countries undergoing decentralisation processes this latter form of support is equally important for professionalisation since district or local government level staff often lack the capacity to in turn support community-based management or to monitor delegated contracts. In particular, support for improving financial management is weak in many countries – a pressing issue that must be addressed to ensure sustainability.

In the USA, two well-established organisations provide post-construction support and guidance directly to community-based management entities. The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) grew out of six regional NGOs in the 1960s, and the National Rural Water Association (NRWA) is a membership organisation providing support for community-run water management. Both of these represent ‘bottom-up’, local NGO driven organisations, but are equally well linked into government funding systems both at federal and state level.

In Colombia, the *Programa de Cultura Empresarial* (Entrepreneurial Culture Programme) has focused on the promotion of good management and business principles, while retaining the not-for-profit status of community-based management (see Box 3). Indeed, in

Colombia the term ‘community-based service provider’ is used to describe the Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) running water supply systems, whereas in most other Latin American countries ‘water committee’ or ‘water board’ are the most commonly used terms. This difference in terminology reflects the concept of a more professionalised service provider. It also reflects the fact that professionalisation should not only be understood in terms of hiring professional staff, but also in terms of operating to agreed standards and providing a service in a professional manner.

BOX 3 COLOMBIA'S ENTREPRENEURIAL CULTURE PROGRAMME

In 1998, a review of progress on water sector reform revealed that a high percentage of small municipalities in Colombia had failed to complete procedures to legalise water utilities. It also showed that infrastructure was still being built without identifying a service provider to operate it. As a result, the Entrepreneurial Culture Programme was established, renamed in 2003 as the Programme for Strengthening and Technical Support to Small Municipalities.

The Programme has three objectives: 1) to establish and/or legalise community-based water service providers in rural areas and small municipalities; 2) to support the development of a business structure among these service providers; and 3) to improve service provision indicators among the providers that participate in the programme.

Community-based management is recognised as the main and most relevant service provision option in rural areas, but it must operate as a formal service provider under basic business and entrepreneurial principles, even though it continues on a non-profit basis. Initially, the programme focused largely on dissemination of the legal and institutional framework and requirements among municipalities and operators. Later, more practical tools were provided that allowed operators to become more professional, including training materials on issues such as billing and tariff collection, book-keeping and financial management, operation and maintenance, and customer relations.

Source: Rojas, et al., 2011



Photo: IRC

Strength through association

Communities can professionalise and increase their capacity by working together in horizontal organisations, based on the concept of mutual self-support. In Honduras, the *Asociación Hondureña de Juntas de Agua*, (AHJASA, Honduran Association of Water Boards) and municipal water associations have demonstrated that they can provide economies of scale and support to member organisations. In Burkina Faso, small towns and rural villages are combined into 'Associations of Communes' to provide mutual support

BOX 4 APPROACHES TO DELEGATION IN BENIN AND RWANDA

A variety of service delivery models exist in Benin. The most common model is still a community-based management approach, where a water user association (service provider) acts as the operator. However, as professionalisation is pursued, alternative management structures are being put in place. For simple technologies such as handpumps, the Commune (local government) may delegate operation to a community representative or private operator. Many similar systems, or a range of different types of system (e.g. handpumps and piped networks) within a geographic area may all be delegated to one operator.

For more complex piped networks or mechanised boreholes, other more complex models are recognised under the legislation, including delegation to a private operator; a tripartite contract between the Commune, the water user association and a private operator; delegation of production to a private operator and distribution to a water user association; or delegation to a water user association. Delegation operates through open tendering, with positive discrimination for local entrepreneurs. National-level operators are excluded.

In Rwanda, rural water supply schemes managed by private operators increased from 7% of water schemes in 2003 to nearly 30% by the end of 2007. Each water scheme is metered and the operators charge on the basis of the total amount consumed per month. Communities pay for all water collected from the scheme at a rate of 15 francs per 20 litre container (equivalent to US\$1.50 per cubic metre). The water rate covers operation, maintenance and amortisation costs of the scheme. The system has benefited the community in several ways. It has generated employment and stimulated grassroots entrepreneurship in the communities, facilitated the systematic collection of operation and maintenance costs, contributed to the reliable delivery of water, and guaranteed the sustainability of the water schemes. The Government of Rwanda has decided to extend this type of management to all rural areas of the country.

Sources: Adjinacou, 2010; AfDB/OWAS, 2010

and pool resources. These associations include a range of different water systems (point sources and networked) and cover a number of different communes. They have revolving funds, accommodating the different stages of investment life-cycles of their members' systems. In total there are some 41 systems involved in such associations across ten communes. However, this approach was developed prior to full decentralisation and the establishment of communes in 2006, and is currently viewed as 'illegal'; nonetheless it has yielded positive results and continues to work well after some ten years of operation.

Delegated management

In a significant number of countries, including some in the lower income and more aid-dependent bracket, rural water provision has been transferred entirely to delegated management arrangements. A shift has taken place away from professionalised water committees to management and operation by private sector entities. There may still be a role for members of the community, but this tends to be manifested as seats on local oversight boards, such as the community water boards in the USA or Water and Sanitation Development Boards in Ghana. It should not be assumed that less monitoring and support are needed for private operators, who may also need help to strengthen their managerial and technical skills.



Photo: Peter McIntyre

Improving accountability and regulation

A key aspect of the adoption of a more professional approach to sustainable service delivery is the establishment of accountability mechanisms – the ways in which consumers can hold service providers to account for the service they receive. For community managed rural water supplies, there is much emphasis on the ‘short-arm’ of accountability found in the direct relations between consumers and their respective water committees who act as service providers. There is ample evidence that this link is very vulnerable: there is a high risk of falling into a vicious circle of poor service delivery, non-payment of tariffs by unhappy customers, and further deterioration of services. Initiatives toward professionalisation can learn from this, through an examination of the rights and obligations of both customers and service providers.

Recognising the limitations of the short-arm of accountability, contractual agreements offer a ‘long-arm’ of accountability between the service providers and local government, specifying the services to be provided and against which performance conditions can be measured. Local authorities should have regulatory powers and an oversight function to check on service providers, even if a clearly established service delivery contract is not in place. This arrangement is found in

Burkina Faso, Benin and South Africa where the water service authority (in Burkina Faso and Benin the Commune) has contracts in place with the service providers. Communities also need to understand where responsibility lies, and be able to report problems to the service authority, which should then ensure that issues are resolved by the service provider.

The final, and most comprehensive approach, is the establishment of an independent regulator. This concept has its roots in the regulation of privatised urban service providers. Regulation for rural areas is only now coming into the picture. One of the main problems associated with this formal regulation is the tendency to over-regulate, by transferring inappropriate and overly punitive urban criteria to rural contexts. In Colombia, where regulation for rural areas is relatively advanced, the result has been that many rural service providers have shied away from registering with the regulator for fear of being fined, despite the potential access to new sources of funding and other support that such registration would bring.

Recommendations

Where should countries focus their efforts to professionalise the delivery of rural water services, especially where there is a tension between increasing coverage and maintaining services? A number of steps can promote the professionalisation process:

- Formally recognise rural water management structures within local government by-laws and national legislation and policy, and ensure legal standing of water management committees.
- Allow delegated management as an alternative service provider model to community-based management.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities between the service authority, the service provider and day-to-day operators.
- Start on a pilot basis and build capacity at all levels, ensuring that pilot projects are based on a realistic assessment of the capacity and resources available to permit future replication and scaling up.
- Support service authorities (i.e. the districts or municipalities), which, in turn, support service providers. This should not be limited to water sector issues, but may be in areas of wider public management and administration, such as management of information and databases, contracting and coordination.
- Where policies for supporting community-based management systems are already in place, commit sufficient funding and human resources for implementation.

There is a general trend towards professionalisation, both of community-based management and among more commercially orientated service delivery models. In those countries where professionalisation has already begun, efforts are needed to ensure checks and balances are sufficient, and accountability mechanisms are in place. Ideally, an independent regulator should ensure service providers are accountable to their customers and contracts are enforced, while avoiding the tendency to over-regulate.

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Photo: Petra Brussee, IRC

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About this Brief

This 'Professionalising community-based management for rural water services' was authored by Harold Lockwood and Anna Le Gouais of Aguaconsult. It draws from the 13-country study carried out under Triple-S (Lockwood and Smits, 2011) as well as other materials. It was reviewed by Clarissa Brocklehurst, consultant in water supply and sanitation and former Chief of UNICEF's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Section, and René van Lieshout, Regional Coordinator of East Africa for IRC.

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