

Progress Report on Roll out of SWSSBs in Lira

Triple-S/IRC in collaboration with the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) and district local governments of Lira and Kabarole piloted an area based management model for operation and maintenance of rural water facilities. The model promotes establishment of Sub county Water Supply and Sanitation Boards (SWSSBs) to provide management support to the Water User Committees (WUCs), enable pooling of funds and clustering of water facilities at sub-county level to ensure Operation and Maintenance costs can be covered. The boards also provide a structure that can manage O&M funds for Capital maintenance transferred from District Water and Sanitation Conditional grant.¹ The SWSSBs are one of the strategies that the MWE is considering to scale up to strengthen operation and maintenance of rural water services and move towards professionalization of community based management.

The piloting of SWSSBs was undertaken in July 2013 – August 2014 by the District Local Governments of Lira and Kabarole with support from IRC/Triple-S. A total of 14 boards were established, 8 with support from Triple-S and 6 others by the Local governments of Lira and Kabarole.

In April IRC Uganda conducted follow up monitoring visits for SWSSBs in Lira. The purpose of the assessment is to get an update on the progress of the DLGs in operationalizing the boards and identify the emerging issues to inform further capacity development efforts.

The assessment was conducted through a half day meeting with representatives of the Sub county boards, Health Assistants, Community Development Officers, District water Office, Northern Umbrella Organization, IRC and Divine Waters. Three (3) of the 6 SWSSBs were represented during the meeting.

General Observations

Interim boards were established for all the three sub counties represented; Lira, Barr, and Ogur. The boards were then trained on their roles and responsibilities and were supported to conduct Parish dialogues to sensitize Water User Committees (WUCs) and Water Users on the concept. The SWSSBs then embarked on the process of recruiting WUCs to formalize their membership and subscribe to the boards. The recruitment proved to be a very demanding task that was met with resistance from the WUCs due to; fear of handing over control of user fees to higher level/distant structures, inadequate understanding of the concept and lack of buyin from leadership in some sub counties. However, some successes have been observed from rolling out the boards.

¹ The Ministry of Water and Environment is considering transferring O&M funds to Sub county level but currently there is no capacity to manage the funds

There has been good buy-in and leadership from the District Water office. The office has earmarked Five million shillings collected from the community capital cost contributions to support community engagement, raise awareness on the SWSSBs, and build capacity to perform their roles. The HPMA has also been linked to the board to provide support on repair and maintenance of water systems. In the financial year 2015/16, the district plans to contract HPMA to conduct major repairs, giving priority to water systems whose user committees have that joined the SWSSBs. According to the Asst. District water Officer, the SWSSBs are taking on major repairs/capital maintenance tasks that are beyond the financial capacity of the WUCs.

The performance of Lira Sub County was the most outstanding. The Sub County provided good leadership in the process of establishing the board and has convinced other WASH implementing partners like Divine Waters to channel their support for capital maintenance of water facilities through the SWSSBs. Lira Sub County and Divine Waters agreed on a cost sharing approach of 50% contribution towards cost of repairing broken water facilities. By April, 3 major repairs had been completed using the approach. Minor repairs remained a responsibility of WUCs. Functionality in Lira Sub County increased from 74% in 2014 to 80% in 2015. Functionality is expected to increase further once the water facilities for decommissioning are clean off the data base.

Out of the 150 water facilities/user committees in Lira Sub County, 30 WUCs are subscribing to the water board. However, all the WUCs, and Local Council leaders in the Sub County are aware about the SWSSB.

Barr Sub County also considerably improvement in functionality of water facilities from 67% in 2014 to 80% in 2015. Though the improvement was mainly attributed to a campaign championed by the LC 3 chairperson on improving functionality of water systems through enhancing user contributions. For a long time Barr Sub County had the lowest functionality rate in Lira district. The consistent sharing of functionality status in the district meetings triggered the Sub County political leadership (LC III) to take action to catch up with other sub counties. However, the Sub county board is credited for promoting consistent payment of water user fees through a series of community mobilization visits.

After the exit of Triple-S, community engagement and awareness continued in Lira Sub county but stopped in Barr, Ogur and Ngetta sub counties. The main reasons for discontinuing community engagement include; inadequate buy-in from the Sub county leadership; limited guidance from the District Water Office due to lack of a clear budget line for building capacity of boards; the concept has not been well articulated by Sub county technical staff making it difficult for them to promote it.

It is also worth noting that the progress in Lira Sub County is attributable to the passionate leadership provided by both the sub county chief and the health assistant. However, owing to Local Government procedures, the sub county chief has been transferred to Ogur Sub County, where the performance of the boards is wanting. During the meeting, the chief

explained that he will try to maintain the same passion and leadership that he employed in Lira sub county, in order to raise the performance of the Ogur SWSSB.

Scoring performance of the SWSSBs

The SWSSBs were asked to assess their performance on a scale of 1-5 using the five parameters listed below;

Parameter	Sub county Score		
	Lira	Barr	Ogur
Understanding and appreciation of the Concept	5	3	1
Level of awareness of WUCs and Water users	3	2	1
Recruitment of WUCs	3	2	1
Subscription of WUCs to the board	3	1	1
Capacity of the Board to perform tasks	2	2	1

Understanding and appreciation of the Concept

There is a contrast in the level of understanding and appreciation of the SWSSB concept among the different board members. Lira Sub County scored very high in understanding the concept hence provided good leadership in rolling out the concept. On the other hand level of understanding and appreciation of the concept in Ogur was ranked very low and consequently buy-in from the Sub county chief was very low. The working relationship between the LC III chairperson and the Sub county chief was also very weak. This hindered promotion of the concept beyond community engagement process facilitated by Triple-S. The technical staff in Barr felt that SWSSBs were rushed and that communication on how to roll them out was not clear.

Ngetta Sub County was not represented but feedback from the DWO showed that the political leadership did not buy-in and provided no support in promoting the boards. The LCIII chairperson was more in favour of sticking to the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) approach and was not able to see the link between the boards and VSLAs.

Level of awareness of WUCs and Water Users

The level of awareness among the WUCs and water users is still low. The boards were not able to continue with community engagement after Triple-S. Only Lira Sub County continued. The main reason advanced was lack of financial resources to support community mobilization efforts. However, in Lira the Sub County chief and Health Assistant integrated community mobilization in their existing work, using every opportunity within the sub county activities to inform all stakeholders; including political leadership at village, parish, sub county and district level, Parish Development Committees

(PDCs), technical staff at Sub county, Head teachers, WUCs, Village Health Teams (VHTs) and religious leaders. This made their outreach work easier.

Recruitment of Water User Committees

There is contrast in recruitment of WUCs across all the sub counties. Lira scored highest while Ogur scored lowest. Though community awareness on the SWSSBs was conducted in all sub counties, the level of recruitment of WUCs is still low. The sub counties attributed this to the one-off parish dialogues and community sensitization campaigns that were not sustained to provide adequate time for stakeholders to understand the idea. The sub counties also did not have a clear recruitment plan. The other factors were associated with the inadequate understanding of the SWSSB concept among technical staff at the Sub county, the low level of buy-in from the Sub county leadership and limited support from DWO.

Subscription of WUCs to the Board

The Subscription of the WUCs to the boards is still a big challenge. Only Lira SWSSB has managed to get WUCs to consistently subscribe to the board. Out of the 150 water facilities in the Sub County, WUCs for 30 water facilities are subscribing to the water boards. The Lira sub county chief attributes the success to clear understanding on the value addition of the board to supporting operation and maintenance especially when WUCs are faced with major repairs beyond their capacity. Normally these are handled by the district but mobilizing the resources takes a longtime. With this in mind the Sub county leadership decided to pre-finance and support SWSSB initiation activities such as; follow up on community engagement processes, procurement of accountability tools; receipt books, income & expenditure books. The common voice from the sub county technical and political leadership prompted WUCs to start subscribing to the board. The decision to procure and share the accountability tools showed a change from the way WUCs were conducting business and inspired WUCs to subscribe to the board.

In Barr and Ngetta where VSLAs are strong and active, the Sub county leadership did not see the value addition of the boards and the Health Assistants and Community Development Officers were not able to articulate how the board would add value to the work of the VSLA. Some WUCs in Barr had accumulated up to two million shillings from water users fees but opted not to join the boards arguing that they had capacity to manage the water facilities on their own.

Another factor hindering subscription is the lack of clarity on the proportion of water users' fees to be submitted to the boards. At the time of conceptualization of the idea, the WUCs were expected to submit at least 80% of the collections. However, during community engagement, the communication on remittance was not clear; some WUCs thought that all the funds collected would be remitted. This led to resistance from the WUCs due to; fear of handing over control of user fees to higher level/distant structures

and the WUCs were skeptical of having user fees managed by ‘government staff ‘ – Sub county chief. The misinterpretation of the management structure of the board prompted resistance and hindered subscription of WUCs.

Positioning and Strengthening Buy-in on SWSSB Model

The meeting clearly showed that despite the strong buy-in from the District Water Office on the rollout of SWSSBs to strengthen operation and maintenance of rural water services, the actual application of the model on ground still faces several challenges. The principle custodians charged with the role of supporting the day to day testing and application of the model – the Sub county chief and extension staff do not have a good understanding of the details on how the model will work and how the established boards will work with existing structures. This has led to conflicting messages and misinterpretation on the rationale of the boards. Buy-in from political and technical leadership at sub county level has not been fully achieved. Their capacity to fulfill their roles and responsibilities is still low. Under the Triple-S initiative the boards were informed of their roles and received basic orientation on how to fulfill them. However, the boards have not received routine mentoring and support to give them room to learn and adapt their roles. Being newly established structures in the rural water sub sector, the boards need close supervision and support.

Proposals of Local Government to enhance Understanding and Buy-in on SWSSBs

- Organizing a briefing meeting for all Sub county chiefs, extension staff, and local council III councilors to clarify the rationale of the boards
- To agree with Sub counties on performance parameters/targets for following up on the process of rolling out the boards
- Support Quarterly board meetings at sub county level to track progress and address emerging issues
- Re-echo the role of community representatives in representing interests of Users on the boards

Proposals for IRC & other agencies on further Capacity Development on boards

- Produce simplified information materials on role of the boards
- Facilitating the boards to learn from Umbrella organizations on recruitment of WUCs based on their experiences in attracting water board subscriptions