

IRC-International Water and Sanitation Centre.

IRC's role in capacity development in the water supply and sanitation sector

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Introduction

"The knowledge we gain from this research is much more valuable than gifts. It is something that we keep for life" (Bolt et al. 1996). This is how villagers in Nkoundja, Cameroon reacted after they visited Nyen village to look how people there are solving their problems in management, operation and maintenance of their water systems. The visit had an immediate effect on the water caretaker of Nkoundja who realised that it would be better to work differently after he had seen how his colleague in Nyen behaved. "We have been discussing this over and over again and his behaviour never changed", said Mr. Issiaka Njankouo, one of the community research team members." Now he has changed his attitude radically and is working very satisfactorily"

This story from IRC's supported community management project reflects the main principle that underlies IRC's work in that we act as a facilitator in support of others that improve the water and sanitation conditions in the developing world. IRC is an independent non-profit organization based in the Netherlands that started of as a reference centre, global publisher and information clearing house for sector information. Gradually it evolved to a sector resource centre by adding research, publication, training, advisory services and advocacy to its work (see also our Website: www.irc.nl). Faithful to its origins and based on thirty years of lessons learnt, IRC continues to act as a WHO collaborating centre in promoting systematic and pragmatic consideration of sustainability issues and better water and sanitation for a healthy future. UNICEF, the UNDP/World Bank Water and Sanitation Program, the World Health Organization, the Secretariat of the Collaborative Council and the Netherlands Government are represented in its Governing board. The mission of IRC is to help people in developing countries to get and use the best water and sanitation services they can afford. We work in partnership with individuals and institutions through shared learning processes designed to develop awareness, knowledge and capacities. We emphasize the exchange of information, experience and the development of resource centres.

In our work we apply the following principles:

- *We act as facilitators*
- *We work with partners on an equal basis*
- *We stimulating dialogue*
- *We aim to contribute to establishing a learning environment*

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IRC contributes to making water supply and sanitation systems more sustainable

Many governments and institutions are engaged in a process of change. More emphasis is gradually put on sustainability and effective use of the systems, and on the behavioral changes needed to achieve the health and development benefits which justify investments in this sector. Nevertheless, in terms of funding and allocation of human resources the emphasis in the sector still is on enhancing coverage through the construction of systems. This approach generates short term results, but does not consider the negative impact of resulting failures and loss of investments. The opportunity costs of not giving priority to sustainability have been and are continuing to be enormous. Even many of the systems installed during the last ten years are not performing well. They may be used and maintained by communities to the best of their abilities, but long term sustainability is not ensured. This is an important reason for funding agencies to insist on a demand responsive approach. Yet this is not sufficient because not all factors affecting sustainability can be controlled at community level (Visscher, Bastemeijer and Brikké, 1998). A key lesson learnt, but not necessarily applied, is that a more systematic attention is needed for all factors affecting sustainability of water supply and sanitation systems. Shared learning processes involving different institutions and individuals can contribute greatly to awareness, knowledge and capacities to carry through the major policy reforms and strategies for sustainability that are urgently needed. IRC's strives to support three key conditions for sustainability by:

- ***Encouraging informed decision making*** implying that all stakeholders, communities, government, NGO's and private sector get equal access to information and can take part in a dialogue to orient decision making.
- ***Promoting a learning perspective in capacity building and technology sharing;*** This is needed as blue print approaches do not work.
- ***Acting as process facilitator and information provider*** that can guide and stimulate the change that is needed and support sector institutions to better implement their social mission.

IRC's Objectives

Information sharing, capacity building, innovation and process facilitation are all crucial elements of sustainable sector improvements. This places IRC in an important position as node in a network of partners. This is well reflected in the objectives that it has established:

Facilitating Processes of Change and supporting new developments

IRC will contribute to closing the gap between policy and practice by helping sector agencies in selected countries to review the sector problems with the stakeholders and to establish joint learning projects.

Areas for further knowledge development include community water resources management, environmental sanitation and improving the effectiveness and use of existing water supply systems. Current research activities in these areas will be expanded and new research activities will be developed that will result in new publications and new IRC training courses. New publications will also be developed by encouraging Programmes in the South to report on their experiences with important sector issues.

Making Optimal Use of Sector Knowledge

The information highway has greatly enhanced information exchange in the sector, and the number of people and organizations with access to the World Wide Web grows daily. While the positive aspects of electronic information exchange are many, there is also the danger of information overload. IRC has defined a clear role for itself in acting as an information broker and a help-desk for Sector professionals serving their information needs in an efficient way. IRC staff is modifying the IRC Web page (www.irc.nl) to provide links to the water-related sites on the Internet including a virtual reading room on sector journals and newsletters. The page also comprise information on IRC's courses and workshops on hygiene, water resources management and gender. Part of IRC's bibliographic database, IRCDOC, has been made accessible via the Internet. In this we also work very closely with the Secretariat for the Collaborative Council and together with them we publish the weekly water and sanitation news service: Source Weekly and a bi-monthly newsletter: Source Bulletin.

In cooperation with a.o. SDC and UNICEF, IRC is active in making English language information available in French and Portuguese. Several of its publications in the Technical paper and Occasional Paper series have now been published in these languages.

Supporting the development of a network of independent resource centres

Access to un-biased information is one of the most crucial ingredients to enable informed decision making and sustained development. This information has to be available to organizations and individuals that are working in the countries. It has to be close to the users and users need to be assisted to ensure that they can access the information they really need without going through a lot of documents and papers. Furthermore they need access to new information and may need some training to be able to use that in an effective way. From this train of thoughts a picture emerge of what we call a Sector Resource Centre that operates in a network of centres thus having access to a broad range of specialized information. IRC thus supports the development of a network of independent resource centres. Resource centres have a number of key roles to play:

- they act as a knowledge broker and clearing house for sector information;
- they share experience with other resource centres including IRC;
- they constitute a sector memory in the country or region where they operate as they will store available information in a retrievable way;
- support innovation by linking in to applied research and innovative training;
- they encourage and help other sector institutions to comply with their social mission and adopt the changes that are needed to improve sector performance.

Sectoral and cross sectoral resource centres can contribute quite effectively to meeting capacity development and information needs provided that the various stakeholders in countries and at the international level give priority to systematically and consistently using the available knowledge and information. Where decision makers recognize the importance of resource centres in processes of change and in rethinking policies and strategies to meet the unprecedented challenge (emerging water crisis, serving the unserved, population increase, urbanization, decentralization) ahead, this is increasingly the case.

A number of organizations on different continents are already cooperating in different ways with IRC. In Africa these include NETWAS (Kenya, Uganda), PAID/IPD-AOS (Cameroun, Burkina faso); ETSHER/EIER(Burkina Faso), IWSD(Zimbabwe), and CFPAS (Mozambique). Recent cooperation concerns the preparation of institutional assessments and case studies in the context of the Stream project aiming to contribute strengthening individual resource centres and networks by building on

the combined experience of the participating organizations. An international workshop on resource centre and network development is planned for next year.

Concluding remarks

In a rapidly changing institutional environment (decentralization, increased role of private sector) there is an urgent need to build the capacities and establish basic conditions for sustainability. This involves building capacity for O&M and for management of systems at community and local levels, but also the training of engineers and technicians to address sustainability issues and increase their ability to communicate with communities and other stakeholders so as to make sure that informed decisions can be made. Whereas this capacity building process goes along with the implementation of new policies, programmes and projects in a dynamic sector environment, traditional educational institutes such as universities and technical colleges do not suffice to bridge the capacity gap. Specialized sector resource centres such as IRC can play a role here by making information more systematically available, linking up various stakeholders, facilitating process of change and train trainers if needed.

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