



Challenges of decentralised delivery of RWSS in Uganda

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THE GOVERNMENT OF Uganda has vigorously pursued a policy of decentralisation, since 1993, that involves the devolution of specified powers and responsibilities from the centre to local governments. The responsibilities that had hitherto been the domain of central government, affected the pace and quality of service delivery for both Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) and planning, implementation and management of piped urban water supplies outside the towns run by the National Water and Sewerage Corporation (NWSC).

The regulatory framework for decentralised delivery of Rural Water Supply (RWS) is provided for in the Local Government Act (LGA 1997) that provides for the continued process of decentralisation. The powers, responsibilities, functions, funds and services from the central government are devolved and transferred to Local Governments in order to increase local democratic control and participation in decision making, and to mobilise support for a development that is relevant to local needs. Under the LGA 1997:

- District, Municipal, Sub-county and Division Councils are corporate bodies.
- District administrations are responsible for the planning, development, rehabilitation and maintenance of the rural water and sanitation systems in liaison with the Ministry responsible for water.
- District administrations are entitled to funding from the central government in form of conditional, unconditional and equalisation grants.
- The District Administration can contract out public services including water and sanitation to the private sector.
- The central government is charged with the responsibilities of policy making, coordination, technical guidance, support supervision, inspection, monitoring and providing specialised training.

The lead central government agency for RWS is the Directorate of Water Development (DWD) under the Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment (MWLE). The Directorate has the mandate for the overall water resources management and development, and planning and supervision of rural water and sanitation programmes in liaison with relevant line ministries, development partners and stakeholders.

The Rural Water Supply and Sanitation sub-sector covers 85% of the population of Uganda whose scattered

homesteads are largely served through communal point water sources such as protected springs, boreholes, shallow wells and gravity scheme standposts.

At present about 55% of the rural population have access to safe water supply and 52% to basic sanitation facilities. These figures however, mask considerable disparity between and within districts and do not consider the functionality of water sources. The Government of Uganda has responded to the poor access to basic water and sanitation services by including investment in the sector as a key component of the Poverty Eradication Action Programme (PEAP). The water sector will thus benefit from additional funding under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. According to the RWSS Investment Plan – 2001; the total investment for RWSS sub-sector, is estimated at US\$ 910 million over the period 2001 – 2015 in order to achieve 95 – 100% coverage.

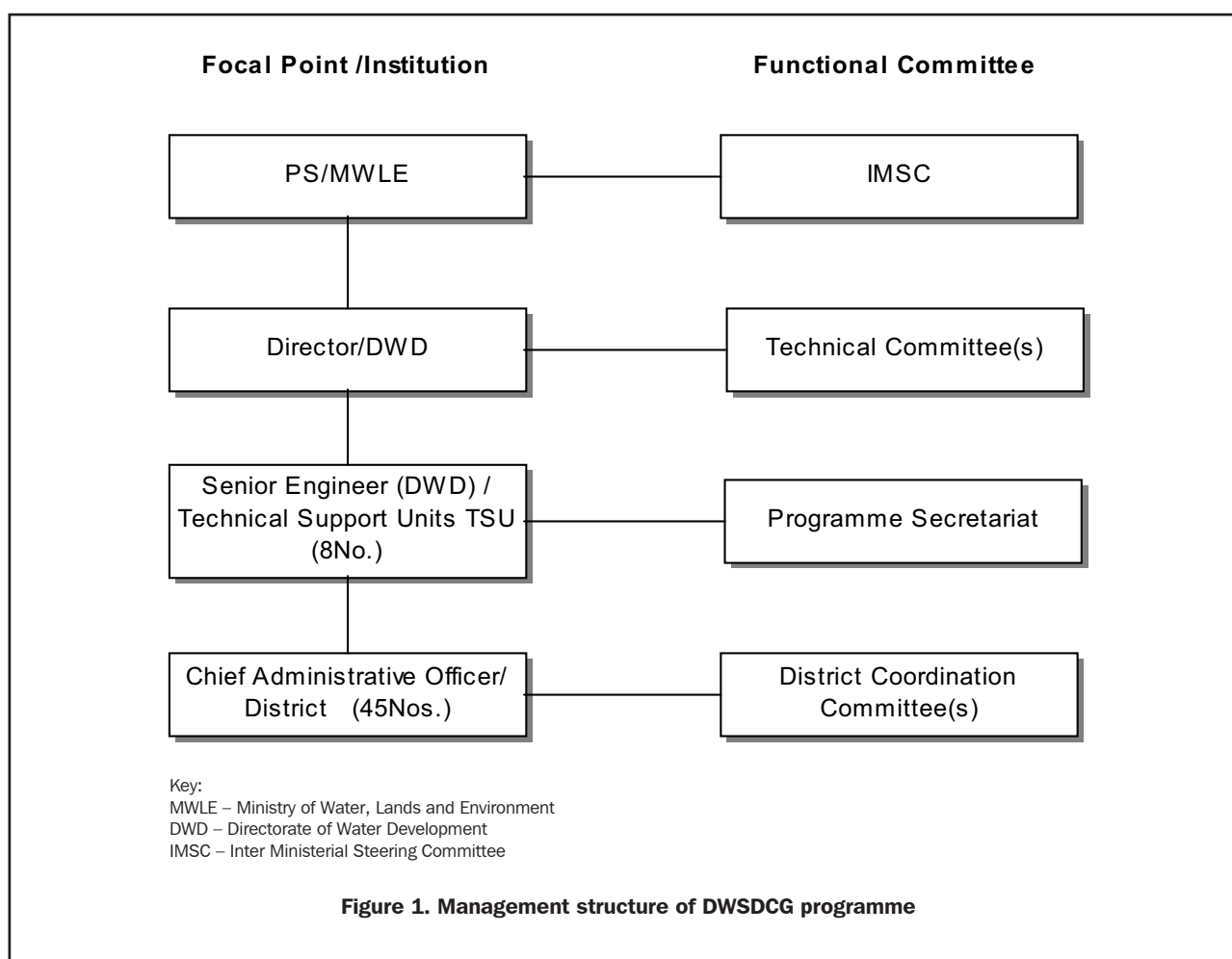
Effective from 2000/2001 Financial Year (FY), RWS sub-sector development budget was disbursed directly to local governments as conditional grants to finance the District Water and Sanitation Development Conditional Grants (DWSDCG) Programme. The districts utilise and account for quarterly releases of funds from the centre before accessing subsequent releases. This approach however, seems to place a lot of emphasis on construction of new facilities without devoting commensurate resources to the operation and maintenance of the installed facilities.

DWSDCG programme structure

The District Coordination Committees compile workplans and budgets, with support from the TSU. TSUs are regionally based for a group of (5-6) districts. The workplans are then sent to DWD for final compilation, by the programme secretariat, and the submitted to Ministry Finance for funding. The funds are released directly to district accounts.

Transitional arrangements

One of the major findings of the Rural Water and sanitation sub-sector reform study in year 2000 was that many districts lacked the capacity to implement an effective water and sanitation programme in their present state, and needed strong support for institutional and organisational development and capacity building. In order to address the capacity gaps in Districts, the Ministry of Water, Lands and Environment set up Technical Support Units (TSU) to provide the needed technical and management backup



support to districts for 3-5 years. TSUs are not regional government structures; they are just a deconcentration of DWD for technical assistance to districts.

The TSUs were initially resisted by some districts which argued that TSUs were usurping powers / undermining the autonomy of District local governments. The TSUs however have now been appreciated by all Districts as necessary partners in:

- Effective capacity development of districts for effective implementation of sector programmes.
- Effective deconcentration of DWD and thus providing districts with the necessary backup technical assistance within easy reach.
- Providing the necessary quality assurance of the facilities constructed with private sector participation and making input into district plans before submission to the centre for funding.

Key challenges to delivery of services

Private sector participation

- The changing roles of key actors (as authority and responsibility are transferred from central ministries to district authorities, and implementation is no longer

performed by public sector, but rather by the private sector under the supervision of the public sector), carries a number of implications to be dealt with. The TSUs have made some headway in supporting districts with tender documents for procurement of contractors for low cost technologies like springs, shallow wells and GFS, and instruments of supervising the private sector but again a lot remains to be done in re-orienting staff in the new district water office to take on their new roles fully.

- As part of the decentralisation-privatisation process, the market for services being contracted out is increasing. A severe-lag in the private sector's capacity to provide quality services is consistently reported in some districts, especially the remote boarder districts with poor infrastructure.

Procurement

- Districts' capacities to tender for and procure services, plus supervise contractors, still need considerable strengthening. Currently, DWD undertakes, centrally, the bulk procurement of consultancy services for Rural Growth Centres and their contractors to ensure uniformity in approach and sharing of experiences be-

tween districts. It is hoped that this function will be transferred to the District Water Office after about 5 years, when districts will have developed the necessary capacity.

- Individual district procurement of some works and services like, borehole drilling, leads to diseconomies of scale and increased costs. Bulk procurement of such works by the centre would secure cost savings but under decentralisation, this is seen as usurping the roles of a decentralised local government and thus resisted.

Decentralisation

- Adequate authority and budgets have not yet been devolved down to lower levels of local government (sub-counties) to carry out their roles and responsibilities in the manner envisioned; Most of the funds are still sent from the centre to districts as conditional grants. The districts argue that conditionalising most of the grants undermines the local governments financial autonomy. In response the central government feels that conditionalising grants is a way of supporting governance and decentralisation; government would continue to intervene to ensure basic minimum delivery of services to the people. (The intention is that capital development budget will eventually be decentralised and the grants made unconditional).
- Districts closer to larger towns, with more resources and better organisation, often attract and benefit from assistance than those with less resources and not well organised, which may be unfair in terms of inequity reduction. The efforts by DWD to establish technical support units, regionally based for a group of districts, to offer more technical support and guidance to districts is a move in the right direction and will go along way to reducing inequality in support to districts. However, much remains to be done in supporting the activities of TSUs countrywide.
- The Local Government Act (1997) establishes District Tender Boards that are charged with award of tenders to the private firms. Most of the districts consistently submit reports on political interference in the award of contracts leading, in some cases, to poor quality of facilities constructed.

Sustainability of facilities installed

The unit costs for implementation of the programme are tagged to physical outputs and thus there is a general imbalance between service delivery and capacity building for long-term sustainability of facilities. The software aspects of the programme are not adequately funded. This would seem to create a dependence culture of communities on central government for maintenance of facilities.

The conditionality of return of all unused funds back to the centre at the end of each Financial Year, encourages the district partners to build water facilities as quickly as possible. So there is a disincentive for district implementers to undertake community mobilisation and capacity build-

ing before construction. This seriously undermines the community's sense of ownership and ability to sustainably manage the facilities. These rules need to be changed.

Conclusions/recommendations

1. The effectiveness of investments in rural water supply, under decentralisation, should not be judged purely in terms of increase in safe water coverage because to achieve long-term sustainability of the facilities constructed, some of the funds have to be invested in aspects of training, capacity building for staff and WSCs, orientation of districts staff into their new roles, management of contracts and sensitisation of district and other lower local government councils. These aspects do not result in physical increase in safe water coverage but are key to the success of the decentralisation.
2. Decentralisation is more likely to succeed if flexibility is built into it; for instance, when districts are allowed to go into partnerships with competent NGOs for implementation of some activities where savings can be made. This flexibility enables key innovative approaches to be tested and results shared to improve implementation.
3. Decentralisation presents an opportunity for major sector reforms and requires patience, political support and an interactive approach between the centre and local governments to resolve the issues that inevitably arise during implementation.
4. Base the support to the process of decentralisation on long-term (10 – 15 year) and strategic reforms and investment plans to enable the process and systems to evolve and be fairly judged.
5. Private sector participation in construction of facilities is pursued on the assumption that it is more efficient than public sector and that eventually unit costs for delivery of services would be reduced. The overall management of contracts is however, critical to the realisation of this intention/objective; and thus the need to offer backup support and training to district / local government staff in the management of contracts.

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