



Scaling up community management

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COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT HAS become the leading concept for implementing water supply systems in rural areas. It has been successful at empowering communities and improving their involvement in, and management of, domestic water supply systems in many countries around the world. Increasingly it is being adopted in national policy and legislation frameworks as the favoured approach to operate and maintain rural water supply systems. To date, however there has been little sign of community management being successfully used to tackle either the unacceptably high numbers of people unserved by improved water supply systems, or the failure of many of these systems to be managed sustainably.

Community management: its roots and assumptions

Community management is seen as an answer to the large scale breakdown of water supply systems and the failure of governments to either provide potable water themselves, or devise a system where others agencies supply it reliably and consistently. The idea that communities themselves should operate and maintain their water supply systems came partly from an erosion of belief in the capacity of national governments to deliver water to their populations and partly from the belief that communities have the skills and the motivation to meet their own essential needs. Over the last decades many different methods have been used by a variety of agencies involved in the implementation of rural water supply to strengthen the capacities of community people to manage their water supply systems. Demand-responsive approaches, different forms and methods of participatory approaches, training and capacity building all aim at preparing community people for the tasks and responsibilities involved in managing a water supply system. It has been assumed that, once a system has been installed in a community, the success or failure in sustaining the system would be determined by factors within the community, such as the level of skills, the quality of leadership, the willingness to pay for water and the transparency of management institutions and procedures.

Community management: successes and

¹ Most of the content of this paper is derived from an upcoming ITDG Publishing-IRC publication by Ton Schouten and Patrick Moriarty: "Community Water, Community Management – From System to Service in Rural Areas". The book will be available in the second part of 2003. It can be ordered both at IRC and at ITDG Publishing.

constraints

Has community management been successful in supplying domestic water to rural populations? Yes, it has. There are numerous communities that have shown to be capable of managing their water systems for a prolonged period of time. And no, it hasn't, because there are also numerous communities that in the years after "handing over" in one way or another got into problems with managing their water systems. The problems are not only of a technical nature such as the lack of technical capacities to do major repairs or problems with spare part supply. Often the problems have a social background. They are related to the lack of management skills, the lack of communication between water users and their committees, problems to collect fees for water used, refusal to pay for services, problems of enforcing rules, bad leadership and exclusion of minority groups from the use of a water system or from decision making. Social problems have wrung many systems dry. It is not reluctance or apathy of community people that cause these problems. It often are factors that were not foreseen at the early stage of implementation, training and preparation: the growth of the community population, the entry of illegal settlers, the operator moving to another part of the country, the committed chairman retiring, the lack of spare parts, already existing internal divisions in the community causing exclusion and conflict. Systems have been implemented for a static community, not for a community that changes over time and that is subject to social, cultural and economic divisions of interests. Once these problems start, the agency that implemented the system, has moved on to the next community and will not be able to come back and help the community to overcome its problems.

So yes, there are numerous communities capable to manage their water supplies, but they are islands of success in a sea of struggle and problems.

Community management: institutional support is needed

To increase the success of community management it is needed to look beyond the community and throw out a challenge about the institutional support. Some communities may alone bear the full responsibility for managing their water supplies, many will not. Community management can not mean that, following the installation of a system, the outside agency drives off in the sunset and everyone lives happily ever after. Indeed, a comprehensive and effective framework for institutional support is needed

if we want to keep the systems working after “handing over”. The efforts and capacities of communities are crucial, but they must be supplemented with the efforts and capacities of governments, support agencies, NGOs and the private sector. Together, they can create a rural water supply service in which each stakeholder takes its share of responsibility in an institutional framework that addresses all the functions needed to provide water to rural people, including policy making, regulation, legislation, taxation and price policy, planning and construction, technical support, operation and maintenance. Community management as it is practiced now addresses only the functions of construction, operation and maintenance and leaves out the other functions. Community management as it is practiced now delivers water to rural people through projects – bound in space and bound in time. Community management as it is practiced now puts too much of the responsibility in the hands of one stakeholder: the community. For community management to become a valid management option for rural water supply, it should address the whole spectrum of functions, it should deliver water through national programmes and it should be the responsibility of all stakeholders – in particular government. Community management can be at the basis of a sustainable rural water supply service, but only if it is framed in national policies and an effective institutional support structure.

The challenge

What then is the challenge? Based on the above, the challenge is twofold:

- ensuring that community managed water systems are sustainable and that adequate institutional arrangements are put in place to support community management in the long term;
- finding ways to increase coverage from the current “islands” of success to larger areas: reaching entire populations (Thematic Group Scaling Up Community Management of Rural Water Supply, 2003).

This challenge can be summarised as “scaling up community management of rural water supply”. The first part of the challenge, to ensure sustainability, could also be phrased as “scaling up in time”. The second part of the challenge, to increase coverage, could also be understood as “scaling up in space”. The two particles of the challenge are intrinsically linked. Extending coverage to 100% is pointless unless sustainability is improved at the same time. Coverage – scaling up in space - is mainly related to implementation ability: the capacity to get concrete poured and management committees trained more quickly and effectively. But simply implementing projects that fail after a few years is not an answer. Sustainability issues are related to the ability to backstop the new community capacities indefinitely, to retrain people who leave their positions or die, to bring legal accountability to financial management by

auditing water committees, to mediate disagreements and resolve conflicts. Scaling up community management requires an enabling institutional environment that is capable to both plan and implement water supply systems for all and provide support to sustain these systems indefinitely. The crucial part of this enabling environment is not so much the national policy, that is relatively easy to develop and many countries have done so already, the biggest task is to improve the capacity of intermediate-level actors to implement and sustain water systems, those whose role it will be to support the community after “handing over”. Currently there is a glaring gap in capacity at the intermediate level and it is filling that gap – by training, capacity building but also by changing attitudes and work practices - that is the most pressing need in terms of scaling up community management.

From projects to service

Scaling up also requires different approaches to implementation, especially a move away from projects. Projects seem effective in terms of providing systems on the ground, but are almost inevitably hopeless at setting the basis for increased coverage or in ensuring sustainability. Projects as they are used now create islands of success, easy to satisfy the thinking that coverage moved from 35 to 45 %. Projects will never be able to accomplish 100% coverage of sustained services and because of their piecemeal and ad hoc character will even be counterproductive in meeting that challenge. This is a particularly important issue for international NGOs and donors, who often have been the champions of projects, in particular their own projects, and often have created structures parallel to government structures. Such an approach however, makes sustainability virtually impossible. The long term presence of international NGOs and donors can in no way be a substitute for trying to develop local capacity, in particular at the intermediate level.

Scaling up is about benchmarks

Scaling up as it is defined in this paper sets the standards high. It says that going from 65% coverage to 70% coverage is not to be taken for granted if the strategy, plans and frameworks are not there to move up to 100% coverage in a defined time frame. It says that increasing the sustainability of a system from 4 to 8 years is not to be taken for granted if the strategy and the plans do not exist to replace, upgrade or extend systems in order to accomplish indefinite sustainability.

The benchmarks for a scaled up rural water supply service therefore are:

- that the ‘water supply system’ is sustainable, technically and institutionally and indefinitely – most importantly that eventual replacement or expansion of the system can be delivered within the existing framework, and that the system can adjust to changing demand;

- that a successful community water supply carries with it an implicit assumption of equity. A system that reliably and sustainably meets the needs of 80% of the population while leaving the poorest 20% un-served cannot be counted a success;
- that the resource is sustainable – that is, that the system does not fail at any time due to failure of the water resource – e.g. due to drought, excessive water table draw-down, streams drying up etc.

In most situations ‘indefinite sustainability’ seems like a tall order. Yet that is what the ultimate target should be. It is not acceptable that a water supply works well for five years, then intermittently for five years, then sporadically for five years, and then not at all while trying to identify a new donor to come up with the capital investment to renew or expand the system. Systems inevitably get to a stage where major renovation is necessary. With many ‘appropriate’ technologies such as handpumps this can happen in five to ten years. A system that a community maintains by carrying out minor repairs over a five year period, but that fails when it comes time to replace the entire pump rather than a few nuts, is not sustainable. It is not to be assumed that the community will take responsibility for eventual replacement. But someone must. It is not acceptable to talk about a sustainable water supply, if it is not clear where the responsibility for eventual replacement of the system lies. If a village grows rapidly then it may need a new system. You can not expect the old system to continue if it cannot cope with the demand. As such sustainability is an exacting benchmark rather than a feel good adjective. These benchmarks should drive the process of scaling up. They are the ultimate targets and they can only be met if adequate institutional arrangements are put in place.

A call for action

The Millennium Development Goals include an enormous challenge for the water and sanitation sector. So does scaling up as a possible vehicle to achieve these goals. It is not the first time that the international community gathers around ambitious goals. Maybe this is the time where the lessons learned about the supply driven models of the 60s and the 70s and the lessons learned about the community management models of the 80s and 90s come together in a realisation that coverage can not be increased without putting institutions in place to ensure sustainability of the constructed systems and the realisation that the islands of community management success are not good enough to provide water to all.

Action must come in the first place from donors and from governments of developing countries. The international donor community played an important role in bringing about the changes in thinking on water supply and sanitation in the 70s and 80s. Not only did they change thinking, they also played a large role in implementing community management projects. Donors, together with country based

NGOs carried out pilot projects which have often been completely outside government management structures. Pilot projects appeared to be legitimate at the time, but this approach must change. It should no longer be acceptable for donors to implement projects in isolation of national structures and planning. However poor the capacity of government, community-managed systems can not be sustainable in the absence of external support. This support, except in truly exceptional circumstances such as war or anarchy, must, to be legitimate, take place within a government-provided framework.

Governments must also mend their ways. They must accept community management as a legitimate form of system management, and must provide the necessary institutional environment to support it. Equally, they must enable support providers – local government, NGOs, private sector, decentralised line ministries – the necessary space, and where appropriate, resources to play their role.

The principal need is for the development of capacity, the capacity of governments to develop and implement effective policy and legislation, and the capacity of local governments and water supply ministries to identify and implement cost-effective support structures that build on the management capacities of communities. Research is needed to develop capacity building tools and institutional models required by governments and agencies. Such (action) research should involve local actors and should be build on the successes and constraints of local management practises. It should work out models for intermediate level support, framed in existing administrative and governance structures. It should allow local actors, governments, communities, NGOs and donors to learn from experience.

Belief and vision or false and unrealistic expectations

It is easy to set benchmarks and proclaim what should be done. There are numerous “buts” to the targets of scaling up community management of rural water supply. And there is not an easy answer to each of these “buts”. But maybe it should be accepted that scaling up at this moment in time still largely is about advocacy, about beliefs and about efforts to bundle people’s energy and strengths. But so are the Millennium Development Goals. Without belief, achieving these goals will be impossible. Without a vision, action will be superfluous and the energy of people working in the sector – from community to department – will be lost. But, indeed but, the question to the “how to” must be addressed. How to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, how to achieve the Iguazu Action Plan, if implementing projects and creating islands of success is not good enough? How to scale up community management of rural water supply? This question puzzles many sector experts and scaling up is taken up by different organisations in the water sector. The Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP) of the World Bank has written a discussion paper on the subject and is planning to increase its research efforts

(Davis and Iyer, 2002). The Environmental Health Programme (EHP) of USAID has proposed concrete institutional support mechanisms (ISMs) for community managed water and sanitation systems (Lockwood, 2002). A thematic group on “scaling up community management of rural water supply” consisting of WEDC, WaterAid, the WSSCC, SKAT, EHP, Plan and IRC is actively promoting scaling up, disseminating information on scaling up and investing in district-based research to learn about the models and processes needed to go to scale (Thematic Group Scaling Up Community Management of Rural Water Supply, 2003). The awareness that tools, frameworks and guidelines are needed is there. The key issues are known, sector specialists should now support government to go to scale and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Conclusions

Community management has the potential to grow into a management option in its own right that can address the ambitious Millennium Development Goals. To do so community management must be scaled up and institutional arrangements at the intermediate level should be put in place to support and supplement the efforts and capacities of communities managing their own water supply systems. Such an enabling institutional environment will be able to achieve 100% coverage and indefinite sustainability of small water supply and sanitation systems. Much work remains to be done, in particular the development of models and tools to enable governments to go to scale. Water sector organisations such as WEDC, WaterAid, the WSSCC, EHP, SKAT, Plan, WSP and IRC are currently working on the development of such tools and models and are actively promoting scaling up.

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