

Supporting sustainable water supply services in difficult operating environments: a case study from Timor-Leste

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Summary

If WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) services are to deliver continuous benefits to users they must be supported by strong, responsive in-country institutions. Strengthening of permanent institutions tasked with service management requires approaches that don't simply stop at the delivery of taps and toilets, but extend to the whole service delivery chain.

This document is aimed at WASH practitioners and policy-makers working to develop the management and support functions of local institutions, ensuring they are well placed to manage services on an ongoing basis. It seeks to share WaterAid Timor-Leste's experiences of institutional strengthening in an environment characterised by limited sector management capacity, limited budget allocation by government, social conflict and intense climate variability. To achieve this objective, WaterAid Timor-Leste works to improve service management capacity, post-construction support structures, monitoring, planning, financing and accountability pathways. Barriers to sustainability and WaterAid's approaches to addressing them are described in the proceeding sections.

This paper describes two interventions that have evolved during collaboration with local government, aimed at strengthening the sustainability of WASH services. First, the formation of umbrella support associations that assist their members – community water user groups – with the monitoring of services, targeting of technical support, management training, and financial support. The second intervention involves strengthening accountability pathways and the voice of communities to demand improved services using citizen report cards.

WaterAid's country strategy in Timor-Leste has evolved over the past ten years, after starting during a period of instability with a newly formed government and the phasing out of humanitarian aid. Throughout this time the country programme has continuously worked at district level promoting a number of innovations through its operational programmes. This included the introduction of Boundary Rider initiativesⁱ for improvement of hand pump maintenance, community-led total sanitation (CLTS), and the promotion of citizen and service provider engagement mechanisms for greater accountability and improved service levels. Building on this local base and its credibility as a trusted partner, WaterAid Timor-Leste has brought lessons from the

ⁱ Water supply technicians travelling on motorbikes to follow up with communities.

field to support national processes around local non-governmental organisation (NGO) advocacy with government and budget analysis, and to input to the development of the first National Water Supply Policy (see Box 1 below).

One common thread across WaterAid Timor-Leste's work has been a strong commitment to working with and supporting local government, culminating in the new 2016 strategy, which is aligned with WaterAid's global **district-wide approach**. WaterAid Timor-Leste is now well-placed to support decentralised local government, which will need significant capacity building as the Government channels increasing resources through these new municipal authorities and with a greater, although still inadequate, share of funding for post-construction support.

National context

Timor-Leste became a sovereign state in 2002. With a population of just over 1.2 million, it is a small and new nation with Government institutions that are still evolving. Despite a recent history of conflict and civil unrest, there has been stability since 2008. It is a liberal democracy that has held a series of open and transparent elections; civil society in Timor-Leste enjoys a fair degree of freedom and is active. The country has valuable oil and gas resources generating revenue for social development programmes and infrastructure, and as a result its economy has expanded rapidly. It is now classified as a lower-middle income country with a gross national income per capita of US\$2,680. However, it still faces significant social challenges, such as child malnutrition. The country is very mountainous and many of the rural population, just over 67%, live in difficult-to-access communities with poor transport links.

Timor-Leste has a strong indigenous culture, particularly in rural communities where traditional leadership is greatly respected and village chiefs (*Chefe Sucos*) are often seen as the most trusted source of information. The chiefs are also elected representatives of the *Sucos*, which forms the lowest tier of Government, below districts (now reclassified as municipalities). A dependency culture has developed in many of these communities, due to a history of needs-based humanitarian responses and a general perception that Timor-Leste has significant oil wealth and therefore the Government has resources to be shared through direct hand-outs.

Box 1: WaterAid Timor-Leste country programme

WaterAid has been present in Timor-Leste since 2005, initially with Plan International and then from 2007 as a full country programme of WaterAid Australia. It has operational programmes with local partners in two municipalities, **Manufahi** and **Likisà**. It also links practice with advocacy as part of its contribution to national reform and policy debates, for example introducing CLTS as a pilot that later informed the National Basic Sanitation Policy. Its budget for the 2016–17 fiscal year is just over \$1.8 million.

Programme achievements:

- Operational programmes for WASH service delivery in 178 communities to date.
- Piloting of various post-construction support mechanisms for community-based management, including the creation of umbrella support associations (A-GMFs).
- Development of citizens' engagement mechanisms for greater accountability and improved service levels, which decreased the number of households per water point, demonstrating improved sustainability.
- Support of sector reform and the development of the National Water Supply and Sanitation policies.
- Support to development of local government capacity in the transition to a new decentralised mandate.

Key domains of WaterAid Timor-Leste's new country strategy:

1. **Municipal strengthening:** working to strengthen local government capacity to deliver sustainable services through supporting government to plan, implement, and link effectively across key sectors, including health, education and nutrition, in addition to directly providing services in rural communities.
2. **Securing resources for WASH:** working with Government and civil society to monitor, analyse and mobilise resources for WASH.
3. **WASH as a human right:** working to link Government commitments with sector performance monitoring, and realise strategies to progressively eliminate inequalities in service delivery, including piloting a social audit tool for rural WASH services.
4. **Sanitation and hygiene behaviour change:** working to support the development of a unified, national approach for behaviour change through inter-sectoral promotion of hygiene and sanitation.

Decentralisation

The Government of Timor-Leste is committed to decentralisation, and has been working on a framework to delegate spending and management via the Ministry of State Administration to municipalities, including funds for the management of social services such as health, education and water and sanitation. However, progress is slow and the new decentralisation law passed in March 2016 is starting with a group of four pilot municipalities planned for January 2017, before being scaled up. This process is hampered by a lack of human resources and capacity in municipalities – many of which lack basic administrative systems and even, in some cases, bank accounts.

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For the rural water sector, one significant outcome of the decentralisation process, albeit with delays and challenges, is a tilting in the balance of power, resources and mandate away from the line ministry officials and to local government. As part of this process, it is hoped that the municipal government outreach staff – (*Fasilitador Postu-Administrativu* or FPA) who provide support to community water user groups (GMFs), monitor coverage and coordinate water interventions at municipal level – will be better resourced and supported in their role.

Rural water supply coverage

Access to improved water and sanitation in Timor-Leste is among the lowest in the region. Current national coverage data indicates that 72% of the population have access to an improved water source and 39% have access to improved sanitation. Coverage in rural areas is especially bad, with only 61% of people having access to improved water and only some 14% having piped access to premises.¹

Even where schemes are in place it is difficult to accurately assess how well they are performing, let alone the levels of service provided. Reported functionality rates vary by organisation from highs of 89%ⁱⁱ to 84%ⁱⁱⁱ to as low as 67%, as stated by the Government, sourced from the Government's rural water supply monitoring system *Sistema Informasan Be'e e Saneamentu* (SIBS), which provides water coverage information where there is an active FPA. However, there is still no reliable, comprehensive database of all rural water supply infrastructure, so these figures should be treated with caution. To put it into perspective, no one knows exactly how many community-managed schemes actually exist, but the figure is estimated at 'somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000'.^{iv}

Financing for rural water

The Government is now the largest investor in both urban and rural water supply, reflecting significant achievements by the sector to build the profile and prioritisation of WASH. This also reflects an important shift from the dominance of donor finance over the past decade, with a significant increase in allocation for rural water supply from about \$6.7 million in 2014 to \$12.7 million in 2015. As part of the broader drive for decentralisation, the Government has also committed to continuing the National Program of Suco Development, whereby each *suco* (village) can invest in community infrastructure using a demand-driven development model. Australia's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funds a bilateral WASH programme (BESIK) and was the single biggest donor to the sector, providing some \$80 million over two phases between 2007 and 2016, but it has drastically reduced WASH funding in 2016 to less than \$2 million per year.

ⁱⁱ This figure is from a recent evaluation of WaterAid's own interventions for systems up to two years old in 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Functionality rates given for BESIK-funded schemes up to three years old, as of December 2014.

^{iv} Opinion provided by head of WaterAid country programme.

Sector institutional arrangements

The Ministry of Public Works has lead responsibility for rural water supply through the Directorate General for Water and Sanitation (DGAS). The DGAS has offices and staff operating at district (now municipal) level whose task it is to provide technical support and oversight to local government, coordinate investments, carry out data collection and support water service providers. The legal framework for domestic water in Timor-Leste differentiates between urban and rural provision; rural communities manage and maintain their own systems through water user groups, or *Grupu Manajamentu Facilidades* (GMFs). Under current arrangements the Government can also designate larger or more complex rural schemes as 'water supply areas', which are then run directly by Government staff or delegated to an operator, but importantly the GMFs are always retained as part of the management structure.

A revised policy for public water supply, now in its sixth major draft, is widely expected to be submitted to the Council of Ministers in 2017. Once passed, this will clarify several important ambiguities, which should build a more solid foundation for rural (and urban) water service delivery. Principal among these is clarification of asset ownership; the state have ownership in all cases, with the ability to delegate management to GMFs who run systems 'on behalf' of Government. The new policy draft also cements the primacy of the GMFs as the model for rural water provision.

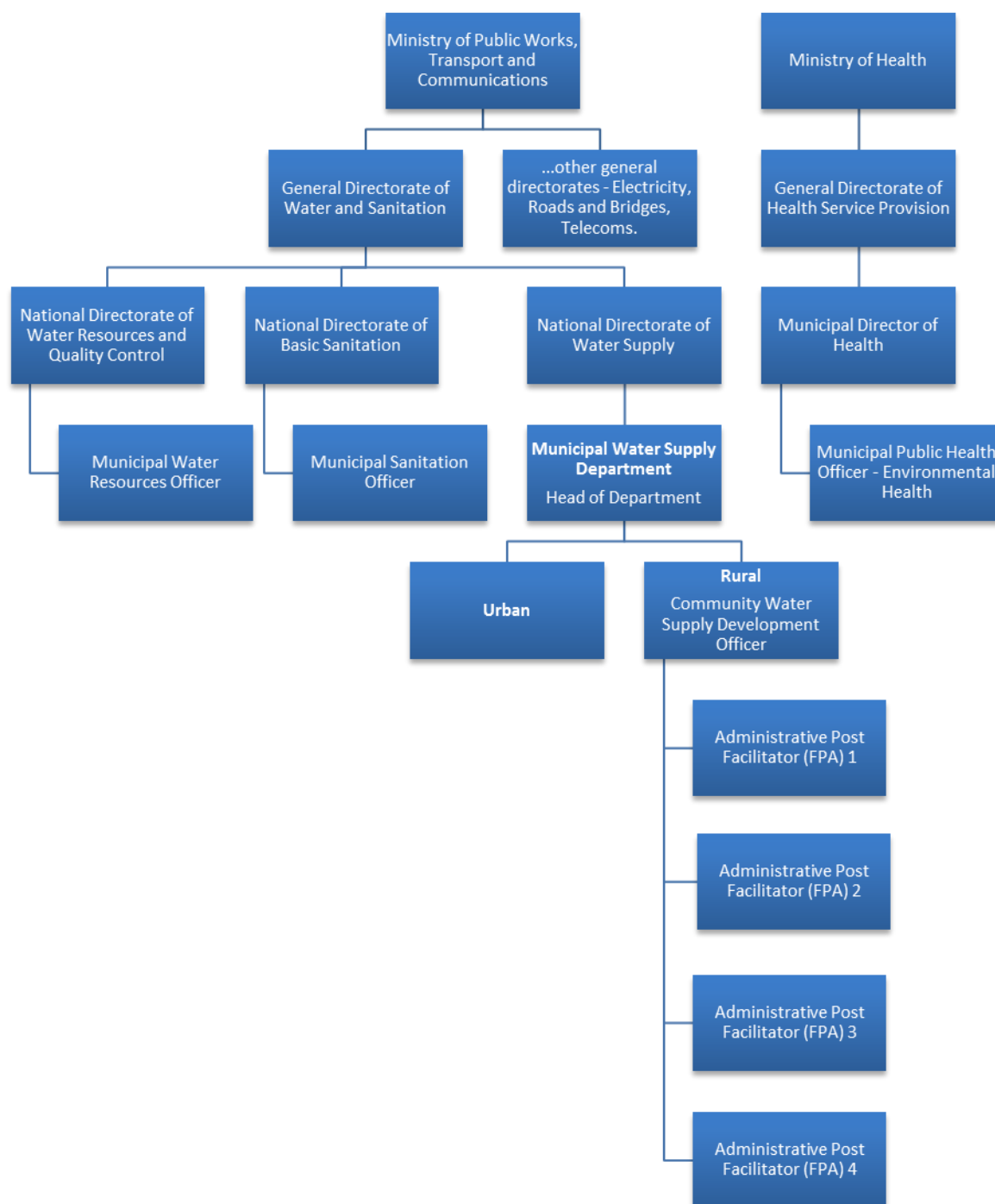


Figure 1: Government of Timor-Leste WASH administrative structure
 For rural water supply, FPAs are mostly junior staff members working as water supply outreach workers, with four to six in each of the 13 municipalities.

Major threats to sustainability

As in many countries, the sustainability of rural water services is constrained by multiple, interconnected factors. The main threats WaterAid Timor-Leste have identified include:

- Limited management capacity on the part of many GMFs, which struggle with scheme management, aspects of operation and maintenance, and financial management.
- Financial limitations, both in terms of very low tariff collection and even partial cost recovery, as well as limits on the financing the Government has made available for capital maintenance and support to GMFs.
- Social conflict over rights to water at the local level and tensions between community members.
- Environmental impacts of changing land use, population growth and climate change, with both extremes of water sources drying up and excess rainfall leading to flooding, landslides and damage to physical assets, all made worse by the mountainous terrain in many rural areas.

Addressing sustainability

Work in the sector

DFAT's bilateral programme is focused on strengthening operations and maintenance systems for rural water supply. It has focused on trialling service provision contracts for NGOs and contractors to operate a number of large (serving more than 2,000 households), rural water supply systems and to maintain electric pumps. However, the DGAS are interested in keeping service provision in-house, and would prefer to expand their staff rather than contract out services.

Plan-International in Timor-Leste has been trialling small grants to GMFs to rehabilitate their water supplies. However, this has been constrained by the capacity of GMFs to manage their finances and undertake more complex construction work.

WaterAid Timor-Leste

Within its overarching strategy, WaterAid Timor-Leste has been working on a number of innovations designed to address weaknesses in rural water supply and improve the sustainability of service delivery – all of which form part of its commitment to support local government. Two of these interventions are described in detail below, together with an analysis of how they are linked to national policy and the potential for scaling up. The first intervention involves the formation of umbrella associations that assist member water user groups with training, financial support, monitoring services and targeting technical support. The second intervention involves strengthening the voices of communities to demand improved services, using citizen report cards.

Improving support to service providers: creation of umbrella support associations (A-GMFs)

Background

WaterAid Timor-Leste has supported the creation of two associations of water user groups (GMFs) in Likisà municipality (2010) and Manufahi municipality (2014) to act as umbrella organisations (A-GMFs). These A-GMFs support member GMFs to work with local government staff (FPAs) in monitoring services and collecting data. Monitoring informs the targeting of technical support, management training and financial support to members. Membership to the A-GMF is open and not restricted to communities where WaterAid Timor-Leste has provided water schemes. The A-GMFs each have an elected leadership committee, who receive a small stipend for their time. At present, neither association is formally registered, although this is in process with the Ministry of Justice, under the legal structure of an 'Association of Members'.

Currently the A-GMF in Likisà has approximately 90 member GMFs, representing around 45% of the total in the municipality. The A-GMF in Manufahi has 67 member GMFs of some 80, and therefore a higher membership ratio of around 84%. In both cases membership is increasing year on year. The programme of work of the A-GMFs is agreed on jointly between the local government's FPA and WaterAid Timor-Leste, who advise on which communities to follow up. There are cases of GMFs directly requesting support, but this is relatively uncommon, so it remains a largely supply-driven approach, with each A-GMF typically visiting a member GMF once or twice per year.

Functions of the A-GMFs

On average the A-GMF volunteers will spend a day in the community meeting with the GMF to review progress, asking about challenges and inspecting the water supply scheme. They rely on the GMF to give information about specific issues, but will make direct observations and help to carry out repairs when needed. The A-GMF staff will also visit and inspect household latrines and handwashing facilities, based on a sample provided by the GMF. They do not usually meet with other groups or individuals in the community, unless there is a specific issue or request.

Through these discussions, observations and site visits, the A-GMF staff compile data about the functioning of the GMF, such as how regularly they have been organising meetings, the level of tariff collection and any minor maintenance tasks. The FPAs compile this data and information from all the visits is presented at annual general meetings and submitted to local government, and to WaterAid Timor-Leste and the municipal water supply department (DAA). In practice the data is used by the FPAs and WaterAid Timor-Leste to plan and target follow-up activities, such as refresher training and repairs. GMF representatives can also access the information in the A-GMF annual report, which provides an analysis of sustainability trends from the data to inform policy and practice. The FPAs pass monitoring data on to the SIBS national monitoring database.

Impact of the A-GMFs

The joint process of information collection, sharing and analysis has helped to significantly strengthen working relations between municipal government and the A-GMFs, to the extent that local government now recognises the added value of the work of the associations. In Manufahi there are also stronger links with the decentralised line ministry, where the association shares an office with the district officer (DAA). Considering functionality of water schemes as a proxy indicator for impact in areas with A-GMF support, there is a 5% higher level of functionality than for the large BESIK-supported schemes, and 22% higher than levels reported by Government in other parts of the country. However, the latter figure includes a range of much older schemes and overall data are not fully reliable yet, but will become more representative as more data are collected and monitoring systems are strengthened. The A-GMFs have also been active in visiting communities and collecting data on the performance of more than 150 member GMFs, with some 21 criteria for technical maintenance, management, community organisation, financial management, hygiene promotion and relationships with government and development partners.

A recent WaterAid Timor-Leste country programme evaluation for 2010–2015 found that, although all communities visited had heard of the A-GMFs, none had received direct assistance because their schemes were functioning well. Although there is evidence that systematic support to service providers can improve service delivery globally, further evidence is required in the context of Timor-Leste to demonstrate that systematic support to GMFs can result in improved performance.²

Financial viability of the A-GMFs

The costs of running the A-GMFs are made up of the fixed expenses of running the office and transport, plus direct programming costs for visiting communities and running meetings and training sessions. In addition, there are the costs of member volunteer time, which can be monetised on the basis of the Government daily rate for this category of labour. Finally, there are the costs WaterAid Timor-Leste incurred in providing overall support and guidance to the A-GMF initiative. These costs consist of the staff time for mentoring, training and organisational development support, and the legal costs for registration. Table 1 shows all costs, based on estimates provided by WaterAid Timor-Leste, which indicates that the model is highly subsidised.

Table 1: Summary of A-GMF cost categories

Cost category	Amount/month (US\$)	Source of funding
Fixed costs	415	WaterAid Timor-Leste direct subsidy
Programme costs	415	WaterAid Timor-Leste direct subsidy
Labour	292	Volunteers' time
Indirect support	1,000	WaterAid Timor-Leste indirect subsidy
Total:	2,122.00	

Given the current situation, the A-GMF model is financially unsustainable without alternative sources of funding. Based on available data for tariff payments (average annual household payment of \$2.07 and typical collection rates of only around 18%), the likelihood of funding from consumer revenue is extremely low to non-existent. Even in best-case scenarios, where small surpluses may be generated, it is questionable whether the best use of funding would be to pool this at the A-GMF level, or to build up cash reserves at GMF level for operation and maintenance purposes.

It is unlikely that the A-GMFs would be able to generate income from any other business source, because they remain weak institutionally. Also, running a profitable enterprise in rural Timor-Leste is generally very challenging, because of the cash economy and a lack of markets. WaterAid Timor-Leste is in discussions with other NGOs to gauge interest in supporting the A-GMF model, but there would still be a reliance on donor funding, which is uncertain. Advocacy for Government subsidy would be a longer term strategy. There are plans to promote the A-GMFs to act as a network of community consultants who can be contracted individually to assist NGOs and other organisations. Also under discussion is the concept of the associations acting as a conduit for providing match-funding to GMFs for larger repairs beyond the scope of their O&M savings.

Lessons, challenges and future focus

The A-GMFs have been firmly embraced by the two municipal governments WaterAid Timor-Leste are working with – Manufahi and Likisà – which are keen on the approach and see the value in working collaboratively on data collection and outreach to rural communities. The association in Manufahi was WaterAid Timor-Leste's second experience, so WaterAid Timor-Leste has applied learning from its earlier experience. Some examples of this experience were being clearer from the outset about relationships with local government, and more inclusive in the formation of the A-GMF, as well as taking more of a back seat in the early establishment of the model. Given the recent moves to accelerate the decentralisation process, the most likely pathway for WaterAid Timor-Leste to scale up and strengthen the A-GMF model is through local government.

However, there is a more difficult and challenging dynamic, in that the national Government is concerned that the DGAS will have to provide funding for the A-GMFs once NGO support is withdrawn. Part of this concern appears to be due to the threat to the Government's ownership of GMFs as a concept, as these are considered to be 'their' mandated grass-roots entities, which should not be appropriated by any non-state actor. WaterAid Timor-Leste's strategy to deal with this is to take a step back and promote A-GMF staff in direct dealings with the DGAS, as a way to preserve their legitimacy. Changing the name of the associations is also in discussion – removing the term 'GMF' as a way of defusing tension, and emphasising their role as an umbrella organisation.

Even if national Government can be convinced of the value of promoting umbrella associations as a means to support community management, there is still the vexed question of financing and how such a model may be funded at scale, given that there

will be insufficient revenue at community level to pay for such services. WaterAid Timor-Leste then has the challenge of developing a viable business model for the A-GMF – part of which may involve them being formally contracted to provide regular support as legitimate ‘service providers’ and part of which must involve some form of subsidy.

Addressing accountability: trialling a community scorecard tool

Background

As part of its overall strategy to improve service delivery, WaterAid Timor-Leste applies a ‘citizens action’ approach to strengthening the voice of community members in holding service providers and regulators to account for the provision and ongoing delivery of services. WaterAid Timor-Leste has piloted approaches that improve access to information about rights to WASH services. A comprehensive community scorecard (CSC) process has been developed as a mechanism to articulate the voices of citizens, at both local and national levels.

The CSC method involves separate meetings for both women and men from communities and service providers. This is followed by a concluding interface meeting to provide feedback and develop an action plan based on a consensus on the quality of service provided, identifying problems and the actions that can be taken by the community and service providers to resolve these. To focus on ongoing service provision, the CSC is designed to be used at least one year after construction, and focus on the service provided to the community by the water user group with local government staff. The CSC is viewed as a first step towards the development of a more comprehensive social audit of basic infrastructure services. To date, WaterAid Timor-Leste has used the tool in 26 communities where it has provided water supply schemes. To demonstrate the CSC and develop the social audit capacity of local NGOs, WaterAid Timor-Leste piloted the CSC in a further 14 locations with Government-built schemes during June and July 2015 and August 2016. This was done with members of the National Platform for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene network (or PN-BESITL in Tetum), which is a group of local NGOs undertaking advocacy work in the WASH sector.

Applying the CSC

The CSC process begins with a review of the technical service provided against national and international standards, using an input tracking process (see figure 1). This is followed by: two gender-segregated community meetings, with eight to ten people in each (numbers will vary according to the size of the community) to establish user perceptions; a self-evaluation scoring meeting held by the GMF along with the responsible FPA; and then a concluding consensus and action planning meeting with the community, GMF and FPA.

Each of the meetings starts with an explanation of the objective, the process and the use of the CSC for soliciting feedback on the service provided and informing an action plan with the service provider. Following discussions, each group is asked to rank the quality of the service provided using a scale from ‘1’ (very good) to ‘5’ (very bad) across criteria they perceive to be important; they are also asked to provide a

rationale for their scoring. The service provider, in this case the GMF along with the FPA, is asked to rank the quality of the service they provide using the same scale, across criteria they perceive to be important. The scores are then consolidated, and at the interface meeting a consensus is found and actions are agreed for items that scored lower than three. Analysis and feedback is provided to the local and national Government, and to the project implementer, for review and follow up, and to inform policy.

Table 2: Example input tracking indicators

No.	Indicator	Standard	Actual	Remarks/evidence	Source/reference
IT1	Water access – time for household to collect water	200m/Less than 5 mins from each household			Timor-Leste Rural Water Supply Guideline 1, p7
IT2	Water access – number of people per water point	Maximum 100 people			Timor-Leste Rural Water Supply Guideline 1, p8
IT4	Water access – accessibility for people with a disability	Efforts were made to provide access for people with a disability			Timor-Leste Rural Water Supply Guideline 1, p8
IT5	Reliability of water supply	Available when needed (at least every day)			Timor-Leste Public Water Supply Policy
IT7	System functionality – percentage of taps functioning	100%			
IT8	Government support - visits from FPA	Three per year			CAP Manual – GMF Support, p8
IT10	GMF function – collection of contributions from household	GMF regulation:			Timor-Leste Rural Water Supply Guideline 1, p9
IT15	Water quality – count of bacteria	Test – meets 0CFU/100ml			WHO/Timor-Leste Water Quality Guidelines

Impact

In cases where the construction process was not yet finished, direct changes were made on the basis of applying the CSC. For example, in one case the government contractor was actually changed because of poor performance, and, in another community, engagement during construction was improved and guidance was issued to contractors to use labour from within the community rather than bringing in outside workers (this was a common concern). In cases where the construction process was complete and the water user group had been managing the system for at least a year, it was commonly found that households had not been paying regular monthly tariffs. This was largely due to a lack of transparency and accountability of the group to the community users. Each completed CSC meeting resulted in the development of a community action plan. These often involved providing a community noticeboard with monthly results of the water user group's finances and provided impetus to establish clear national guidance for training water user groups in financial management.

Lessons, challenges and future focus

The CSC process ensures that there is an effective avenue in place to receive community feedback, and that feedback is acted upon and informs a constructive discourse on improving future services. Another important lesson is to engage community leadership (in this case the village chief) as well as local government officers, in the process, to provide momentum for the action plan. The CSC process has also been found to be more effective when it focuses on a localised area with several water supply systems, in order to consolidate follow-up with local leadership and local government staff before moving on to other communities.

However, in terms of the broader context of support for social audits of government services, the CSC WaterAid Timor-Leste and its partners piloted has proven to be effective and could be adapted for other types of service provision. It could be developed to provide the basis for an assessment of whether services offer value for money. The tool has been focused on rural water supply services to date. However, there has been ongoing dialogue, involving both donors and government, on whether to expand the process and the possible use of the CSC as a benchmarking process (in both rural and urban areas), particularly for the processes of scoring service provision. Both the Government and the donor DFAT have been positive about this option.

As part of the discussion, WaterAid Timor-Leste is continuing to work with the network of local WASH-focused NGOs involved in advocacy for the sector to galvanise this national entity (PN-BESTIL) to lead discussions with the Government on the CSC and the promotion of social audits to increase national ownership. The Prime Minister, Rui Maria de Araujo, has started a new social audit initiative to encourage community participation in government programmes, in order to enhance the effectiveness and transparency of the public sector. Both the President and Prime Ministers' offices have supported the planning process for implementing social audits for four priority sectors, including water and sanitation. Constructive discussions are ongoing with the DGAS and the Prime Minister's office about the potential for the CSC. If the benefits and successes can continue to be demonstrated, there is a chance that this type of social audit could be scaled up

fairly soon. However, as with many aspects of government, this is dependent on political cycles, and, following the elections in 2017, the next administration may be less interested in the CSC.

Conclusions

Future influencing objectives

There is significant commitment within the DGAS to the community management of water supply through the GMFs, as outlined in the drafted National Public Water Supply Policy. Working to strengthen community management of water supplies and the GMFs, and facilitating systems for support and links between the GMFs, and local and national government, will be central to developing sustainable service delivery as municipalities take on greater responsibility and resources through the emerging decentralisation process.

The model of the umbrella association of GMFs will become even more pertinent through the decentralisation process, and will act as a bridge between civil society, communities and any water supply service providers through local government. The A-GMFs will need to be supported to take on any form that emerges from these processes as being most effective and acceptable to government and sector stakeholders.

The CSC approach is emerging as a very practical and effective means of understanding rural water supply service delivery mechanisms and improving services with the engagement of Government in Timor-Leste. As we take the approach further it has the potential to demonstrate the challenges of rural water supply operations and maintenance, and of other services, and also demonstrate effective mechanisms for improving services, raising awareness and attracting budget allocations for operations and maintenance – where there is no budget at the moment.

Lessons learned

Associations and federations of water user groups can be politically sensitive, as governments sometimes perceive them to be accountability institutions, which are not always welcome. Concerns can be placated with as simple an action as a name change, and it is essential that the organisations are led by and represented by the members, not by WaterAid or the support agency itself.

The associations have required significant organisational development support, as they were started from scratch. It has been challenging to demonstrate their financial sustainability into the future, and this may not even be possible without subsidy of some form (as per the National Rural Water Association [NRWA], who receive federal Government grants³ in the USA). Some way towards financial sustainability would be demonstrating the effectiveness of the association so that it attracts funding. This requires setting up monitoring systems at the start to gather evidence of improved service delivery.

The CSC approach has proven to be successful at generating understanding and practical action around rural water supply service provision. It has been very beneficial to get national Government buy-in to the process through the WASH sector agency (DGAS) and share findings jointly with the ministerial level and national leadership. This has enabled acceptance of the findings and understanding of sustainable service delivery with the potential to attract Government funding for operation and maintenance of rural services.

The CSC is best implemented as an ongoing process, not just as a one-off activity, so that action plans are followed up and service improvements are monitored. It is most effective when local leadership, such as village chiefs, are engaged to support the process and also when it is implemented in a large area, rather than scattered in smaller areas, in order to concentrate follow-up activities and simplify ongoing support.

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