

Rural water supply development in the context of economic crisis and structural adjustment

by Ingvar Andersson

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IN MANY COUNTRIES in Africa today the development of rural water supply and sanitation programmes has to be carried out in a situation of severe economic crisis and in the context of attempts at structural adjustment. It is important to understand all the implications of structural adjustment — not only the political, financial and institutional changes but also the less-often mentioned environmental and social aspects.

There is still too much of a tendency to talk only in terms of the activities of donors and national governments. As with all development planning there is too little attention given to lower levels such as districts, communities and individuals, who are the ultimate targets of development programmes. An economic crisis at national level has implications for all levels: communities and individuals and their future.

Sometimes the only mention of the target groups is a well-meant warning that vulnerable groups will suffer and that compensatory measures may be necessary to alleviate the impact. This is too narrow an approach. We must see the target groups as actors rather than victims, and plan accordingly. This is not to say there is no risk involved. Despite the lack of accurate statistics, and the non-existence of impact studies related to structural adjustment programmes, there is enough evidence from development

programmes generally that less-advantaged groups do not benefit and in some cases may even be affected negatively. This is not, however, a special condition in a structural adjustment context. That risk exists in all development planning if special efforts are not made to ensure that the target group as a whole is fully involved in the whole process, and its members benefit equally.

The most serious risk is the possibility of the increasing neglect of social sectors in order to concentrate on so-called 'productive' sectors. Discussion of the social sector as something separate from other productive sectors is a serious negative trend. Social sector programmes—which meet basic needs of the population such as water, health-care and education — are vital ingredients for economic development. Adequate planning of structural adjustment requires that this distinction is done away with. Investment in social

sectors is just as much investment for economic development as that in the industrial or agricultural sectors. If implemented with the full participation of the target group, social sector improvements can be a catalyst for general development in rural communities.

The water sector: problems exemplified

Development within the water sector in many countries in Africa has not been encouraging over the past decades. This, despite the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1980-90) which generated increased investment in the sector but also set unrealistically ambitious national targets. The statistics in Table 1 from Africa as a whole, show the enormity of the task ahead if the target for a safe, convenient water supply is to be reached by 1990.

Hidden in the statistics in Table 1 are problems with a number of countries where progress has been far from straightforward, and where serious problems are faced today.

Problems experienced in the water sector can be seen in the example of Tanzania. (Only rural water supplies are covered in the discussion: sanitation is not included because of the lack of accurate statistics.)

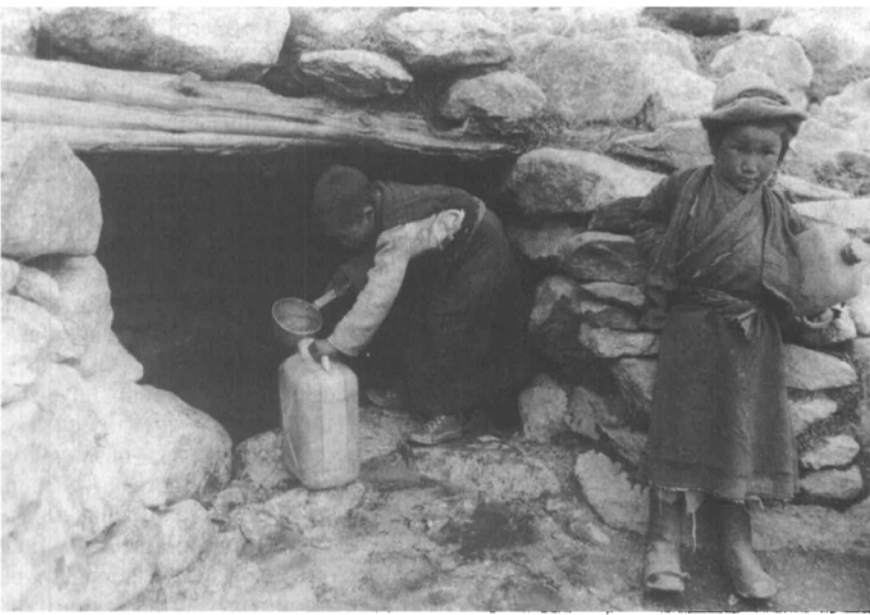
Conditions for the development of a successful rural water supply improvement programme in Tanzania appeared ideal. First, Tanzania has a



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How much can be done at the district and community level.

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Many water supply programmes have lost sight of the community and individual.

Table 1. (I) Rural water supply in Africa

Year	Total population (in millions)	Population served (in millions)	%
1970	213	27.7	13
1980	261	57.2	22
1985	300	75.0	25
1990	321	147.8	46 planned

Source: WHO, 1988

professed ideology of self-reliance. The government has been committed to improving water supplies since independence. Water supplies were given priority in the early development plans prepared in Tanzania after independence, both to provide basic needs but also as a means of stimulating economic development. It was seen as a basic right which should be provided free of charge. The resources Tanzania lacks, namely money and expertise, are available from development agencies. Improved water supplies have also been presumed to be high on the priority list of village needs.

One could expect then that the water supply programme in Tanzania would be very successful. The reality, however, has been a high level of project failure, and very little impact. The majority of supplies installed are not in use, either because they do not work or they do not meet the real needs of the population. There are many factors involved in the poor success rate in the water sector. The economic crisis has reduced interest in the social sectors at planning levels, and increased difficulties in procuring fuel and spare parts. Other important factors include inappropriate technology choice; the neglect of operation and maintenance aspects; failure to include health education and

sanitation improvements; the tendency to plan from above on a large scale with little or no consideration given to local social conditions; the dependency relationship caused by the nature and extent of donor involvement; and the almost complete lack of community involvement, in particular that of women, who are the managers of traditional water sources, and the collectors and users of water in the homes. A major overall problem has been that improvements to water supplies have been treated as purely technical problems, rather than as a process of social change necessarily requiring the full participation of the communities involved.

Official Tanzanian statistics from



Social sector programmes are vital ingredients for social developments.

1985 indicate that 42 per cent of the rural population have access to 'adequate potable water', but poor functioning is said to reduce this figure to 25 per cent. Experience from the regions supported by SIDA, however, indicates that often only the water supply in the district headquarters functions with any degree of reliability and thus a more realistic figure for many regions may be as low as 5 per cent.

The political commitment made in the 1960s and 1970s for provision of water supplies as a free basic service provided by the government has changed in the 1980s as a result of these problems. It would, however, be incorrect to claim this was only due to the economic crisis. There are indications that a change would have been needed because of the inappropriateness of the strategy chosen. It would appear unlikely that, even with better economic conditions, Tanzania could have afforded to operate and maintain large-scale, complex schemes provided with foreign assistance. The economic crisis has only hastened an awareness of the impossibility of the strategy, and the need for alternatives.

The search for alternatives

The crisis described above, combined with the deteriorating economic situation, led to a search for alternatives within the water supply and sanitation sector. On the part of government and donors the adjustments required included political, economic and institutional changes. The majority of consumers had already been forced to revert to traditional sources because of the failure of 'improved' supplies. Expectations of the government's restoring of supplies were at a low level.

The financial picture was bleak as



Improvements to water supplies should be seen as a process of social change.

well. New investments had been given priority at the expense of operation and maintenance. An immediate result of the crisis was that funds for new investment were dramatically reduced. In the 1984 budget the social sectors were given less money, and the need for these sectors to become self-sustaining was emphasized. Major donors such as the World Bank and USAID withdrew from planned regional water supply programmes, leaving the dry central part of the country without external financial sources. Bilateral donors — notably Nordic and Dutch — concentrated their resources on area programmes which covered one or more regions.

Tanzanian funds committed to the sector were mainly allocated to the regions with no external donor support, but were not sufficient to maintain even the level of activity that the 1960s had seen. A serious regional imbalance in access to financial resources was being created.

Ways and means were sought to lower the costs for implementation. The concept of 'self help' was reintroduced largely as a cost-saving exercise. It was now expected that voluntary labour should carry out all the unskilled work previously carried out by paid labourers.

Attempts were made to find alternatives to the complex technology introduced earlier which had led to dependence on expensive fuel and spare parts. Wells and handpumps were somewhat reluctantly accepted as substitutes. As a result investment costs per capita could be considerably lowered. The problems of running the water systems were dramatically reduced, but the problems of maintenance remained. The central and regional authorities could not cope

— either financially or administratively — with the task of maintaining a large number of handpumps distributed over a wide area.

Political decisions have been required which have not been easily made or accepted, given the basic ideological standpoint in Tanzania. The commitment to provide basic services free of charge to all members of society, water as well as health care and basic education, has not been possible to fulfil, and the government has had to ask local governments to take more financial responsibility for providing these services. This means that communities and individuals have to contribute financially through development taxes and some direct contributions, as well as materially through self-help.

Institutional changes

To implement the above political decisions certain institutional changes have also been necessary. The roles and responsibilities of the Tanzanian actors in the rural water supply and sanitation sector have for a long time been somewhat unclear. The responsibility has shifted from one ministry to another, and at times there has been an overlapping of responsibility. This has resulted in frustration and internal conflicts which have hampered the development of policies.

In the early 1980s the central government legally delegated almost all its functions with regard to water supplies to the local government authorities (at district level) through the Local Government Act, which states that local government has the responsibility to 'establish, provide,

maintain and control public water supplies'. Unfortunately, there is a serious bottleneck in that the regional authorities remain largely unchanged. They are still relatively well-staffed in relation to the districts but have a very unclear role. The districts receive inadequate financial support and little back-up, especially in terms of the human resources development necessary to enable them to undertake the new responsibility.

While local governments have the authority to raise the necessary revenues, including the charging for water if necessary, there have been difficulties in getting sufficient funds. Another serious problem is the fact that lack of funds at the national level did not permit the adequate implementation of the decentralization process. The Local Government Acts have not even been translated into Kiswahili, so there must be a whole education programme around this institutional change before there is any possibility of implementing programmes at the district level.

Donors in Tanzania reacted by concentrating on regional programmes. In some cases frustration and bottlenecks caused donors to plan and implement their own programmes in almost complete isolation from the Tanzanian authorities through the increased use of external funds to the programmes and expatriate consultants. This is considered a negative trend — even though more efficient use of external funds was achieved and increased provision of water supplies was possible. In a broader developmental sense it can be compared to a withdrawal from the sector, especially if high-tech, capital-intensive alternatives continue to be used.

At the community and the individual level there was little change. Decentralization was interpreted simply as a transfer of authority to district level. Communities were merely expected to provide cash and labour for projects planned for and implemented by outside agencies. In some cases communities resisted by refusing to provide funding. There continued to be mistrust and frustration. Communities are still largely unaware that they have a role to play in the planning and decision-making of their own development: they are used to the situation where decisions are made outside and projects provided by government authorities, whether at the central, regional or district level. 