

There's a right way to do it — informal arrangements for local resource management in Zimbabwe

by Frances Cleaver

Any community which has survived drought — and whose people enjoy relatively equal access to water — must be doing something right. Frances Cleaver explains why, although there is always room for improvement, this does not mean superfluous or rigid new structures for the sake of formalization.

THERE IS A CONSENSUS in development policy regarding the need for strong institutions at the local level to enable communities to participate fully in the planning, implementation and management of their own water-supply systems. Such institutions are seen as the fora for decision-making, for the generation of rules and regulations about use and distribution, and for the exercise of authority to ensure compliance. Many approaches to institution-building for community management focus on supporting the formalization of community involvement through committees, contracts, and constitutions. We see numerous examples of the establishment of

waterpoint committees, associations or user groups as a policy intended to strengthen local involvement.

How effective is such an approach in water-resource management? Increasingly, there are reports from projects that such artificially created structures may collapse once the project-funding period has ended. Moreover, where such structures exist they may do so merely to satisfy the conditions of agency funding, whilst real community-decision making takes place elsewhere. Rather than look simply at the organizational structures that can be established to support community management, we should also investigate the informal institutional arrangements

based on custom, practice, and local decision-making patterns that have developed in many places.

Nkayi District — the formal system

In Nkayi District, western Zimbabwe, water is supposedly managed at community level through formal waterpoint committees usually made up of three women (representing users) and one man (representing 'authority'). The committee is technically a sub-committee of the village development committee, and is part of a tiered maintenance system involving structures at ward and district levels.

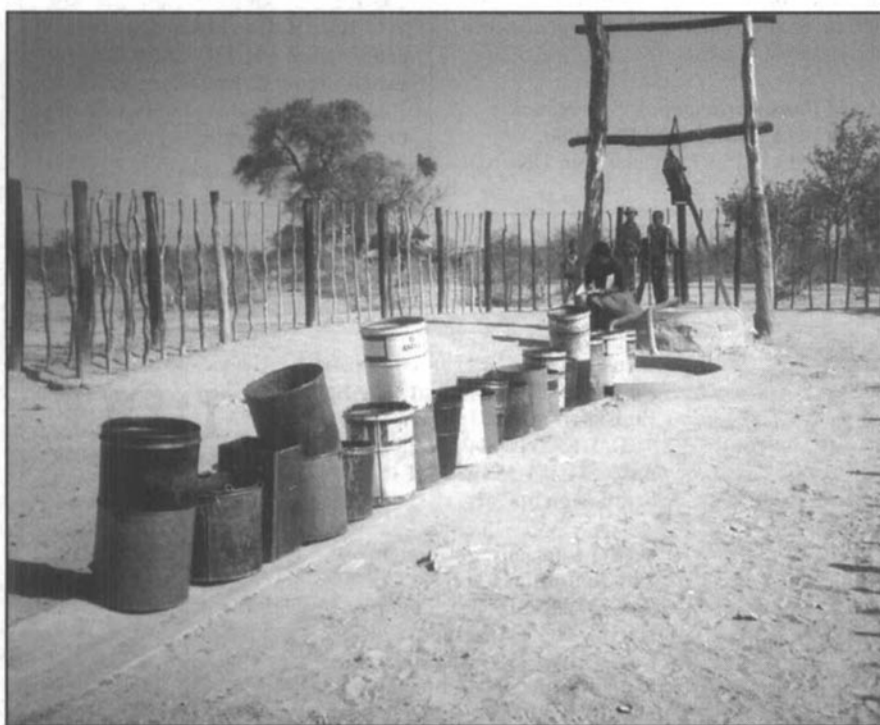
The system is based on the concept of establishing one committee for each waterpoint, representing the users of that point, and great emphasis is placed in training on encouraging a sense of 'ownership' for the waterpoint. Training also emphasizes the requirement that committee members are elected, that meetings are held regularly, and that proper minutes are taken. The committee is expected to undertake routine preventive and minor corrective maintenance, and to guide the community in agreeing rules or by-laws relating to the waterpoint. Models of such by-laws are given at training sessions. This formal management system is based on the assumption that people will use and manage one water source only, and that there is a need to restrict irresponsible use of the water source. But research in Nkayi District has uncovered local practices of water use and decision-making that are contrary to the formal system as manifested through committee structures.

Local principles

Many local principles of water use and management are not explicit rules or regulations but rather customs and conventions, or what people suggest is the 'right way of doing things'. These often predate (by many decades!) the establishment of waterpoint committees.

- *Open access and the use of multiple water sources*

People prefer to maintain access to a number of different water sources over a wide area, not just to the local one



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Nkayi, Zimbabwe. Is the waterpoint already managed responsibly?



Water in Nkayi is valued and conserved (above and right).



that they 'own'. This is partly because certain sources are preferred for particular purposes. It is also for 'insurance' reasons, because if one source dries up, breaks down, or access to it is restricted, the users want to be sure of being able to draw water elsewhere.

The Nkayi people believe strongly that everyone should have access to water sources to secure at least the minimum necessary for survival. But such universal access becomes increasingly disputed during dry months. As water sources diminish, some users (often committee members) try to conserve the remaining supplies by restricting access to community members in the immediate vicinity and to those who have participated in implementation. Such action is reinforced in many cases by 'ownership' messages introduced by project mobilization and implementation activities.

● Scarcity conventions

People in Nkayi use very small quantities of water for domestic purposes (estimated at a maximum of 8 to 10 litres per person per day in the dry season — a desirable amount would be 15 to 20 l/p/d). Even when water is relatively plentiful (for example, at a fast-flowing borehole), people do not increase the amount they use substantially.

There are two likely reasons for this: first, the deeply rooted fear of drought and the perception of water as a scarce resource means that people habitually employ practices which are water-conserving. Secondly, water-use is partly determined by who and how many in the family can collect water — those households with lots of small children and only one adult to carry water use relatively small quantities. When the rainy season begins, women are generally too busy in the fields to

spend time and energy collecting clean water from protected sources and tend to use rainwater from the roof and field-wells.

● Water-use preferences

The Nkayi men and women have markedly different priorities where water use is concerned — men want to ensure that they can water their cattle, whilst women are more preoccupied with having enough water for drinking, washing, and cleaning. So men tend to be more interested in the *quantities* of water available (for example, wells are of little use when watering a herd of cattle) and the distance to such sources. Women are more concerned with the *quality* of the water (particularly taste, softness and cleanliness), and with the *time* and *effort* that they have to put into collecting it. They may prefer to walk slightly further to a water source if there are no queues and the pumping is easy when they get there.

Ownership equals access?

As people use multiple water sources over a wide area, the administrative boundaries through which water is managed are not necessarily appropriate. The waterpoint committees are largely established on the basis of village boundaries and are ineffective in area-wide resource management as they have no remit outside their own restricted area. This is the case even if people of that community depend on 'external' sources of water (a distant borehole or a dam) for their livelihoods.

Attempts to introduce greater 'ownership' of new water supplies may result in *restricting* access. It is generally the poorer households and families living on the outskirts that suffer from such restricted access. So, under such

ownership policies, improved management of the waterpoint can on occasion be achieved at the expense of equity.

People's preferences regarding different sources of water are complex and their choice of waterpoint not attributable to single factors such as cleanliness or time. Additionally, people do not generally use water sources irresponsibly as their proper use is defined by custom and practice. Project mobilization needs to take account of such complexities and to recognize local cultures of water use.

Decision-making

Committees are not necessarily the Nkayi villagers' preferred way of conducting local business. In fact, most decisions of importance (such as restricting access to the water source, or rationing the amount of water available, or deciding to make cash contributions for maintenance), are made at 'meetings of the people' nominally held under the auspices of the village development committee. A number of decision-making principles are apparent at community level.

● Consensus decision-making

The villagers believe that everyone potentially affected by a decision should be present when it is made; therefore meetings of all available adults in the community are held to discuss issues of water-resource management (and other related issues,

such as grazing). Every attempt is made to hold such meetings at times when all can attend. Decisions are taken by a consensus arrived at after often lengthy discussion — not usually by voting.

● *Minimal management*

Wherever possible, the use and regulation of local resources is conducted both through informal decision-making and through adhering to custom and practice. Meetings are only held when a problem arises and action taken only when absolutely necessary (for example, people will not introduce rationing rules until the well is already drying up, even if it dries up at the same time every year). Conventions are only formalized as regulations when absolutely necessary to avoid conflict — or depleting the water source. Management is, inevitably, seasonal; decision-making and regulatory activities are more intense in the dry season.

● *Conflict avoidance*

Many of the resource-use, management, and decision-making arrangements are strongly influenced by the desire to avoid conflict between neighbours. Queuing and sharing conventions at waterpoints have developed for this purpose, and many people suggest that such arrangements exist precisely to avoid quarrels. There is a reluctance to impose any formal punishments on those few people who ignore accepted customs and regulations as this would mean unpleasant confrontation between community members. Rules are interpreted very liberally, therefore, and people hope to persuade others to behave acceptably, through social and family pressure.

Implications for project planning

The model of community management commonly promoted through development projects emphasizes the need for representative, democratic decision-making, for committees to meet regularly and record their discussions, and for there to be explicit rules and regulations with clear sanctions imposed against those who do not comply. It is likely that if we look for evidence of this in communities we will underestimate the actual management and decision-making that takes place through less formal channels. Consensus decision-making lessens the need for sanctions as people are more likely to abide by decisions when they have taken part in making them. Management activity is likely to be highly seasonal and according to need; to expect a waterpoint committee to meet monthly throughout the year is wasting their time to no particular purpose. Local management of water is embedded in social relationships and practice and, therefore, not necessarily subject to bureaucratic principles.

The system of informal water resource management in Nkayi is broadly successful in the sense that the quality and quantity of water available are largely preserved within the constraints of scarce water supplies and heavy waterpoint usage.

The local, informal system of management, however, may not be wholly equitable. Although most people have access to minimum water supplies, this is achieved at greater cost to some than to others. Poor people are far less likely than others to participate in

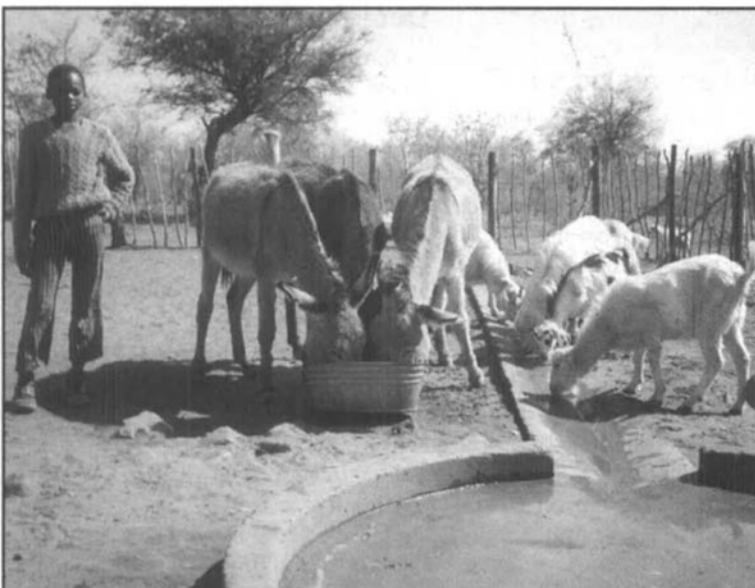
community meetings; in particular, women with small children and absent husbands simply do not have time to attend. This can have serious implications as they are then excluded from the decision-making process and the outcomes may disadvantage them. Such poor people are often those who struggle to gain access to waterpoints when 'ownership' restrictions are introduced.

Support or supplant?

Instead of setting up superfluous committee structures at a local level, there is an argument that development initiatives should support existing decision-making institutions, seeking ways in which these can become more (rather than less) inclusive, and promoting networks for linkages which allow for the area-wide management of resources in the interests of all.

In doing this we would need to address the following questions:

- How do communities manage their water supplies (and other related resources like land) before the project comes along? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such arrangements? Can they be supported without creating new organizational structures?
- Can a wider view of water resource management be developed? How can decision-making, resource use, and conflict resolution across boundaries be supported? How can decision-making about inter-related resources of land, water and grazing be integrated at the local level?
- What action can be taken to ensure that the poor are not disadvantaged by current policies? How can we ensure that the emphasis on 'ownership' of waterpoints is balanced by a concern with equitable access to ensure that the basic water needs of all community members are met?



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Can decisions about land, water and grazing be integrated at the local level?

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