

Linking Sustainability with Community Participation and Gender-Sensitivity



Water and Sanitation Program

An international partnership to help the poor gain sustained access to improved water supply and sanitation services

The more a community and the complete spectrum of its members participate in the decision-making process of water and sanitation project, from its conception onwards, the more they use its services, the better they keep it operational, and the more satisfied they are with it.

The East and Southern African Experience with the Participatory Learning and Action Initiative

East and Southern Africa Region

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Introduction

This *Field Note* summarizes the findings of assessments conducted in 19 rural communities in four countries in the region - Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Zambia.

The assessments are part of the initial phase of the global Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) Initiative.¹ In East and Southern Africa, the PLA came at a time when the region was preparing to hold a regional gender workshop² that WSP-ESA, UNESCO, UNICEF and the Water Research Commission of South Africa organized. As a regional undertaking, participants decided to integrate the PLA initiative in their work, with the assessments be-



coming a major priority. Among other conclusions, the workshop recommended the four countries to participate in the PLA assessments. The expectation was that lessons learned from the assessments would contribute to developing operational guidelines and participatory tools for gender mainstreaming and policy formulation, as well as for monitoring and evaluation.

The Assessments

They were to determine

- the extent to which selected projects and programs were based on the principles of poverty-sensitive, demand-responsive approaches,
- whether they were participatory enough to ensure gender-sensitivity and whether this had any impact on project sustainability, and
- which factors facilitated or limited the implementation of gender sensitive approaches.

The assessments focused on both water projects and sanitation. The thrust was on how sustainable these projects were and what kinds of problems they may have encountered.

The expected outputs would entail

- a tested participatory methodology of tools and techniques for applying gender participation and poverty-sensitive, demand-responsive approaches, and

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¹ PLA was launched in October 1997, by the Working Group on Gender Participation of the Water and Sanitation Collaborative Council in partnership with the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) and the International Research Center (IRC) to advance gender concerns and participation in the sector.

² The workshop held in November 1997 in Pretoria attracted 17 African countries and addressed gender issues in relation to policy, institutional

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- minimum procedures to assess the capacity of communities, participating organizations and regional partners in mainstream gender participation in water supply and sanitation (WSS).

A bonus to the communities and local agencies was the opportunity to learn how to use the gender and poverty-sensitive assessment tools and methods developed for the survey.

Key Findings

Findings covered a spectrum of issues pertaining to **sustainable service, demand-responsive approaches, participation, poverty and economic improvement, gender, policy, and institutional support.**

Sustainable service during the assessment was taken to mean the ability of the community to maintain the water or sanitation system at an acceptable level throughout its design life without direct external support. It applies to both physical infrastructure and management of the system. Most of the facilities in the survey were functioning reasonably well. Most communities collected funds for system operation and maintenance, although financial management was often poor.

Technical training and backup such as ability to get spare parts was not systematically organized although they were found essential for project sustainability.

Kenya: With no backup support, people have to travel sometimes more than 700 kilometers for spare parts. A localized structure that would purchase essential supplies and spares and bring them closer to the community was highly recommended. Project staff could also encourage local private traders to sell spares in their shops.

Zambia: Several communities cannot replace components of the windlass technology provided by the project because they are not available locally.

All communities had water management committees, with roles and responsibilities that varied from one community to another.

The more a community had a voice in such matters as selecting committee members, the more it felt it owned the scheme and the more effectively it managed the service. *The bigger the role of the user, the greater the chance of effective financing, functioning, and management.*

Demand-responsive approaches (DRA) allow the demands of the user to guide key investment decisions. They establish clear links between what users want and what they are willing and able to pay for in cash, kind, labor, and time. This factor overlaps with system sustainability: the more a community decides what it wants, the more it sees the system as its own and is willing and able to sustain it. Demand alone, however, does not create sustainability. A community has to have its own "voices and choice" every step of the way in a project. It has to be involved in all operations, ensuring user satisfaction with the service. More importantly, a community has to be satisfied with the legitimacy of the governing committee and assured of its good governance.



A community meeting in session

A demand-responsive approach was found important even in the initial stages of a project, such as selecting the site, and setting up local management and financing systems (see graph on page 5). Often, not enough local voice had been heard in selecting the appropriate technology for a water system, which had weighed against sustainability. Hence community participation needs to be adopted for all phases of a project, from conception and initiation, through implementation, operation and maintenance, to

monitoring and evaluation. Most of the projects did not have adequate backup support for operation and maintenance, management, training and extension services.

- The more demand-responsive a project is, the more effectively used are its services, and the higher the chances of the community sustaining it.
- Users value water not just for domestic purposes but for economic activities as well. Although the overall goal of the water and sanitation projects is to alleviate poverty and uplift community standards, only water supply has been provided.
- A demand-responsive approach in the initial stages of a project should therefore be associated with all community groups - rich men and women, poor men and women - that would effectively use and sustain the service.

The results also indicate that projects have not responded to the demands for sanitation services. The communities have, however, continued to build their own latrines without much institutional support. These local initiatives might be dampened by weak project support, as the skills and technology options at community level are limited.

In Kenya, South Africa, and some parts of Zambia, there were good examples of community-initiated latrines that were functioning, but sanitation coverage remains quite low. In some communities where the assessments were conducted in Kenya and Zambia, latrines are likely to collapse because of sandy, loose soils.

The responsibility for sanitation is also fragmented among different government ministries, leading to weak institutional arrangements and lack of clear policies to support sanitation demands. Investment policies focus on water and not on sanitation and some projects did not even include hygiene and sanitation education. This has implications on behavioral change.

Communities value improved sanitation, and are willing to invest in it. However, they need support in developing appropriate and affordable sanitation technologies and skills for constructing sustainable structures.

Participation throughout the assessments was defined as the power to make decisions and increase control over resources and structures. The assessed projects sought the participation of all groupings in the communities - men and women, rich and poor. The assessors, in trying to determine the level of participation of these various groupings, found that it was difficult to differentiate between "participation" and "demand responsiveness". Nevertheless, they found that in all projects, community members participated to some degree, although the degree varied from place to place.

In all projects, the communities participated in developing and implementing the scheme. However, only one community participated in conceptualizing the scheme and choosing the technology.

Projects did not conceive the cost implications of the services in terms of investment, operation and maintenance. Consequently, the communities were limited in making informed decisions in relating to type or choice of the technology, level of service, and actual tariffs for operating and sustaining the system.

There was also no adequate foresight in providing backup support after the projects were completed, and this had a deleterious effect on sustaining the services.

The survey showed that user contribution was mainly during the construction phase, either through labour, cash or in kind. Contribution was also related to the member's wealth and in some extreme cases, the poor were exempted. Some communities preferred to charge a flat rate, no matter how much an individual or family used; others charged a monthly fee or as per consumption. Although these communities chose to use various systems, it

allowed the rich to receive more from the scheme than the poor. The rich members used more water for their large and more intensive holdings. However, they are often called upon to shoulder greater burdens in contributing to the scheme, especially when there is a major repair to be undertaken and the community cannot quickly mobilize the required financial resources.



Community members using one of the participatory tools

Participation in sanitation projects and perception of their benefits were hard to quantify. However, communities linked sanitation with improved health conditions.

Poverty, as perceived in the survey, was relative and varied from one community to another. Communities were asked to rank themselves. Although most communities classified themselves as poor, they were still able and willing to pay for water and sanitation services, if the services met their needs. It therefore seems likely that they will continue doing so if they see the value in the service. Communities saw merit in a water supply for a wide variety of purposes, from improved cash income, education and health, to use in small-scale agriculture and time saved from not having to fetch water over long distances. The survey points out that if a community sees the benefits of a water service, it will support it financially and otherwise. Water is generally seen as improving the socioeconomic status of the community as a whole.

- Most projects focus on interventions primarily geared toward provision of water services. However, evidence sug-

gests that people value water and sanitation services that improve their socioeconomic status, in general. What may be required is for projects to look at the productive demands of the users in relation to water and sanitation services. If the returns from the services are easily visible, there are greater chances of the services being sustained. Hence, there is need for development programs to link service delivery to poverty alleviation.

- Although national policies in relation to poverty alleviation exist, there are no specific institutional arrangements and processes to ensure the application of poverty-sensitive approaches in water and sanitation programs.

Gender throughout the survey referred to the socially determined division of roles, responsibilities and power between men and women. Gender roles are dynamic, with relationships always subject to change. Survey indicators were designed to determine if there was a link between gender-sensitivity and service sustainability. It became clear as the analysis progressed, the principle of DRA and community participation was difficult to separate from other factors. Hence they were not independent variables and their contribution to project sustainability could not be assessed separately.

The introduction of gender sensitive approaches in project development and implementation has to build on the community's own perceptions of roles and responsibilities of various groups in the community.

The community concept of who performs what role became clear as projects progressed. The projects that were committed to gender sensitivity and did not come with preconceived ideas of roles and responsibilities have better results. In many instances, projects focused on gender as equal representation of women and men in water and sanitation committees. The assessments however observed, this did not extend systematically to training in leadership and facilitation skills. At household level and especially when eco-

conomic benefits are found, men tend to lead and dominate decision-making. Projects should emphasize the training of women both in technical and facilitation skills.

Instruments used during the assessments were unable to clearly distinguish and evaluate issues of poverty, gender- and demand-responsiveness. However, poverty- and gender-sensitive approaches did indicate how much and how well the facilities were used.

There is a move by all the four countries and the region to develop policies on gender that recognize the importance of participation. With the right policies, the challenge is to implement them. This will require tools, for gender promotion, guidelines for implementation, training and management skills.

Institutional arrangements for providing water and sanitation services vary, but in all the four countries responsibility for water is well defined, while that for sanitation is fragmented. Although there is community demand for sanitation support, especially for low-cost, appropriate facilities and technologies, that demand is not being met.

The assessments showed that most of WSS activities were undertaken during the project cycle and tended to focus mainly on investments. Most sector institutions do not have the capacity to follow up on the operations of the scheme after the project. The institutions also lack tools and skills for applying DRA, and gender participatory approaches. They do not have the capacity to follow up projects after they have been com-

pleted. There are no extension services to give advice and refresher training. Institutions need to train project staff, develop strategies and involve experts in these areas. They also need to allocate resources that will enable them to ensure that these social dimensions are taken into account.

Methodology for Participatory Assessments (MPA):

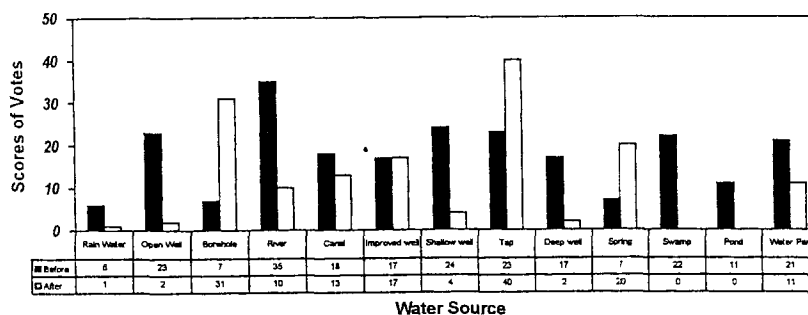
The purpose of the assessments was to determine the degree to which

- a community sustains its water or sanitation service,
- the population uses the service,
- the service meets community demands, and
- the benefits and the burdens of the service are spread out among community members.

Methods used included focused group discussions, interviews, direct observation, and use of a number of research instruments. Participatory tools were developed specifically for the assessments and were generally used in a set pattern. They included

- **Wealth classification**, in which participating community members set their own criteria for judging wealth and categorized community members. The communities had their own way of assessing themselves and did not necessarily follow the national indicators of poverty. While the national indicators for poverty maybe based on per capita income, community indicators tended to judge by the basic necessities of life - the type of house, clothing, number of meals per day, education.

Water Source pattern Before and After the Project



Rivers were the most commonly source of community water before projects came. After the projects, communities turned to tap or borehole water because of its safety and the time saved to fetch it.

