Scaling up water supply – a WaterAid perspective

Peter Sinclair

How can NGOs contribute towards scaling up? They may have a role in serving the poorest people who are left out of mainstream national water supply programmes. This article suggests some other challenges and strategies.

The water supply target set under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – to 'halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water'– is almost entirely about challenging the sector to scale up its activities. To reach this target, not only do all those who currently have access to a clean water supply need to continue receiving a reliable service but, due to population growth, another *1.5 billion* people must also be served. This is only to *halve* the proportion unserved.

For an NGO such as WaterAid, these numbers are daunting, even discouraging. What can an NGO realistically achieve, given limited resources, and what are the key issues that need to be considered? This article attempts to demystify the concept of scaling up in the water sector. It examines some of the challenges to scaling up from WaterAid's perspective and highlights some practical strategies, based on field experience, which can be employed to strengthen an organization's ability to scale up and contribute to the MDGs.

What do we mean by scaling up?

Although scaling up is now a common phrase in development circles, there is little common understanding of what it means. In its simplest form, scaling up means expanding or doing something on a larger scale. The 'something' is often a methodology, approach or 'model' project, which is then adapted and implemented in a way that benefits many more people. Scaling up is a relative term, which is why it often means different things to different people. For example, WaterAid could scale up to a £5 million project, but this might still be considered a small-scale project to a large bilateral donor.

In the water sector, the term scaling up usually means reaching the largest number of people with a clean water supply in the shortest possible time. It is about accelerating programmes designed to increase access to clean water. This might mean reaching more people through a larger number of interventions, or delivering larger projects that benefit many more people.

The speed of delivery is a critical component of scaling up. With estimates that a child dies every 15 seconds due to water-related disease, the situation is indeed urgent and the cost, in terms of human suffering, of *not* scaling up in the quickest possible way is incalculable.

There are two other important elements to scaling up. The water sector has limited resources available, so that scaling up should be done in the most *cost-effective way*, ensuring that these resources are employed as efficiently as possible. Effective scaling up also implies the *sustainability* of the water supplies, otherwise the scale achieved is only temporary.

The difficulty is that there are real tensions between the different elements of scaling up, implying potential trade-offs when designing the most appropriate intervention.

Scale and sustainability

Experience has shown that developing a sustainable project is complex, requiring a significant amount of social mobilization and follow-up support. A sustainable, effective project needs a high level of community involvement, financial management, organizational and technical skills, hygiene and sanitation promotion and general ongoing support. All of these factors, which increase the chance of a project becoming sustainable, also make it more difficult to scale up. Is there a way to scale up our model approaches without sacrificing sustainability, or is it necessary to adapt our approaches to ensure they are more scalable?

Figure 1 simplifies this complex relationship, using a typical infrastructure-driven project and a typical WaterAid project to illustrate.

WaterAid projects would typically have high sustainability and low scale, while a large infrastructure-driven project would often have low sustainability and high scale. The challenge is to adapt project methodologies enabling progress

Indian women village pump caretakers with equipment for demonstrations and training
Credit – WaterAid/Caroline Penn

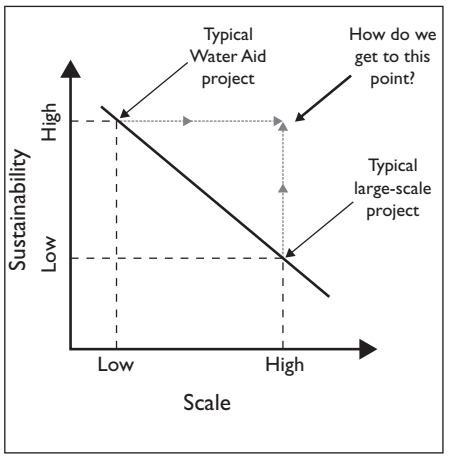

Figure 1 The trade-off between sustainability and scale

towards the top right-hand corner of the graph. For WaterAid this means increasing the scale of our work, without compromising on sustainability.

Scale and serving the poorest

When large-scale or national projects are developed, they are often designed in a way that caters to the greatest number of people, most efficiently. What may be surprising is that for some projects the poorest are intentionally left out. So, for example, a large donor programme for rural water supply may be designed to cater for a 'band of the population' that covers 70 per cent of the unserved population. This would exclude the richest 15 per cent who would be left to serve themselves and the poorest 15 per cent, on the assumption that they would be picked up by the 'safety net' of other agencies more targeted to reaching the poorest (e.g. local welfare or an NGO programme). Projects designed to reach entire populations, they may argue, would not be feasible on efficiency grounds as it would be impossible to design a project (or a national programme) with the flexibility to reach such a wide variety of people, with such different needs.

While an organization like WaterAid is less concerned with the richest segment of the population, experience shows that the poorest are often left out altogether and that safety nets do not exist. NGOs therefore may be better off concentrating on establishing and strengthening the safety net to support the poorest groups who often cannot benefit from mainstream projects.

Scale and flexible design

Does 'large scale' mean the complete loss of flexibility in the design of projects appropriate to individual communities, based on their specific needs? By looking for approaches that can be applied on a large scale, are we forced to take a blueprint approach? To a certain extent, yes. To reach large numbers of people, standardization of approach is necessary to some degree. A completely blueprint project, however, which is not responsive to the needs and demands of individual communities is unlikely to be sustainable.

What may be necessary is for organizations such as WaterAid to develop *minimum standards* for design and implementation that every project is expected to maintain. This would allow elements of the intervention to be standardized, increasing the potential for scaling up. Beyond these standards there would be flexibility to respond to the specific needs of the community, the geographical conditions or the socio-economic situation in the area.

Box 1 gives a list of ten practical strategies, drawn primarily from four WaterAid case studies,[1] which aim to demystify the practical issues around the concept of scaling up. The list should enable implementing agencies to think through some of the practical ways in which they can contribute to scaling up water and sanitation supply projects – and thereby assist in turning the targets under the MDGs into reality.

Conclusion

Experience has shown that many projects implemented on a small scale require a level of financial and human resources that makes them completely impracticable on a large scale. For there to be real progress towards achieving the MDGs, a new paradigm in the water supply service is desperately needed. Balanced approaches will not only attract the greatest attention from donors and governments, but will have the potential to make the biggest contribution to the water targets under the MDGs.

References

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2 Bond, D., Private sector participation in rural water supply – a viable alternative to state service provision?: The experience of Niassa Province, Mozambique'. University of London, September 2002.
3 Making Government Funding Work Harder, WaterAid India, Issue Paper, 1998, see www.wateraid.org.uk/in_depth/country_programmes/india/1377.asp
4 Environmental Resource Management (ERM), Cost Recovery in Water and Sanitation Projects, 2003

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These communities in Niassa Province, Mozambique, chose a protected well with a bucket and windlass because all of the parts could be bought locally and are affordable
Credit – WaterAid/Jon Spaull

Box 1. Ten strategies for water supply programmes

1 Know the big picture

Understanding the big picture in the water sector is important when trying to appreciate the main constraints and possible solutions to scaling up. As part of an overall strategy of working in a country, it is critical to conduct background research to identify the biggest constraints on people gaining access to a clean water supply. Most frequently, these are a combination of financial resource limitations, capacity gaps and the absence of effective policy. By having an overall picture of the sector, it is easier to make decisions about programme design and where to channel limited resources most effectively.

2 Know the cost of the inputs

It is surprising that so much money is spent in the water sector, yet there is so little accurate information about what things cost. Per-capita or per-scheme costs, which include various indirect and 'off book' costs, such as head-office support, are difficult to come by. Without such crucial information, it is difficult to determine whether an approach is cost-effective on a large, or even small, scale. WaterAid Mozambique has recently produced some excellent cost analysis for not only the construction,[2] but also the operation and maintenance of their schemes. WaterAid India has also used its basic financial cost comparisons to make a strong value-for-money argument, convincing the state government to change its latrine promotional strategy.[3]

3 Provide evidence that it is sustainable

To convince large donors or the government that a small project is worth replicating on a larger scale, it is important to provide solid evidence that it is successful and sustainable. This will provide the confidence to enable larger players to adopt the models that NGOs can only implement on a small scale. A simple monitoring system, such as one that measures the number of water points functioning five years after construction, is critical. Having this information available would also challenge other organizations to start monitoring similar long-term aspects of their projects.

4 Work within national water policies

Assuming there is a reasonably good national policy in place, working within its framework offers the potential to take a smaller project to a larger scale. Working outside it will almost certainly limit the ability of any small project to be scaled up to a larger size at a later date.

5 Work in co-operation with other stakeholders

Idealistic notions of development partners working together to increase effectiveness by developing concerted programmes are often offset by the realities of different interests and approaches. There are significant challenges when working together, which is one of the reasons it rarely occurs. But unless these are overcome there will continue to be multiple projects operating side-by-side yet more or less in isolation from each other. The government, both at local and national level, is an essential partner in ensuring that an NGO can contribute to a much larger objective. On the national level, agencies should push donors to work more closely together, as they are doing in some countries like Uganda.

6 Look at low-technology options

Low-cost options for communities can be more sustainable and allow limited financial resources to be spread more widely, both important elements in scaling up. WaterAid Mozambique's work on improving wells instead of handpumps increases the chance of scaling up, as the communities are more likely to sustain this technology, and more can be installed for a given cost.

7 Use the community-to-community approach

The community-to-community or demonstration approach used by WaterAid Bangladesh for sanitation is an interesting way by which communities can be motivated using very limited financial resources. Although it is more difficult to apply to a water supply project, given the capital outlays required, using community exchanges to create demand for services will force local government to respond and provide better services to more people.

8 Think creatively about financial mechanisms

The alternative financing mechanism developed in the WaterAid India Soozhal Initiative, the 100 per cent cost-recovery policies in Bangladesh and the three-tiered subsidy levels employed by a partner funded by WaterAid Madagascar are all excellent examples of ways in which local financing can be arranged in order to reach larger numbers of people. One recent study on cost recovery suggested that the ways in which people are asked to pay for water and sanitation services (for example, through credit, irregular payment schedules to fit in with seasonal income, etc.) is a major factor in their willingness to pay for, and therefore have regular access to, the service.[4]

9 Don't be too selective about the implementing partners

Any organization that has the capacity to implement good-quality and cost-effective water projects should be tapped into in order to utilize all available capacity. Traditionally, WaterAid Tanzania selected a small number of partner organizations to work with, usually government or local NGOs. More recently they widened the scope of their partnerships and invited (through an advertisement in the newspaper) any organizations that were capable of helping them implement their Singida project. A number of private sector organizations now work alongside government and NGOs, implementing the programme much more quickly than if they had not been involved.

10 Use local, existing capacity wherever possible

In many cases it is unnecessary to set up new institutions or committees because they already exist in one form or another. WaterAid India has used existing women's groups to tap into local capacity, avoiding unnecessary parallel institutions that are often not sustainable in themselves. At the same time they have made sure that the women's groups have had the capacity and the desire to take on these extra responsibilities.