

From users to managers: community involvement in water-supply and sanitation projects

by May Yacoob

The primary measure of success for the Decade has changed from maximum coverage to sustainability of systems constructed. The challenge lies in bringing about full community involvement, resulting in a sense of ownership, and the willingness and ability to maintain facilities.

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the Decade, the need for community participation has been acknowledged but has had a chequered history of implementation. To engineers, participation initially meant volunteer-construction labour, a community body with which to contract, and, perhaps, a caretaker trained to perform simple maintenance tasks. Thus participation, as a process, was often seen from the technical viewpoint as a series of discreet tasks requiring a month or less to perform. Many projects also involved social scientists working alongside the engineers but, ironically, the social scientists often failed to convey to their technical colleagues either the meaning of community participation or the level of effort required to achieve it.

Perhaps one complicating factor has been the relative simplicity of the technical tasks involved in water-supply development compared to the relative complexity of achieving participation. Water is a community resource that raises basic issues of household and community behaviour and control. Early in the Decade, Elmendorf and Isely¹ and later Yacoob and Warner² recognized and stressed the central role of water quantity and accessibility in increased water use and of good hygiene in achieving health benefits from water-supply and sanitation improvements. They also

emphasized the role of women as critical to changing behaviour, and urged that their role and needs be addressed as a *sine qua non* of successful water-supply and sanitation projects. These views became widely accepted but with them came a new set of problems associated with their implementation. These views addressed only participation at the *user* level and focused on *achieving* project benefits. It soon became clear that this was not enough, that in addition to participation as users, participation as owners and managers was required to sustain project benefits.

Community management

An important attempt at clarifying the meaning of participation came in a report³ developed in collaboration with PROWESS, a UNDP project that promotes women's interests in water and environmental sanitation. It helped to define the participation problem for engineers and project managers by placing water-supply and sanitation projects in a developmental perspective. It also pointed to a recent shift in pattern within the development community that de-emphasized the operational premise which for forty years had focused on project initiation (the number of systems in place) in favour of project responsibility (the role of the community in sustaining systems).

While adherents of the initiation view cited numbers and coverage figures as measures of success,

proponents of responsibility pressed for answers to questions like the following:

- Have local management systems been identified and are they being used in this project?
- Has a two-way system of information been established between project and community?
- Have local control and responsibility been transferred to the community?
- Are planning, implementation, and transition being evaluated as part of an ongoing process between the project and community?

Although the water-supply and sanitation sector did not embrace this new emphasis totally or automatically, concerns about sustainability encouraged decision-makers to develop new evaluation criteria and indicators of success. They also began using language that reflected the objectives thought to be critical to sustainability. As ownership and responsibility became part of the development lexicon, both engineers and social scientists began to understand more fully the factors involved in developing sustainable systems.

The role of the community

It soon became clear that if the role of the community was to be defined as ownership and management of systems, work toward facilitating that role must begin long before system construction does. There are several reasons why this is true. First, in most cases, communities do not have the skills or training to make wise decisions about system development or to undertake system management. Second, national institutions are often not set up to foster local control. Most countries have an historic tradition that water is a public good and the responsibility of the public sector at the national level. Abdicating control in favour of local communities requires a significant departure from usual methods of management. Third,

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professional engineers and private contractors usually do not have a background of encouraging and supporting local participation at the ownership and management levels.

The record shows that achieving participation of this kind takes much longer than it did to bring about participation as defined in earlier years. It is immeasurably more difficult to identify community groups, train them, and adapt their resources for effective self-management than it is to develop local support during a brief construction period. In Togo, for example, where communities have maintained systems well into the self-management phase, the period of preparation ranged for six months to two years. Training programmes in these projects accounted for about 25 per cent of total project expenditure. The pay-off, however, is sustainable systems: systems serving and involving all residents - men and women, élite and non-élite - that are used properly, maintained efficiently, and managed effectively with minimum outside assistance. As has been suggested above, management capacity must be developed if communities are to fulfill their roles successfully. Developing management capacity requires undertaking a well-defined programme of activities, providing the needed training

personnel, and keeping in mind several important lessons about making the transition from participation at the user level to participation at the management level.

Community activities

The first step in building management capacity is to develop an independent community organization that is skilled in training, problem solving, adult learning, dispute settlement, and resource mobilization. If such a group already exists, or has similar skills, it must be identified; and from the start, the operative idea is community control - it is always the community which makes the decisions. Extension agents can be consultants, facilitators, or instruments of community will, but they must never be decision-makers. Such community groups have often proved to be quite capable on their own, even earning government recognition as autonomous bodies, with the rights appropriate to any corporate entity with financial and social responsibility: water committees in Haiti and Rwanda, for example, have been elevated to the status of legal entities.

Before beginning work with local groups, a community profile must be prepared, giving particular attention to existing structures, formal or informal,

and the extent to which their interests are relevant to water-resource management or health and well-being in the community. Candidates might include the clergy, traditional rulers, or health workers whose role and influence in the community could lend itself to managing resources or modifying behaviour. The negotiation of a contract between the project and the community committee is the next step. It should stipulate terms of payment as well as the contribution in labour and materials required to maintain systems and carry out hygiene education. The creation of subcommittees can address special interests and, at the same time, broaden the base of participation. The active role of women, for example, is a vital concern, although in some water projects their participation has been restricted to onerous and time-consuming tasks such as cleaning the facilities or collecting the fees.

The joint work of extension agents and village committees must begin well before construction. In the first place, the committee must be sufficiently informed to influence and approve design. Then its members can meet with staff engineers to talk through the construction process and agree a system location; construction should not begin until the association approves the plans and agrees on the



The role of women is critical in changing behaviour and introducing good hygiene practice.

terms of payment. Nor can the system be judged complete until three conditions can be met: spare parts are available, the community is prepared to handle routine maintenance; and back-up support is at hand when more complex repairs require help from outside the community. Only at this point do the facilities become the property of the community, which assumes full responsibility for their management, operation and maintenance.

Cost recovery is becoming more recognized as an important factor in system management; poor or non-existent plans for cost recovery may result in a low income-base for the system and, as a result, dependence on external agencies for support. Another consideration related to cost recovery is the right of communities to choose their systems based on a full knowledge of the technologies available, including their associated costs. Even when the choices are predetermined by donor and national government, there are means of adapting them to suit community preference. Willingness-to-pay studies by WASH and the World Bank show that beneficiaries are willing to spend up to ten times more money on fees to vendors than to the government for water-supply services, primarily because of the greater convenience and higher degree of reliability they offer.

Training the trainers

The ultimate success of community capacity-building projects hinges on the time and effort, as well as the methodology and content, involved in training extension agents to work with communities. They are a critical factor, an indispensable link between project and community, and, usually, they are the ones the project depends upon both to administer problems and to foster behavioural change. In projects with an objective of community management, the extension agent's role is one of 'trainer of trainers'. These trainers to be trained are themselves from the community, members of the local groups and communities which, in turn, will instruct the rest of the community. Extension agents would be trained in skills basic to their work with the community, including problem-solving techniques, adult learning, conflict resolution, and participatory methodologies for planning and evaluation. Agents should also be trained in financial management, latrine construction, collecting

information on hygiene practices and developing programmes in hygiene education.

The visits extension agents make to village committees should be scheduled for the same day and time each week. Once there, their role is to consult about and assist in solving problems. Their function is one of guidance, of offering villagers the specialized knowledge and skills they will need to carry out their responsibilities. Extension agents should also review what was learned in prior sessions, remain attentive for comments from the group, and take notes of problems that arise.

Just as members of the community get ongoing training from extension agents, the agents should be involved in their continuing programme. For one full day every other week, agents should meet with their supervisors to report on problems, exchange information, and discuss lesson plans for additional skill areas. Because the agents' relationship with village committees is based on open dialogue and mutual respect, it is imperative that agents have a good rapport with the group. For example, Juan Flaveir of the Philippine Reconstruction Movement, can generally tell if his agents have a good working relationship when he hears villagers calling them by a nickname, often invented by someone in the community. There is no rigid rule as to the 'right' number of villages for an agent to manage, though there is evidence to suggest one person is best utilized covering six to twelve village committees. The more important point, which cannot be overemphasized, is the need for strict regularity of schedules. Agents' visits should be so fixed as to be fully predictable - always on the same day of the week - so that village committees will know to expect them for training sessions.

The following lessons are drawn from USAID- and NGO-sponsored field evaluations and from community self-help projects implemented by UNICEF.

○ Circumventing government institutions may increase a project's efficiency but will not enhance its long-term sustainability. It is important to draw mainstream government services into the process as early as possible and to promote a linkage and policy dialogue with the government at the same time as this is being done with a community.

○ Projects should work within the

resources and capabilities of national, central, and local governments.

○ Extension agents from government ministries should initiate contact with a community only when they can make firm commitments on resources.

○ Proposals that a project makes to a community should be based on clearly understood agreements as to roles, resources, and intended results.

Conclusions

It has been said that management is a performing art - the more it is practised, the more it is perfected, which is surely the case when a community manages its water-supply and sanitation facilities. And in the course of funding, the activities a project develops are an opportunity for that community, under professional supervision, to practice and refine the skills it will need to be autonomous and self-sufficient in successfully managing its system. For the community, the training process is a critical time for building capacity through the support, assistance, and transfer of skills from the project's extension agent: it is this capacity at the community level, complemented by efficient co-ordination at the government level, that will ensure the sustainability of water supply and sanitation projects.

References

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