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REACHING THE UNREACHED: CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Community-based approaches — the mythology

Dr Z. Phiri, Zambia

THE GOAL OF providing full water supply and sanitation coverage to the populations of developing countries is as elusive today as it was at the time of the UN Water Conference in 1977. The figures speak for themselves. It is estimated that over 2.5 billion people in developing countries are at risk from a variety of diseases of which at least 80 per cent can be related to an inadequate supply of water and the unsafe disposal of wastes. Efforts to provide water and sanitation facilities in the developing world up to now have not been outstandingly successful. In recognition of this and the general importance of water supply and sanitation in socio-economic development, member states of the UN declared the years 1981 - 1990 as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD). The goal was to provide all people with an adequate supply of water and sanitation by the end of the decade.

The decade period was characterised by a lot of buzz phrases such as appropriate technology, community participation, user choice, felt need, bottom-up management, community-based management etc. Governments became increasingly sensitised to the need to use 'unconventional' approaches in attempting to increase service coverage and realise the anticipated health benefits. Yet at the end of it all, a report by the UN Secretary-General concluded that the decade's achievements amounted more often than not to standing still or falling behind. The projections are ever more shocking. For example, it is estimated that a doubling of the current rate of increase in the provision of water supplies would be require din Africa simply to keep pace with urban growth. A trembling of the current rate of coverage would be required to achieve full coverage by the year 2020.

Some prominent workers have indeed questioned whether community management is not just an inefficient surrogate for sound local government structures. Others have gone further by equating community participation to community manipulation. Does not the long-term success of rural and peri-urban water supply and sanitation programmes depend much more upon efficient local government structures built solidly over a period of many years than upon complex community participation procedures formulated on an adhoc basis? Is it not possible that, at times, the so called felt needs of a community may be based on a limited understanding of the real problems and the changes required?

The proponents of community-based approaches, on the other hand, have repeatedly argued that community participation results in improved designs, reduced costs of construction, reduced costs of operation and maintenance, improved realisation of project benefits and so on. There is now a general feeling in some quarters in this school of thought that the inclusion of user-participatory components in projects will make all come right. The limited research that has been carried out into "user-participatory projects" has however shown that these projects are as likely to fail if improperly organised and planned as conventional projects. Since the emphasis on user-participatory projects is relatively new, is it not safe to predict that an embarrassing number of failed "user-participatory" projects will emerge over the next few years.

Fours years away from the 21st century, reaching the unreached is as daunting as eve before. What are the available alternative approaches? Is it not time we started seriously examining other constraints such as severe and chronic shortages of institutional capacity, skilled manpower, training opportunities, economic incentives, credit etc. How realistic are we in hoping to attain the goal of "water supply and sanitation for all" by the year 2000, 2010, 2020 or whatever it is this time? Is it not true that solutions to reaching the unreached worldwide will only be found within a framework of poverty alleviation? Is it enough to just raise the profile of a sector? How much local research and training is going on in the water sector of developing countries? Are not locally generated learning cycles pre-requisites for sustainability? Does not there appear to be an irresistible desire among donors, governments and others for quick, visible results? Does this not lead to "hit and run interventions"? Is it not true that in the pursuit of these quick, visible results, the sustainability of water supply and sanitation programmes is left to fend for itself? Are we on our way to reaching the unreached. Are the unreached reachable? Are community-based approaches the answer?

In Zambia, we have realised that whereas it is true that there is no consensus over the best approach to be adopted, it is equally true that Zambia's inadequacies in the provision of safe water supplies are chronic as evidenced by the frequency of television coverage, consumer complaints, newspaper headlines, or just the very common sight of children and women carrying water in containers to their homes. The statistics also speak for themselves. Zambia's population is estimated at 9.4 million with a high urbanisation rate resulting in over 50 per cent of the population living in urban and peri-urban areas. The UNICEF Zambia annual report of 1993 reported an urban access to safe

water of 76 per cent and only 41 per cent in rural areas. The figures for sanitation coverage are even less encouraging. This is so despite some very commendable investment programmes being implemented with the support of donor agencies during and after the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD). There is not much to write home about regarding the "decade community-based approaches" in Zambia. For Zambia therefore blessed as she is with abundant water resources, a significant portion of the population does not have access to safe water supply, Why? Various reasons have been advanced. Institutional weakness has been cited at various fora as the most important single problem. This weakness, it has been said, manifests itself in various ways, particularly in the use of a multiplicity of ineffective agencies with sometimes overlapping jurisdictions and competing interests and an inadequate framework for encouraging and supporting local initiatives and community participation.

It should be noted in passing that Zambia has implemented a variety of community-based water supply and sanitation programmes all over the country. The main policy with regard to water supplies has been to ensure supplies of acceptable quality and quantity to as many users as possible. For the specific case of rural piped water supplies, a number of donor / aid agencies have been involved since the 1970s. The programmes have been implemented with various levels of success. It is not the intention of this paper to review all the water supply programmes in Zambia but two projects warrant special mention. During the period 1982 to 1990, Zambia in collaboration with the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) implemented two projects whose purpose was to demonstrate the 'user-participatory approach'. These projects were called the Public Standpost water Supplies (PSWS) and the Piped Supplies for Small Communities (PSSC) projects. The fundamental objectives were to set up Local Demonstration Schemes (LDS) at selected project sites with emphasis on community involvement and participation; prepare manuals and guidelines for standpost water supplies; to continuously evaluate the projects for purposes of generating knowledge; to develop and adopt appropriate methods for excreta disposal; and to apply the knowledge gained in the project to other parts of the country. Noble objectives indeed. I must admit that we had several problems designing the programmes in such a way as to ensure that the results would be meaningful. Although some of these concerns were later laid to rest, the conclusions tended to be site specific and there, honestly, was very little to generalise. This in itself was cause for us to be a bit more critical about the now fashionable community-based approaches - if only to learn more from them. I should end by confessing that the debate on the best way of delivering water supply and sanitation to low-income communities is far from over. That is why I have brought the debate to New Delhi. Are the unreached reachable in the near future? Are community-based approaches the answer?