Communications for community management of infrastructure

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Communications for community management of infrastructure

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1. COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE

From Community Participation to Community Management

Community management is not just a different way of talking about community participation. As we all know, community participation as a concept arose in the mid sixties but was not really adopted by the IDWSSD until the mid eighties when it became apparent that governments and donors could no longer afford totally centralized operation and maintenance systems for water and sanitation infrastructure. Planners began to realize that in order to share the responsibilities for maintenance, beneficiaries or users would have to be involved in some form or other in the on-going maintenance of their own community systems.

Although there was an implicit understanding that beneficiaries would have to change their role from that of totally passive receiver, there was no vision that central agencies and donors might also have to change their approach to implementation in order to facilitate this process. The initial design of projects basically remained the same with emphasis on the 'top-down' hardware approach provided by the central agencies. This was supplemented by separate communication components intended to facilitate the community's involvement in taking on some responsibility (keep the pad clean, preventive caretaking, etc.) for maintenance after the systems had been installed.

Not surprisingly, this middle of the road approach has not always proved to be successful. It is now realized that in order for the community to take on responsibility for maintenance it must also be involved in the planning and implementation of the project right from the initial stages, to develop a sense of 'ownership' for the system and an ensuring understanding that if a system is to be maintained, it is the community's responsibility to do so.

This paper examines the concept of community management and the role that communications must play in facilitating that process. It first looks at communications in the development process, discusses its present role in the water and sanitation sector and finally outlines an approach to developing a communication strategy for community management.

From Beneficiary to Client to Manager

Community management implies that the community does more than contribute labour or small inputs into the planning process but emphasizes the community's decision making power over water inputs and the role it must play in maintaining and paying for these inputs after they have been installed. This implies a completely different role for the central water agency and a change of role for the community:

> The community must change from that of passive receiver to informed consumer/client/manager capable of making choices as to what type of service level they themselves will have the capacity to service and pay for. The community must also acquire management and organization skill with leadership capable of defining tasks and carrying out the management function to do this.

> The central water agency must change from benefactor that makes all the decisions to that of facilitator enabling the community to make their own decisions and must learn to be responsive to consumer/client demands. It must become accountable to the community.

In a recent project proposal for demonstrating the 'community management' approach in India, the donor agency reading the proposal sent back a query. How, they wanted to know, in a project that is still said to be implemented by a government agency, can we ensure that the community itself makes the major choices and takes the important initiatives?

This is the key question. How can we use communications to facilitate this change of behaviour and how do we do it at both the community and government/water agency level?

2. THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Development Communications

If we see communication as the imparting or exchange of information, we can see that development communication could be said to be the process that makes use of communication tools to facilitate a person/community's access to information to enable the person/community take on responsibility for some of its development needs. Communication thus plays a role by providing a complex listening/interpreting mechanism to help the person/community identify needs and finally interpret those needs to the planners. Conversely it can assist the planners in presenting their views and ideas back to the community.

> In Mirzapur district, north of Dhaka in Bangladesh, video was used to record a focus group discussion amongst village leaders discussing the community's problems around the sharing of handpumps, the need for ongoing maintenance and their desire to have male members included in the caretaker training program. This video was then taken back to Dhaka, reviewed by project organizers who changed their thinking re caretaker training. There was nothing the project team could do however about the problem of pump sharing (who should pay for the repairs, etc.), the community had to work that out for themselves through a further internal process of group meeting and individual discussion.

Communications in Water and Sanitation Sector

A look at the overall present day role for communications in the water and sanitation sector in the region however, shows that more often than not, communications tends to not be viewed so much as a facilitative process to empower a community to take on its own responsibilities for water and sanitation, but as a product that can be used, or a tool to instruct communities into a pattern of behaviour (read hygiene education) previously defined by the project planners (pay for on-going maintenance, wash your hands, etc.). Consequently communication inputs are measured in a product oriented manner (the number of messages delivered or the number of posters/manuals that have been produced to facilitate this delivery of messages) when what should be evaluated is the community's capacity to organize its own requirements for water and sanitation inputs and government's role

in facilitating this process.

Why is this so important? The overall goal of a water and sanitation project is to improve the general state of health and environment of a given group of people in order to increase their subsequent economic activity. We are not looking at access to safe water alone but at increases in health and economic productivity as a result of people making use of safe water and environmental sanitation practices.[1] This implies the need to introduce a set of new ideas, new practices and, in the case of community management, new responsibilities that must be undertaken by this group of people both collectively and individually. This presupposes the need for sustained behavioural change.

Studies have repeatedly shown that people are more ready to change their behaviour on a more permanent basis if they are given the chance to be involved at a decision making level in making these changes for themselves and for their community. Moreover, while the "delivery of messages" approach to behavioural change has a fair degree of success in the West (campaigns to reduce smoking, reduced fat intake in diet, lower cholesterol, etc.) where the population has already accepted the premise that it is the responsibility of the individual to take control over his/her own health needs and where a high degree of education makes this possible, it is not applicable to low income countries where people do not feel they can do anything to change their own lives nor have the sense that the government can and should actually support them.

3. THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

In planning a communication strategy for community management, communication cannot be seen as a separate component, communication is the underpinning for the peojct, or in another way, communication is the project.[2]

There are basically two levels of communication inputs needed for developing a communication strategy: the need to design communication strategies for facilitating a change of behaviour at the central agency level (to change from implementer to facilitator) and the need for facilitating behavioural change at the community level.

Central Level

Not a great deal of attention has yet been paid to developing explicit communication strategies for assisting policy makers and central government agencies in the process of changing their role from providers to facilitators. Certainly conferences such as this and international forae add to the process. The idea of holding participatory workshops involving all implementing agencies to work out shared, overriding goals for the project is a strategy put forward by PROWWESS and one that will be implemented in India through the RWSG-SA upcoming Community Management Demonstration Project. RWSG-SA also plans to produce a handout in easily readable and visual form outlining the project goals and strategies and explaining the communication strategy for facilitating community management.

Community Level

Quite recently more thought has been given to developing communication strategies for community involvement in project planning, implementation and management. Although, of course, there is no such possibility as a blueprint for action, there are certain guidelines for project planners that could be established: For example, it is essential to identify the cadre of people, particularly women, trained in communication/participatory/ adult education skills who will be responsible for creating the interface between the project facilitators and the community. This unit could either be set up within the facilitating agency (e.g. communication cells set up within PHED in 7 states in India), attached to the agency (Socio-Economic Unit in Kerala) another government institution or NGO. The unit must also have adequate budgetary and administrative support including transportation. It is very important that the unit have a degree of decision making power within the project and with the other facilitating agencies.

PROWWESS: Promotion of the Role of Women in Water and Environmental Sanitation Services. (a UNDP interregional project).

RWSG-SA: Regional Water & Sanitation Group-South Asia, the World Bank.

PHED: Public Health Engineering Department

The role of this unit will be to liaise with the community through participatory individual and group meetings to: discuss with them the possibilities of improved water and sanitation systems and seek their participation in working with the government to provide these services, assess with them their needs and identify together through shared baseline data collection and the type of village mapping discussed in Mr Boydell's paper etc. their technical requirements and abilities to pay for differing levels of service, train and assist them in decision making vis a vis technical requirements, build capacity in terms of assisting in the formation of water committees, book keeping, hygiene education and caretaker training. In many countries it will be essential to form separate women's communication groups to ensure their participation.

This is the process of capacity building towards management that the implementing agencies must facilitate. The role of facilitator is not as straightforward as that of provider but it can be done, is being done in pockets throughout the region. In the long run, there is no other way.

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1. From a paper called "Community Participation in Rural Water Supply Program: Some Issues". R GOPALAKRISHNAN, Humphrey Fellowship.

2. CHATTERJEE, Ashoke, Communication Consultant, Department of Rural Development, Government of India.