

DISCUSSION PAPER

Water committees - do they work

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To promote greater community participation in the management of rural water supply systems, the general policy of external support agencies has been to establish a water committee or a water/sanitation committee made up of members of the community. But the concept of water committees has always been one imposed on a community by ESAs. Communities have not had much to say in how their water supplies are to be run. It has generally been assumed by ESAs that having a water committee is the best way to run a community water supply.

But experience from Ghana and Ethiopia suggests that water committees often do not function as intended. Often, especially in the case of handpump systems, there is a flurry of activity during construction of the water source and installation of the pump. The ESA, be it a government water department or an NGO, then tells the community leaders that they must form a water committee consisting of so many people "at least two of whom should be women." So the leaders obediently call a general meeting at which a field worker of the ESA usually lays down the guidelines for a water committee; what it should do and the responsibilities of the different office holders. The usual procedure is that people are nominated and the most suitable candidates elected. The field worker takes the names of committee members; who is the chairman etc. and goes back to the office to record yet another successful formation of a water committee.

But often such committees never meet again! After some time, it is not uncommon for an outsider to visit the community and when they ask if there is a water committee here, are told no they do not have one!

Why is this so? One reason is that with a handpump, as long as it is working there is no need for the committee to meet; it has not well defined at the outset. Particularly with government installed systems, the community often assumes that as the government came and installed the system, the government will come and fix it when it breaks down. Another reason for non-functioning water committees is that they often have no real power to act, unless the chairman is also a powerful member of the community.

This brings us to the issue of whether water committee members should include local politicians, or should they be completely apolitical. In Ghana, after the second coming of the Rawlings regime, each village had to form a Committee for the Defence of the regime, each village had to form a Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR). Similarly in Ethiopia, each village had a "kebele" which is similar to a CDR. Under the former Mengistu regime each kebele was made up of Workers Party of Ethiopia cadres. If

the chairman of the kebele was also elected chairman of the water committee, then the committee had the necessary power to take decisions and the clout to implement them. If the committee did not include members of the kebele, then it was usually impotent. The downside of politically-oriented water committees, however, is that when the regime topples, as Mengistu's Derg did, then local politicians or cadres are purged and the water committee collapses too!

This paper suggests that it is time to take a fresh look at the necessity for water committees. There is a strong argument in favour of letting the community decide how best it is going to manage its water system. Maybe there is already a body within the community that can handle this task and which has the power to take and implement decisions. Maybe there is no need for a formal "democratically elected" water committee. External agencies should get away from the idea of automatically forming water committees because that is a Western concept of how a water system should be run, and it looks good in reports that a number of committees have been formed this month. What is not reported is whether said water committees are functioning or not.

We need to go deeper into existing community structures and determine whether the community really wants yet another committee. Maybe existing structures could handle the additional task of running a water system, after having received some management training from the ESA. The main role of the ESA therefore would then be to concentrate on preparing the indigenous body to run the system efficiently.

Discussion

There should be some form of organisation to look after a water supply although it need not necessarily be a formal water committee. Opinions varied greatly as to whether water committees should be political or apolitical. Reference was made to communities in Volta Region where members of CDR's on water committees now lacked credibility following the introduction of a multi-party system.

The religion also has to be considered eg. If a Christian NGO asks for a water committee the members are invariably Christian to the exclusion of Moslems which will marginalize them. Incentives to motivate water committee are not a good idea as it leads to more problems in the society. There is definitely a need to use existing structures within a community which could be responsible for water supply eg. if there is a strong chief and he's council of elders. Question arose: should ESA impose gender issues on a community especially on traditional societies? Flexibility should be the watch word as far as managing water supplies is concerned.