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Modern approach to sustainability

Mrs Tamara P Lamabadusuriya



Introduction

Experience worldwide and in Sri Lanka shows that water and sanitation facilities provided directly by institutions without the active participation of end users are often not properly operated or maintained and hence unsustainable. Various factors have contributed towards this including low ownership, social unacceptance, incorrect location, lack of affordability and unacceptable technology.

Wherever there is a genuine need for improved water and sanitation facilities most communities have shown willingness and capability to contribute towards planning, implementation, operation, maintenance and funding. Hence, active community participation is promoted, thereby identifying hidden strengths in rural communities to implement water and sanitation projects.

Policies were formed with this new concept and the Community Water & Sanitation Programme Unit (CWSPU) was established to facilitate improvement of water and sanitation facilities in Sri Lanka. One main objective of the CWSPU is to pay more attention to human and environmental aspects rather than to technological and financial aspects of a project, which was, (lone traditionally). This project is funded jointly by the World Bank (IDA) and the Government of Sri Lanka.

Approach

Overall responsibility of the project is vested with the CWSPU. Village level implementation is done by Partner Organisations (POs) closer to the villagers and Community based Organisations (CBOs). Projects will be implemented through six main phases

- Village identification and activation
- Mobilization
- Self assessment
- Participatory Planning Process
- Implementation
- Operation and maintenance

While the CWSPU strengthens POs and CBOs by assisting them financially, giving them the necessary training and coordinating the overall programme, POs together with CBOs will identify, develop, plan and implement individual projects.

This approach is first launched in a particular geographical area of Sri Lanka. Policies formulated under this project will later be applied to other areas in Sri Lanka.

Methodology adopted

Since the inception of the CWSPU last year, approximately six months were spent (till end of 1992) formulating draft policies, preparing inventories on governmental and non-governmental organisations and elected local councils actively working in the project area. Their suitability as future POs was assessed. Another aspect the Unit was mainly concerned with during initial period was to assist some selected POs to develop their community development skills, technical skills and various other skills such as organisation, communication and management.

Experience in the first pilot project area

In the six pilot project areas villagers were activated and mobilised in order to make them aware of the project and get all the villagers involved in the work. After assessing the degree of mobilisation villagers launched a programme to carry out a village self assessment. In the process village volunteers and community organisation actively working in the village were identified. Some organisations such as death donation societies, youth societies and women organisations got together and formed new organisations. Women were encouraged to take part in these activities. The strengths and weaknesses of their organisations were identified. Some unemployed educated youth joined these organisations to take part, in the water and sanitation project.

Once the villagers are organised and their priorities are identified, if there is a need for improved water and sanitation, the CBO request for technical assistance from the PO. One village requested for such assistance. Thereafter the technical officer of the PO assisted volunteers to undertake the household survey. The outcome of this survey was that the community prepared a village map, to a certain accuracy, with all the roads, footpaths, households, water points, latrines etc. marked on it. Nearby water sources were also marked.

At a village meeting where the CWSPU, PO and the community participated, the villagers pointed out that they have several shallow dug wells, which are prone to pollu-

tion and also several small springs which go dry almost every drought. Village was represented by one member from each ten households. People in a part of the village who have no access to well water or spring water get their domestic water from the nearby river.

Authorities discussed the request and the findings of the village volunteers. Although this community has sufficient water right round the village, some have no access to safe water points. The hilly terrain aggravated the problem. The community's sole request was to tap a stream about 200 metres high on a hill and provide pipe borne water supply to the village. The proposed pipe line involves approximately 4 km pipe length and crossing three ridges and valleys. The solution seemed very straight forward to the villagers. The source had sufficient quantity of water; it is located sufficiently above the village to convey water under gravity.

In assisting this village to plan the best solution for their water problem the CWSPU had to face several problems:

- Can a small PO without qualified engineers and surveyors plan a water supply scheme of this magnitude?
- Should CWSPU assist this particular PO in solving the water problem in this village?
- Will the community operate and maintain a large scheme like this?
- Up to what extent the community will understand the requirement of a feasibility study for a scheme like this, and how will it affect the ownership of the scheme and finally the sustainability?

Tentative cost estimates were prepared in order to make the community understand the cost implications. The cost contribution offered by the project as per the project concepts was merely 1/3 of the total cost. Finally the question was put to the community, whether they need a 100% improvement to their water supply or something in between. Finally the community agreed to look for alternative proposals to match the project contribution and to get their contribution minimised. Specially small schemes to serve clusters of houses will be considered.

Conclusion

Engineers working in community projects should tackle this type of problem very carefully, in order to maintain the momentum of the community while allowing them to think of the most appropriate technical solution for their community. Achieving time target and financial targets should not be the main idea.

At the time of preparing this paper this was the only experience gained in working with the community. Experience in other project areas in time to come may be much different. The best method to get community participation is not universal and the authorities will have to take appropriate action as and when necessary.