# Putting Community Management in Place

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Paper presented at International Conference 'Suitable Water Management and Technologies for small settlements' , Barcelona, 13-15 October 1998

**Summary**

This paper discusses community management, explaining its complexity by looking at the community and the management side. It identifies an emerging paradigm shift form communities working in agency projects to agencies supporting community projects. It presents the experience in a project on community management that is being implemented in six countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It also builds on the experience of 'joint learning' projects in Colombia in presenting key points that facilitate community. It concludes that enhancing informed and transparent decision making, enabling communities to learn management skills, and helping agency staff to take different approaches are essential to improve the performance of community water supply systems.

## 1. Introduction

Community management is not a very clear concept as it has different connotations in the literature. It has similar unclarities as community participation, which already in 1982 was defined as the provision of free community labour inputs in government projects on the one extreme, to autonomous self-reliant development on the other (White, 1982). Despite or perhaps because of the unclear definition, community management of water supply and sanitation systems is increasingly seen as a fundamental option for sustainable development. Community management of services, backed by measures to strengthen local institutions in implementing and sustaining water and sanitation programmes, was one of the guiding principles adopted in the New Delhi Consultation in 1990 and reconfirmed in Agenda 21 (Evans and Appleton, 1993).

Why is it believed that community management of water supply and sanitation systems, will be any more successful in achieving sustainable coverage than the top-down approaches from the past? Experience in many developing countries shows that even very good water agencies cannot successfully operate and maintain a network of widely dispersed water systems without the full involvement and commitment of the users. Despite the best endeavours of central agencies, staff, transport and budgets become over-stretched, leading to broken down systems, dissatisfied consumers and demoralised agency personnel (Lammerink, 1998). Many governments are becoming convinced that centralised systems cannot deliver the required services for the Sector. This resulted in a strong push towards decentralization that started in the late eighties.

Hopes are high with respect to community management. It is suggested that community management is an approach that seeks to make the best use of resources available within the community with support from government agencies. It puts people in charge of their own water systems in flexible partnership with supporting agencies. In this, communities take on more tasks and responsibilities, relieving agencies of routine management and maintenance duties. This releases agency resources which then can be used to reach more people. Successful community

management is claimed to build community confidence and to stimulate wider development efforts. It is also stressed that there is still a lot to learn (Evans and Appleton, 1993).
Much of this learning is at agency and institutional level as they often still hold the strings of the purse and so can dictate the developments. Increasingly governments and institutions are trying to adopt a more integrated and demand responsive approach. This is stimulated by the growing pressure to focus on sustainable functioning and effective use of water supply and sanitation systems. Another reason why government agencies are searching for alternatives and are amenable to participatory approaches is that over the past two decades "blue print" development strategies have been shown to be ineffective in meeting the basic needs of large numbers of marginalized, vulnerable people (Thompson, 1995). Thus public sector agencies show growing interest in participatory approaches, involving the community in their attempt to do more with less financial resources. They develop, for example, links with NGOs who have been using similar types of approaches.

In this it is surprising to see that agencies do not really have internal mechanisms to learn from their experience with communities, to learn how to work with them and to share this among their staff. What is needed is an approach to learning that allows to develop new methodologies and promotes changes of prevailing attitudes, behaviour, norms, skills and procedures within the agencies.

Not only does the agency staff need to learn to work with communities and to overcome the top-down approach from the past, but the communities also need to come to grips with working with the agency staff in a horizontal relationship. In the future the push for change however will be more radical with increasing decentralization and with communities who are to pay a larger share of the cost. Then the paradigm shift of communities participating in agency projects to one of the agencies participating in community projects will become even more important.

Community management does not imply that the communities must take care of everything or pay the full costs. They operate in partnership with the agencies and possibly the private sector thus enabling different distributions of responsibilities. The function and task to be performed by the organization acting on behalf of the community can thus vary considerably (Lammerink et al., 1995).

## 2. Some findings from the field

In 1995 a participatory action research (PAR) project on community management for rural water supply has been initiated by IRC together with partner organizations in six countries, Cameroon, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Colombia and Guatemala. Local research teams worked closely with community members of a total of 24 communities to better understand community management and to explore possible improvements. The essence of this project is to help communities to gain a better understanding of the problems they face and to let them become a key factor in problems solving. "The knowledge we gain from this 'research' is much more valuable then gifts. It is something we keep for life" (villager from Nkoundja, Cameroon). Community members thus become catalyst and in beginning to understand and discuss their

problems they create the space to allow a range of actors to participate and express their views (Bolt et al., 1996).

A first assessment of the situation in the six countries (IRC, 1997) indicates that:

- in each of the countries, community management of completed rural water supply systems is the accepted national policy, but implementation is not universal and each agency has its own procedures;
- no governments so far treat communities as future managers in the sense that they can make their own choices from a range of options, each with their own pro's and con's. None train communities for all community management aspects. Training is focused on technical tasks and bookkeeping, and is mostly given to men;.
- experience with existing community managed-water supply systems varies. In Cameroon, 438 schemes were built to be community managed showing a present breakdown of 9 percent, whereas many other schemes built without community involvement are no longer operational. Others report that a lot of community managed systems do not function well, partly for technical and ecological reasons partly because of poor administration and lack of management training and back-up support.
- quite some community members are not served because of poor water distribution and poor network management. Several of these persons have contributed to the construction of the system in cash or kind, but do not obtain the benefits;
- problems in existing systems are of technical, managerial and socio-economical nature, but communities just mention technical problems. Other problems surface only after further probing and discussion.
- record keeping both financially and concerning agreements in meetings is very limited and erodes the confidence of the community members. The same goes for communication and information sharing that is sparsely done and is mainly in the hands of the local leadership;
- many ESA's stipulate preconditions for future management, usually the formation of a water committee with some women representation. However little is done in developing management tools or management training;

Another participatory evaluation of 40 community managed water systems in Ecuador revealed that the systems do provide water but are in need of both technical improvements and better management (Visscher et al., 1996).

On the positive side the PAR project already shows that working in a horizontal way with the community and helping them to clarify their problems is a very powerful tool for change. Communities in Kenya for example were initially timid but are now enthusiastic about the management of the water system, and are taking tasks at hand in a transparent way. An overall picture is emerging that communities are capable to manage water supply systems, but do need back-up support. On the side of agencies clear support approaches are needed. Strategies and tools for enhancing management capacity in communities are developed and tested in the project, which offers now a flexible support approach, called Participatory Action Development for community management. This approach aims at responding to concrete needs of a community related to their management tasks and skills around public services, it aims at finding solutions to concrete problems and conflicts in the management of rural water supply by communities (Lammerink et al., 1998).

in a platform to manage an ecosystem must learn from scratch about the system, agree on its boundaries, share concepts about its sustainable management, develop indicators for success and methods for making things visible (Röling, 1994). This has very interesting parallels with the water sector, where communities establish water committees that serve as platforms to manage and take decisions concerning their water supply systems, including the sensitive water catchment areas. This platform may also serve sector agencies that increasingly must enter into negotiations with communities about the service that they want (Visscher et al., 1997). These agencies must accept however that as Röling states the stakeholders need to learn about the system in all its aspects. This implies no quick fits, but a process of dialogue, creating adequate learning opportunities for all involved on both the community and agency side.

Management is a concept that is very much in development and is changing to sharing responsibilities in new ways. It is becoming much more focused on learning, creating an enabling environment, building trust. It places much more emphasis on communication and holistic approaches. A collective learning process, starts with dialogue, or an open exchange of ideas in the group. This permits the participants to discover their potential and perspectives. This dialogue differs from the more common discussion, which has its roots with 'percussion' and 'concussion', literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes all competition (Senge, 1990). Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look beyond individual perspectives. It requires a positive learning environment. This is not easy, particularly in a politicized environment such as the water and sanitation sector. Not only are good facilitation and a variety of techniques required, but also leadership training for group members and a review of the historical developments with the community. Equally important is the need to review with the sector staff the social missions of their institutions and their own aspirations. This requires building confidence and trust, helping them to become self-confident and gain self-esteem. A guide to this process was already provided by Tao to Loa (700 BC):

> 'Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, love them, start with what they know, build on what they have. But of the best leaders when their task is accomplished, their work is done, the people all remark: We have done it ourselves'

The community is not the only actor, but can benefit from partnerships with the water sector institutions and the private sector. There is no blue-print what the inputs of different actors can be in the different project stages (Figure 1), but what may be expected is that the role of the government or NGOs who initially are the project leaders will reduce over time and the role of the (community) water enterprise (water committee, users association, private enterprise etc.). increases. The different actors or their representatives thus have to come to an agreement on what the specific contributions and responsibilities will be over time. This they can only do on the basis of informed decision making which particularly addresses the expected service level and the long term management of the system, being still the weakest issue today. The discussion may include possible future extensions of the system, not in great detail but the basic concept should be clear.

*Figure 1: The involvement of actors in water supply projects*

However, also better strategies need to be found that harness the partnership between communities, governments, NGOs and private sector. In different parts of the world such strategies are being developed for example in the Transcol project in Colombia (Visscher et al., 1997) and in the WAMMA project in Tanzania (see Box). These strategies all have in common that they work towards institutional change and changing attitudes of both agency staff and community members.

**The WAMMA programme in Tanzania**

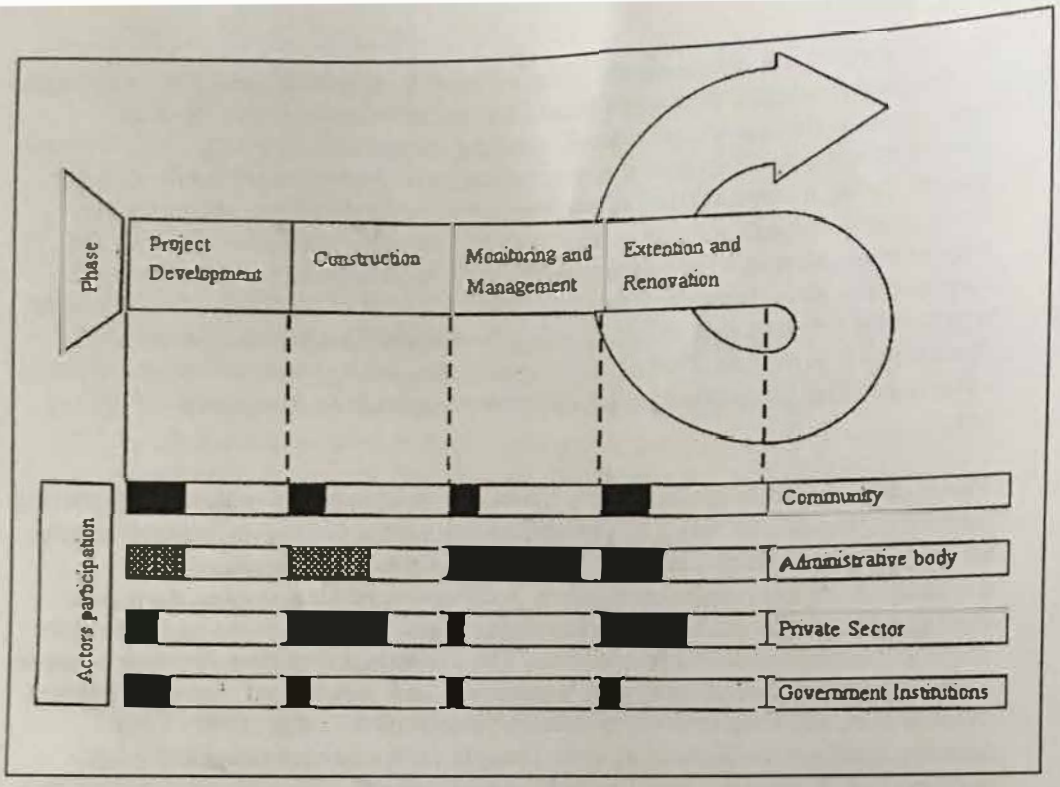
In the WAMMA programme four organizations have made a conscious effort to share hands by establishing joint district teams which support villagers in planning and implementing water and sanitation projects. The acronym WAMMA stands for these four agencies, namely: WA for WaterAid; M for Maji (The Water Department); M for Maendeleo ya Jamil (the Community Development Department); and A for Afya (the Health Department). Lessons learned include: governments and NGOs can be effective partners in community water supply and sanitation programmes; empowerment of field workers makes them dynamic agents for change; participatory approaches need to work within existing systems and structures; changing attitudes and working practices takes time; adding the health dimension to water programmes calls for flexible and innovative approaches; and the approach used is not a blueprint, but is replicable. (based on Appleton et al., 1997).

## 3. Revisiting community management

Instead of trying to complete the definition of community management or add another version, there seems to be an easier way to increase our understanding of what it encompasses. Community management deals with two dimensions, communities and management and the relation between both.

*Communities*, groups of people with common but also conflicting interests and ideas and different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The identity of the people in the communities is shaped by their history and their socio-economic and environmental conditions. Some of them, often the economically better off, may be better informed, may know more of the world, but may on the other hand, have certain interests in keeping the status quo and therefore may not be willing to solve certain problems. Women may have interests different from those of men and may not have been heard in the past, or their position may make it difficult to achieve changes on their own (Galvis et al., 1997; Lammerink and Wolffers, 1994; Wijk van, 1997). Men, women and children have different needs, different access to resources and different areas in which they can take decisions. Yet all have the right to equally contribute to and benefit from development activities, thus making it necessary to strike a gender balance in programme activities, problem identification, conflict resolution and joint management of common interests.

The water supply system may be one such common interest, but at the same time can be a major source of conflict. This brings us to the dimension of ***management***. In his discussion about resource negotiation, Röling (1994) introduces the concept of a platform of decision making, which he defines as a nodal point of social interaction between stakeholders to allow for integral decision making about a resource they perceive to be in need of management. He argues that stakeholders coming together




## 4. Towards community management

In essence the question of community management of water supply systems boils down to: Who manages (decides) what, with what tools and with who's support so that the community as a whole benefits.

The object of management is the water supply system. This system needs not only to overcome the hygiene risk the community faces from the existing water systems, but also to provide the level of service the community wants, is financially willing to support and for which an adequate management system can be found. It is often overlooked that new water supply systems have to compete with existing sources. Only if a better level of service can be provided in terms of coverage, quantity, continuity, quality and cost sustained system performance and effective use may be achieved (Visscher ed., 1997). This implies that an adequate insight is needed for the key actors both on the community and agency side of the existing situation, the perceptions of the problem, the desires and the realistic options for improvement. Table 1 summarises key points that are needed to enable community management.

Projects can change the attitudes of people, when they start with developing respect for each other among the actors involved and stimulate information sharing without qualifying it. Here the responsibility lies initially with the external agency staff who often still need to learn to respect the local culture and beliefs. But even in the communities self-respect may be low. Starting a project with a historical review by the community themselves of their water supply situation and the rites and myths involved

*Table 1: Basic requirements for community management*

It needs to have clear indicators for these issues, that need to be established with the water enterprise and the system operators (Visscher et al., 1997). It needs to spell out the action to be taken if the desired level for specific indicators is not reached.

**Monitoring made easy and effective**

For a handpump the performance can be measured in terms of the number of strokes it takes for the water to appear and the volume produced per minute at a fixed stroke speed. If it takes more than two strokes for the water to appear the footvalve needs to be checked and possibly replaced or the piped is leaking. If the volume produced per minute falls below a set standard the cupseals need OT be replaced. The operator measuring performance in this way sees a gradual reduction in volume and can predict when it will reach the minimum level, thus enabling him or her to plan the necessary repair, instead of waiting till the pumps breaks down. Similar indicators can be established for the performance of piped systems as well as for financial and managerial performance.

## 5. Some concluding remarks

Although a paradigm shift seems to be emerging the principal challenges to put community management into mainstream practice are still huge. Currently in most countries, community management of rural water supply systems is the accepted national policy. However, their is still a considerable gap between policy and practice. In fact, communities are not treated as future managers in the sense that they can make their own choices from a range of options. Nor do they get the opportunity to learn the required management skills.

This and the lack of back-up support for problems going beyond the community level are important reasons for the sub-standard performance of many systems. This will continue to be the case unless the managerial aspects are better taken in hand and practical management tools are developed together with communities.
Management skills also include handling of conflicts because communities consist of people which not necessarily share the same interests and values. Often conflicting interests exist both within the community and between the community and outsiders.

Gradually we see agencies start to participate in the development endeavour of the communities instead of the community participating in the agency projects. This paradigm shift however will only materialises if new learning approaches and participatory methods are adopted in challenging institutional settings where community knowledge and institutional knowledge are equally valued and people start to respect each others views.

The partnership approach means for agencies that new coherent strategies and methods are needed to further build management capacity in, and in dialogue, with communities. This also implies that agencies need to make the necessary adjustments and strengthen their own capacity to provide such effective support to communities.

Also institutional change is needed which allows for harnessing the partnership between communities, governments, NGOs and private sector. The relationship should be transparent, based on mutual understanding and appreciation of the different 'social' missions of the institutions.

- enabling environment which guarantees that communities can establish legal enterprises to manage their water supply system and that management decisions including for example tariff setting can be taken by these enterprises
- linking technology choice with operation, maintenance and management requirements clarifying what management it takes both at the local level and in terms of possible back-up by private sector or government.
- ensuring that the level of service responds to a realistic demand of the community
- partnership attitude between agencies and communities in which perceptions of problems and solutions can be discussed on the basis of equity and respect, valuing both academic and community knowledge in the same way
- transparent decision making ensuring that informed choices can be made
- proper management arrangements including practical management tools
- impartial institution that has the power of authority and the skills to mediate between the (community) water enterprise and the users in case of important differences of opinion
- accepting a learning period in which training and learning go hand in hand until water enterprises and the communities they serve can cope by themselves with limited back-up support.

*Based on Visscher ed., 1997 and Brikke et al., 1997*

has proven to be a good tool to get this going in the Transcol project in Colombia (Visscher et al., 1997). An interesting result was that after two project years a local farmer indicated that he learned from this project that 'everyone is the teacher of everybody and everybody learns from everyone'.
Informed decision making is another tool to change attitudes. As it is clear for everyone what choices there are and what choice eventually has been made the power of the decision makers changes from hidden agendas to public accountability. It also dramatically cuts opportunities for malpractice and corruption and may lead to easy acceptance of the consequences.

**'Informed decision making' helps to change attitudes**

In one of the Transcol communities the tariff was raised tenfold by the water committee to enable the introduction of water treatment without any protest. In a community meeting a metaphor of a bus company was used for the water supply system. People being accustomed to paying for the bus could clarify the reasons for this. Then a similar reasoning was presented for the tariff related to the water system in which the different cost items were explained and discussed. After the discussion it was very clear what the tariff needed to be and what possible cost savings could be introduced.

An issue which is often treated badly is the establishment of a simple monitoring model and the provision of simple monitoring tools. If they are provided most monitoring models are reporting forms and not tools that initiate and stimulate action. It appears as if the reporting on achievements (positive or negative) is more important than sustaining the service of the water supply system at the desired level. Monitoring should support the technical, economical and managerial performance of the system.

In order to be able for a community to share management responsibilities at a higher degree, stakeholders should be allowed to learn about the system in all its aspects. Support strategies should enable for sufficient learning opportunities and a process of dialogue for all involved. The challenge is how to enable such a continuous process, knowing that 'each place, each culture, each experience requires its own approach'.

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