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### PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES TO WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

# Is there any optimum level for community participation in RWSS? – An Engineer's view

*K. Dahanayake, Sri Lanka*

*Active community participation is considered the single most important determinant of overall quality of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) projects implementation to ensure the long term sustainability of delivered WSS services. It would be worthwhile to study the optimum level of community participation with the ultimate objective of sustainable water supply service development. This paper attempts to evaluate the level of actual community participation and difficulties come across during Asian Development Bank assisted Third Water Supply and Sanitation (Sector) Project (TWSSP) implementing in Sri Lanka. It is concluded that, as there are no "blue print" solutions in the RWSS sector; optimum community participation is a relative phenomenon. Participation is dynamic, and its nature change with project implementation approach and socio economic condition of the target community. Achieving effective participation is expensive and complicated and hence needs due attention to decide optimum participation level.*

## Introduction

Active community participation is considered as the single most important determinant of overall quality of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) projects implementation. There are so many success stories worldwide to prove the value of community participation. However, the level of community participation varies depending on the project implementation mechanism adopted by the project. Extent and effectiveness of community participation is also depend on other factors such as prevailing socio-economic situation, local institutional support arrangement, level of project support staff intervention and existing WSS situation.

Under the Asian Development Bank assisted Third Water Supply and Sanitation (Sector) Project (TWSSP), community based RWSS project targeting approximately one million people is implementing in Sri Lanka at present. Underlying participatory principles adopted by the project are given in the Box 1 below:

### Box 1. Underlying participatory principles adopted by TWSSP

- Project act as a facilitator rather than a facility provider
- Project interventions based on the community needs and expressed demands
- Promote local partners involvement for the service delivery
- The community to decide service levels, technology, cost and scheme management arrangement
- Mandatory community contribution towards facility construction cost
- Scheme management responsibility vested with the community

The project implementation mechanism has designed to accommodate above principles and is now in 4th year of implementation. This paper attempts to evaluate the level of actual community participation and difficulties come across during project implementation, in order to decide optimum community participation level for future projects.

## Community participation approach in TWSSP rural water supply component

Key characteristics of participatory approach adopted during each sub project implementation phase are presented below;

### Preparatory Phase: - Sub project selection

Village communities are invited to forward their request for improved WSS facilities using standard format designed by the project with the consent of minimum 50 percent of households (HH) in the village. The community has to collectively complete the request form by indicating present WSS levels, village basic socio-economic data, availability of water sources for development and their agreement for contribution towards capital cost. A village level public awareness program is carried out prior to distribution of request form to ensure equal opportunity to all villages in the target area. Sub projects for intervention are selected by ranking community request using selection criteria developed by the project. This ranking was done in a participatory workshop, attended by local level officers involve in development activities and local politicians under the guidance of the project staff.

### **Community Mobilization and Planning Phase: - WSS facilities planning**

The project promotes extensive community participation under the village participatory planning (VPP) process. The community takes the leading role for source identification, water supply technology selection, service area and service level selection and construction planning. The project, with the assistance of NGOs who work as partner organizations (POs) provides guidance and technical assistance. Communities prepare project proposals for WSS facilities and forward to Project Implementation Units (PIUs) with the recommendations of POs.

The project's community mobilization program support establishing and strengthening community based organizations (CBOs) to undertake VPP process and subsequent project implementation. CBOs, which represent beneficiary community, are responsible for project proposal and community action plan preparation.

### **Construction Phase: - WSS facilities construction**

Once the community proposal approved, PIU sign a construction contract with CBO for water supply facility construction and release funds to CBO as per the contract. As the project fund allocation is limited to the maximum of 80 percent of the project cost or specified per capita technology based cost ceiling (whichever is less), the community has to contribute by cash and free labor for the facility construction. The CBO is responsible for overall construction activities including construction management, financial management, procurement and quality control.

### **O&M Phase: - WSS facility management**

CBOs are responsible for scheme management and decide the operation and maintenance (O&M) arrangement depending on the complexity of the system. Point sources such as dug wells, hand pump tube wells, domestic type rain water harvesting systems generally maintain by user groups while small to medium scale piped water supply systems covering approximately 10 HH to 500 HH coverage maintain by CBOs. O&M arrangement for large-scale rural piped schemes over 500 HH coverage is either carrying out by CBOs or assign to Local Authorities (LA).

### **Issues in Community Participation**

Community involvement in RWSS project implementation is a challenging task in many aspects. Firstly, communities think that WSS facility provision as a government responsibility. Secondly, they are reluctant to involve in community based projects due to past experience of failures or simply due to lack of trust. Thirdly, even they involve in the project, there are conflict of interests, lack of transparency and socio economic barriers which affect smooth functioning of CBOs. Key lessons learned under TWSSP in each project implementation phases are:

**Preparatory Phase:** - Villages for project intervention are

selected based on community requests forward by communities. Cross checking the accuracy of information provided by communities is difficult, if not impossible. This is mainly due to unavailability of accurate secondary data and difficulties to access all villages, which spread over large area for data verification. It was observed that in most instances, the selected villages for project implementation are substantially needy areas, but some times most deserving villages are leave out due to lack of accurate information.

### **Community Mobilization and Planning Phase: -**

This phase consists series of community meetings and discussions to establish CBO and to finalize WSS proposals. The project follows a structured approach which stipulate time bound community mobilization and VPP program with specified outputs/milestones throughout the program. This approach is quite effective for managing the project considering the large amount of village level sub projects (approximately 250 at a time) involved. However, by design, this arrangement promotes top down approach, as the level of community participation is somewhat predetermined irrespective of affecting factors such as the level of community commitment, availability of viable WSS solutions and competence of PO. As a result, some communities get frustrated either due to too much of community meetings and involvements (too much community participation) or insufficient time for community mobilization and WSS planning (inadequate community participation).

Under the VPP process, communities are guided to decide WSS technology and service levels. The community decision is largely depend on their knowledge related to water supply and sanitation. Their general anticipation for obtaining highest possible service level, which is in most instances piped water supply at household level, also influencing the decision. The question is to decide appropriate level of project involvement in the decision making process. Two critical and variable factors affecting this decision is (1) competence of project staff and (2) level of understanding by the community on selection of appropriate WSS solutions

**Construction Phase:** - According to project principles, community contribution towards construction cost should exceed 20 percent of the total construction cost. Contribution is made either by cash or by providing free labor depending on the situation. Voluntary community contributions made by way of managing construction, financial management, organizing free labor contributions are also have a substantial value, but not accounted under community contribution. It has been observed that voluntary contribution process creates following key significant impact on the social condition in most project implementation villages:

- Provision of free labor and/or cash affects the livelihood of poor families as they loss time and resources for income generating activities
- Those who offering voluntary contribution for construction management has to sacrifice substantial amount of

time for project works affecting their normal family life

- Conflicts arising due to delaying or not providing community contribution as agreed, misappropriation of funds by CBO officers, differences of opinion regarding construction works among beneficiaries

The fundamental question needs to be better clarified is that why the community contribution necessary for the construction process and what is the optimum contribution level. More precisely, it has to be analyzed whether 20 percent community contribution and other voluntary contributions towards construction cost of facilities has an element to support towards substantiate project cost. Or else, it is only for creating a sense of ownership and provisioning more appropriate service to the community.

### O&M Phase: - WSS facility management

For centuries communities have been involved in management of “point source” type water supply facilities and domestic type latrines. However, management of common piped water supply facilities is new to them, and need fair amount of courage and determination to deal with. Unlike Planning and Construction phases, O&M is a long-term phase with continues community commitment required. The project approach is designed on the basis that the community will continue scheme management in a sustainable manner throughout the lifetime of the facility. For common piped systems this requires long term voluntary contribution particularly by the CBO leadership. This might be a burden to the Sri Lanka’s rural society, as it affects their livelihood activities.

### Searching for optimum community participation level

As there are no “blue print” solutions in the RWSS sector, optimum community participation is a relative phenomenon. However, searching for optimum community participation level is advisable to:

- Maximize service delivery efficiency and to minimize project management cost
- Strengthen community development approach
- Optimize community participation in order to lessen disruptions to livelihood
- Minimize community conflict situations

in order to enhance long term sustainability of facilities provided.

The field level project staff should clearly understand that “loading” communities with the responsibility of almost all decisions and activities in project implementation is not the correct approach in participatory development. It is a well accepted fact that active community participation is

prerequisite for sustainable WSS project implementation. It is equally important that participation of project implementation officers

### Conclusion

Beneficiary participation including participation by women in the RWSS sector is essential for project effectiveness as well as for local capacity and empowerment of people for sustainability. Participation is dynamic, and its nature change with project implementation approach and socio economic condition of the target community. Achieving effective participation is expensive and complicated and hence needs due attention to decide optimum participation level. Any large scale RWSS project has an element of top down approach by design, which is impossible to eliminate completely. In contrast, participatory approach does not mean that the community is responsible for all decisions. Essential aspects to be considered for future project planning are:

- As high community participation does not necessarily mean that higher project effectiveness, projects should be designed for adequate participation level
- Field level project implementation staff needs to aware their role very clearly to achieve effective community participation
- Analyze possible social implication which may come across due to participation approach as maintaining the prevailing social fabric is paramount
- Community mobilization is expensive and hence needs both quantitative and qualitative analysis to arrive at optimum project input level

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### Contact address

Kamal Dahanayake  
 Technical Consultant  
 329/2, Jubilee Lane, Walana North, Panadura,  
 Sri Lanka  
 Email – kamalpsd@sltnet.lk

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