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

# Building sustainability through water company and community linkages

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*The Three Delta Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Project is a joint venture between the governments of Vietnam and Australia to improve the welfare and living conditions for residents in the Mekong Delta towns of Bac Lieu, Ha Tien and Sa Dec. The project's major focus is the development of urban environmental infrastructure, and also includes significant components of institutional strengthening and community development. A key implementation strategy for building the long term sustainability of the new infrastructure is to promote and strengthen linkages between the water and sanitation companies responsible for the infrastructure, and the communities they serve. Major challenges have been a lack of understanding by the companies as to the value of the community programs, and a significant lack of capacity at the town and community levels for initiating the various community programs. Now 2½ years into this 6 year project, the strategy is beginning to show results.*

## Project overview

The Three Delta Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Project is a 6-year project to improve the welfare and living conditions of residents by rehabilitating and extending the water supply and sanitation systems of Bac Lieu, Ha Tien and Sa Dec, three provincial towns in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam (Figure 1). Town populations range from 60,000 (Ha Tien) to 130,000 (Bac Lieu). The project commenced in October 2001 and is now about half way through its implementation. The project cost is approximately A\$70 million (US\$53 million), jointly funded by the Australian and Vietnamese Governments.

The project's main focus on providing engineering infrastructure is supported by significant components of institutional strengthening and community development, as follows:

### Engineering infrastructure

- Water supply: the project is providing a clean, safe and adequate 24-hour water supply to the urban and newly developing areas of the towns. Water pressure is being increased and the reliability of the systems improved.
- Drainage: new primary, secondary and tertiary drainage systems are being constructed in Bac Lieu and Sa Dec, and existing systems are being rehabilitated.
- Wastewater: public toilets are being provided at bus stations, markets and other public places. Many household septic tanks and toilets are being built through a sanitation credit scheme.
- Solid waste: the existing uncontrolled rubbish dumpsites are being replaced with new sanitary landfills sufficient to cater for the community's needs until 2020. Rubbish

bins, pedicarts and trucks are being provided to extend the solid waste collection service to all urban areas and commune centres.

### Institutional strengthening

- The institutional strengthening component is providing training and equipment to build the capacity of the local water supply and environment companies to implement, operate and maintain the new works, and to improve their financial and operational management.

### Community development

- The community development component is improving the overall welfare, living conditions and health of the communities by increasing their awareness of water, sanitation and health linkages, enhancing gender equity and improving neighbourhood environments.

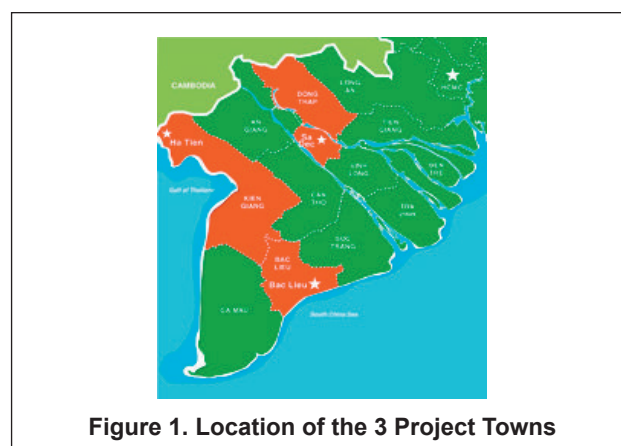


Figure 1. Location of the 3 Project Towns

## Challenges

### Existing water and sanitation systems

The towns were originally selected due to their inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure. Conditions in the 3 towns are broadly similar, and the communities have become accustomed to poor or non-existent levels of service, and therefore lack knowledge or expectations of what a good service should comprise. A brief summary of conditions at the outset of the project follows:

- Water systems are mostly old, limited in capacity and providing an intermittent and unreliable service. They need extensive upgrading and expansion to meet current needs. Service coverage of piped water ranged from 13% (Ha Tien) to 52% (Sa Dec).
- Drainage systems are mostly rudimentary, limited in extent, poorly maintained and ineffective.
- Wastewater disposal is normally through on-site septic tanks or open drains or canals; only 40-50% of households have in-house toilets.
- Solid waste collection is available to only 30-40% of households, with disposal at inadequate, uncontrolled dump sites.

### Community capacity and awareness

At the start of the project, community organizations in the towns lacked contact with the water supply companies. There was a low awareness of the systems and services provided and of water, sanitation and health linkages. In general there was little coordination among the various local authorities, such as the town people's committees, water and sanitation companies and mass organizations. People had little knowledge or information about the benefits and costs of clean water and environmental sanitation, or of the services which could, or should, be provided by the companies.

Community organizations like the Town Women's Unions had very limited institutional capacity, no computer skills or equipment, and were not confident to accept new approaches. Community leaders lacked basic health and sanitation education or knowledge of infrastructure, lacked communication skills such as facilitating group meetings and organizing training, and had little exposure to outside ideas. Their capacity in planning and management was weak and there was little belief in community participation.



**Photograph 1. Water sellers in Ha Tien can charge up to VND 50,000/m<sup>3</sup> (US\$3.20/m<sup>3</sup>)**

### Water company focus

At the start of the project, the water supply companies were not much interested in community development and didn't see the purpose in it. Companies were initially focussed on engineering aspects of the project with little appreciation of people-related issues, particularly customer service. For the most part they were simply water supply "factories", producing and distributing water and maintaining, to some extent, the systems. They, together with local public works and environmental companies, also operated limited solid waste collection and treatment facilities, and other urban services.

The companies mostly had limited institutional capacities and weak management, and basic financial and accounting systems. The companies exercised minimal asset management with no maintenance plans or control over non-revenue water. New customers were faced with difficult and non-user friendly administration procedures, high connection fees and unsuitable tariffs. The companies had little knowledge or understanding of customer service.

The companies lacked any form of community involvement, coordination or participation, with no information exchange or customer feedback. There was no consideration that benefits might accrue from such activities and companies therefore initially offered little support to the project's community programs.

### Strategies

Working closely with the Provincial Water Supply and Environment Companies and the Town People's Committees of the 3 towns, the project's approach to building sustainable outcomes has been to strengthen links between the companies and the communities they serve through the following activities:

- Promoting the concept of customer service and communications.
- Informing communities about the project and environmental health and sanitation through structured, community-driven Information, Education and Communications (IEC) activities.
- Contributing jointly with the town and community towards small neighbourhood environmental and school sanitation improvement projects.
- Supporting credit schemes for low-cost septic tank and toilet construction.

To support this approach the following project management structures were established at the outset of the project:

- Project Management Units in each of the project's water supply and environment companies, for management of the infrastructure components.
- Community Advisory Committees at town level, for coordination of the various community development programs. These committees comprised local agencies

and community organizations such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, education and health departments, water and sanitation companies, ward people's committees, etc.

Lastly, and most importantly, is the project's strategy of close integration of the infrastructure, community development and institutional strengthening components and working teams. Thus, while the engineering infrastructure team has been working on the designs and initial construction works, the community development team has worked towards building the capacity of key community organizations and groups and developing the various community development programs, whereas the institutional strengthening team has worked with the water supply companies on concepts of customer service and relations, improvement in management and customer information and increased awareness of the importance of customers and of their needs and perceptions.

### Community development program

The primary objectives of the 5-year community development component of the project are:

- To increase awareness of water, environmental sanitation and health linkages, so that communities are in a better position to appreciate, value and benefit from the new and upgraded water and sanitation infrastructure being provided through the project, with the ultimate aim of making the improvements and the investments more sustainable in the long term.
- To facilitate improved neighbourhood and school environments, through support of community level participatory activities which will enhance and extend the impact of the major infrastructure works.

These objectives are being achieved through the following programs:

- Comprehensive IEC program over a period of 3 years, a key element of which is the Core Group, responsible for planning, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of IEC activities in each town. This forum has brought together, for the first time, representatives from the Town People's Committee, Women's Union, Youth Union, Offices of Health, Education, Culture and Information, and water and sanitation company, to plan and implement IEC activities in the towns.
- Sanitation credit scheme, to support the construction of household septic tanks and latrines. This has been most successful to date with the construction of around 400 septic tanks in each town during the past year.
- Environmental health microactivities program, to support the construction of small neighbourhood environmental improvement projects such as lane paving, tertiary drainage, bridges, lighting, etc. The program started in Bac Lieu

where 77 microactivities have been completed to date. A recent review of the program identified a high level of positive social and environmental impacts resulting from the program.

- School sanitation program, to support the construction of sanitation improvements in schools, such as toilet blocks, water systems and hand washing facilities.

Acceptance and joint funding of the programs has been achieved in all 3 towns with the Town People's Committees matching project funds for the microactivities and schools programs, and contributions to the IEC budget. An interesting feature of the program is the establishment of a joint "community development" bank account in each town, which has provided funding accountability and openness, and a simplified process. Sustainable management of the programs beyond the project is being assured through ongoing negotiations with the responsible contributing agencies.

### Progress towards sustainability

By the completion of the Three Delta Towns Water Supply and Sanitation Project in 2008, it is expected the following achievements will have been reached:

- Substantial improvements in the water supply, drainage, sanitation and solid waste infrastructure systems and services in the 3 project towns. Water will be supplied on a 24-hour basis to 90% or more households (a total population of around 250,000) in the service areas with adequate quantity, quality, reliability and pressure.
- Enlightened and financially viable water supply and environment companies, providing high quality services and responsive to community needs.
- Communities and customers who are informed about and understand the benefits of good water supply and environmental sanitation, and are prepared to pay a fair price for good services.
- Improved neighbourhood environments, community sanitation, and school sanitation facilities provided through the community development programs.

At the start of the project the local authorities and community organizations were unsure about the project's ideas and plans under the community development component. However, through much hard work in the initial stages, there has already been a considerable improvement in the capacity of participating community organisations, although more support is required. Significantly, the coordination and working relations between the communities, town agencies and water companies have improved.

After more than 2½ years of foundation building and development of good working relationships based on mutual respect and trust, the project's community development component is now well established and based on the best practices of community consultation, participation and lo-

cal ownership, is gender responsive and firmly linked to the project's infrastructure outputs.

There is much interest and increased involvement in the project's activities from community groups and local authorities. This can be seen in:

- Household contributions to microactivities.
- Community requests for solid waste collection services.
- Household loans for septic tanks.
- Agreement of Town People's Committee to use of joint bank account for community activities.
- Co-funding for the various community and IEC programs.
- Provincial level agencies becoming more interested as they start to see benefits of the project's approaches and support.

Likewise there is developing interest and involvement by the water and sanitation companies, and after 2½ years we are beginning to see the benefits of strengthening linkages with the town agencies and community, with financial contributions towards community activities and increasing support and participation. Key examples of this are:

- Companies highly appreciated the training in customer oriented approaches, and have replicated the training.
- Provision of funding for IEC activities seen as beneficial to the companies.
- Provision of free connections for primary schools and kindergartens.
- Sharing of information about their systems and services with existing and potential customers.
- Preparation of brochures about services provided, service areas and proposed extensions.
- Improvements in service to community through provision of septic tank desludging services.
- Improvement of solid waste services at request of community groups.
- Benefits to customers through improved opportunities for customer feedback, complaints and suggestions.

### Lessons Learned

The following experiences should contribute to building long term sustainability of urban water supply and sanitation projects through water company and community linkages:

- There is a vital need for the promotion and development of strong linkages and good coordination between water supply and sanitation companies and community organisations at all stages of project implementation.
- Institutional strengthening and community development must be regarded as key components of water and sanitation projects.
- In order to be most effective, the resources devoted to institutional strengthening and community development

should be significant and related in terms of budget, duration and timing to the resources devoted to the engineering infrastructure works.

- Sound water company and community linkages are essential for the establishment of effective, realistic tariffs and connection fees. Only in this way can subsidies be reduced and companies provided with greater financial autonomy, thereby enabling them to further improve the services they provide.
- Water supply projects should always be considered in combination with environmental sanitation. Increasing the volume of water supplied to urban communities will exacerbate existing drainage problems.
- Formal steps need to be taken to integrate the project components. This integration should involve networking between component work teams, with a clear understanding of how the different component activities link to support the common objectives of the Project.
- Timing of community development inputs is important, for example, public health awareness campaigns need to occur before the construction and operation of new facilities but not too long before, or the community may become discouraged.
- "Willingness to pay" data must be carefully collected and used with caution – communities with low levels of knowledge and awareness of the value of clean water supplies and environmental hygiene and health, cannot be expected to understand the value of services which they know nothing about, nor can they be expected to have any expectations of such services, until their awareness is raised.
- In general, it can be said that "the poor have no voice"; however, targeted information, education and communication programs can provide them not only with a voice, but with opportunities to improve their lot.

From the authors' experiences, these are the key lessons learned so far from this project and from other urban water supply and sanitation projects in developing countries.

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