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PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES TO WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Multi-faceted participatory approaches in rural water and sanitation projects

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The Rural Water and Sanitation Project implemented in two districts in the Eastern Region of Ghana between 1991 and 1996 by the UNDP and Ghana governments was people-centred in many ways. These included active participation of women, use of video films and microscopes in community mobilization and health/hygiene education, respect for local customs in borehole siting and the use of local folks in strategic construction of VIP latrines and pump repairs. Others include the impact of a mix in training venues, improved social status for voluntary workers, capacity-building and skills up-grading for local artisans leading to improved incomes among the poor etc. The success of the project hinged on the deployment of participatory strategies tailored to the socio-cultural milieu of the beneficiaries.

Background

In an attempt to respond to calls to improve the health and living standards of rural dwellers in two deprived districts in one of the regions in Ghana, the United Nations Development Programme with support from the governments of Ghana and the Netherlands implemented a pilot rural water and sanitation project between 1991 and 1996. The main objectives of the project were the provision of 120 boreholes fitted with hand-pumps, construction of 750 demonstration household ventilated improved pit (VIP) latrines and the establishment of a system of community management of the facilities.

The inception of the project was preceded by a socio-economic study of about 150 communities in the two districts. The results of the study necessitated the incorporation of social-cultural factors in order to elicit maximum participation of the beneficiaries. This was based on the philosophy that it is not so much the physical facilities as the people who should be made the focus of development projects (Mhango, 1987). In all the communities, the common socio-cultural indicators resulted in the adoption of a number of strategies in project implementation. These took into consideration the predominantly patriarchal nature of the communities, nucleated settlement patterns, low income status, peculiar social status perceptions as well as rural forms of entertainment and information dissemination. These factors were all taken into consideration in project implementation since the design was favourably silent on the modus operandi of these (identified) factors.

Project Inception

Local means of communication was used to disseminate information about the project to almost every settlement in the two districts. These were through District Assembly meetings where all communities were represented. Project staff also paid visits to the communities and among other things met with community leaders to inform them about the project. Visits were made to all communities and guided walks provided by opinion leaders gave a fair idea of the state of water, sanitation and health of the people. The interaction between local folk living in deprived rural communities with project officials alone was psychologically satisfying to the communities. Communities that were interested were to send an application to the District Assembly where political, administrative and traditional authorities were represented. Criteria such as population (project support was limited to settlements with less than 2,000 inhabitants), water sources, sanitation facilities, water and sanitation associated diseases, community initiated projects etc. were used to shift the large number of applications. In the end, 50 communities were selected to benefit from the 120 boreholes. These were made to form Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) Committees who managed the facilities on behalf of the communities. The beneficiary communities were assisted to develop a sense of ownership of the facilities.

Participatory Tools

A variety of participatory tools were used in community mobilization as well as health and hygiene education. These were based on practical methods of mobilization through observation. They included the use of either a microscope or a powerful magnifying glass to examine the community's main water source. As many members of the community were made to have a look at this sample. This convinced many to opt for potable water instead of the traditional polluted source. A similar tool was the 5% alum solution which was used in a cup and compared to another cup containing the same sample. When stirred, the cup with the alum solution looks less murky since all germs are coagulated underneath the cup as a residue. This frightens community members and makes them eager to obtain an improved water source.

One very interesting tool used for community mobiliza-

tion was the mobile video van. Since most rural dwellers had little recreation or entertainment, the use of this tool was found to be very effective. The mobile van arrives in the community at about 4.00 pm when most farmers would be retuning from their farms. Films on boxing, soccer and drama in the local language (three powerful crowd-pulling tools) were used from the beginning. Thereafter project films on community participation, importance of potable water, improved sanitation as well as health and hygiene education was shown. Community members were later asked to comment on their impressions and this appeared to have attracted fairly good appreciation.

Selection Sites for the Facilities

One way of concretizing the community management system was the active participation of communities especially opinion leaders and women in the siting of boreholes. Their views were considered in order to prevent drilling of boreholes close to abandoned sanitary sites, refuse disposal centers, cemeteries, sacred sites etc. It afforded the women and children an opportunity to make choices which made the facilities closer to their homes while respecting local customs and traditions. In the end, about 97% of the 120 boreholes were sited close to and within the communities while the remaining 3% were about 100 meters away due to hydro-geological considerations. Hitherto, women and children were often walking an average distance of 600 meters to fetch water from traditional contaminated and polluted sources. This way patronage of the facilities was going to be ensured than if the boreholes were located far away without the involvement of the beneficiaries.

Pump installation and apron construction

Pump installation of the 120 boreholes was undertaken by experts with locally trained area mechanics for major repairs. This was meant to sharpen their skills and provide income to their low incomes. Apron drains were constructed by beneficiary communities using standard designs made by the project. The sense of ownership was strengthened through construction as residents took pride in spending locally-generated resources to make their own drains, sometimes attempting to surpass their colleagues in neighbouring communities by improving the quality and competence in construction.

Use of Traditional Leaders in VIP Promotion

In the communities, even though discretion was expected to be exercised by WATSAN Committees in the distribution of materials for VIP latrines, priority was given to the cultural factor through the use of the chief or regent. It was felt that once the custodian of culture and community leader owned such a facility, it was good and had to be replicated by others who visited his palace often. Most meetings held to promote the project including VIP latrines were held in the chief's palace.

A combination of these factors helped tremendously to promote the VIP latrines. The original idea of promoting 750 demonstration latrines was exceeded as demand outstripped supply and the number had to be increased to about 1,000. Thereafter the idea appeared to have caught on so well that by the time the project ended, over 250 additional VIP latrines had been constructed without project support.

Economic considerations

One positive manner which assisted in the large number of VIP latrines must have been the economic consideration provided by the project. Even though the beneficiary bought his own materials for the super-structure and paid for excavation of the pit, the expensive parts such as cement, vent pipe and roofing sheets were provided by the project for which beneficiaries did not have to pay. The three formed about 60 – 75% of the total VIP latrine construction cost. With respect to the water, communities were made to pay an amount of C60,000 per borehole ($160) into the community's own bank account towards operation and maintenance. This pre-requisite in the project intervention was to serve as an initial demonstration of interest and community ownership towards management of the facilities. The combined effect of these economic factors resulted in increased funds for operation and maintenance and an increase in number of VIP latrine beneficiaries.

Women's participation

To generate interest of women operating in a predominantly patriarchal society and given their crucial traditional roles and influence on the attitudes of children (Melchior, 1989), women's sensitization workshops were organized. Before then, every WATSAN Committee of seven members was expected to be made up of at least three women. One representative of women on the WATSAN Committee was invited to participate in a workshop facilitated only by women. The facilitators were women professionals who were prepared to share ideas with the rural folk in areas such as team work, basic management principles, domestic, personal and environmental cleanliness, basic income and expenditure accounts, water and sanitation associated diseases etc. The women left the workshop with action plans aimed at applying their acquired knowledge back in their communities. They however were unable to implement most of the plans for a number of reasons. The men who felt neglected were reluctant to lend their support to the women. Some women attempted to over-turn traditional ways of doing things immediately to assert their influence while other community members felt that the women representatives on the WATSAN Committees were being paid for their services and therefore did not require their co-operation. In spite of the relatively low impact of this approach, the importance of women in a rural water and sanitation project had been established.

At the time the project ended, women were active in about 60% of the beneficiary communities. This is regarded as quite impressive given the fact that at the beginning of the project, only some 24% of women appeared interested in the development of their communities with respect to water and sanitation.

Training Venue Factor

Two different types of training programmes were used during project implementation and both were found to be quite effective. Even though moving women from their homes (for central workshops where representatives were camped at one place for few days) impacted negatively on the domestic scene, it afforded the participants opportunity of learning from other colleagues about challenges being encountered and how they managed to solve them. Both men and women were accorded higher recognition by their colleagues when they returned home from the workshops. The social status of WATSAN Committee members was also enhanced when the project adopted the "in-situ" coaching sessions where project staff moved from community to community to either re-inforce earlier skills imparted or help to demonstrate new ideas through hands-on training as in basic book-keeping and how to use participatory tools in hygiene education.

Community Recognition

To boost the morale of WATSAN Committee members since their work was voluntary, many communities designed various methods of demonstrating recognition. These ranged from weeding of their farms, non-payment of water user fees to non-attendance to compulsory "communal labour" duties like clearing of access roads, non-payment of special levies etc. The project added T-shirts and caps designed with the project logo to the WATSAN Committees. These were mostly worn to their meetings and when they held meetings with project officials. This gave them special social recognition and provided impetus to their performance. In some cases, traditional authority appeared challenged and apprehensive to offer support.

Conclusion and Lessons

An evaluation of the project carried out at the terminal stage revealed reduction in many water and sanitation associated diseases while the two districts had started opening up for other development projects. Some WATSAN Committees were made to take on other responsibilities such as health, rural housing and agricultural co-operatives. The demonstration effect rubbed off well on other communities making later project implementation easier and more manageable.

It is important to define broad objectives in the design of rural water and sanitation projects. Implementation should then make room for the involvement of Community Development and Management Experts, experienced Sociologists, Social Workers etc. These Rural Development Specialists would identify key socio-cultural issues among beneficiary communities and attempt to incorporate as many of them as possible during execution. The flexibility with which project staff operated relying on a variety of socio-cultural considerations and employing a number of participatory tools are regarded as key and vital elements in this exciting and successful project.

References

Melchror, Siri (1989) Women, Water and Sanitation Or Counting Tomatoes As Pumps, PROWESS/UNDP Technical Series, Lessons, Strategies & Tools.

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Notes

1. The sixty thousand cedis (C60,000) was equivalent to $160 at that time (exchange rate of about C375 to 1$).

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