
31st WEDC International Conference, Kampala, Uganda, 2005

MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS FROM WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Achieving a lasting impact in rural water services: a case study from south-west Uganda

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The achievement of lasting beneficial impacts through rural water supply services has been elusive. In too many cases significant effort and investment has been devoted to providing a service, but after a few years (or even a few months) the system breaks down and no longer provides a useful service to the community. Much thought has gone into the question of what is required to bring about sustainable services, but there remain missing dimensions in much of the existing literature and practice. This paper describes a small research project, focused on one long-term rural water and sanitation programme in south-west Uganda, which specifically addresses the question of sustainability. The paper outlines the research aims and methodology, and presents part of the conceptual thinking derived from literature and key-informant interviews. Field work is on-going at the time of writing, but will be completed in time for oral presentation at the conference.

Introduction

The achievement of a lasting impact in rural development is a major challenge for donors and the agencies implementing poverty-focused community projects and programmes in low-income countries. Too few good examples of sustainable development exist, from which to inductively develop an understanding of sustainability in practice. The Kigezi Diocese (Church of Uganda) Water and Sanitation Programme (KDWSP) in Uganda however is one such model, and its success in delivering sustainable rural water services has been extensively documented through evaluations undertaken between 1997 and 2004 (Carter et al, 1997; Morgan et al, 2001; Danert et al, 2004).

KDWSP has now been working with rural communities in south-west Uganda for nearly 20 years. It has so far served around 200,000 people with basic water supply, sanitation and hygiene education, and it adds 20-25,000 to that number annually.

During 2005 the authors are undertaking a small piece of theoretical and empirical research to investigate what accounts for this programme's success in delivering sustainable water services in rural communities, and how the case-specific findings can be generalised to the interventions of other faith-based organisations, secular non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) and to Government. The findings will be disseminated widely in the literature, and among interested stakeholders.

Approach

The research consists of three components: first, a review of international literature and documentation specific to the Ugandan water sector and KDWSP; second, a set of in-depth interviews with key informants, all professionals in rural

development in sub-Saharan Africa; and third, quantitative and qualitative field studies to determine the extent to which the services brought about by the programme really have proved to be sustainable, and to explore the reasons for long term impact, or its breakdown.

At the time of writing the first component is in progress, the second has been completed, and the third, the field work, is under way. By the time of this conference the work will have been completed and written up, and the findings will be available to all interested stakeholders.

Starting point of the research

The starting point for the research is the belief that certain features of KDWSP combine to account for its success in delivering sustainable services. Table 1 lists 12 key factors which were set out in an initial brainstorming session involving the research team and senior staff of KDWSP in February 2005.

Although all these 12 factors are considered to be important, two in particular were agreed to be the focus of the research, partly because of their particular importance, and partly because of the overall advocacy purpose and target audiences for the research. The two key areas are **on-going support to communities**, and **links to local Government**.

Early findings: a conceptual framework

The concept of sustainable development which we are developing from this and other field experiences in sub-Saharan Africa puts at least as much weight on the intangible aspects of **ethos** and **process** as on the **activities** undertaken in development interventions. It is only through the shared commitment, values, attitudes, approaches, and understanding of all stakeholders, combined with technical, social and

Table 1 Factors contributing to sustainability of KDWSP interventions

Factor	Comments
Community participation – more than lip-service	The importance of bringing about full community participation from the planning stage through to O&M is well known. However the difficulties of achieving this, and the commitment required, often mean that little more than lip-service is paid to the the achievement of real community management. This is not the case in KDWSP.
Gender meaning gender – not just women on committees	KDWSP first started working with women’s rainwater tank construction groups in the late 1990s. This aspect of the work has prospered, and now KDWSP’s focus is shifting to a more balanced attention to women’s and men’s groups – a properly gender-balanced approach.
Close working relationships with local Government	KDWSP has worked extremely hard to forge strong links with local Government, from village and parish level, through sub-county, to District. The programme is now also very well known to central Government. This puts it in a strong position to advocate for changes to policy and practice nationally and internationally.
Underlying ethos, including a learning and reflective attitude	Honesty and transparency characterise the programme’s approach, but perhaps above all has been its freedom, ability and willingness to experiment, try, fail or succeed, learn, and move on. KDWSP is a learning and reflective organisation.
Realistic attention to scaling-up	KDWSP is a small programme, bringing water and sanitation services to 20-25,000 new people per year. Kabale District’s population is about 500,000. Clearly the programme cannot meet the needs of this target population alone, and Government now has a significant role in meeting the needs of the District. KDWSP has been innovative in its approaches to scaling-up, focusing especially on facilitating others, including the private sector, to extend the programme’s work.
High quality of construction, and value for money	KDWSP’s strong ethos of respect for all, including its own workers, has resulted in little or no compromise on construction quality. This is unusual in Uganda, especially in programmes funded by Government and implemented through the private sector.
On-going support	KDWSP has recognised before most organisations that sustainability will not be achieved through “full community management”. Communities require support at the times when hardware fails catastrophically, or when committee structures break down. KDWSP’s experience, among others, has already contributed to changes in Government thinking (specifically in the National O&M Framework).
Emphasis on household level water supply as well as community sources	Community management of water supply services is not easy. Household level ownership and management can be more straightforward. KDWSP’s work with household rainwater harvesting has broadened its scope beyond ‘community’ water supply.
Hygiene promotion through health workers living in the community	KDWSP’s health workers live in, and become adopted and trusted by, the communities where the programme works. In a large gravity flow scheme, health workers may be resident part-time for up to a year. This approach is extremely effective in bringing about subsequent community commitment to improved hygiene practices.
Inter-community competitions	As a means of building on community pride and dignity, the programme has for many years organised inter-community competitions to encourage good hygiene practices and effective scheme maintenance. These are very effective.
Commitment to community capacity building	A further expression of the programme’s ethos is its belief in communities’ potential to manage and finance their own services. Consequently, capacity-building is seen as a means of drawing out the potential of communities, and leaving them better able to initiate and manage their own development.
Geographic focus	Many, if not most, programmes spread themselves too thinly, often for good political reasons. However, this limits their efficiency and effectiveness, and compromises the chances of sustainability. KDWSP has for many years operated a geographically focused strategy, which enables it to work effectively in one area before moving on to the next.



Photograph 1. A service reservoir in a 12 year old gravity flow scheme



Photograph 2. Rainwater catchment at a primary school



Photograph 3. A public tapstand in a gravity flow scheme

institutional skills put into practice, that sustained beneficial outcomes can be achieved, and the boundaries of chronic poverty pushed back.

In understanding the determinants of sustainable development outcomes, full account needs to be taken of at least three inter-linked aspects of the development enterprise (Figure 1). Underpinning the entire endeavour is the **ethos** – the values, attitudes, integrity, and degree of commitment – of the individuals and organisations involved. When combined with a sound understanding of international, national, community and institutional contexts, a sound ethos can lead to a set of **processes** which are conducive to the achievement of sustainable beneficial impacts: truly participative and empowering, mutually respectful, culturally sensitive, and taking sufficient time. Processes alone are not enough though, and they need to be combined with skills and expertise in technical, social and institutional aspects, financial resources, sound management, and access to information and networks, to build the right set of intervention **activities**. When all these ingredients come together in a vision shared by donor, implementing agency and communities, then a lasting impact can be achieved.

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