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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MULTISECTORAL APPROACHES

Multi-sectoral decentralized water and sanitation provision in Zambia: Rhetoric and reality

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Decentralization is the cornerstone of local delivery of basic services such as water, sanitation and hygiene education in Zambia. Given the range of skills required to deliver these services in an integrated way, there is a strong need for multi-sectoralism at national and local levels. Currently, inter-ministerial competition and conflicting priorities hinder the realization of this multi-sectoralism and threaten the effectiveness of decentralized service delivery. In particular, the de-concentrated nature of line ministries conflicts with the need for intersectoral co-operation within decentralized local authorities. Unless there is strong political will and direction from presidential level then decentralization will never be truly realized and may actually hinder the effective delivery of water and sanitation services. If this is the case then decentralization is simply rhetoric and a return to centralization may be necessary in order to ensure that the rural poor attain their basic human rights.

Introduction

After independence many African countries adopted a centralized development approach which resulted in most governments becoming actively involved with the production, distribution and development activities of their countries during the 1960s and 1970s. It was assumed that centralized public administration and planning was the panacea for stability, prosperity and sustainable development. Zambia aggressively pursued this strategy until the 1980s when the wind of change under the guise of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) blew across the continent. The main thrust of these programmes focused on macro policy development, building market oriented and local governance systems, rolling back the state and reducing the size and influence of centralized development administration. Therefore, in the1980s and early 1990s the emphasis of development in Africa shifted to embrace local participation and empowerment issues leading to local governance. Decentralization was adopted as a vehicle for achieving local governance.

The institutional framework for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS) was formally adopted by the Government in 2004 and sets out the institutional basis for the National Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (NRWSSP) 2006-2015. The framework devolves water supply and sanitation functions to local authorities in accordance with the 1991 Local Government Act, the 1994 National Water Policy, the 1997 Water and Sanitation Act, and the Decentralization Policy of 2002. As part of the launch of the Water and Sanitation Sector Reforms in 1993 and the adoption of the National Water Policy in 1994 the Government of the Republic of Zambia adopted the Water, Sanitation and Health\Hygiene Education (WASHE) strategy for the delivery of all rural water supply and sanitation services. It is a people-oriented, inter-sectoral and integrated approach to planning, implementation, operation and maintenance (MLGH, 2007).

The need for multi-sectoralism

The basic principles of the WASHE approach can be summarised as:

a) Integration of water, sanitation and health/hygiene education (giving all three components equal emphasis and priority);
b) Promotion of collaboration and coordination among actors;
c) Promotion of community management of water supply and sanitation, and promotion of gender equity in the management of facilities

This strategy requires a wide range of skills from different disciplines. Table 1 shows the relevant skills required for implementation of the WASHE strategy and the institutions or departments where these skills currently lie at district level.

Table 1. Multi-sectoral skill requirements for WASHE strategy

WASHE strategy component	Required skill areas	Where skills are currently housed
Water	Drilling and equipping of boreholes Geophysical analysis Water resources management Improvement of traditional water sources Environmental protection	Ministry of Energy & water Development (MEWD) (DWA) Environmental Council of Zambia (ECZ) Forestry Department Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MACO) Ministry of Health (MOH)
Sanitation	Promotion of sanitation activities Building of sanitation facilities Solid waste management Drainage	Ministry of Health (MOH) Ministry of Education (MOE) Environmental Council of Zambia (ECZ) Ministry of Local Government & Housing (MLGH) - Local Council
Hygiene Education	Community mobilisation Hygiene promotion Life skills	Ministry of Community Development & Social Services (MCDSS) Ministry of Health (MOH) Ministry of Education (MOE)

Due to this spread of skill-sets and roles and responsibilities, the main elements of the WASHE strategy are:

- Establishment and development of inter-sectoral district committees popularly known as District WASHE Committees or D-WASHEs; and
- Formation and training of village water committees, called Village WASHE Committees of V-WASHEs.

Under this institutional framework, the need for a multi-sectoral and integrated approach to the provision of rural water and sanitation cannot be over-emphasized. In principle, the technical departments of the relevant line ministries, the local authority, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs), by virtue of their membership of the District Development Coordination Committee (DDCC) and the District WASHE subcommittee, work together to ensure that there is harmonization of plans for water and sanitation provision and that the required skills are brought together in a co-ordinated way.

Challenges

Decentralization in Zambia is at a stage where the policy and implementation action plans are in place to inform implementation of the process. However, although progress has been made, decentralization is still in its infancy. Its ultimate aim is to devolve authority to local councils for all the functions of the line ministry departments at the district level and for Government at the national level to concentrate on policy guidelines and technical oversight. While the local authorities have the mandate for the provision rural water and sanitation, currently they do not have the required capacity or expertise. One of the most important

challenges to decentralized service delivery is the slow pace at which decentralization is moving. Since the 1980s there has been a gradual but consistent transfer of structures and responsibilities to local authorities while reducing financial allocations and at the same time reducing the local authorities' revenue base. For example, in 1991 houses belonging to local authorities were sold to sitting tenants through a presidential directive at low and un-economical rates. One observer remarked that the list of these changes read "like a manual on how to destroy local government" (Chitembo, 2003, p.2). For instance, the government formerly provided substantial grants to local councils, but according to one recent estimate, these transfers now accounted for less than 5% of total local council revenue (Msichili, 2003). As another commentator observes, "decentralization may turn out to be more the exercise of central control than the granting of autonomy to local institutions" (Munyonyo, 1999, p.3).

Although the decentralization action plan outlines the process, it is doubtful that the line ministries have any intentions of moving this forward. There has only been one meeting of the National Development Coordination Committee (NDCC), probably because the first meeting highlighted contentious issues related in large part to decentralization. Those at the top of line ministries are not willing to relinquish direct control of their district structures which devolution proposes. Under devolution, the local authority through the local public service commission would become the employer of the key line ministry departments in the district. These would make them became departments or units within the local authority and financing modalities would have to change from passing through the line ministries to being disbursed directly from the Ministry of Finance to the local authorities. This prospect is not popular as it is perceived to have the effect of reducing the power and influence of national level ministries.

Even secondment of staff from line ministry departments to the council generally only works where their there is an external agency funding the position/s or where the respective line ministry can recall the staff member at any time as they remain the primary employer. The real problem from the perspective of devolution is that about 80% of staff in the district work for line ministry departments where they are charged with the implementation of the strategic plans of their ministries. Currently the line ministries have decentralized by de-concentration and hence the first call of duty of staff is to their respective line ministry departments. The lack of legal obligation on their part to report to the district council results in a laissez-faire attitude towards their duties. This makes sector coordination at the district level a challenging task. In the past an attempt to remedy the anomaly at least in part was tried but could not last. The 1980 Decentralization Act linked departmental heads as members of the local council, but the 1991 Local Government Act did away with that structure. Figure 1 shows the institutional set-up of decentralization by de-concentrated sector ministries.

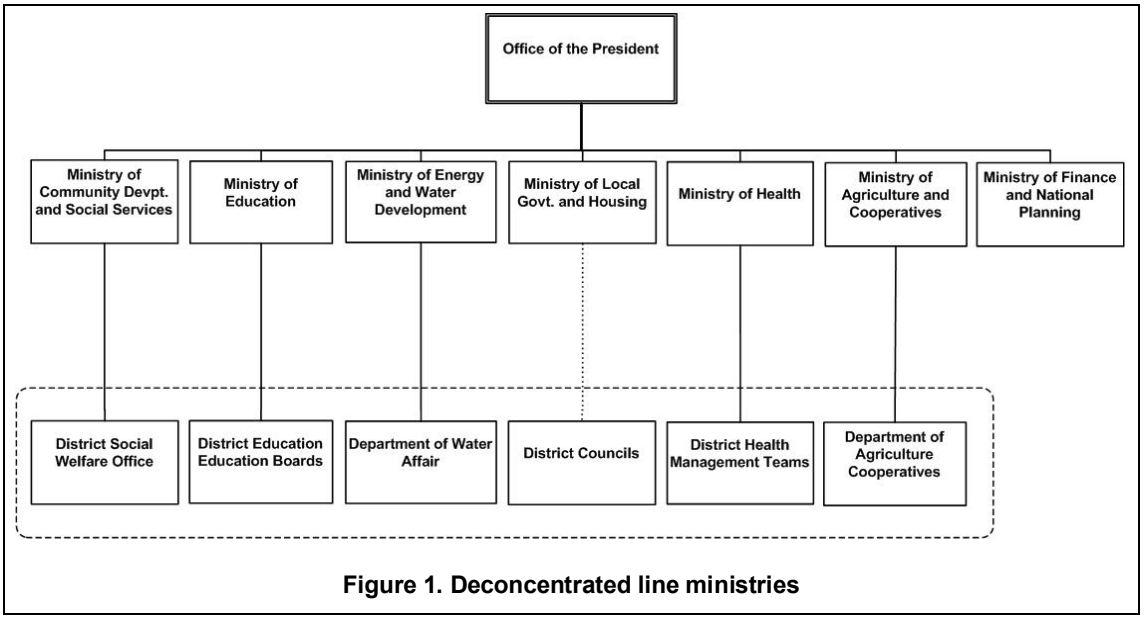

Figure 1. Deconcentrated line ministries

Other than the cost issue of decentralization, the slow process towards decentralization by devolution probably indicates that there is more need for political will at the highest level if this goal is to be realised. Line ministries will continue to resist unless they are forced from above. True devolution is the probably the

only way to truly bring about participation of local communities in their development agenda; however, at present it is largely rhetoric.

While the DDCC and the D-WASHE provide some platform for information sharing and collective planning, the fundamental issue is rather the present ambiguity enshrined in system. The staff in the line ministry departments have job descriptions which are tied to a set of tasks which take precedence over their roles to perform tasks set for them by the D-WASHE committee. Additionally the struggle for alignment plans is another draw back. The ideal when devolution is completed is for the various departments within the local authority to follow one plan and for each technical department to buy into components of this for implementation. However, this is not currently the case. It is even more difficult when it comes to committing funds for water and sanitation in a coherent and cost effective manner, if at all. The general scenario in the district is that commitment to the programme is strong only when an external agency provides funding for water and sanitation. Water and sanitation service delivery, and the D-WASHE committees, tend to die off when there is no donor funding. This brings to question the commitment of line ministry departments to water and sanitation provision. This problem is further compounded by the fact that the NRWSSP advocates for the abandonment of D-WASHE committees in the interest of multi-sectoral local authorities. This is based on idealized rhetoric rather than practical implementation and may actually serve to make water and sanitation delivery at district even worse.

It can be argued that decentralization in its present form is not multi-sectoral, at least in the manner that it fails to work smoothly to deliver the mandate of the local authority to provide water supply, sanitation and hygiene services. While there are many advantages of a multi-sectoral approach to service provision, there is need for an institutional structure that formalizes the relationships in a legal sense.

Evidence from other countries which are further ahead in the decentralization process suggests that there is concern by central government that too much power has been given to the local authorities. In Uganda, local authorities employ local civil servants and raise revenue on behalf of Government retaining 65% for local development and there mandates should be free of political interference. This has culminated in a growing tendency to re-centralize the appointment of top district officials with the ultimate aim of reducing the influence of local district leaders, this development was bemoaned by Jaberi Bidandi, the former Ugandan Minister responsible for Local Government, “as a big threat to the system” of local governance (New Vision, 2008).

Conclusions

Decentralization in Zambia currently remains a far-fetched prospect. Ministerial power to control financial resources is among the most important perceived benefits of centralization. The motivation for this in national line ministries is the political control and manipulation of the lower levels. In order to reverse this powerful driver massive political will from the highest level is required, as well as a constitution that provides a platform to guide the practice. There is obviously a cost to all this, ranging from lack of capacity of local governments to manage the recruitment and supervision of technical staff to poor financial management, and poor management of district tendering procedures, to name but a few. Rather than shy away from decentralization, the central government should endeavour to build capacity in the districts if it is to have any chance to succeed. These constraints should be considered as part of the implementation process. In the present form decentralization will never become a reality and delivery of services such as water and sanitation will remain inefficient and ineffective for a long time to come. If the political will to drive decentralization does not materialize at presidential level then a return to centralization with multi-sectoral co-ordination between relevant line ministries at national level may actually result in improved services to the rural poor.

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