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Towards a Sector-wide Framework for Capacity Development: the 'Training For Real' Project for Uganda Water Sector

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Abstract

The human resources are the most important resources for delivering Millennium Development Goals. This fact was recognised by policy makers in the Uganda water and sanitation sector, who, with the support of their development partners commissioned the 'Training For Real' (TFR) action research project. The TFR project aimed at motivating human resource development managers in the sector and training providers to be responsive to the demands of employers and make professional development of water and sanitation sector staff more relevant. The activities of the TFR project comprised of setting up a sector HRD thematic group and enhancing their professional capacities; research into current practices of capacity development; survey of perceived impact of past training activities; organising forums that brought together key stakeholders in the sector with academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); piloting innovative methods of delivering capacity development; and support stakeholder institutions in information and knowledge management. These activities have paved way for a sector-wide framework for human resource development and capacity building, and this fits well with the trend existing in the Uganda water/sanitation sector of adopting Sector Wide Approaches (SWAs) in management of the programmes.

Keywords

Capacity development, Sector Wide Approaches; Water /Sanitation Sector; Developing countries

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

A total of 191 United Nations member states participated in the Millennium Summit in September 2000, and agreed to eight time-bound and measurable Millennium Development Goals (MDG) aimed at reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women by 2015. One of the targets set under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to reduce by half, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. The most recent assessment by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme estimates that by the year 2004, about 1069 and 2612 million people, the majority of whom live in developing country, lack access to safe water and basic sanitation, respectively (WHO and UNICEF, 2006). The target for improved water supply and sanitation is overarching. Access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation does not only enhance environmental integrity; it is also critical to achieving the UN's overarching goal of poverty eradication, and the Millennium targets for health, education, and promotion of gender equality and women empowerment.

WHO estimated that about US \$13.7 billion is required to achieve the MDG target for access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation using minimum cost solutions (Evans, Hutton & Haller, 2004). Besides the enormity of resources required, a key issue area is how the available resources can best be utilised to achieve an optimum outcome. To utilise the available resources most optimally, policy makers in some developing countries have adopted sector-wide approaches

(SWAps) to managing water and sanitation programmes. SWAps emerged in the 1990s as a means of streamlining development assistance by improving donor coordination, reducing the fragmentation of efforts and moving towards broader government-formulated policy frameworks and implementation mechanisms (Land et al, 2003). SWAps recognise that partners in government, the donor community, NGOs and the private sector have to work together, each partner making a different but essential contribution to the sector's goals. Uganda is one of the forerunning countries to adopt SWAps to managing water and sanitation sector programmes and activities.

SWAps in Uganda has been largely successful in some situations such as allocating investments funds, determining annual focus areas and measuring sector-wide performance. However, SWAps have not yet been applied to getting the most from capacity development budgets and activities that underpin effective human resource management in the sector. Yet the human resources are a critical factor for the successful implementation of sector programmes. Financial resources injected in the water/sanitation sector will not make the required impact unless there is a right mix of human resources in terms of numbers, attitude, focus, skills and knowledge. Furthermore, there is need to ensure that the capacity of staff in the sector is continuously being upgraded in response to the changing needs and expectations of the customers.

Capacity development has been defined in various ways. Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and UNDP defined capacity development in a similar manner as a process by which individuals, groups, institutions, organisations and societies enhance their abilities to identify, define and deal with development needs and challenges in a broad context and sustainable manner (Lusthaus, Adrien and Perstinger, 1999). Policy makers and managers in the Uganda water and sanitation sector identified gaps in their capacity development activities and commissioned an action research project to identify better practices. The 'Training For Real' project was commissioned in 2003, with an overarching goal of reducing the gap between the skills and knowledge of water sector professionals and the demands of sector employers.

Conception and purpose of 'Training For Real' (TFR) project

The TFR project was an offshoot of the 'Learning and Teaching Network', an international research project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), undertaken by Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) of Loughborough University in 2002/2003, which sought to enhance the development of professionals in the water and sanitation sector by improving dialogue between employers and training providers in developing countries. Uganda was one of the six countries in which a scoping study for the 'Learning and Teaching Network' project was implemented. DFID Uganda Office became interested in the findings of the scoping study, and through the Uganda Water and Sanitation Sector Joint Partnership Fund (JPF), requested WEDC to develop a more detailed research proposal for Uganda along the theme of the 'Learning and Teaching Network' project, leading to the conception of the 'Training For Real' Project.

A key finding from the 'Learning and Teaching Network' project was that there was hardly any formal collaboration between policy makers and managers of the water/sanitation sector institutions with the academics from the faculties in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In response to this reality, the purpose of the TFR project was to motivate HRD and training providers to be responsive to the demands of employers so that professional development of water and sanitation sector staff is more relevant. The activities of project were meant to pave way for a sector-wide framework for human resource development and capacity building, and this fitted well with the trend existing in the Uganda water/sanitation sector of adopting SWAps in the management of the programmes.

METHODS AND ACTIVITIES

The TFR project started in mid-2003 with a six-month inception phase that undertook initial consultations and institutional mapping, enabled the stakeholders to buy into the project objectives, and ensured that institutional reporting and review mechanisms are in place. The inception phase was carried out using a variety of methods to gather information and engage with stakeholders such as interviews, meetings, job analyses, discussions and field visits. Other methods used to gather information were review of policy documents and other grey literature, and direct observation and inspection of outputs.

To carry out the project activities, the main phase of the project also used a mixture of methods that included the following: (i) review of policy documents and other departmental grey literature in key sector departments and organisations, and HEIs; (ii) survey questionnaires sent to staff in key sector organisations and sample local government units; (iii) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders; (iv) focus group discussions among key staff; (v) group interviews with relevant stakeholders; (vi) observation of the working environment; (vii) paired interviews between stakeholders from the water sector and higher education institutions; (viii) coaching and mentoring of key HRD staff; (ix) forums involving stakeholders from key sector organisations and HEIs; (x) meetings and seminars; (xi) talks from guest speakers; (xii) distance learning modules (mentored and non-mentored); and (xiii) panel discussions. Activities carried out during the 1½ years' main phase of the project are classified under the following main sub-sections.

Developing the capacity of HRD managers in the sector

The inception phase findings pointed to gaps in the capacity of HRD managers in the sector to adequately identify the training and capacity development needs of the staff in their respective organisations. To gain a deeper understanding of existing gaps, interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with key HRD staff in the sector, and their working environments observed, early on in the process. Key staff in Directorate of Water Development (lead organisation for rural water development and water resources management), National Water and Sewerage Corporation (lead organisation providing urban water and sewerage services), Environmental Health Division (the lead organisation for environmental sanitation services) and the Uganda Water and Sanitation NGO Network (the umbrella organisation for civil society organisations involved in the water and sanitation sector activities) were engaged in the study that aimed at inquiring about their skills, knowledge, experience, attitude, motivation and enabling environment. The results of this study were used to develop a continuing professional development (CPD) module for the HRD key staff in the sector organisations.

Subsequently, a Water and Sanitation Sector HRD Thematic Group was set up, composed of staff responsible for training and capacity building in the afore-mentioned key sector organisations. The specific objective of forming this discussion group was to develop the members' capacities, through individual study of course materials, supplemented by facilitator-mentored series of special interest meetings, leading to improved planning for capacity building programmes and activities, and creating an enabling environment for development of a sector-wide capacity building framework.

Mentoring of the group was achieved through partnership with the Human Resource Managers' Association of Uganda and Partners for Water and Sanitation (PAWS). PAWS is an initiative set up by the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society in the UK for the purpose of transferring useable knowledge to low-income countries. At the same time, members of the HRD thematic group were encouraged and sponsored to subscribe to the Human Resource Managers'

Association of Uganda and the Uganda Management Forum.

Research into Training and Capacity Building Practices

Several research activities were commissioned to gain a deeper understanding of the current training and capacity building activities carried out in the sector organisations, as well as what training and capacity building courses HEI currently offer, with specific reference to the water and sanitation sector organisations. The units of analysis were the water/sanitation sector organisations providing services, and academic departments of HEIs that train professionals absorbed by the sector, including engineers, technicians, community development officers, health officers, social scientists, economists and HRD managers. The research method adopted for the study was paired interviews in which key stakeholder(s) from the 'supply' institution (one of the HEIs) worked with a TFR research assistant to interview a group of stakeholders from the 'demand' institution (one of the water and sanitation sector organisations) in their working environment and vice versa.

An interview guide was developed, pre-tested and piloted prior to administering it to stakeholders in the participating organisations and HEIs. As curtain raisers, both the 'demand' and 'supply' side institutions were asked about their strategic orientation, core competencies and organisational structure. Other key questions posed to 'demand' institutions sought to find out about (i) categories and facilitators of existing capacity development activities, (ii) existing linkages with HEIs, (iii) course evaluation procedures, and (iv) perceived barriers to effective capacity development. On the other hand, HEIs were asked about (i) what capacity development courses they currently deliver to the sector organisations and what the sources of funding for these courses are; (ii) whether there are any collaborations with other HEIs; (iv) the methods of course delivery; and (v) the processes for developing, modifying and evaluating the courses.

Eight water/sanitation sector organisations and ten departments from HEIs took part in the fieldwork. A total of 16 staff from the water/sanitation sector, and 19 from HEIs participated in the interviews. Stakeholders in most organisations preferred to have group, rather than individual interviews. Prior the date set for the interview, the interview guide was thoroughly discussed by a TFR research assistant and the key stakeholder taking on the role of an interviewer. Understanding the objectives and rubric of the study in advance was necessary to enable the stakeholder to take a leading role in the interview process. Involving the stakeholders in the interviews provided added value: professionals from the 'demand' side institutions observed and appreciated the working environment of academics in HEIs, and vice versa.

Survey of perceived impact of past capacity building activities

Fieldwork carried out during the inception phase of the Uganda TFR project in 2003 identified a significant gap between the skills, knowledge and competence required of professionals in the water and sanitation on the one hand, and what the training institutions deliver to their graduates. To close this gap, the sector provides various capacity building courses to the staff. However, evidence from the inception phase fieldwork pointed to the fact that existing capacity building approaches are largely haphazard, disjointed and do not adequately or strategically reflect the sector's ambitious objectives and targets. To explore this issue further, one of the activities under the project was a retrospective survey of staff perceptions on training and capacity building activities carried out in the last four years. This study targeted sector staff who directly interface with the households in the rural and urban areas.

The fieldwork was carried out in four purposefully selected district headquarters and one urban area. For rural services, the study involved district officers in charge of staff development, water services, public health, environmental sanitation services for households, community development,

and school sanitation. The urban water utility was represented by the Area Engineer, The Personnel Officer, the Water Engineer and the Sewerage Engineer. Perceptions on effectiveness of previous training and capacity building activities were elicited using self-administered questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and review of departmental documents.

Forums

Key stakeholders from the water/sanitation sector organisations and HEIs were brought together in several forums organised as part of the TFR project activities. Besides being the main reporting method on project progress throughout the year, the forums were an integral part of the project process. Communication was in various directions: the project team could report progress to the wider stakeholder group, whilst stakeholders could give feedback on the direction of the project. There was also peer communication, with stakeholders from different parts of the water/sanitation capacity building sub-sector reporting their activities and sharing best practice. The forums were attended on various occasions by political leaders and key policy makers such as the Minister of Water and Environment, the Permanent Secretary, the Director of Water Development Directorate, and the Commissioner of Planning and Quality Assurance. The activities carried out under each of the four forums, which were held in 2005, are summarised in the following paragraphs. The views coming out of the discussion sessions in all these forums were carried forward for refinement at a planning meetings held in December 2005 and March 2006.

Forum 1. This forum introduced the project to a wider audience, and presented findings from the inception phase. A case study from the private sector showed how skills development is managed, and a lecture on information and knowledge management was delivered. The forum was closed by the Hon Minister of Water, who led the stakeholders in signing a large board to demonstrate their commitment to the 'Training For Real' values.

Forum 2. Results of the research activities were presented at this forum, and Nsamizi Institute of Social Development, one of the HEIs provided a case study of conducting an effective training needs analysis. Experience on the pilot distance learning modules on report writing skills and consultancy skills were presented by the participating stakeholders. After a tailored lecture on information management, the Training For Real website was launched.

Forum 3. Good practices were presented from all the participating HEIs on matching demand with supply. This was followed by presentations on accreditation by Uganda Institution of Professional Engineers (UIPE) and from a visiting professor from Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM), UK. The second day of the forum had presentations and discussions from both the demand and supply sides on how the supply institutions could become more responsive to the needs of the sector.

Forum 4 - 31 WEDC Conference TFR Specialist Session. This was one-day international symposium in which 13 papers were presented on the aspects of training and capacity building in the water and sanitation sector. Thereafter, a discussion session looked at (i) how training/capacity development activities could be coordinated; (ii) how could minimum criteria be set for management of workshops; (iii) how innovative capacity development methods could be scaled up; (iv) what mechanisms could be set up to increase involvement of HEIs in sector training activities; and (v) what mechanisms can enhance information and knowledge.

Piloting Innovative methods of training and capacity building

The inception phase recognised the need to improve the range and delivery of training activities in practical terms, in addition to the discussion on policy matters. Delivery of distance learning

modules in report writing skills and consultancy skills was piloted as part of the project activities. Local tutors and a mentor were appointed to facilitate these modules in April 2005. A total of twenty stakeholders completed the courses. Another innovative capacity building delivery method tried out was conducting a panel discussion on the topical issue of trans-boundary water negotiations under the Nile Basin Authority initiative, which was held during Forum 2.

In a related activity, stakeholders from supply and demand institutions were commissioned to carry out pilot capacity needs assessments with a view of learning from the process. Altogether five studies were conducted in topics that were identified during the inception phase as requiring skills development. The topics were (i) negotiation skills in the water and sanitation sector; (ii) partnerships between NGOs, communities and the private sector; (iii) design, operation and maintenance of valley tanks and dams; (iv) information needs for decentralised water resource management, and (v) wastewater treatment technical management issues. These studies came up with findings on the level of skills and knowledge required, and recommended the mode of delivery of the training course to reduce the knowledge gaps.

Information and Knowledge Management Support

A baseline survey was carried out on the information and knowledge management position of the four collaborating HEIs. The information audit revealed the following deficiencies in the libraries and/or resource centres of these institutions: (i) a lack of Internet access in all but two institutions; (ii) lack of effective searching skills; (iii) inadequate pedagogical skills among junior cadres of staff; (iv) a serious lack of new monographs; and (v) the lack of cutting edge information as serial subscriptions have been suspended.

A three-pronged approach was adopted to alleviate these deficiencies within the available time and logistical resources. Firstly, lectures on specific themes on information and knowledge management were prepared and presented during the forums. The concepts of knowledge and information management were introduced during the first forum, the second forum covered the theme of internet searching, and the third forum dealt with issues of quality assurance. Secondly, information materials were provided to the participating HEIs and resource centres of key sector organisations. Thirdly, pilot projects were carried out with two key HEIs to improve information management in their institutions. The features of the book bank system in an academic faculty of one of the HEIs were upgraded by creating a searchable on-line database. For the second institute, a process was established to improve documentation of key procedures and processes, in readiness for the computerisation project currently underway at that institute.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

These findings have been drawn from the TFR final project report (Kayaga et al, 2006). It was evident from the study that there was no common understanding among the key sector stakeholders of what capacity development means. There is need to sensitize the sector professionals that capacity development is much more than training, and involves a strategic and holistic view of the development of sector workforce and the capacity of its different stakeholders such as communities, support agencies, contractors, consultants, NGOs and local government representatives. Capacity development is an ongoing process for all stakeholders, in order to adequately respond to the ever changing operating environment.

The study found that a sector-wide strategy and approach to HRD was lacking; good practice was not shared and resources were inequitably distributed. Barriers to performance existed at various stages of the project cycle, but these gaps were not being prioritised. Not all the stakeholders had a

voice in decision making regarding HRD direction. This was particularly true for the large number of smaller institutions that probably constituted the majority of people working in the sector. Some sector organisations had good practice in HRD, contrasting with an obvious lack of capacity in other organisations. There was a general willingness to work as partners, but duplication and repetition were common issues, perhaps due to lack of communication and knowledge sharing, rather than explicit competition.

Funding did not appear to be a limiting factor at the time, but allocation of the funds did not reflect sector-wide needs or goals. It was estimated that about 17% of the budget in the Directorate of Water Development, the leading sector organisation was allocated for capacity-building activities in the financial year 2003/2004. This amount was higher than what was allocated for two combined divisions of water-for-production and water resources management. At the time of the study, there was hardly any flow of feed back information about HRD investment to inform future resource allocations or the development of operational frameworks. Capacity building activities were not aligned along organisational objectives or sector goals. Training needs assessments were not being carried out in the sector. Indicators of performance and therefore impact in HRD were generally lacking. Training and capacity building initiatives and activities were largely ad-hoc and disjointed. Different sections and divisions in the same departments operated their own training budgets and had uncoordinated training plans.

Research carried out on current capacity building activities found that there were no formalised links between supply and demand institutions. Although there were quite a number of continuous professional development courses being offered to staff in the sector, most HEIs had not developed the capacity to deliver tailor-made short courses to the sector. Most HEIs perceived their core remit as delivering learning and teaching programmes that result into attainment of formal academic qualifications. Even then, these formal education programs were perceived by the employers in the water and sanitation sector as being supply-driven: there was minimal involvement of the 'supply' institutions in the process of developing and modifying the courses. Academics in the Higher Education Institutions identified the barriers to being responsive to the needs of the sector as mainly inadequate resources, a high student/lecturer ratio, and poor enabling environment.

The main findings of the retrospective survey in five purposefully selected districts were that most training conducted was in form of short-duration workshops (67%), although stakeholders placed more value on longer certificated courses. The respondents thought that some of the training topics covered deserved a longer period of time for them to achieve the required impact. Furthermore, the training and capacity building activities in the districts were not harmonised, and often led to repetitive training for some staff, at the expense of others. Training activities were perceived as counter-productive by some staff, and there was no corporate memory to keep concepts gained from training.

Through discussions in the series of the TRF forums, a consensus was generated that a sector-wide capacity building strategy was needed to provide direction and coordination, in line with other sector-wide approaches adopted in areas such as investment finance and performance measurement. The sector-wide strategy would set out training priorities for the sector, and inform organisational capacity building strategies, which would in turn lead to better utilisation of human and financial resources. It was agreed in a planning working held in December 2005 that a capacity-building coordination framework be developed, to include key stakeholders from 'demand' and 'supply' institutions. A follow-up stakeholder meeting held in March 2006 appointed members of the Water/Sanitation Sector Training/Capacity Building Coordination Committee, who were to carry forward the process of developing a sector-wide strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

Policy makers in developing countries face an enormous challenge of uplifting a big section of their national populations from abject poverty, and hence achieve the MDGs. Programmes and activities in the water and sanitation sector are strategic, as access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation does not only enhance environmental integrity; it is also critical to achieving the UN's overarching goal of poverty eradication, and the Millennium targets for health, education, and promotion of gender equality and women empowerment. Human resources are a vital component in the planning and delivery of services. However, since they are less easy to quantify than other tangible resources, human resources are rarely prioritised for strategic planning. Financial and other resources provided to the sector will not make the required impact unless there is a right mix of human resources in terms of numbers, attitude, focus, skills and knowledge. There is need to extend strategic planning approaches to capacity development, coordinate human resource development for cost-effectiveness, and exploit the synergy that exists between different organisations, if sector professionals have to achieve the sector goals with available limited resources.

The various activities undertaken as part of the TFR Project laid firm ground for development of a sector-wide HRD strategy for Uganda water and sanitation sector. The action research identified gaps and engaged the key stakeholders in the sector in activities that sought to improve the effectiveness of the capacity building programmes. One key immediate outcome of this project was the sensitisation of key stakeholders that sector-wide coordination of capacity building activities is crucial, and this could best be achieved through development of a sector-wide strategy. A strategy for human resource development will only be effective, cost-efficient and meaningful if the relevant HEIs are fully engaged in its formulation and implementation. To that effect, the collaboration between the relevant higher education institutions (supply) and sector organisations needs to be strengthened.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This action research was sponsored by the UK Department of International Development as part of their a study for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID. The authors are grateful for the efforts of members of the local research team, as well as the stakeholders in the Uganda Water and Sanitation Sector and HEIs who participated in the study.

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Paper presented at the IWA International Conference on water management & technologies applications for developing countries, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 14-16 May 2007

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