

A lesson in listening

by Siri Melchior-Tellier

Water and sanitation projects are often a community's introduction to NGOs and extension workers. They should also be an entry point for community-led development.

ON THE INDONESIAN ISLAND of Timor, people in four villages were installing new handpumps as part of a drinking-water and sanitation project. Throughout the project, the collaborating agencies — the Ministry of Health; the PKK, an NGO that is active nationwide; local university groups; and PROWESS-UNDP — were naturally watching closely to see how the project was going.

Eight months after operations began, researchers returned to the villages to learn as much from the people as possible about whether and why (or why not) the project was succeeding, if the water was being used, whether there were health benefits, whether women's water-carrying burdens were reduced, etc. To the researchers' surprise, villagers were taking almost as much time as before to collect water, but they were also using more of it. The reason came out when, no matter what they were asked, people started talking about tomatoes and vegetables.

'Are your pumps being used?'

'Oh yes, we use them to water vegetables.'

'Do you have income?'

'Of course, we sell vegetables.'

'What is your opinion of the role of women in the village.'

'Why, they are very important people — they grow vegetables.'

For the researchers, this was a lesson in listening, in hearing what was actually being said and why, without filtering out the unexpected; pump installers and health ministries do not normally ask about or get excited about tomatoes.

More important still, the tomatoes stand for — no, the tomatoes are — what people needed and wanted most. The question for project design, which comes back again and again in participatory development, is clear: how does one ensure that the people's own interests and motivation continues to be the foundation of and the force behind community action?

Action not words

'Water and sanitation are the concern of women' is something we hear increasingly from engineers (often

men) working in the international aid projects in this field. They say this because they have observed at least some of the following phenomena:

- Women (and to a lesser extent children) are the ones who are most involved in drawing water for household use, transporting it home, storing it until it is used, and using it to cook, clean, wash, and water household animals. The women's knowledge about water sources, their quality and reliability, the restrictions and advantages of their use, and acceptable storage methods, may be a matter of life and death to them and their families.

- In Kenya, it is estimated that 3 million women spend an average

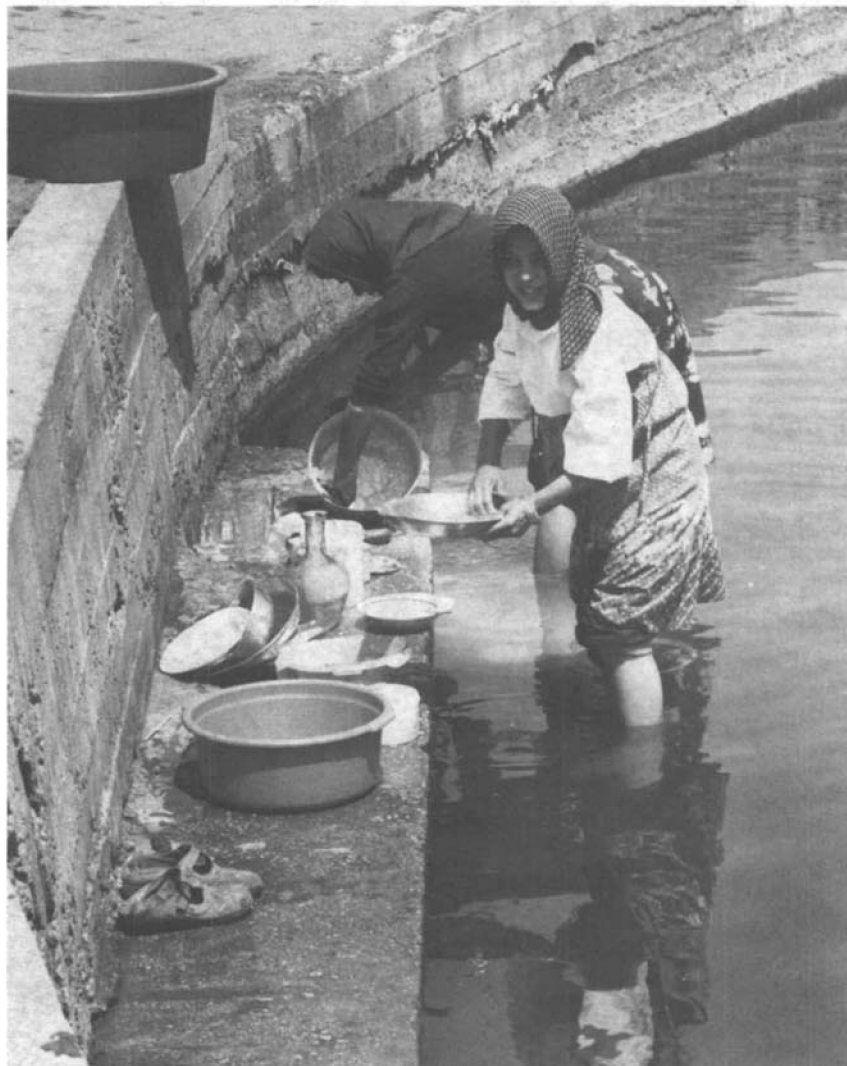
of three hours a day collecting water; in other areas of the world, it may be as high as 6 to 8 hours.

- The energy expended on this task may consume a third of the women's daily caloric intake — not negligible in populations where malnutrition is already a threat.

- Apart from various infectious diseases associated with poor water quality, trauma induced by carrying heavy loads is common.

- Women are generally the main guardians of household cleanliness and the caretakers of the sick. (Frequently they are also responsible for funerals and rites of mourning). They are the principal teachers of hygiene behaviour to their children. To quote Dr R. Rugunda, former Minister of Health of Uganda: 'Women are the front-line health workers'.

Men, women, and children in various societies usually have specific and different customs related to cleanliness



UNICEF

Women's knowledge about water sources may be a matter of life and death to them and their families.

and defecation. Frequently, children's faeces are considered harmless and their defecation anywhere therefore acceptable. But the fact is that millions of children die every year because faeces are not disposed of in a sanitary way. At the other extreme, women's defecation practices are often surrounded by more shame than men's. Frequently they must relieve themselves in secrecy, for example at night, a difficult feat in areas with endemic diarrhoea, especially if defecation has to be done in fields far away from the home. In some societies a husband may not even be aware of his wife's problems in this regard, as it is not considered appropriate for her to discuss them with him.

Responsibilities are also traditionally separate, but complementary. Women and men in developing countries sometimes have separate incomes, savings, and financial responsibilities. Women may, for example, be responsible for buying or producing food, and men for the children's education.

There is a growing number of female-headed households; most countries fall in the range of 10 to 40 per cent. In many countries women may be unable to own land (to install a pump on) and have no access to credit

(for purchase or maintenance facilities). Finally, almost universally, by practice or by law, women have less decision-making power than men, both in the private and the public spheres.

Women are not a special interest group in the field of water and sanitation; they are the mainstream interest group. They need to be both partners and beneficiaries. Unfortunately these facts are as yet rarely translated into action in terms of projects. Why is this?

Diversity within communities

One problem with community participation efforts has in the past been that they often reflected only a very narrow cross-section of the community — namely, most participants were men.

Communities have been taken as a homogeneous mass: if you talk to the headman, you know what the community wants, needs, and can do. Yet within a given community there may be many different groups — old/young, rich/poor, Hindu/Muslim, men/women/children — each with different priorities, vulnerabilities, and talents.

Participation has been seen as a contribution of labour, ideas, and materials. It should be a partnership

for decisions such as what type of facility, when, where, and whether or not to participate in the project in the first place, and for choosing community representatives.

'Decision' is the operative word. With some education, many people realize that water tends to be a woman's task. It may take more effort to demonstrate that her task might also involve decision-making outside the home, but it's worth it.

A broad range of methodologies is currently used to improve community involvement in water and sanitation projects. A didactic approach might be a health education programme where villagers are informed about health hazards and taught to wash their hands after defecation.

Another approach is social marketing. This basically relies on extensive research into the beneficiaries' views, beliefs, and skills, and then an education programme is tailored to overcome any obstacles.

A participatory approach has a different basic objective: to strengthen and enlist local problem-solving and decision-making capability, both individual and communal. In turn, the communities use this skill to sustain and benefit more from development activities, such as water and sanitation.

UNICEF/Bruce Thomas



There is a growing number of female-headed households, but in many countries women may be unable to own land and have no access to credit.

PROWESS's experience has been primarily with, and focuses on, the participatory approach.

Problems

The first key to successful community participation is to avoid illogical project plans in the first place. Some projects justify their existence simply because 80 per cent of diseases are caused by unsafe water and inadequate sanitation, so more installations must be needed. There is no proof that this simple assertion is correct; in fact it is clear that installing facilities will not bring any benefits unless they are effectively maintained and used.

A project where the project management has developed and chosen the technology and taken all the decisions cannot expect villagers to be keen to contribute cash towards the cost of the project. This would be ambitious even if the application methodologies had been developed and tested during the initial phases.

Projects often incorporate community participation (or more often contribution) without specifying how this is going to be achieved. Frequently this responsibility is passed on to 'the government'.

Sometimes the clear necessity of women's involvement is acknowledged, but often the activities planned to fulfil this need exclude decision-making and marginalize the women.

Solutions

Objective indicators of success and the relationship of activities to objectives should be analysed. Analysing sustainability, for example, naturally brings up questions regarding women's role as a way to reach the objectives.

A project, a project plan, and those who formulate the plan are closely connected. In the past, plans were often formulated by one or more technical specialists. Increasingly, organizations attempt to bring applications specialists into the process, but they are often not brought in until a later stage, after major decisions have been taken. We have to recognize that there is a communication gap. To build up 'creative tension' rather than 'abrasive tension' between the two, time is needed. Our experience shows this happens more often when the applications specialists are there from the beginning and become part of normal working patterns.

Be specific. It can be argued that it is even more difficult to plan community participation precisely than to plan the construction of a water system.



Sometimes the clear necessity of women's involvement is acknowledged, but often the activities planned to fulfill this need exclude decision-making, and marginalize the women.

Many aspects need to be left undefined, but one can at least furnish the means to develop answers and act on them. A project document can:

- identify institutions and staff to undertake these activities;
- plan a sizeable budget for them;
- leave sufficient time for the activities to get going before installation begins; and
- establish a work plan which discusses how 'software' and 'hardware' can be woven together.

If possible, describe the types of decisions in which communities have a role, for example will communities be able to decide whether they wish to participate? Will women be involved? Who will give the green light for the drilling of a well — the engineer, the community extension workers, or the villagers? In addition, methodologies

for hard-to-reach groups, such as women, can be described or the situation can at least be analysed.

Each approach has merits and costs, and these depend on the task at hand; often a combination of approaches may be desirable. They are all intended to reduce the gap between the 'supply' of services presented by governments, donors, etc., and the 'demand' for services by the intended beneficiaries.

As one PROWESS project manager noted: 'Communities always have the last word: if they don't like the project, they won't use it.'

Work locally

Development implies change, including some social change. It is naive and counterproductive, however, to think that participatory approaches can or



Take special notice of children — they are important partners too.

will be allowed to play a social awakening role in a society which is not ready for them.

Our experience is that many measures can be taken to maximize benefits and minimize disadvantages. One is to work as much as possible with local organizations and expertise. Such local expertise will generally choose to (and has long experience in) approaching communities through established channels and traditional, often male, leaders. When such approaches are used, we find that men are generally very supportive of the women, hold them in great esteem, and may even follow their example (especially if income is produced). Another approach which we have encouraged is training and consultations that bring together highly heterogeneous groups (e.g. several levels of local hierarchy, staff of different ministries). One of the most striking pieces of feedback we have had is that field practitioners are very pleased with the training of heterogeneous groups; it may mean some adjustments in the early stages, but ultimately leads to better complementarity and mutual respect.

In the long run, this institution-building — where the different parties, including communities, function better together — is perhaps one of the best aspects of the participatory process.

We also find that children are often disregarded in projects. Although this article is about women, the village reality is that women and children are too closely related to be separated. Yet the children's situation is special.

For one thing, we find children are very knowledgeable (after all, they are their mother's helpers in this field). They know about water sources, health habits and health risks in the environment. They are often franker than adults, sometimes have more time and

are more open to innovations. Projects often have a special impact on them — e.g. if new water sources are closer, the children may be sent for water instead of the women. Attendance at school is of course affected by the children's duties. The conclusion is simply this: take special notice of children — they are important partners too.

Appropriate staff

Water and sanitation projects are traditionally undertaken by organizations such as the Ministry of Public Works or of Water, or by a technical department within the Ministry of Health. Staff have generally been engineers and technicians, and field staff have been few — only those needed for drilling boreholes, constructing latrines and so forth.

On the other hand, for community participation, you need more field staff and staff trained in skills related to community participation rather than in 'technical' skills.

This is an absolutely critical question, once you try to implement activities on a large scale. Enthusiastic personnel can be found and, if necessary, trained for small-scale activities. What happens when you upgrade?

In our experience, there are several major possibilities, none of which involves hiring new staff:

- Train the existing extension workers (say, in the Ministry of Water Development) in participatory techniques.
- Identify and link with other government agencies that have a stronger field presence, and whose extension workers have community-level experience, e.g. the Ministry of Community Development or Health Education, or primary

health care workers in the Ministry of Health. This can be bureaucratically difficult, but we have a number of examples where it works.

- If such a link-up of organizations is difficult, some governments actually place responsibility for community water and sanitation with a ministry or agency which already has a strong field presence (such as the Rural Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture).
- Identify and link with NGOs that have grassroots experience.

Which of these models is appropriate obviously depends on the situation (and is not necessarily a matter of choice, at least not for outsiders). For example, there is a question of the scale and stage of the programme: is it a small-scale pilot or test, a sub-national 'dress rehearsal' under replicable conditions, or a full-blown national programme?

This is particularly important with respect to NGOs. Right now, there is justifiable interest in further developing the link between governments and NGOs. Most countries have literally thousands of NGOs with unparalleled experience in community participation, and they are potentially very helpful. An examination should be made, however, of what their most useful role can be and this depends on the country situation: many countries' NGOs are particularly helpful in developing methodologies at the pilot or test level, but do not have the capacity for large-scale action. For that scale of action, the crucial question of institutional responsibility must be faced as early as possible.

So this is where the tomatoes come in again, demonstrating a form of 'speaking out'. In the Indonesian case described earlier, tomatoes irrigated and grown by women were seen in the community as the main positive outcome of a water-supply handpump project. Women had 'spoken out' and 'taken decisions' not by words but by actions, by their actual use of water.

So my opinion is that if you want to see the real successes, then you should count tomatoes as well as pumps. Water and sanitation projects will be more successful, and be seen as more successful, if they are seen and planned as entry points for development — meaning development in the directions that communities themselves define and seek. ●

Siri Melchior-Tellier was Programme Manager of PROWESS, and is now Head of International Development with the Danish Red Cross, PO Box 2600, DK-2100, Copenhagen O, Denmark.