Scaling up the community management of rural water supply

Ton Schouten and Patrick Moriarty

Community management must mature from being an NGO- or donor-driven model, based on time-bound pilot projects. Instead, under the leadership of government, it must encompass scaled-up delivery of water supply services, with community institutions governing and operating their systems, supported by local and national government structures.

Most rural water supply systems are delivered through one-off, time-bound projects. In addition to providing hardware, most of these projects aim to develop the institutions and capacities through which the community can manage the new system by itself once the project is over and the implementing agency has left. This is referred to as community management (CM).

Some communities succeed; many others struggle or fail. The causes of failure are multiple. Some come from within the community: lack of community cohesion; lack of management skills; unrepresentative water committees; technology that overstretches capacities or ability to pay; lost capacity due to death or migration; weak demand caused by alternative, traditional water sources; financial problems, etc. But external factors play a role as well: a non-existent or weak supply chain; a lack of standardized technologies; poor design and construction faults; interfering politicians and source depletion.

From projects to sustainable services

More than a decade of experience with CM has clearly demonstrated that, as long as new or upgraded water supplies are provided by stand-alone projects, it will be impossible to achieve sustainability. To achieve sustainability, projects should be part of a system of service delivery that encompasses planning, constructing and sustaining water supplies. Such a service delivery system is directed by policies that explain and regulate the type and level of service – quality, quantity, reliability – as well as how, for whom and by whom the service is delivered and financed. This system must also be backed by legislation and managed by capable institutions at all levels.

Implementing projects in isolation from a properly thought-out system of service delivery is thus counterproductive. In seeking to satisfy short-term demand for increased coverage, project teams actually divert attention away from the core challenge of establishing the institutional mechanisms for indefinitely sustainable water supply services.

Benchmarks

As it applies to rural water supply, we understand 'scaling up' to imply replacing the current project-based model of water-supply delivery with a service-based model. In such a model, rural communities and their systems are no longer viewed in isolation, but have a recognized, formalized and clearly defined role within a policy and institutional environment for service delivery at scale.

Scaling up is an easy term to use, but much more difficult to pin down. Can replicating a successful model from one to 10 to 100 communities be considered scaling up? Perhaps, but if there are 10 000 communities in the country it could still be insignificant in its impact. It is therefore useful to define some benchmarks for a successfully scaled-up service. These include:[1]

- An established (or implemented) water-supply service (quantity, quality, reliability) is sustainable – technically, institutionally, indefinitely. Most importantly, eventual replacement or expansion of individual systems, or their components, should be deliverable within the existing service delivery model.
- Equity considerations demand that a successful service targets 100 per cent of the population within a service delivery area. A service that reliably and sustainably meets the needs of 80 per cent of the population yet leaves the poorest 20 per cent unserved cannot be considered a success.
- The resource base must be sustainable – that is, the service should not fail at any time due to failure of the water resource, e.g. due to drought, excessive water table draw-down or streams drying up.

These benchmarks consciously try to move decision makers away from the short term, system- and project-focused approach towards a service delivery approach. The inclusion of the concept of a 'service area' thus provides an entry point to addressing scale.

CM within a supportive enabling environment

Over the past 10–15 years many governments have taken up CM, or management at the lowest possible

level, as the basis for their rural water supply policies. At the same time, wider decentralization processes have meant that water supply has increasingly become the responsibility of local government. Shifting responsibility to this decentralized 'intermediate level' means that this becomes the level at which scaling up must start.

Community management is the most appropriate model for scaled-up service provision in rural areas. We believe that, in rural areas at least, CM is the best model for scaled-up service delivery, for reasons of flexibility and suitability (or fit). In a nutshell, because poor rural communities live in such diverse and rapidly changing physical and social environments, it is impossible to devise a single blueprint that meets the needs of all. Only by supporting locally determined, tailor-made solutions can the right match between costs and benefits, resources and needs, be made.

Support for the CM model is also grounded in a wider empowerment and rights-based approach that sees communities as partners, invests in their assets and capabilities and increases their access to opportunities.[2] Empowerment, however, should be more than project-based community participation. As part of a scaled-up service delivery, empowerment of communities should be shaped and formalized in policies and institutional structures. For that it is necessary to define CM more clearly.

Community management is all about control. This means the ability to make strategic decisions about how a system is designed, implemented and managed; to select service levels, set tariffs; and, if desired, to employ someone else to look after operation and maintenance. This could also be called the governance function of a water service delivery system. Provision is the other function: operation, maintenance, construction and planning. To link CM to institutional structures and make it more effective, governance functions must be separated from provision functions – as in the South African Water Services Act.[3] The governance function is exercised by the water committee, which should be supported by the country's wider governance framework. Provision functions can be based in the community but may also be exercised by private or public sector actors from outside the community.

The community's governance and provision functions must be defined by and framed in national policies and institutional frameworks. Support to the community is needed.

This approach to CM, with its emphasis on clear legal recognition of the community's governance function, gives meaning to empowerment and offers opportunities to communities, private and public actors in the rural arena. Such an approach has a long history in countries such as Switzerland[4] and the USA[5] where community institutions are an integral part of the service delivery system. CM is therefore not a second-best management option for poor developing countries.

Communities cannot do it all by themselves. Critically, as mentioned already, communities need support. Providing this means developing the capacity at the intermediate level to back-stop communities in governance functions and to support communities, or others, in provision functions. This capacity has to be developed in a range of intermediate-level actors: de-concentrated offices of line ministries; private consultants and contractors; CBOs; local NGOs; professional associations; banks; courts; training institutions. It includes the ability to design and construct systems; maintain communities' management and technical skills; audit and provide financial support to water committees; supply spare parts; support monitoring systems. It can even mean operating the entire system under an elected board of management.

In South Africa, community water supplies like this are governed by the local communities

Local contexts will determine the role of different actors: existing institutions, policy frameworks, level of decentralization and, most of all, community capacity. In all cases (local) government is the preferred actor to drive the process, because of its mandate. It is therefore the capacity of local government – to plan, facilitate, monitor and oversee – that is most critical for scaled-up service delivery. Developing this capacity quickly and effectively is, we would suggest, the central challenge to achieving the MDGs in rural water supply.

Achieving flexibility, sharing knowledge

As already emphasized, scaling up is about sustainability (as well as increased coverage) and sustainability is about flexibility and ensuring appropriate fit. For flexibility, the experience and knowledge of all actors are needed, from community to government, from private to public. Flexible solutions are best identified by taking a learning approach, where key stakeholders search for and test mechanisms and institutions suited to their region together. Achieving flexibility requires a policy and legislative framework that allows experimentation and modification, and an institutional environment that rewards initiative.

Scaling up may also shake the status quo in a country's water supply structures. Interests may be threatened. International agencies may see their independence threatened and may be reluctant to work towards harmonization of CM approaches; private business may be uprooted because the balance may (temporarily) shift from construction to institution and capacity building; government staff may feel bypassed when responsibilities are transferred to communities; local politicians may see their vote-buying practices blocked; and communities may be resistant to accepting decision-making responsibilities. In the process of going to scale, in one way or another, different interests must be negotiated.

Creating the platforms for experimenting, learning and negotiating is

critical. Government leadership is of crucial importance in this process. It must be credible and capable not only of being accepted as a facilitator of learning and negotiation, but also as an ultimate decision maker. If creating intermediate-level capacity is the first challenge to achieving the MDGs, then developing the capacities of inter-national- and national-level agencies to support and facilitate the process of learning and negotiation is the second.

References

1 adapted from Schouten, T. and P. Moriarty (2003) *Community Water, Community Management: From System to Service in Rural Areas,* London, ITDG Publishing and Delft, The Netherlands, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre.

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4 Saladin, M. (2002) 'Wittenbach: where a club for a few evolved into a co-opera-tive for all', SKAT Foundation, St Gallen, Switzerland, http://www.skat-foundation.org/publications/pdf/Wittenbach.pdf

5 See Gasteyer article in this issue.

About the authors

Patrick Moriarty is a hydrologist and Ton Schouten is a rural sociologist both working for IRC, leading a programme on scaling up funded by the Dutch Government. Advocacy, case studies, publications, web presence, action research, workshops and training are part of this programme. Most important is the facilitation of a thematic group 'Scaling up com-munity management of rural water supply' – a platform for sharing and deepening conceptual understanding about scaling up, for advocacy and joint action. Members are: SKAT, WaterAid, Plan, WEDC, WSSCC, EHP, UNDP, Umgeni Water, Streams and a number of consultants. This *Waterline*s special is a thematic group output.

web**watch**

This edition of *Waterlines* has been written by members of the Thematic Group on Scaling Up, which is led by the IRC. The main organizations involved in this group follow:

■ **Thematic Group on Scaling Up**
The website provides details of the aims and objectives of the group, news about ongoing activities and links to members of the group and key documents on the subject. It also includes a new Community of Practice on Scaling Up, which will provide authoritative and rapid guidance to those seeking assistance, and will become operational on 1 January 2005. Documentation on scaling up will remain on the IRC site, see below.
www2.irc.nl/manage/facil/scalingup.html

■ **IRC International Centre for Water and Sanitation**
The IRC website offers access to new pages on the theme of scaling up community-managed rural water supply as well as many reports and docu-ments on the subject.
www.irc.nl/

■ **Environmental Health Project (EHP)**
The EHP is a USAID-funded initiative that began a second five-year contract in June 1999. EHP is a leading agency for issues relating to water supply, sanitation and environmental health, with a particular emphasis on the Latin American region. This website provides access to many reports, including recent work on institutional support mechanisms.
www.ehproject.org

■ **WaterAid**
WaterAid works in partnership with local organizations in 15 countries in Africa and Asia, and works to influence governments' water and sanitation policies. Its site has information on a range of research activities, which cur-rently include work on financing of the MDGs, as well as access to reports and country programme profiles.
www.wateraid.org.uk

■ **Plan International**
Plan is an international organization working with children and their families in communities in 45 countries, and includes water and environmental sani-tation as one of its core operational activities. The website offers contact details and information about operational programmes around the world.
www.plan-international.org

■ **Skat Foundation**
Skat Foundation and Skat Consulting promote professional knowledge shar-ing and the provision of advisory services in a range of thematic areas including water supply and environmental sanitation.
www.skat.ch

■ **Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP)**
The WSP is an international partnership of leading development agencies concerned with water and sanitation services for the poor. The website offers a comprehensive introduction to many topics, including scaling up and demand-responsive approaches; it also contains a useful on-line documen-tation centre.
www.wsp.org

■ **Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)**
The WSSCC was formed at the end of the United Nations International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade (1981–90) to provide a framework for collaboration between sector agencies. Their website includes publications, information on Vision 21 principles (a framework for interventions in the water and sanitation sector), programme activities of the Council as a whole and links to other initiatives.
www.wsscc.org/

■ **Institute of Water and Environment, Cranfield University**
The Institute is concerned internationally with water for people, for food pro-duction and for the environment. Its website includes an introduction to the activities of the Community Water Supply and Sanitation Team and includes information on MSc courses, PhD projects and research, training and consultancy activities. There is access to full reports and brochures.
www.silsoe.cranfield.ac.uk/iwe/

Compiled by Peter Ryan, WaterAid, UK