

# COMMUNITY MANAGED WATER PROJECTS – LIFE SKILLS AND POSITIVE SPIN-OFF EFFECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The appropriateness of the community management approach to manage rural water systems in a sustainable way is debated. One of its attributes is the strong capacity building focus that it has brought into development work. Through managing a water project, community members are exposed to new experiences such as cooperation, democracy, gender balance and working service delivery systems. In addition, the strong focus on accounting, budgeting, transparency and reporting gives the committee members life skills that have positive spin-off effects. This paper will illustrate this based on experiences from long-term support to the management of water supply systems in Uganda. It will argue that although this may not be the most efficient form of ensuring sustainable services, it has positive effects that are difficult to measure but can have an important impact on the development of the community as a whole.

## INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades rural water projects in developing countries have mostly been implemented by NGOs and governments under the community management approach (Lockwood et al 2010). This approach gives the community the responsibility to keep the water system running. Despite the effort to build capacities in the communities so that they are able to do this, it is now more and more recognised that communities are not able to do it on their own (Lockwood et al 2010). They need some kind of continuous support, both in terms of advice and financial help to cover replacement costs. Some governments and organisations even start to experiment with different operations and maintenance approaches, such as contracting to the private sector. Costs and effectiveness of different approaches are now compared. An important element, however, that it is difficult to express in numbers and values is the positive spin-off effect that the community management approach has. Through learning about management, accountability and cooperation, water committee members are exposed to experiences that help

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them develop their own business, and eventually help developing the community as a whole. This paper will discuss these positive effects further, by drawing on experiences from Uganda.

## THE CAPACITY OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

For a long time, the community management approach has advocated for putting more responsibility on the communities, and giving them more power to shape their own development. However, after studying rural communities in practice, it becomes clear that communities can only take on responsibilities if they are capacitated to do so (Bolt and Fonseca 2001). In many cases, communities feel overwhelmed with their task, and become frustrated. An assumption that has contributed to the excessive reliability on communities is that with initial training when the water infrastructure is constructed, community members will be able to continue on their own. This assumption does not take into account the complexity of managing a water system, and the basic notions that need to be in place in order to benefit fully from the training. Whereas the formal education system normally gives us 10-13 years of schooling, it is assumed that almost illiterate people can grasp concepts of accounting, calculation, report writing, budgeting and planning after only a few days training. It is clear that learning to manage a water system is a process that takes much more time than that.

In order to understand the need for capacity building, it is important first to understand the level of exposure that typical rural communities have. Levels of education vary from community to community, but in addition to a lack of formal education (literacy and numeracy), there are a number of other basic notions that do not correspond to “western” thinking and therefore influence the capacity to manage a water system. For example, in fishing communities in Uganda, people live from one day to another. Since there has been war, conflict and also natural disasters, there is little point of investing in a firm house, or even maintain the house, since it can be destroyed any time. This results in an attitude that completely contradicts the savings-investment thinking that is the basis of capitalism and free-market economy and that has driven development in western countries for the past centuries. For a person in such a village, it does not make sense to fix the house before it completely breaks down. This same thinking is applied to the water pump.

A second attitude that characterises the fishing villages in Uganda is the need to fight for own survival. Resources are scarce and income needs to be maximised to ensure survival for the family. People are therefore not used to voluntary work, or to do something for the common good. Obviously, if people only think about themselves, the whole idea of public goods disappears because people will only exploit the system for their own gain. It is therefore not easy to convince them that working as a volunteer on the water committee will benefit the village as a whole, and eventually themselves. This is linked to the fact that most inhabitants of poor fishing villages lack exposure to working businesses or working government services. If you have never visited a restaurant yourself and experienced good food and service, it is extremely difficult to grasp the idea of customer service in general. Ideas such as keeping the customers happy so that they buy more water are therefore hard to understand. These are notions that are more than logical to a person from

the city or from a western country, but that are completely new to rural communities.

This does not mean that communities are not able to take on the responsibility of managing a water service, on the contrary. It just means that the capacity building effort needs to be adapted to the existing level of education and exposure in each village. Actually, managing a water system can provide life skills that have positive side-effects, like shown by the case study below.

## FROM WATER PROJECT TO CHICKEN FARM

Katunguru is a fishing village in western Uganda. A water project was installed in 2004, and through the implementing organisation, Fontes Foundation, a “community management plus” (Moriarty and Verdemato 2010) system was installed. This means that the community is responsible for operations and maintenance, but that the organisation gives long-term support, continuous follow up, capacity building and help to raise extra funds in case of large breakdowns. In this case, the NGO is acting as the institutional support mechanism. The small piped water system with using simple water treatment from a surface source is managed by a voluntary water committee, however, technicians and tap-attendants are paid an allowance at the end of the month. Water is sold at public taps per 20 litre container. The tasks of the committee are to read meters, collect money from tap attendants, buy fuel, chemicals, cover small maintenance costs and pay salaries at the end of the month. The water project has now been running for more than six years managed by the community with support from Fontes Foundation. There have been challenging times, and a number of committee members have been exchanged. Most problems encountered were in relation to lack of communication within the committee, lack of communication between the committee and other stakeholders, mistrust, lack of willingness to cooperate and political interference. Therefore, in addition to putting emphasis on accounting, transparency measures, reporting and improving communication, Fontes Foundation concentrated the follow up around showing the community members how to work together and find solutions on their own.

In 2008, one technician from the water system and seven other community members started a group to establish a chicken farm. Each member contributed some money and a chicken house was constructed and the first chicks bought. The members used their knowledge from the water project to pool resources and carry out an investment, something unusual for a fishing community. In addition, they opened a bank account and started banking profits from the egg sales every month, and the profit is in the end divided between the members after expenses are paid. The chicken farm is still running, and has since expanded to several buildings, housing more than 100 hens at a time. This example shows how people, with their experience from managing the water system, managed to use the knowledge and experience in a way to improve their own living situation.

## LIFE SKILLS

In effect, it was not only the ability to make calculations, budgets and accounting that made the people start the chicken farm, but the realisation that it is possible to work in a group and that it is worth it to invest in a business that can give revenues in future. In short, it is long-term thinking and cooperation. These skills can also be called “life skills” because in a development country setting, they are the main elements to make an improvement of livelihoods possible. In summary, there are three main categories of skills that a water project can teach community members, and that can have positive impacts on local businesses;

1. Transparency
2. Cooperation
3. Actual skills of accounting, management etc.

## TRANSPARENCY

Like already explained above, a problem in fishing communities is the need to fight for own survival. This does not only mean that sometimes a gain is at the expense of somebody else, but also that dishonest practices are carried out, either because of need or greed. In addition, corruption is deeply entrenched down to community level in many developing countries, and most people have experiences from corrupt local governments. It is therefore natural for people to mistrust anyone who handles their money and to immediately suspect that money has been stolen. An important lesson from the water project is that there are safeguards and routines to provide transparency and in this way show people proof that money has actually not been misused. In the Katunguru project, there are a number of such routines such as signing sheets every time money is handed over from one person to another, a pumping book to record use of fuel and chemicals, water meters to make sure tap-attendants hand over all the money to the committee and so on. If good project accounts are kept, it is easy to look at the numbers in case of any doubt. In addition, committee members are encouraged to publicly display monthly accounts at the Sub-County office. When committee members learn these routines and how allegations can easily be proven right or wrong, they not only learn to trust each other but also how to prevent corruption to take place in their own businesses or their daily life. Moreover, they learn that a service can be run in a clean way, something that is already a revelation for many. This attitude can increase their demands for accountability from local leaders and politicians, and work against corruption from a grassroots level.

## COOPERATION

Cooperation starts with the way committees are elected. For example, for some communities it is difficult to understand why leaders cannot appoint their friends to be on the committee. Holding “real” democratic elections teaches the community an important lesson, especially in places where political elections are always affected by irregularities. Once the committee has been put together, one of the main challenges is to make them come to meetings. Only after poor communication has caused many problems, committee members start to understand the importance of monthly meetings where issues and reports are communicated. In the beginning it is important with the mobilisation by an outside organisation. After a while, though,

community members start to understand how issues are clarified during meetings, and how the most complicated problems can be solved by inviting the conflicting parties to a meeting. This teaches people an important lesson about conflict resolution. In addition, the work on the committee shows members how it is possible to work together to achieve a common goal, in this case to keep water running in the community. Commonly, committee members sit for periods of two years at a time. This means that after six years, a number of people in the community have spent some time on the committee. Having this turnover makes the capacity building effort bigger for Fontes Foundation because new members have to be trained, however, a general increase in knowledge has been observed over the years. Committee members also comment that it gives them more credit in the community, because more people know how challenging the task actually is.

## ACTUAL SKILLS

In addition to the life skills acquired when experiencing the work on the committee and the various problems encountered along the way, Fontes Foundation also continuously trains committee members in reporting, good management, leadership, accounting, basic mathematics, budgeting, fund raising, community mobilisation and technical skills. It has been emphasised that all committee members should know all skills, so that they can more easily understand and control what individual members such as the treasurer or the technician is doing. These skills are general and can easily be transferred to small businesses such as shops or, like in the example of Katunguru, a chicken farm.

It is important to mention that the positive effects mentioned above are not automatic, but influence the communities in different ways, in different time-frames and with different magnitude. Not all communities are receptive for life skills development, and the way how the capacity building is carried out is crucial and needs to be adapted to the level and need of each community.

## MEASURING LIFE SKILLS

The example of Katunguru shows how important life skills acquired through the work on the water project can have a positive impact on the development of the community. This is an important side-effect of the community management (or community management plus) approach that is often not taken into account. One of the reasons is that it is extremely difficult to quantify. Governments, such as the Government of Uganda, increasingly measure management and functionality indicators, such as down-time of a system, or active water committees through number of active members or number of meetings (MWE 2009). Hygiene and sanitation indicators not only measure infrastructure but increasingly also behavioural change. However, there is no practice of measuring the positive spin-off effects of skills acquired through managing a water system. When collecting baseline data for a water project, indicators about health and behaviour are prioritised. Without a baseline it is extremely difficult to later measure any change, unless it is such a concrete example as in Katunguru. A different problem is that there can be other factors influencing business development as well, and it is difficult to create a causal link to the water project. However, these positive effects should be taken into

account, especially when discussing new approaches to operation and maintenance of rural water systems. Although a private sector or government approach might be more cost-effective, the opportunity to develop life skills might be lost.

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