

Sharing Experiences in Implementing a Community Based Water Supply Schemes in Post conflict Areas in Sri Lanka

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Abstract/Summary

The Government of Sri Lanka was provided with financial assistance from AusAid (Australian Agency for International Development) to implement a community driven project focused on provision of water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) promotion in areas affected by the protracted conflict that lasted nearly three decades. The areas that were mainly affected was the Northern and the Eastern parts of Sri Lanka, where following the conclusion of the confrontations in 2009, the gradual resettlement displaced persons was taking place. The implementing agency was the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) of the Government of Sri Lanka (functioning under the Ministry of Water Supply) the lead organisation for pipe borne water supply in the country. The project known as the North East Province Water and Sanitation Project (NEP-WASH) was a pilot project administered by the World Bank and was to be completed within a period of two years (2011-2012). The project sought to merge infrastructure development with hygiene behavioural change in communities affected by conflict. The project was a major success story not only in terms of achieving its primary development of objectives provision of water supply, sanitation and hygiene education, but also by mainstreaming the concepts of participatory development, gender equity, social inclusion and integration. The experience gained by the project (which was implemented in ten communities) was the basis for the design of the Rural Water Supply Component of a wider World Bank financed Water Supply and Sanitation Improvement Project currently being implemented. This paper discusses the experience in conducting community WASH projects in the specific context of post-conflict resettlement in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Sustained access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation facilities has been a serious problem for communities in isolated rural areas of the country. Despite significant achievements in coverage at the national level, the numbers drop dramatically for rural areas particularly in the provision of pipe borne water supply. Often these communities represent the poorest and the most marginalized and vulnerable households in the country, and the added burden of the opportunity cost of fetching water is something these communities could ill afford.

Provision of infrastructure alone was not going to be sufficient to ensure the desired behavioural changes due the affected citizens not having exposure to normal communal living because of living in a war situation that entrenched unsanitary practices.

The beneficiary communities were resettled after a long period of internal displacement and showed limited characteristics of belonging to a community. Many of them had left their native places as children and lived in temporary shelters throughout their lives. Villagers, some of whom now heads of families, have not lived with one another as members of the same community although they hailed from the same village before the conflict. Many of the young male adults had lost their lives in the conflict and the older people who had knowledge of their ancestry have passed on. This resulted in the very challenging task of implementing community driven development project in communities that had not only being traumatized, but highly fragmented.

The villagers were in a state of desperation. Faced with a range of complex and intractable challenges due to the prolonged conflict that resulted in underinvestment in essential social and physical infrastructure in the area. People had little opportunity to engage in meaningful livelihood activities. The local and international NGOs operating in the area provided free offerings for their sustenance; and the people were getting used to receiving handouts and not engaging in productive work. The situation had escalated to a state where they were displaying signs suffering from a dependency syndrome.

The villagers gave WASH activities little priority. During the initial stages of project implementation, the NWSDB project team had limited access to the communities due to the presence of land mines and severely damaged access roads, which were overgrown with shrubs. Access to routine services, facilities and supplies was difficult. The houses that were damaged were either being reconstructed or had been abandoned.

Context, aims and activities undertaken

The project faced many challenges in the community mobilization process as different ethnic and religious communities showed different attitudes and cultural behaviour towards community activities and the priorities of WASH. Even within the members of the same community, they displayed differences in attitudes and interest. They carried the remains of different cultural and contextual settings that prevailed during their displacement; that included living in other districts, provinces or even countries.

The Project Team had to approach each and every community and their subsections with a strategy unique to each engagement. Suitable community facilitators were mobilized who had first hand understanding of these communities; often educated young persons from the community who have had some opportunity to live a relatively “normal” life during the conflict and returned back to their original villages. The Project Team believed that if somebody from their own community who well understood their state of mind was to be the facilitator, then the mobilization process would be more real. Therefore, the strategy was to involve these young adults and older school-going children within the community to approach their elders and to begin to instil a sense of hope. As the messages were being relayed through their own people, the elders began to warm up to the changing social dynamics.

According to Herald Vervoorn - ZOA Refugee Care, 2003-2006, Most families do not even have a private well. Due to the conflict and displacements toilets were damaged or families have never been able to build a toilet, while they had no income and there was no cement. In certain districts only a small percentage of the population has a real toilet, the others have to use a pit, corner of their compound or go to the sea or jungle.

Main Challenges and Concerns Addressed:

Lack of knowledge regarding the connection between water and health: Although lack of water is generally experienced by people living in water-scarce environments, the connection between water and health outcomes is not well understood by all. Often reference is made to the past without recognizing the changes that have taken place in the interim. The perception that the forefathers used the same source of water is taken for granted for continuing with the same sources and practices. Poor people are often victims of WASH related diseases and suffer economic and social losses as a result. Where “old habits die hard”, concerted efforts for information, education and communication is capable of making and sustaining the desired behavioural changes. The NEP-WASH pilot project conducted awareness programmes for all sections of the communities with targeted programmes identifying the differing needs of the women and the girl child as well as men and boys.

Community participation: Community driven development approach lay emphasis on community participation from setting objectives, planning, mobilization, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and subsequent operation and maintenance. In the context of resettlement where people are busy with establishing their livelihoods or even the resettlement process still ongoing, it is a challenge to obtain community participation as normally expected elsewhere. In many cases the people are more concerned

with establishing the boundaries of their dwellings that is difficult to identify due to the long period of abandonment. In some communities the old leadership is non-existent due to migration or death during the conflict. The dispersed families who lived among their relatives have not only have new additions to their families who are strangers to normal way of life, but also have been exposed to extreme experiences of an armed conflict. In most cases, several village communities have to depend on one water source for a new water supply scheme. In such situations, organizing people into community action is fraught with extraordinary difficulties.

Gender sensitivity and vulnerability: Women play a significant role in WASH related activities. Fetching water for household activities are socially perceived as the role of women or a girl-child. However, due to various socio-cultural reasons women’s concerns were not adequately heard and addressed. Only limited opportunities exist in the decision making process on matters that affect women the most. The situation is hard for the poorer of the poor, in particular, female heads of households.

Under the NEP-WASH Pilot Project, women responded positively to the opportunities afforded to them for decision making by assuming positions of responsibility within Water User Association (WUA). They functioned not only in the WUA management committees, but also as small group leaders in their respective neighbourhoods. However, despite cultural barriers standing in the way of women taking leadership; the mandatory requirements in the formation of the committees within the WUA helped them to assume a considerable role and their voices were heard.

Equity: The pilot project was implemented in the conflict affected villages consisting all major ethnic groups. This served to address the perception that NGO/international aid agencies work only for certain areas and for certain ethnic groups and exclude other communities that are were also conflict affected.

Social harmony: The project contributed positively to build social harmony. It brought the relatively isolated ethnic communities in the north and the east that did not have exposure to the outside world for at least one generation in contact with members of the other ethnic communities. New and valued relationships developed between the beneficiary communities on one part and the government officers, the contractor’s skilled worker force on the other. The beneficiaries who who provided unskilled labour to the contractors learned new skills and gained knowledge in addition to gaining much needed income. After the construction activities were over some people continued to work under the same contractor at other construction sites away from their own village.

At the community level, people of different villages got organized into one water service community. Exposure visits were made to well established community managed systems elsewhere and the participation in training programmes on operation and maintenance also contributed to harmonizing the relationships among different ethnic groups as well as the sub groups within the village. Traditional institutions that are important agents of social integration were rejuvenated in the process of project implementation. In some places the traditional religious institutions provided land for the project. There were instances of individuals offering private property for the project although the majority of the beneficiaries belong to other ethnic groups and religious faiths.

Main results and lessons learnt

The three focus areas of the project were to provide water supply, sanitation and hygiene education to conflict affected communities. The strategy was for the implementing agency to outsource the construction activities, to provide contractors and the technical supervision to be done by the national authorities. The participation of the beneficiary community through the WUAs formed for the purpose. The community water supply systems thus constructed serves a population of 8,359 in 2,059 households of which 354 households are female-headed. By way of 10 water supply subprojects, these communities are provided with 60-80lpcd; in most cases 24-hour supply. In addition, approximately 500 water sealed latrines were constructed to ensure total sanitation in the project areas.

The implementing agency (NWSDB) created an enabling environment for the WUA in terms of capacity enhancement of the key officials and the executive committee members in respect of the various project

activities and the operation and management functions of the water supply services following the subsequent handing over of the system. Institutional linkages were formed through the formal registration of the WUAs with the local government authorities and the divisional administrative system. Bank accounts were opened with the State Banks in the name of the WUAs to facilitate the activities initiated. The mechanism created at the national level – the Project Management Unit (PMU) – encouraged direct communication between the community and the NWSDB.

In respect of these activities the WUAs played a significant role in terms of assisting in the organization of all relevant activities. With respect to the water supply scheme they provided indigenous knowledge to help identification of potential water sources, collected the basic information for needs assessment and provided inputs and observations for planning. Thereafter, they assisted in the process of implementation including community mobilization for the purchase of water meters from suppliers through tender procedures and obtaining private land owners’ consent for pipe laying and land for construction sites through dialogue.

The projects were successful in mobilizing communities to assume responsibility for planning, implementing and managing both water supply and sanitation infrastructure. However, training and consolidation of community organizations takes a sustained effort to be successful in the longer term as WUAs need time to develop a full commitment and acquire experience to manage infrastructure. Community participation should begin as soon as subproject selection is completed. Identifying and engaging the community leaders and identifying O&M staff that would eventually manage the scheme early in the process allows for more time to better ready the community to confidently takeover the scheme once completed.

WUAs were often found to be reluctant to increase tariff resulting in them being unable to generate adequate revenues to properly account for O&M of the system; and particularly to save for future replacement costs. Sustained training on tariff design book keeping and revenue management to make tariffs sustainable and equitable needs to be done in addition to introducing a mandatory tariff structure indexed to key related inflation elements.

Conclusions and Recommendations

An important part of the strategy was the creation of a community organization to take charge of operation and management as well as partnering in the implementation. The experience shows the viability of public institutions in creating and supporting community level organizations. It also had an impact on the officers, the local political authorities as well as the contractors in terms of being supportive towards community management.

Outsourcing the construction work resulted in social harmony. The contractors were outsiders who had different cultural backgrounds. However, they were still welcome by the beneficiary communities. The contractors used the local labour and in the process of construction cultivated good relationships with each other. The local people also learned construction technology. After the construction work was complete some local labour chose to leave the village to work under the contractor at far away sites.

The project provided the community with opportunities for assuming leadership. Females took up leadership positions in the WUAs and in small groups. They were inspired by the mode of operation of the project and the prospects for enhanced welfare of their children and the establishment of home gardens that will enable them to prepare healthy food and earn an additional income. The women in particular, especially the female heads of households were reassured that this project gave them personal security and dignity.

"After four years of operation, our observations are that all of the 10 schemes are still in operation with communities handling their own maintenance.

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References

- (1) 2014, NEPWASH project completion report.
I interviewed the Water and Sanitation Specialist of the World Bank Colombo Eng. Samantha Wijesundera who confirmed the smooth functioning of the Kiliveddy and Navatcholai Schemes and the full beneficiary satisfaction and that Wijesundera stated that "to his knowledge all schemes constructed under the project function in the same manner".
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- (3) Implementation Status & Results ,Sri Lanka-LK North and East Pilot WASH for Post-Conflict Resettle (NEP WASH) (P126697)

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