

# Capacity building to couples for community and women empowerment and effective and efficient implementation of WASH approaches: The case of the Amhara Integrated Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Project, Ethiopia

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## Abstract/Summary

A water, sanitation & hygiene (WASH) project in the rural areas of Amhara Region, Ethiopia has introduced WASH specific capacity building activities for couples. The objective is to enhance active and meaningful participation of the community, and in particular of women, in WASH related activities. Capacity building elements included training sessions, an experience sharing visit to a gender sensitive community and monthly community discussions. As a result, changes of attitude and behaviour among the couples were observed. These went beyond pure WASH related aspects, including abolishment of domestic violence among the participating couples. Besides, the trained couples acted as promoters of good WASH practices. This piloted approach of capacity building of couples can bring significant changes in ensuring gender equality and in sustaining promoted WASH approaches in rural areas. The approaches applied in this project have been replicated in other two woredas / districts.

## Introduction

Ethiopia's coverage of clean water supply for urban areas was 93 %, while the access to potable water in rural areas is 49 % only (UNDP MDG Report 2014 Ethiopia). "Water and sanitation related diarrhoea is among the top three causes of all deaths in Ethiopia, and Amhara region is one of the regions that have faced this life threatening challenge for many years" (Tilahun et al, 2010). Although women and girls are primary users, providers and managers of water at their households, their access to information, training and decision making concerning WASH is very low. Women's multiple roles, responsibilities and heavy workloads leave them with no space for involvement in influential decision making related to the development of water and sanitation resources. (Ministry of Water Women's Affairs Department, 2005). The purpose of this short paper is to present capacity building activities with couples, which aim to improve the empowerment of women and the community through the effective and efficient implementation of WASH approaches. These capacity building activities have been implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation under its Amhara Integrated Rural WASH (AIRWASH) project.

## Context, aims and activities undertaken

Like in most villages of Amhara region, Ethiopia, women in Meha Kebele experienced drudgery of

fetching water for domestic purpose. They suffered from sanitation and hygiene related diseases, lived in a highly patriarchal society, and were subjected to painful domestic violence, which was very common among the villagers and often related to issues around water supply and management for household consumption. Hence, women suffered heavily due to issues related to clean and safe water supply as well as sanitation and hygiene. It was also their responsibility to care for their children, as well as for elderly people and other family members. The people of Meha Kebele were vulnerable to malaria and other water borne parasites and diseases like amoebas and typhoid.

Compared to unmarried women, married women, restricted by their husbands, have less access to information, regarding their rights to clean and safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene, and gender equality. Due to the traditional gender roles such as managing household chores, care for elder relatives and children, married women are often excluded from information, which occasionally may be passed on to them via their husbands. The root cause of this problem is patriarchy. As a result, married women do not understand their rights to WASH services, but consider them a gift from the government and/or other institutions. Subsequently, their participation in WASH activities is minimal. All these gender gaps identified in Meha village can be found in other villages of Amhara region as well as in most parts of Ethiopia.

Taking this contextual situation from Meha village into account, the objective of the AIRWASH project’s capacity building approach was to empower married women and to ensure the sustainability of WASH services through women’s active participation in planning and implementation and management of these services.

In order to create a conducive situation by changing the patriarchal attitude for married women who have relatively less access to information than unmarried women, and to empower women, the project opted for addressing with its capacity building efforts households rather than individuals and therefore invited couples, husbands and wives, to the various capacity building activities.

In consultation with the Woreda (district) and Kebele partners Meha village was selected and 26 couples, 3 single women and 3 facilitators were invited. This WASH capacity building was the first of its kind in the history of the Amhara region and consisted of training sessions, experience sharing, an exchange visit and community discussions. The events were arranged at times and places which were favoured by the women. The contents of the training included gender issues, gender mainstreaming in WASH, water points management, sanitation and hygiene issues, as well as social inclusion. Soon after the training, a one-day experience sharing visit was arranged to Awuramba, a nearby community well known in the region and even in the country for ensuring gender equality and social inclusion. This experience sharing visit enabled them to grasp lessons on gender equality issues, waste disposal and management, water structure management, improved latrine building, installation of hand washing facilities next to latrines, and on care and support to elderly and disabled people. Refresher trainings were given twice to these participants so as to strengthen their way of using and managing WASH services. There has been close monitoring and follow-up by the Woreda partners and the project staff.

Later, the project replicated the approach in two more villages in other Woredas. Unlike in Meha village, the project ensured that most villagers could attend the training, experience sharing and community discussion forums.

### **Main results and lessons learnt**

The chosen capacity building approach brought wives and husbands to the centre of an equally levelled playground to face and experience gender equality, sanitation and hygiene, and water point management equally side by side. It also disproved the belief women could get information only as a trickle via their husbands. Besides, the participants fully transferred the lessons learnt from the exchange visit into practice. They attended together community meetings which helped especially the women to develop self-confidence. As their self-confidence grew, their active involvement in all WASH activities increased

dramatically, which in the end resulted in increased ownership of WASH services.

At operational level, the results obtained are illustrated as follows: In collaboration with the community, three hand dug wells were built by the project. The villagers, especially the trained women fully engaged in site selection, technology choice, in light work during the construction of the water schemes and in mobilizing construction inputs such as sand, cement and gravel. Once the work was completed, women also contributed to operation and maintenance activities related to the newly constructed water points. Today, three of the five members of the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Committees (WASHCO) are women. The trainings and experience sharing visit helped them to enhance their participation at all levels of WASH activities and fully discharge the WASHCO's duties and responsibilities. Besides, the trained couples took a lead role in constructing pit latrines, involvement in household care and management, and in sharing household chores between husband and wife. Together with fellow villagers they constructed a community hall to conduct monthly meetings where they discussed issue like sanitation, hygiene, gender division of labour, and use and management of water schemes.

To summarise the results:

- Once shy, the women now are speaking about their rights to water, sanitation and hygiene, as their self-confidence increased. To mention a quote from one married woman: "Before the project's intervention to our village, we were ignorant on many things. Women suffered, they didn't know their rights and were unable to stand for their rights. But after the project's training, experience sharing visit and community discussions, everything has changed and we are leading a better and peaceful life thanks to the project."
- 26 trained women are able to get information through training, meetings and events in the same manner as their husbands;
- With regard to inclusiveness, 14 socially and economically disadvantaged persons (10 women;4 men) have got access to information on WASH practices and services;
- Once passive receivers, women have become active participants and actors regarding WASH activities, including participation in WASH committees. The trained persons participated in site selection, technology selection, participating in light works during construction, community audit and monthly community discussions. 9 women WASHCO members played an active role in mobilizing women to participate in the various WASH activities;
- The couple training helped men and women from 26 mixed households and 3 women headed households to understand gender division of labour as a socially constructed issue, which therefore can be changed. The training, the experience sharing visit to Awuramba community and community discussions enabled 26 men to participate in helping wives in household chores, such as fetching water from hand dug wells, caring children, cleaning activities which reduced the burden of women and girls. Women expressed their views freely in community meetings and decision making and mutual understanding at household level improved. Besides, domestic violence which was common before the training stopped (this data is gathered through discussions with model villagers);
- 150 households, who did not participate in this particular training, received training from the trained couples and started replicating good practices such as construction of pit latrines, but also setting up fuel saving stoves and improving management at household level.
- They started to make body washing/taking shower once a week at family level at 29 households.

Lessons learnt from this capacity building approach involving couples are:

- The training helped especially married women to get the same access to information, education and technology regarding WASH services as for their husbands; this was unusual and new, and enabled the women to develop self-confidence and increase their stake in WASH;

- As married women participated together with their husbands in this capacity building process, they together fully understood the advantages and disadvantages of sanitation and hygiene, and management of water points, which helped for effective and efficient implementation of the community's WASH activities;
- Couple capacity building interventions are best for men and women to understand traditional gender division of labour as a social construct, which can be changed through mutual decision making and respect at household level as well as through awareness raising at community level;
- From the planning of WASH services to the completion stage, the equal participation and contribution of women and men guaranteed the sustainability of the WASH services;
- To get women's active and full contribution for WASH activities in the village, taking into consideration time and places that suit women for each training, meetings and community discussions are essential.

Some challenges however remain. High levels of illiteracy that are prevalent in the villages and patriarchal attitudes of the community limited the pace of exercising the approach within a reasonable timeframe. Although continuous follow up, exchange visits and sensitization sessions made the approach a reality, problems occurred in the progress of the introduction and dissemination of the approach. Hence, continuous support and follow-up meetings, and community discussions are essential for the villagers to ensure sustainability of their achievements.

There are also issues and to some extent concerns when looking at the potential up scaling. The approach chosen was rather resource intensive (ETB 1200, equivalent to USD 55 per participant) with lots of meetings and exchanges, and it required well qualified staff as trainers and facilitators. While replicating it in two more villages, the costs came down to about ETB 1000 per trainee. Still, the amount is relatively high when looking at government resources. Therefore, it has to be seen to which extent these resources can be made available through the governmental WASH support structures and to which extent the required facilitation and training capacities can be built within the Government.

For the AIRWASH project, continuing close collaboration and partnership with the local government partners is mandatory in order to strengthen the approach, reducing costs and promoting its up scaling. Promotion of the approach will include the preparation of guidelines for the governmental staff at Woreda level as well as capacity building of these Woreda staff.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The capacity building approach whereby couples are given centre stage, and as demonstrated by the AIRWASH project in Ethiopia, broke the glass ceiling and brought the women as key WASH actors to the centre. The capacity building interventions enhanced women's knowledge about their rights to clean, safe and adequate water, improved sanitation and hygiene practices, water resource management, as well as gender equality and social equity. The representativeness of the village could serve as a basis to scale up the approach by others throughout the Amhara region as well as in other parts of Ethiopia. To disseminate this approach, the following recommendations to different actors are suggested:

#### **Government**

- Government WASH actors should endorse this practice and replicate it in other WASH activities implemented by the government and it should coordinate other NGOs to replicate the good practice.
- Government WASH actors should get involved in or at least follow up the further development of the approach.
- Government WASH actors should encourage stakeholders to adopt and clearly highlight the approach in annual rural WASH plans and its implementation.

### NGOs

- NGOs working in the WASH sector should replicate this good practice in order to ensure sustainability, gender equality and social development.

### AIRWASH Project / HELVETAS

- Should create awareness on the approach, both formally and informally.
- Should advocate the approach for scaling up at different levels.

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