



Action research in scaling up rural water supply and sanitation in Ethiopia and the Philippines

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The international NGO Plan is using its experience in two countries to establish two action research pilot projects, involving government agencies, CBOs and NGOs, with the potential to be scaled up to the national level.

Plan is an international humanitarian child-focused NGO which seeks to address the issues that prevent children from reaching their full potential. It works with communities in 45 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean in the implementation of programmes and projects of, among others, water and sanitation, community management and community capacity enhancement.

Plan is moving away from solely implementation to facilitation, and from a project approach to a broader programme approach. It is working to scale up community-managed rural water supply systems, and has embarked on a programme to provide 100 per cent sanitation in Bangladesh as well as seeking to scale up its School Improvement Programme.

Following the 2001 conference 'From System to Service, Scaling up Community Management of Rural Water Supply' organized by the IRC, Plan and others, action research was initiated to increase the knowledge and practice of scaling up community management.

Initial selection

The Philippines and Ethiopia were selected as the first two countries in which action research was to take place. This was because they were receptive to the needs of the concept, could readily accept ownership of the programme and saw the real need to try something in tune with grassroots realities that could also add significantly to the national-level debate on water and sanitation

provision. Other factors considered were the level of commitment and interest demonstrated by governments (national and local), an overview of decentralization levels, interest of other important stakeholders such as multilateral institutions and bilateral donors and the active participation of local organizations and stakeholders.

It is important to note that the work of NGOs in both Ethiopia and the Philippines is largely characterized as conventional service delivery assistance rather than engendering structural change or meaningful empowerment of the poor. Yet 'scaling up' is about creating an enabling environment where innovative activities in one community serve as a model for wider replication. The success of scaling up depends on its acceptance by mainstream institutions.

A national workshop and reconnaissance visit formed the main plank of the first elements in both countries. Terms of reference were developed by Plan and IRC aimed at joint learning and sharing experiences on scaling up with country stakeholders.

Participating stakeholders would then also be involved in discussions about how to proceed. The reconnaissance visit was to take place after the initial workshop with the intention of consulting stakeholders, acquiring their commitment to the action research and then visiting a selected district to pilot it.

In both countries an 'action research core group' will initially lead the research in a pilot district to learn how to strengthen institutional structures

supporting community-managed systems in a specific, representative setting. But an important part of the research will also take place at the national and/or regional level, through a national steering group, to disseminate the lessons learned in the district, and to make sure that the action research links to ongoing programmes, strategies and policies.

Action research in Ethiopia

In 2001 Plan conducted a baseline study that found a lack of clean water, health services, schools, access roads, and credit services for improved farming. Water consumption is less than 10 litres per person per day, compared to the minimum standard suggested by the WHO of 20 litres. This lack of clean water and suitable sanitation facilities was also identified as a problem in Shebedino, the district chosen for the action research. Shebedino, in Southern Region, has 53 *kebeles* (villages), and is some 300 kilometres south of Addis Ababa; its total population is about half-a-million.

Plan is now working with the communities to implement a five-year project aimed at providing several villages with clean water and latrines. This includes: water scheme construction; sanitation promotion and latrine construction; the training of community members in water pump maintenance.

There is great experience in rural water service provision in Ethiopia, and most stakeholders use community-management approaches. However, experience is scattered and there has

been little systematic capacity building of intermediate support levels. The challenge will be to bring experiences, approaches and models used together, learn from them and pilot improvements. There is a national water sector strategy, which, combined with the decentralization process that is taking place, means regional government is the implementer. But decentralization also reaches down from the region to the *woreda* (district), the principle being that management should be devolved to the lowest level of organization. The regions decide how much of their budget will be spent on water, health and education; the federal government only provides the regions with advice.¹ The action research is to take place within this framework, and acknowledges the leadership of the government in the sector.

Work commenced in the capital, Addis Ababa, where a five-day workshop took place in April 2004. Forty participants – representing local and international NGOs, central government ministries, regional ministries and water boards – were presented with the ideas of scaling up and action research. Participants visited the famous community-managed Hetosa Water Scheme and also Shebedino. By the end of that week the first meeting of a National Steering Committee had been held.

Then, in early May, a Regional Steering Committee was formed. Roles and responsibilities include: reviewing and recommending research agenda; endorsing pilot districts for action research; disseminating research findings; supporting the district core team; identifying and co-ordinating collaborative organizations; mobilizing resources; advocating for appropriate legislation, policies and strategies; and monitoring progress. Eight of the organizations on the Committee also joined a Technical Advisory Group to provide technical advice on appropriate technology, to review research proposals, methodologies and findings of the action research, and to advise the Regional Steering Committee.

Action research in the Philippines

A similar process of building the project team infrastructure and getting

the buy-in of stakeholders has taken place in the Philippines. A National Oversight Committee was formed, comprised of a similar mix of central government ministries and local and international NGOs.

The pilot area is Camotes, which consists of four low-lying islands – Pacijan, Poro, Ponson and Tulang – located in the Camotes Sea between Cebu Island and the province of Leyte. A District Management Committee has been formed involving stakeholders with knowledge of water and environmental sanitation, local government and community management, who will be important players when replication is sought. In June, the National Oversight Committee travelled for a reconnaissance visit to meet up with the District Management Committee and get final clarification on scaling up, action research and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities.

Overall, the situation for scaling up was favourable: government policies, institutional and legal frameworks were in place. The water associations are legally recognized bodies; many are effective and well organized, and some have been operational for more than 10 years. However, there were many concerns, including: policies and laws not being properly disseminated down to the communities; the planning for capacity building of the associations not being clear; inadequate integration of sanitation with water supply; and the associations not being responsible for the promotion of hygiene and sanitation.

Common issues and next steps

In both countries stakeholders have taken time to conceptualize and understand action research fully. This is not surprising; after all, they will be ‘actor-directors’ and there will not be the traditional gap between the researcher and those researched, the deciders and the doers. The use of the research was of central importance. ‘No action without research and no research without action’ was the slogan. Action research involves a constant feedback and dissemination of results and outcomes to the stakeholders in the district and national government, to ensure that research is not isolated from institu-

tional realities. The action research must work within the policy environment and be specific to each location; one participant called this ‘Ethiopianizing the concept of scaling up’.

Politics, with a small and large ‘p’ figure large. In Ethiopia, the communities are very interested in developing their own capacities and ‘modernizing’ their management, but government officers want to limit the communities’ involvement to the village level and may resist this. In the Philippines, one *barangay* (village) in the Camotes Islands had four water associations – two even using the same spring source. This situation had arisen because of a local political division – a defeated *barangay* leader lost an election for mayor and did not want his supporters in one association to join the victorious opposition in any shape or form, water included.

Plan headquarters and IRC will: give support in capacity building; arrange international visits and experience sharing; support the action research quality; and process and disseminate the output of the action research. Information exchange between Ethiopia and the Philippines will be crucial to breathe extra life, even healthy competition, into the whole process.

2005 will see a cycle of diagnosis, testing and implementation (both at district level in the core group and at national and regional level in the steering groups). In 2007, the programme will consolidate findings, disseminate at national and international level, and address scaling up from district to national level. After each five month phase a full month will be used to address documentation, dissemination and experience sharing.

Reference

- 1 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Ministry of Water Resources, Water, Mines and Energy Resource Development Bureau, SNNPR (2002) ‘Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Demonstration Project, Southern Nationals, Nationalities and Peoples Region (Shebedino, Alaba and Derashe Woreda) Final Report’.

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