The need for champions in rural water supply

by Tapio S. Katko

Experiences with rural water supply systems in Finland may provide useful lessons for management in the South.

FINLAND HAS A LONG tradition of water supply co-operatives in rural areas. It is often one enlightened person, here called a 'champion', who has played the key role throughout the initiation, establishment, planning, and implementation and up to the operational phase.

In the last decade community participation has become a commonly accepted strategy in rural water supply projects in the South. Yet the literature contains surprisingly few references to the key individuals who organize this community participation. Experience in the long-term development of water supply co-operatives in the rural areas of Finland proves the importance of the champion's key role in management and the waning interest in community participation over the years.

The concept

The term champion is normally used in product development to mean a highly enthusiastic and committed individual who is willing to take substantial risks to ensure the success of a technological innovation.[1] The champion may be an entrepreneur, who owns the business, or an intrapreneur, an employee of a corporation.[2] In 1985 the State of New York in the United States put out a self-help handbook to assist local governments. It stressed two primary factors: potential — the capacity to carry out programmes; and readiness — the community's will to perform. The first factor emphasizes the presence of entrepreneurs or 'spark plugs', meaning that there is a need for a person who is able to introduce an idea and make it work.[3]

Bennett and Myers[4] pointed out the need to find a champion within the organization of a modern water utility when introducing computerized systems. They stressed that the employees must be involved in the planning and implementation of these systems to gain their support. The post of a 'system champion' should be established to promote the system and to solve its problems, both human and technical. The champion must have credibility with end-users, be a self-starter, and possess outstanding communication skills.

Relative roles

Finland's long tradition of water-supply co-operatives began in the 1870s. In 1988 there were about 500 water supply co-operatives, most of which served less than 1000 people. A water co-operative consists of the consumers, the board, and the manager, who we here call the champion (Figure 1). Consumers are the water users, decision-makers, contributors or payers, and owners of the systems. The co-operative is managed jointly by a small board and, typically, the most enlightened person, the champion. Traditionally the champion has been a man who has initiated the water supply system and has later also acted as a voluntary manager. Other involved parties have been government and municipal authorities and the private sector.[5]

The development of the existing water co-operatives can be divided into three stages: those established before 1950 without any public support; those established from 1951 to the mid-1970s with some government support; and those established in dispersed rural areas after the mid-1970s, often with some support from municipalities. First-stage associations were largely based on self-help. Most of them used wooden pipes and were built by local, small-scale contractors. Second-stage associations saw a decrease in self-help construction, the introduction of mechanized construction, the replacement of wooden pipes by plastic, and the growing interest of rural municipalities. High-quality groundwater has always been the major source, often without treatment.

Figure 2 represents the relative roles of the various parties and the changes of those roles during the three phases. The co-operative, including the cham-

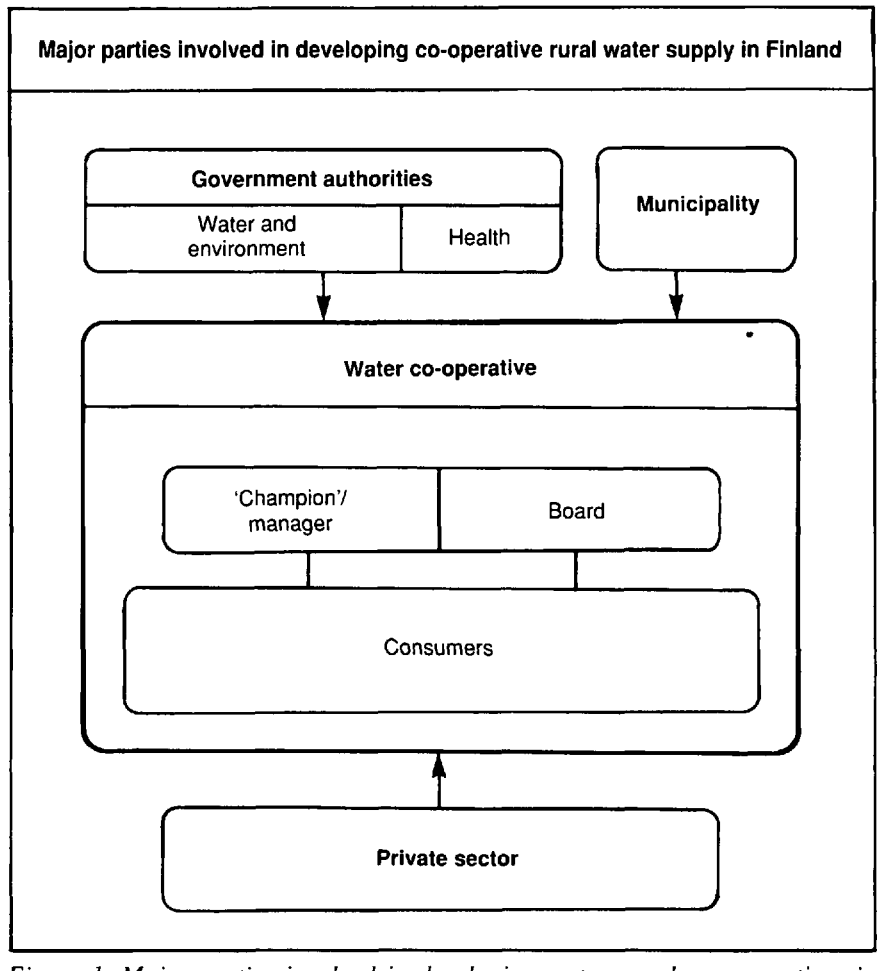
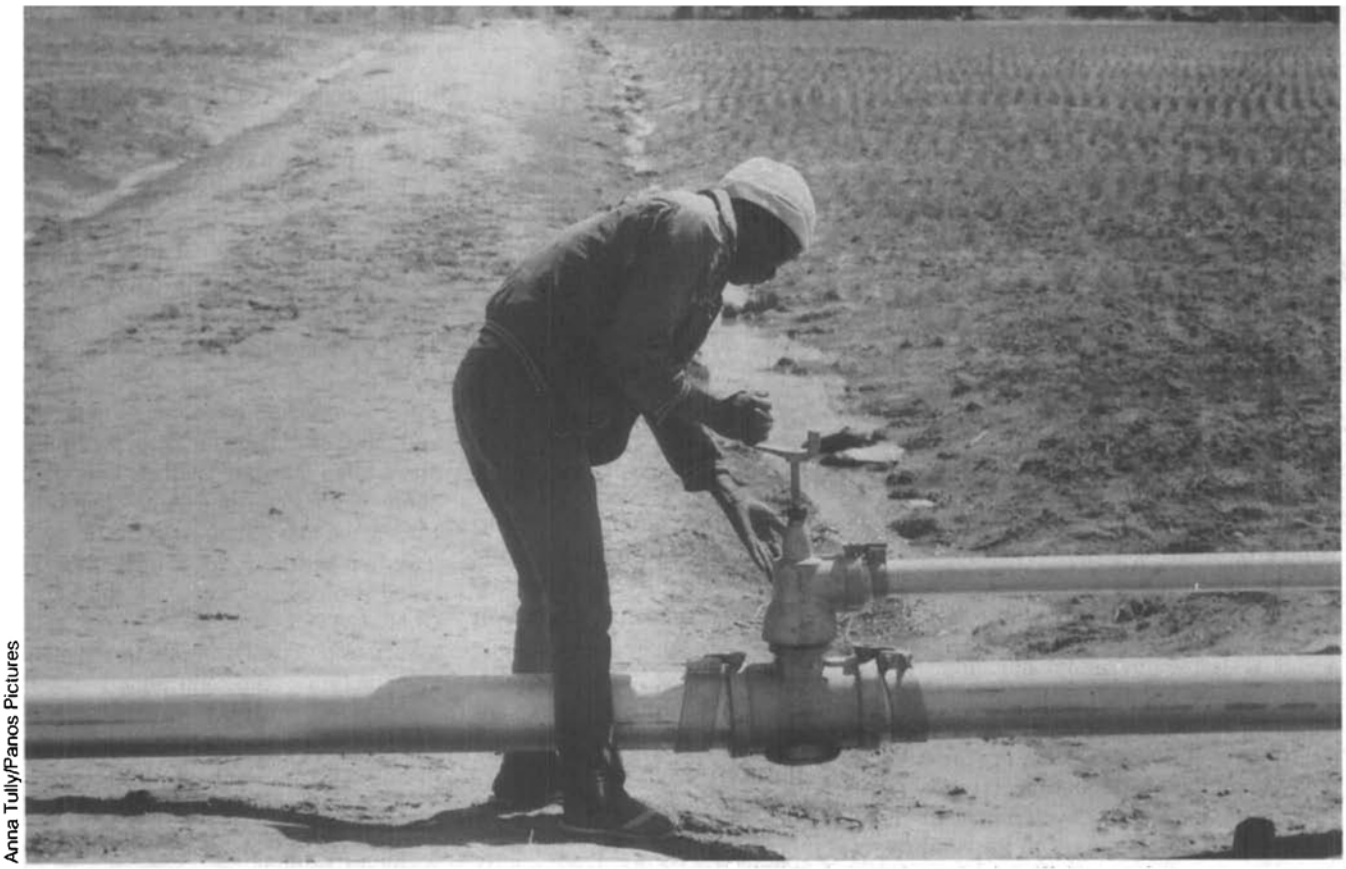


Figure 1. Major parties involved in developing water supply co-operatives in Finland.[3]



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It is quite likely that identifying and supporting one enthusiastic individual, or 'champion', will lead to better systems and consistent management.

pion, board, and consumers, has always played a key role. The role of the champion is dominant. His or, in a few cases, her, role has changed over the years from a voluntary intrapreneur to a part-time or full-time manager.[6]

The water authorities have become increasingly involved in the sector's development, but they still concentrate on initiating improved water supply and formulating the policies. Financial support from the government to the sector has always been less than ten per cent, and the municipalities' support to dispersed rural areas has gradually increased. Consumers, as the water users, beneficiaries, and owners of the systems, have always paid the major part of the capital costs and all of the recurrent costs. The private sector, that is the consulting companies, contractors, and service enterprises, has increasingly assumed responsibility for the planning, implementation, maintenance, and accounting services, but the extent of their roles varies from case to case.

Development stages

The development of a water co-operative proceeds as follows:[5,6]

- Initiation and promotion
- Establishment of the co-operative
- Planning
- Implementation
- Operation and maintenance

In the initiation, promotion, and establishment stages the role of the champion is decisive. Usually that person is an active man who also takes part in other community activities.

In the main rural villages of a municipality the initiator has often been a local civil servant, such as a police officer or a teacher, or some other dominant and visible individual such as a shop-owner or a business person. Such a person knows most of the people in the community and is able to communicate easily with them. A professional background in the water sector is not a precondition, but the characteristics of a champion are a must. In agricultural areas, the initiator is typically a farmer, often someone who has suffered personally from the consequences of inadequate quality or quantity of water.

In the initial phase women have usually actively demanded an improved water supply, especially for household use. In initiating and persuading households to express their willingness to join a water co-operative, women are often very active, but they are seldom board members. A number of the male water veterans said that 'women have their means to persuade their husbands to join a water co-operative'!

Another example from dispersed rural areas also highlights women's role. In one municipality a questionnaire was sent to rural households to

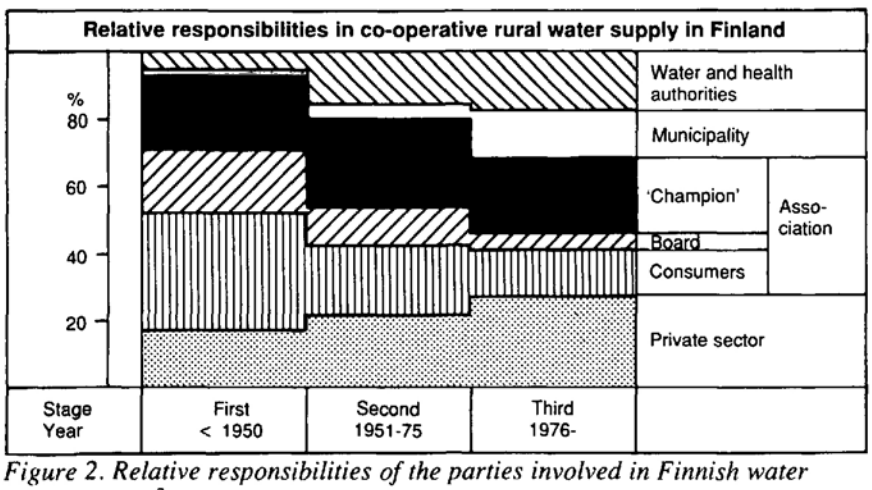


Figure 2. Relative responsibilities of the parties involved in Finnish water co-operatives.[3]

enquire about their willingness and need to improve their present water supply system. Many of the households which had occasional shortages in winter and whose water contained excessive iron were still carrying water from wells or transporting it from far away. Of the roughly 100 questionnaires returned, about 80 per cent were filled in by housewives,[6] but the men still consider the improvement and management of household water supply as a 'male' duty.

The champion is typically the one who sells the idea of common water supply if it has not yet been introduced. If there is a tradition of common water supply systems in the area, the willingness to join is strong from the very beginning. Sometimes a common water supply system has been introduced by families who have moved to the area and who were used to good water services in the past. In the initial phase the champion is often assisted by a few active members of the community or the board.

The co-operative board participates in the planning by finding out the households' willingness to join the system, by organizing promotion activities, and by arranging financing, including possible external support. Since the consumers in rural areas know their area best, it is advisable to have them involved in the planning stage either as board members or as individuals.

The champion of the co-operative is heavily involved in construction, often on a full-time basis. In small systems he or she may work for nominal pay. The board members organize the supervision together with municipal and government water district representatives, if needed. In the 1950s and 1960s it was common for the champion, and often also the board members, to take out short-term, high-interest loans themselves. When the size of the association is 2000 consumers and above, the system typically has a full-time manager. This depends, however, on the local circumstances and services.

The consumers' interest in the co-operative changes over time. In the initial and implementation phases, consumers participate actively in the general meetings of the co-operative. After the system is completed their interest soon decreases, and usually only a few people besides the board members attend general meetings. It is common that some people have to be called upon to attend the co-operative council meeting to make up a quorum. If no problems emerge, the consumers stay passive. If changes in the ownership of the system are expected, or the system itself needs to be rehabilitated, their interest revives. In short, people are concerned about their water supply system only when things are not as usual. This again emphasizes the need for a champion, who will remain involved in the project when other people lose interest.

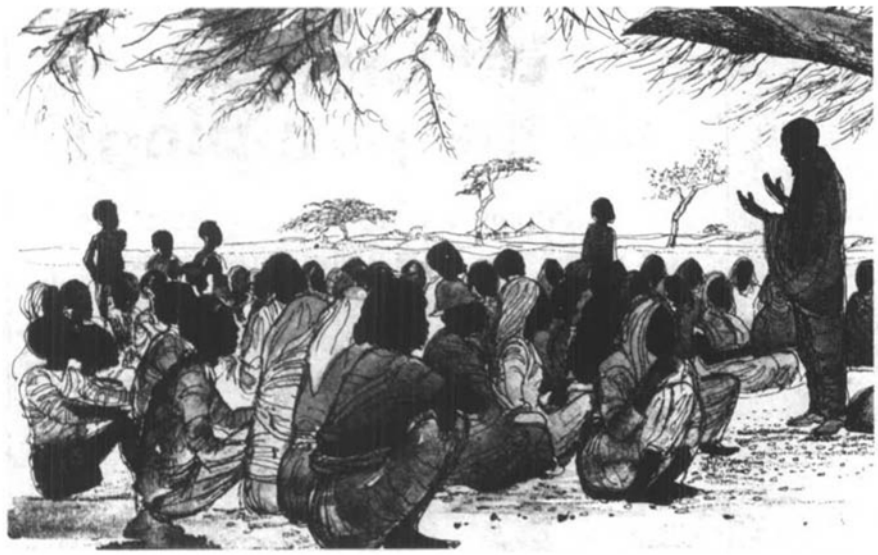
Men as champions

A study by the author shows that the water co-operative tradition is still very much alive in the rural areas of the country.[6] While a number of water co-operatives have merged with larger systems, new water co-operatives are still being established in dispersed rural areas. The study also revealed that out of the 125 water co-operatives surveyed, only four had women as managers or champions. Five out of the 125 cases had female board-members, primarily providing accounting and secretarial services. The management and technical issues of water supply are thus largely left to men. Women's role in *initiating* improved water supply has been vital, however, and will continue to be in the future.

It seems that the key issue is not necessarily gender-related though. The willingness to join a common system is decided at the household/family level. The problem is rather to find people who will take initiative and action. It is interesting to note that men with some technical and engineering background, as well as police officers, have often been the champions in rural centres in Finland. It is mainly a question of the ability to get things organized and implemented.

Implications for the South

The Finnish case study suggests that instead of having collective community participation, champions should be sought for promoting and implementing rural water supplies. This approach adheres to the definition by Paul that community participation should be seen as 'an active process by which beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receive a share of project benefits'.[7] The development of water supply associations in Finland has been highly dependent on community participation and management. But entire communities are not often involved in water supply associations, and the decisions to participate and contribute are not



The 'champion' plays a key role, from initiation to planning and implementation.

made only at the community level, but also by individual households and associations.

Finland is a relatively homogenous nation with special natural, social, cultural, political, and environmental conditions and needs, and there are significant differences between it and many regions in the South. The Finnish experiences are from a quite sparsely populated country, whereas population densities in many developing countries are much higher. In many developing countries the population growth rates are also very high, whereas in rural Finland they are often negligible or negative. But it is also true that without consumers' own efforts, the governments in the South cannot improve, or even guarantee, the present service level of water supply.

It is sometimes claimed that cultural and social characteristics have the potential to sidetrack the development process, yet often the real constraints seem political. In the South there are many good examples of entrepreneurship in traditional water supply, such as the commonly practised vending and reselling of water. But these practises benefit those who operate the unofficial economy more than the general public.

In Finland it is common for one or a few highly committed, enthusiastic individuals to promote and manage rural water supply. The individuals have acted for the common good and not for personal benefit because, among other reasons, the community maintains appropriate control through the association. It is necessary to evaluate work-related cultural values to determine how and to what extent individuals are willing to assume such responsibility. The rural population in Finland is homogeneous, and managers have little opportunity to promote the interests of a special group, as managers sometimes do in the South.

Since this case deals with a country in the North, the applicability of the champion approach should be tested in the South, where the different social and cultural preferences will determine the effectiveness of this method. ●

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