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SANITATION AND WATER FOR ALL

Community management in refugee camps

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THE INVASION OF Afghanistan by the forces of the former Soviet Union led to over 5,000,000 Afghans to taking shelter in Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan hosted 3.29 Million Afghan refugees from 1979 to 1990; and more than 1 Million registered refugees are still living in Pakistan. The North West Frontier Province (NWFP) which borders Afghanistan hosted most refugees; out of 334 Afghan refugee villages established, 258 were in NWFP.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), from 1979 to 1986, funded construction of tube well based water supply schemes in refugees camps in NWFP. By late 80s there were more than 113 functional schemes in NWFP which were being operated and maintained by UNHCR. In 1994, UNHCR, due to financial constraints, decided to implement a Community Management Program (CMP) in refugees villages in order to build self-reliance in the refugees and, at the same time, reduce UNHCR financial obligations.

The water policy

A water policy for management of refugees water supply schemes was formulated and approved by Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR), a Pak-government department looking after refugees affairs, and UNHCR in January 1995. The policy recommended the following options for future management of schemes:

Option-I

The refugees will be motivated to take over the management of water supply schemes in their villages. The schemes will be handed over to them in good working conditions and after this they will be responsible to pay all the recurrent costs including electricity bills, operational staff salaries, minor repair expenses and share in major repairs. In order to ensure long-term support for when problems are too much for community to manage, the UNHCR will provide 75 per cent share of the cost of major repairs of pumps, motors, starters, generators, tube wells and transformers.

Option-II

If, in some refugee villages, the refugees show inability to manage the existing schemes, then they will be encouraged to dig alternate sources (shallow wells) which will then be developed by UNHCR funded NGOs. After the completion on shallow wells, the existing schemes will be closed.

Implementation of Community Management Program (CMP)

Cowater International, a Canadian consulting firm, was engaged by UNHCR to implement the CMP, and was given one year starting January 1995 to decide the fate of 84 water supply schemes. The implementation of the program included:

Public meetings

Meetings were arranged with the refugees, and the locals where it was found that they were also beneficiaries, to discuss various aspects of the water policy. They were then asked to come with a decision or unanswered questions at a latter date. On the average, four to five meetings were held with each community (beneficiaries of one water supply scheme) before they could make a decision regarding selection of the option which they felt best suited to their needs.

Selection of option

The majority of the refugees opted to take over the management of existing schemes. The main reasons for this were the high initial investment (Rs 5000–7000; 1 US $ = Rs. 31 in 1995) required for option-II above i.e. digging a shallow well compared with Rs. 10 to 20 per month for option-I, and difficulty in digging shallow wells in some areas due to hard rock or saline ground water. Some communities considered piped water supply an added facility and felt proud in managing their own schemes.

Formation of Water Management Committees (WMCs)

The refugees were asked to form 8-9 member WMCs which they mostly based on tribes or mosques. In some areas, where locals were also beneficiaries, Joint WMCs were established. The WMCs were then asked to select their executives (Chairman, Secretary and Treasure) and take a decision regarding retaining the old operational staff i.e. valve man, watch man or hiring new staff. The WMCs were given a free hand in this matter. It was, however, stipulated that the executives should be a little literate to enable them deal with the financial and associated problems. Considering the fact that the tube well operators were experienced and, in most cases, land owners, WMCs were asked to retain the same operators.

Signing of preliminary agreement

An undertaking regarding the willingness of WMCs to take over the right of use and management of the existing

schemes from UNHCR under specified conditions or digging of shallow wells was taken from all WMCs. The undertaking was duly signed by WMCs, Cowater field staff, representative of CAR and refugee village administrator.

Immediate repairs/digging of shallow wells

WMCs and representatives of Cowater, CAR, Danish Committee of Aid for Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) and International Rescue Committee (IRC) jointly prepared an inventory of repair work needed in the distribution network and tube wells for option-I, and (ii) selected sites for digging of shallow wells where the community favoured option-II.

Immediate repairs in tube-wells were undertaken by Afghan Refugees Water Supply Division, a government department working under CAR, while those in the distribution system were done by DACAAR and IRC in their respective areas. For the shallow well option, WMCs were asked to arrange for digging of shallow wells of specified diameters and to report to IRC/DACAAR once the water table was hit. IRC/DACAAR then, in their respective areas, developed the shallow wells by lining and installing hand pumps.

Signing of formal agreement

After the completion of repair work, a formal agreement which bound all the three parties namely WMC, UNHCR and CAR legally and defined their roles and responsibilities was signed.

For option-I, the formal agreement also included:

- details of major repairs for which UNHCR was to share 75 per cent of the cost;
- a list of immediate repairs carried out prior to the handover of the schemes;
- an inventory with distribution system layout; and
- work completion certificates which the implementing agencies took from the WMCs to avoid any future conflict regarding the status of schemes.

The final agreement for option-II clearly stated that the WMCs will be solely responsible for operation and maintenance of shallow wells in future without any assistance from UNHCR.

Managerial and technical training to WMCs

Managerial training guidelines were formulated and a number of one-day training sessions were organized for executives and operators of WMCs. The training focused on background of CMP, roles and responsibilities of WMCs executives, UNHCR, CAR and Cowater, expected problems in management of schemes, record keeping, tariff collection, payment of electricity bills, operational staff salaries, major and minor repair expenditures and savings. Technical training/refresher sessions were also arranged exclusively for operators in which various aspects of day to day operation and maintenance were covered.

Results and achievements

By the end of the CMP i.e. December 1995, 47 tube wells were handed over to 35 WMCs and 12 Joint WMCs while 12 WMCs were given the charge of 360 shallow wells. Follow-up visits have shown that:

- despite the fact that UNHCR's financial assistance has been cut down by two third i.e. by Rs. 12.1 Million per year and limited to major repairs only, the schemes are being successfully managed by the WMCs with an improved standard of service e.g. flexibility in operational time, immediate repairs when needed, less misuse of services;
- the program has fostered and consolidated self-reliance in refugees. A number of WMCs has made savings of Rs. 30,000 to 40,000. Some have, on their own, expanded their distribution networks to increase revenue and replaced their pumps; and
- WMCs have provided a forum for the refugees to address not only water problems but also other social issues like health, education and repatriation. They are also being utilized by donor agencies and NGOs to implement their schemes in refugee camps;

Conclusions

The concept of community organization for management of water supply schemes was applied in refugee camps and found to be highly successful. This paper highlights the key components of the refugee community management program which included public consultation, formation of representative committees by the community, rehabilitation of schemes, signing of formal agreements spelling out details of the schemes, managerial and technical training and ensuring long-term technical and financial support. It is hoped that the positive results and experiences of NWFP Community Management Program in the water supply sector can be replicated in other parts of the world for building refugee self-reliance.

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