



## Operation and maintenance of water and sanitation facilities



*Ntombentle Zungula, South Africa*

IN THIS PAPER I am going to talk mainly about the link between gender issues and health, especially in rural areas and impoverished peri-urban and urban areas, and the impact these issues have on maintenance of water and sanitation infrastructure. The above-mentioned areas rarely link water and sanitation issues to their health.

Operation and maintenance of water and sanitation projects depend on the clear understanding of the project by the beneficiaries (owners). It is important for the communities to know how the project relates to their lives. This relationship should be understood even before the construction of the project starts. Hence the involvement of the community becomes necessary from the inception of the project. Capacity building is an on-going process that includes a range of processes and events, one of which is awareness creation. Other aspects of capacity building include community organization, discussion groups, workshops, informal talks and structured formal training. Although to rely only on structured training can impose problems if the identified group lack motivation. Sometimes, a lack of motivation is assumed by outsiders when in fact there are cultural reasons for the situation, for example; where a newly married woman may be chosen for a position of administration whereas according to tradition she is not permitted to speak in the presence of her in laws or in public. At times a community chooses a young energetic men for training who often leave the area to look for jobs in big cities. Structured training targets a group with the hope that they will serve the community. The idea of serving the community voluntarily is a win and loose situation. Most people that are willing to volunteer also have their own needs to take care of. They may have family responsibilities or direct needs such as food, clothing and social needs. Money becomes an issue in order to fulfil these needs. Voluntarism can easily cause misunderstanding because once a personal need arises there may be no time to inform the people that one is serving. The volunteer just decides to leave. In some communities voluntarism works but in some it does not work. Training, although it is an important aspect of capacity building, can only bear good results where there is acknowledgement of social problems, understanding of cultural beliefs and appreciation of gender considerations.

When one talks about maintenance of water and sanitation projects one should make sure that the benefit of that to the community is clearly understood and the link to their health as a benefit is clearly spelt out. Poverty and hunger are issues that are of priority in the minds of rural commu-

nities. So, unless a clear link is made to the personal benefits of maintenance, other priorities will take all the people's attention and time.

This can be seen, for example, where one sees adult people sending the young children to relieve themselves outside next to the door and expect dogs or pigs to clear that mess. The use of toilets becomes a privacy or status thing. In some homes, toilets are reserved for fathers and visitors. Men normally pass water on trees or near the kraal, as a result it is a cultural value that a man should wake up early in the morning and go to the kraal to pass water and on his way back he checks whether things are in order. Although this is obviously not hygienic it is not seen as harmful to anybody.

A detailed study by W.A.S.H indicates that the provision of clean water by itself does not have a great impact on the prevention of common water borne diseases. These diseases include diarrhoea, ascariasis and trachoma. Most rural communities do not relate diseases like diarrhoea with water. Diarrhoea is associated with the change of season by most rural communities. During autumn, in my area, we normally have fresh green mealies and pumpkins. People just expect that children will have diarrhoea, and adults will have stomachache, they relate this to diet. Nobody relates the sickness with water or clean water. Hence the maintenance of water projects becomes a futile exercise. It is a fact that adults learn what will benefit them. Maintenance in water and sanitation projects suffers a lot because communities never associated water and sanitation as major benefits in their lives. It becomes very important for developers to link health, hygiene and sanitation to people's lives when implementing a water project.

Another common issue is that communities publicly agree with the demands set by funders and implementing agencies that require gender balance, when deep down in their hearts are not happy. They fear that they might loose the funding or they might be seen as people who are against the government rules if they voice their opinions honestly. It has been my experience in many communities in the Eastern Cape that gender balance has been accepted just to meet the government policy or the funder requirements. Such projects usually lack full community participation.

Maintenance involves responsibility, time, resources and gender balance. I refer to gender balance because men and women have different needs about projects. In our South African context the word gender is still a sensitive one. People believe that women want to control instead of being equal partners. It becomes important for the facilitator to

be sensitive in his/her approach when dealing with gender issues. The approach should be simple by promoting the use of both men and women in all aspects of development. Once the concept has been accepted positively, one can start encouraging new divisions of work, equal participation and sharing of skills that are limited from the other partner. It is a common practice that women do not participate in technical and manual work and are not seen as decision-makers. There are men who would prefer to use a toilet as storage for their tools or use it to keep grains after reaping the field than using a toilet for its purpose. The place is kept clean and secured but it is not used for its purpose. This indicates the lack of understanding about the purpose of having a toilet. In some water and sanitation projects there is a need to actively bring men and women together as partners because of their different interests. These interests from both partners form a strong maintenance belief and set the standard for future maintenance. Men often want to keep control but need to be made aware that women also have strong needs about the projects. In water projects women always identify distance and cleanliness as key problem areas, whereas men will identify the need for animal (stock) drinking water as a priority. Men are correct to identify this kind of a need, they do not fetch water, and they find water from the bucket already clean

Women become the soft targets when promoting health and sanitation. Women see the condition of the water they get when fetching water from the rivers, springs and wells and so they easily understand the importance of maintenance once they have clean water. Women see their children suffering. The fear of returning to a bad situation after things have improved makes women easy converts. Women become the caretakers and experts on water and sanitation in their communities. In most rural areas project implementation goes fast and smooth, where women control project. The reason for this is the everlasting benefit that women are looking for. It should be clear to everybody in the community that maintenance should be a joint venture although in turn women become more reliable in maintaining the systems because of the above mentioned reasons. To me as an adult educator this is no surprise as adults learn what will benefit them personally. Women as adults become more interested in learning what will benefit them as well.

To encourage an equal partnership, men and women in development need to share their differing skills, experiences and points of view. It is fun to talk about gender this way and it becomes fun even when communities start implementing it. Once the partnership is working well, different opinions about the usage of the project diminish and the level of maintenance improves as both genders take responsibility.

My paper may sound biased against men when discussing maintenance issues especially about water. Yes, the reason for this is the cultural belief of the African people; water for domestic use is a woman's responsibility. Men think of water for farming purposes only, hence the digging of trenches and blocking running streams to the field. However, there is a tendency for women to be reluctant to take up technical or leadership roles in water projects because they sometimes feel that they lack the skills. It is part of the project initiative to identify key areas of training. Women can be trained in technical related skills and financial management. Men were never born experts of management and technical skills; somebody invested that knowledge to them. It is high time that the same investment should be made for women, especially now that we have identified key areas where women play a vital role to improve the lives of people through water and sanitation projects.

In conclusion, I want to emphasise the question of sustainability. Maintenance is nothing else except to make sure that the project remains in good order and is used by people even after the mentoring phase is over. The project is there to serve all of the community and the aim is to see the project working for longer period or for the life of the community. A true development project should change the quality of life of its people and even the way people interact should change. A successful maintenance style is the style that adapts to changes and challenges, a style that is based on communication and openness.

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NTOMBENTLE ZUNGULA, Training Unit Manager,  
Rural Support Services.

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