Introduction

The achievement of lasting beneficial impacts through rural water supply services has been elusive. In too many cases significant effort and investment has been devoted to providing a service, but after a few years (or even a few months) the system breaks down and no longer provides a useful service to the community. Much thought has gone into the question of what is required to bring about sustainable services, but there remain missing dimensions in much of the existing literature and practice. This paper describes a small research project, focused on one long-term rural water and sanitation programme in south-west Uganda, which specifically addresses the question of sustainability. The paper outlines the research aims and methodology, and presents part of the conceptual thinking derived from literature and key-informant interviews. Field work is on-going at the time of writing, but will be completed in time for oral presentation at the conference.

Approach

The research consists of three components: first, a review of international literature and documentation specific to the Ugandan water sector and KDWSP; second, a set of in-depth interviews with key informants, all professionals in rural development in sub-Saharan Africa; and third, quantitative and qualitative field studies to determine the extent to which the services brought about by the programme really have proved to be sustainable, and to explore the reasons for long term impact, or its breakdown.

At the time of writing the first component is in progress, the second has been completed, and the third, the field work, is under way. By the time of this conference the work will have been completed and written up, and the findings will be available to all interested stakeholders.

Starting point of the research

The starting point for the research is the belief that certain features of KDWSP combine to account for its success in delivering sustainable services. Table 1 lists 12 key factors which were set out in an initial brainstorming session involving the research team and senior staff of KDWSP in February 2005.

KDWSP has now been working with rural communities in south-west Uganda for nearly 20 years. It has so far served around 200,000 people with basic water supply, sanitation and hygiene education, and it adds 20-25,000 to that number annually.

During 2005 the authors are undertaking a small piece of theoretical and empirical research to investigate what accounts for this programme’s success in delivering sustainable services in rural communities, and how the case-specific findings can be generalised to the interventions of other faith-based organisations, secular non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) and to Government. The findings will be disseminated widely in the literature, and among interested stakeholders.

Early findings: a conceptual framework

The concept of sustainable development which we are developing from this and other field experiences in sub-Saharan Africa puts at least as much weight on the intangible aspects of ethos and process as on the activities undertaken in development interventions. It is only through the shared commitment, values, attitudes, approaches, and understanding of all stakeholders, combined with technical, social and
Table 1 Factors contributing to sustainability of KDWSP interventions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<td>Community participation – more than lip-service</td>
<td>The importance of bringing about full community participation from the planning stage through to O&amp;M is well known. However the difficulties of achieving this, and the commitment required, often mean that little more than lip-service is paid to the achievement of real community management. This is not the case in KDWSP.</td>
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<td>Gender meaning gender – not just women on committees</td>
<td>KDWSP first started working with women’s rainwater tank construction groups in the late 1990s. This aspect of the work has prospered, and now KDWSP’s focus is shifting to a more balanced attention to women’s and men’s groups – a properly gender-balanced approach.</td>
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<td>Close working relationships with local Government</td>
<td>KDWSP has worked extremely hard to forge strong links with local Government, from village and parish level, through sub-county, to District. The programme is now also very well known to central Government. This puts it in a strong position to advocate for changes to policy and practice nationally and internationally.</td>
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<td>Underlying ethos, including a learning and reflective attitude</td>
<td>Honesty and transparency characterise the programme’s approach, but perhaps above all has been its freedom, ability and willingness to experiment, try, fail or succeed, learn, and move on. KDWSP is a learning and reflective organisation.</td>
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<td>Realistic attention to scaling-up</td>
<td>KDWSP is a small programme, bringing water and sanitation services to 20-25,000 new people per year. Kabale District’s population is about 500,000. Clearly the programme cannot meet the needs of this target population alone, and Government now has a significant role in meeting the needs of the District. KDWSP has been innovative in its approaches to scaling-up, focusing especially on facilitating others, including the private sector, to extend the programme’s work.</td>
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<td>High quality of construction, and value for money</td>
<td>KDWSP’s strong ethos of respect for all, including its own workers, has resulted in little or no compromise on construction quality. This is unusual in Uganda, especially in programmes funded by Government and implemented through the private sector.</td>
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<td>On-going support</td>
<td>KDWSP has recognised before most organisations that sustainability will not be achieved through “full community management”. Communities require support at the times when hardware fails catastrophically, or when committee structures break down. KDWSP’s experience, among others, has already contributed to changes in Government thinking (specifically in the National O&amp;M Framework).</td>
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<td>Emphasis on household level water supply as well as community sources</td>
<td>Community management of water supply services is not easy. Household level ownership and management can be more straightforward. KDWSP’s work with household rainwater harvesting has broadened its scope beyond ‘community’ water supply.</td>
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<td>Hygiene promotion through health workers living in the community</td>
<td>KDWSP’s health workers live in, and become adopted and trusted by, the communities where the programme works. In a large gravity flow scheme, health workers may be resident part-time for up to a year. This approach is extremely effective in bringing about subsequent community commitment to improved hygiene practices.</td>
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<td>Inter-community competitions</td>
<td>As a means of building on community pride and dignity, the programme has for many years organised inter-community competitions to encourage good hygiene practices and effective scheme maintenance. These are very effective.</td>
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<td>Commitment to community capacity building</td>
<td>A further expression of the programme’s ethos is its belief in communities’ potential to manage and finance their own services. Consequently, capacity-building is seen as a means of drawing out the potential of communities, and leaving them better able to initiate and manage their own development.</td>
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<td>Geographic focus</td>
<td>Many, if not most, programmes spread themselves too thinly, often for good political reasons. However, this limits their efficiency and effectiveness, and compromises the chances of sustainability. KDWSP has for many years operated a geographically focused strategy, which enables it to work effectively in one area before moving on to the next.</td>
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institutional skills put into practice, that sustained beneficial outcomes can be achieved, and the boundaries of chronic poverty pushed back.

In understanding the determinants of sustainable development outcomes, full account needs to be taken of at least three inter-linked aspects of the development enterprise (Figure 1). Underpinning the entire endeavour is the ethos – the values, attitudes, integrity, and degree of commitment - of the individuals and organisations involved. When combined with a sound understanding of international, national, community and institutional contexts, a sound ethos can lead to a set of processes which are conducive to the achievement of sustainable beneficial impacts: truly participative and empowering, mutually respectful, culturally sensitive, and taking sufficient time. Processes alone are not enough though, and they need to be combined with skills and expertise in technical, social and institutional aspects, financial resources, sound management, and access to information and networks, to build the right set of intervention activities. When all these ingredients come together in a vision shared by donor, implementing agency and communities, then a lasting impact can be achieved.

References

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CONDUCTIVE PROCESS (how things are done – the approaches of donors, implementing agencies and communities)
- Focus – on need
  - People-centred approach – fostering and understanding, participative, empowering, building on existing culture and capacity, recognizing importance of gender
  - Attention to quality
  - A problem-solving approach, characterized by experimentation, learning and reflection
  - Willingness to learn
  - Recognizing and responding to heterogeneity
  - Taking time
  - Integration – recognizing the inter-related nature of community needs and problems

AND
- Sound social and institutional skills
- Adequate time
- Financial and human resources and good leadership
- Good organizational management (including financial and human resource management)
- Access to information and networks

MAY LEAD TO
- Understanding of international issues:
  - development trends
  - drivers of development
  - sources of funding, knowledge and assistance

AND
- Understanding at national level:
  - national policies & strategies
  - institutions
  - sources of funding
  - politics and history
  - natural environment

AND
- Understanding at agency level:
  - how organizations work
  - importance of sound financial management
  - need for good time management

AND
- Understanding at community level:
  - social and cultural issues
  - community institutions
  - capacity and vulnerability

PLUS
A FAVOURABLE ETHOS (personal qualities and corporate culture of donors, implementing agencies and communities)
- Values – wishing to reduce suffering and poverty, to empower, to raise dignity
- Attitude – respect for all stakeholders, respect for women, initiative
- Commitment – a willingness to “go the extra mile”
- Integrity – honesty, trustworthiness and transparency
- Leadership – ability, energy, interpersonal skills, respect for others

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for sustainable community-based development interventions (read from bottom)