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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, WATER SUPPLY AND
ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Citizens' action: how bridging the accountability gap leads to improved services

Biraj Swain, India, James Wicken, Nepal and Peter Ryan, UK

The goal of universal water and sanitation coverage remains a distant hope. Despite all the efforts of those in the water and sanitation sectors something is missing. This 'something' is accountability to the people. Poor people are asking not only where are the services but who is responsible when they are not provided? This is the essence of Citizens' Action: citizens are supported to engage in dialogue with service providers and governments; holding them to account for the provision – or lack of it – of services. WaterAid and partners have instigated a series of Citizens' Actions. A typical action includes community mobilization, generating a picture of service levels, raising awareness of entitlements, preparing for engagement with providers and a dialogue. This paper provides some examples of ongoing Actions and makes a call for other organizations to join this work to turn it into a people's movement demanding accountability.

Introduction

The snail like pace of progress on the grim and well known statistics of water and sanitation coverage mean that the goal of universal coverage of water and sanitation remains a distant hope; even the intermediate target to halve by 2015 the proportions of people living without these necessities – as set out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – look like they will be missed by some distance. Despite all the efforts of those in the water and sanitation sectors something is missing. This 'something' is accountability to the people. Currently in the watsan sector there are no mechanisms for accountability mechanisms to citizens. Monitoring by service providers is limited to recording of expenditure and physical outputs and is reported upwards with no involvement of communities.

In these dire circumstances poor people are asking not only where are the services but who is responsible when they are not provided? It is clear that new momentum is needed to ensure that agencies stick by their commitments, that governments put into place – and act upon – legislation necessary to support service provision and that service providers act more urgently to meet demand.

This is the essence of Citizens' Action: citizens are supported to engage in long-term dialogue and negotiation with service providers and governments; holding them to account for the provision – or lack of it – of water and sanitation services.

This is necessary because there are not only discrepancies between words and action and between policy and practice, there is also a gulf between responsibility and action. We call this the accountability gap and we believe through Citizens' Action people can bridge it.

WaterAid, through its network of partner organisations, instigated a series of Citizens' Actions in 2005, which are set to run for the duration of the Water for Life decade until 2015, the deadline for achievement of the MDGs. Projects are underway in Nepal, Uganda, India, Ghana, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Mozambique. Many others will follow.

It is the purpose of this paper to set out some of the main elements of Citizens' Action and to issue a call to join them, to make the accountability mechanisms which are at the heart of Citizens' Action the norm, to make a movement.

Bridging the gap

In a nutshell Citizens' Action helps communities prepare to engage with service providers and government and then supports that engagement for as long as required. Project partners facilitate the process, rather than mediate on behalf of citizens.

In each project local people develop a fuller understanding of:

- Their entitlements to water and sanitation
- Their current water and sanitation service situation
- The range of responsibilities for policy and service delivery

For example, in Jahanabad Union, Rajshahi district, Bangladesh, the facilitating NGO, Village Education Resource Centre, prepared an "Odhikar Potro" (Rights Paper) that contains in simple language the watsan policy entitlement of the people under various laws and policies and governments commitments to the people. The community was excited to see, read and internalize this information and was inspired to engage in dialogue with service providers to realise their entitlements. In India, in the inaccessible Santhal Parganas region of Jharkand, the rural water supply scheme called Swajaldhara and the Total Sanitation Campaign are run by

the Federal and State government. People's entitlements under these schemes were simplified and explained to the communities. Local youth were built up as community cadres and trained on the nuts and bolts of these schemes and how to disseminate information regarding this. They were also trained on other empowering legal provisions made by State and Central government for accessing information and decision making, such as government mandated Social Audit methods and the Right to Information Act 2005.

While the local situation determines the methods chosen, a typical Citizens' Action follows a basic pattern:

- Community mobilisation: People are encouraged to become involved through their existing organisations. Where these are weak, then the need for support is greater and longer.
- Generating a picture of service levels: Local people are assisted to choose and then implement a method for collecting and analysing information about their water and sanitation services. These can be relatively structured methods such as:

Report cards

Essentially a market research exercise, like an opinion poll. The report card brings together all the survey results for presentation.

Community scorecards

Local people rank or score the range of their services at a communal level. They then refer to these ratings in their meetings with service providers or government officials.

Mapping water and sanitation

1. Urban slum enumeration and mapping: based upon the experience of urban "slum federations", people are assisted to number and to make a communal map of the location of dwellings and households in slum areas, along with services and other amenities.
2. Rural waterpoint mapping: locations of water points are pinpointed using Global Information System (GIS) pictures and maps and are compared with population locations. This makes the equity of distribution clear and irrefutable and provides a firm basis for holding those responsible to account for future actions.

Forums and juries

Or they can be less structured methods such as forums for public testimony and sharing of experience, or juries of citizens which meet periodically to compare experience and then move to discuss and demand changes.

- Raising awareness of entitlements to water and sanitation: Community members are helped to understand more fully their water and sanitation entitlements by right, law or regulation.
- Preparing for engagement with providers: With the data they have collected citizens can compare the service they actually receive with their entitlements. If training

in negotiation is needed, this can be given. People can discuss how to approach service providers and what their objectives will be in any dialogue.

- Dialogue: Communities can start negotiation with those responsible for providing services or who are responsible for developing policy. Partners give support for as long as necessary.

Citizens' action progress so far

The experiences to date are fresh – some of the work is in its infancy. Local people are joining the process in their thousands, in numerous locations, with local NGOs and community based organisations leading the work and spreading the word. This enthusiasm is radiating from participating citizens to agencies that have chosen, admittedly after initial reluctance, to take an active part in the work. Service providers have come to see this type of work not as a threat but as a way of moving forward cooperatively to achieve mutually satisfactory goals.

In Nepal a report card was created based on community interviews on governance issues in water and sanitation. The report card was used by the community to negotiate with government for improvements and the community and government have prepared a joint action plan. In another Action in Nepal a number of pro-poor amendments to government proposals for urban reform have been achieved, including lifeline tariffs, lower connection fees and larger numbers of connections to poorer areas. Additionally, there has been agreement that civil society should be represented on the management board of the utility.

In Uganda, both central government departments and local government agencies are engaging with the 'slum' mapping and enumeration process now well underway in the Kawempe Division in Kampala. Local people are making themselves visible to authorities for the first time instead of being seen as a massive problem, with little hope of solution. The maps they have created are being loaded onto GIS systems to be used as a basis for planning services. This Action is being carried out with the input and guidance of Slum Dwellers International.

In India, local people have had major public successes in areas such as freedom of information, right to water and making report cards, and are now developing their own forums for testimony and negotiation (see boxes 1 and 2). Communities are also generating their own databases on the facilities in their area and their functionality and the expenditure by service providers and are using this to cross-check the reporting done by the authorities of service provision in their area. By publicly displaying the names and contact details of service provider staff, avenues are opening for citizens to question their performance based on the evidence in the database.

In Bangladesh the central government provides a subsidy for the hard-core poor through the Local Government Institutions (LGIs) to enable them to build their own latrines. Communities were concerned that richer households are

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Box 1. Social audit cum public hearing in Chikania Gram Panchayat, India

The gathering was attended by over 2,000 people. It started with sharing of the findings of an audit on the water and sanitation situation in 15 villages surveyed by the villagers. Six local people then gave testimonies on their lack of awareness about government water supply and sanitation programmes and their lack of access to these programmes. The testimonies included the guidelines for these programmes which educated the crowd on their entitlements. This was followed by a fantastic, very funny and creative play on the Total Sanitation Campaign featuring Yumraj, the God of Death, who is portrayed as over worked due to deaths from water borne diseases. The jury made a five point resolution including a three month deadline for officials to restore all non functioning hand pumps and establishment of joint community/government committees to monitor the water and sanitation situation, and plan follow up activities. The meeting went on for two and a half hours and not for a moment did the crowd dwindle, they shifted places & position but heard attentively to all that was being deliberated upon.

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points and toilets in their villages, showing the current status of these facilities. The tool of visualizing the poor facilities ignited the disadvantaged ethnic communities to sit with the Chief Sub-District Authority, Union Parishad Chair, DPHE Engineer, UNICEF staff and NGOs to plan and implement improved watsan projects that will directly benefit the community. These maps will also be used to validate central level monitoring reports, which are currently drawn up by the authorities without any input or validation by the people.

In Ghana and Ethiopia, rural communities are also devising their own ways of engaging with providers which build upon structures and practices already in operation. Community scorecards are being carried out in a number of locations in the Afram Plains and Wa areas of Ghana. Community people come together to 'score' services provision and a process of interaction is embarked upon, culminating in officials and representatives discussing results and agreeing action plans.

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Box 2. Public hearing leads to promises from authorities in Rajabhitta Gram Panchayat, India

The function, attended by more than 1,500 people, started with a song by the Santhali women on the importance of public water points. This was followed by sharing of survey findings on the status of water in the villages. This highlighted the poor condition of hand pumps and the weak systems for maintenance. It also showed the amount budgeted for water and sanitation services versus the services provided and raised questions over the quality of construction work. Then it was the turn of a street theatre group from Telo which performed a Nukkad Natak on the relevance of clean drinking water and hygiene behaviour. The jury, consisting of the Gram Pradhans of all the villages of the Panchayat passed a six point resolution which included making budget allocations more transparent and increasing community monitoring of drinking water systems. Finally, officials of the Public Health Engineering Department responded to the charges and promised to repair every hand pump within two days of receiving a complaint and announced a new scheme to train the women on hand pump maintenance.

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Box 3 Authorities begin to engage in Ghana

"If people have open minds, do not mind being criticised, and can see the process as a way to improve services, for those of us who are willing to listen to the voiceless, the services can improve. We are so used to telling the poor what they need and what they should do, now we need to listen, we need to turn it around the other way."

Ms B B Batir, Director of Community Water and Sanitation Agency, Upper West Region, Ghana

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One of the Actions in Ethiopia centres upon addressing the needs of people who are being relocated due to the wholesale development of new residential areas in Addis Ababa. Work is also to be carried out with street sleepers and slum dwellers, to ensure that their needs are met.

Challenges and next steps

Citizens' Actions challenge the current power structures in a community and for this reason service providers can be reluctant to get involved. Some of the risks of this process are:

- Perceptions by service providers that they are being disempowered and their power bases eroded – this leads them to question the legitimacy of the process and its outcomes
- Exposing capacity and resource weaknesses that service providers are unable to respond to
- Raising the bar of citizens' expectations, to be participants in the planning of service delivery and monitoring of the outcomes, to a level that service providers can not meet
- Publicly embarrassing staff by showing them up as corrupt and incompetent – this can result in threats against the accountability champions

To deal with these risks and manage any repercussions it

mainly capturing these subsidies. Through Community Based Organizations (CBOs), the villagers collected lists of households who had received the government subsidies on sanitation over the past two years. Communities determined the possible flaws in the preparation of these lists as they knew best who was eligible for the subsidies in their areas. In one area, through such an exercise, it was found that almost half of the subsidies distributed had gone to better-off households and not to the poor as intended. The community is now getting ready to share these findings and its recommendations on how to better target subsidies with the Local Government Institutions so that targeting of such subsidies in the subsequent months and years can be improved.

In another community in Bangladesh, in Wagga Union, Rangamati Hill district, people created maps of all the water

is important that the process in anchored by organizations experienced in challenging power structures.

Other challenges are how to maintain the momentum and enthusiasm of the cadres who are emerging from this process and how to mainstream these processes within government machinery.

To make a bigger impact, this process needs to increase in scale. We are asking other organisations and individuals to join together with those already carrying out Citizens' Action projects, to share experiences of similar initiatives and to promote this way of working for accountability in water and sanitation service provision - this wider involvement for Citizens' Action needs to become a movement.

The financial and institutional requirements for initiating and sustaining this sort of action – it is a ten-year process – are significant. It is vital to avoid these becoming one-off exercises. Everyone has a role to play; commitment is needed from:
- Partner organisations to get involved and spread the work further among poor communities
- Governments and service providers to promote the principles and become engaged with communities in dialogue and negotiation
- Donors to support and fund these processes

Citizens' Action projects demonstrate WaterAid's belief that anything less than governments' and service providers' accountability to the people means that universal access will continue to be a mirage and the MDGs will be missed by some distance.

We were convinced, when Citizens' Actions work started, that generating context specific measures to bridge the gap between promises and reality, driven by local people on a large scale, could be a very significant boost towards achieving the MDGs and onwards to water and sanitation for all. The best advert for joining this process is that local people are now starting to become convinced it is too. The benefits of working in this way can cascade far beyond the water and sanitation sector. Once empowered, communities are beginning to use these processes to ask questions about all sorts of services, such as electricity, education and food subsidies. In India the Gram Sabha and villagers are taking pro-active interest in the latest social security scheme, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. People are monitoring this scheme and deciding the community assets to be created through the works. This demand for accountability is the ultimate outcome of Citizen's Action.

Reference
WaterAid (2006) *Bridging the gap: Citizens Action for accountability in water and sanitation*, WaterAid, London, UK

Contact addresses
Biraj Swain
Policy Officer
WaterAid India
25 Navjivan Vihar, Malviya Nagar,
New Delhi 110017
India
biraj@wateraidindia.org

James Wicken
WaterAid Asia Regional Advocacy and Policy Advisor
Shanta Bhawan, Lalitpur
GPO Box 20214,
Kathmandu
Nepal
jameswicken@wateraidnepal.org.np

Peter Ryan
Policy Officer
WaterAid UK
47-49 Durham Street,
London SE11 5JD
UK
peterryan@wateraid.org