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**SUSTAINABLE WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES
FOR ALL IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD**

**Sub-county water supply and sanitation boards: a more
effective approach to community-based management**

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The Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of Rural Water Supply Sources in Uganda is governed by the Community Based Management System (CBMS). That mandates the users to take charge of their water sources, contribute funds for the maintenance of those sources and establish Water User Committees (WUCs) as the governance structures responsible for the overall O&M system. However, the WUCs are plagued with several challenges which render them ineffective. In 2013 IRC/Triple-S in partnership with the District Local Governments of Kabarole and Lira proposed the Sub County Water Supply and Sanitation Boards (SWSSBs), as an approach to address the challenges of CBMS and to enhance the functionality of WUCs. The principle idea is to merge the existing WUC and WSSB models into the SWSSB model, where the SWSSB will become the principal service provider for the whole population of the sub-county. The approach has been piloted in eight sub counties so far. This briefing paper examines the progress, raises the key emerging issues and lessons, and also provides a snapshot of the prospects of the SWSSBs.

Background

Water User Committees face several challenges that render them ineffective and inefficient. These include inadequate technical support from the District Water Office (DWO) and the sub county authorities; inadequate funding; lack of clarity about ownership of facilities and maintenance responsibilities, hence the continued reference to water sources as 'government owned'. Many of the committees are also non-functional due to lack of quorum or inadequate interest of the members.

Another challenge is legality of the WUCs. The committees are voluntary engagements and while they are recognised in policy, they are not able to sue or be sued in courts of law. They are therefore not obliged to fulfil their roles and are not able to take action on community members who default.

The WUCs also lack adequate guidance on how to raise and manage the water user fees collected. The DWOs and the sub county technical staff that could provide such assistance have limited human and financial capacity. Take Kabarole district for example. The District has more than 1500 protected water sources spread over 15 sub counties and six town councils. There are approximately 95 water points per sub county. The limited number of staff at the district and sub county cannot effectively manage the O&M requirements to ensure sustainability all the 1500 sources. The DWO has two staff - an officer and an assistant. Moreover, at sub county level, there is no designated official in charge of water supply. The DWO relies on the Community Development Officer (CDO) and the Health Assistants (HA), yet the two officials always have other issues to attend to in their primary areas of concern.

An organised structure at the sub county is therefore required to mobilise and manage resources independently and professionally for all water sources collectively. There is need for administrators to handle the management of finances, reports, plans, and such non technical issues with clients, donors and partners. This can effectively be done by fully constituted SWSSBs.

In addition, there are very many water sources with just as many WUCs that are not well coordinated and are not able to effectively engage with the DWOs. The many existing WUCs are not able to mobilise adequate O&M funds for their respective water sources. While they may collect some funds from the few

willing water users, the collections are never enough to pay for O&M costs whenever the need arises – especially if the source requires major repair. Thus, they continue to rely on the DWO for O&M support, which causes delays as the DWO may not be able to attend to all sources effectively. Given the vast number of WUCS it would be recommended to have a structure that brings all of them together, where their resources could be pooled and used to address minor and major repairs faster. The sub county provides a perfect opportunity for the creation of the proposed structure.

For some time now, the Ministry of Water and Environment (MWE) has been considering allocating O&M funds to the sub county. However, there is no structure to receive and manage such funds or even to provide working modalities for O&M. The DWO does not have a focal person at the sub county level specifically handling water issues and therefore relies on the Health Assistants (HAs) who are more inclined to working on health needs. Meanwhile, the existing WUCs and the sub county technical staff do not have the requisite capacity to manage such funds. A structure is needed to manage the O&M funds and to strengthen support at the sub county level. This will also provide better opportunities for engaging with private sector actors like hand pump mechanics, to manage the water sources in the sub county and will provide a representative voice for all WUCs in a given district.

Introducing Sub County Water Supply and Sanitation Boards (SWSSBs)

The overall objective of the SWSSB is to strengthen the O&M systems for rural water sources at the sub county level. This will lead to increased functionality and sustainability of rural water supply facilities.

A SWSSB comprises seven members or nine members in the bigger sub counties. The members are representatives of water users, technical officials, political leaders at sub county level and opinion leaders at community level. The board is a voluntary undertaking with most members being water users and members of water user committees.

The idea is for the board to manage all sources in the sub county including spring wells, protected springs, shallow wells, deep boreholes and piped schemes. When WUCs collect water fees at the source, they are expected to remit a percentage to the SWSSB. The remaining funds are kept by the WUC to attend to minor O&M issues when they arise.

When WUCs remit their contribution to the board, they are issued a receipt and the money is kept in a bank account opened in the names of the SWSSB. It is expected that from the monthly contributions, the board account should accumulate enough funds to respond to O&M needs of the subscribing sources. It is unlikely that all sources will require major repair at the same time, therefore the board will always have some money to help sources out whenever the needs arises.

The boards are expected to be accountable especially to the WUCs. This is to allay fears that water users' money will be misused. In that respect, they are expected to issue receipts for all funds received. They are also expected to hold quarterly meetings and to hold community dialogues.

A handbook for the boards has been developed by the Ministry of Water and Environment in partnership with IRC/Triple-S. It outlines the roles of different stakeholders in the SWSSBs. But overall, the following are the roles of the board.

1. Support the WUCs by: creating awareness of the roles and responsibilities of the users in O&M, payment of user fees
2. Set tariffs within the sub county both for water points and piped schemes
3. Monitoring of all water sources in the sub-county
4. Supervise maintenance of water services and activities of hand pump mechanics in the sub county for both water points and piped water schemes (supervise implementation of contracts within the framework of an MoU)
5. Accountability: enable the users to hold those responsible and each other accountable.
6. Major repairs: receive a portion of the user fees to cover major repairs and supervise major repairs
7. Resolve disputes arising from users and WUCs and hand pump mechanics
8. Structure water scheme management to make it a viable financial model, attractive to professional operators, by setting volumetric tariffs and installing metres at standpipes.

Other stakeholders involved in the implementation of this model are: District Water Officer (DWO), the sub county authority, sanitation committees, WUCs and private operators like HPMs. Their roles are also stipulated clearly in the handbook.

In order to track progress in development and adoption of the SWSSB model, the boards are required to submit progress reports. These may be monthly, quarterly or annual reports. When the situation demands,

special and ad hoc reports may also be required. The board reports to the district Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), through the DWO.

Piloting SWSSBs in Lira and Kabarole Districts, Uganda

At the beginning of 2013 IRC/Triple-S working with the DWOS of Lira and Kabarole district, undertook to roll out the SWSSB model. For a start, eight sub counties were selected: Agali, Barr, Lira and Ogur in Lira; and Buheesi, Busoro, Karambi and Kicwamba in Kabarole.

The process started with inception meetings in all the selected sub counties, during which key stakeholders discussed the concept of WSSBs. Participants included the DWOs, sub county extension staff, political leaders and partners at sub county level. From there, the sub county authorities formed interim boards, which are still serving, awaiting the appointment of substantive boards. The interim boards mainly comprised sub county chief, sub county chairman, Community Development Officer (CDO), Health Assistant (HA), councillors, Parish chiefs and members of WUCs.

After the inception meetings, the interim boards then went out to conduct parish dialogues, during which they introduced the concept of SWSSBs and created community awareness on the matter. IRC/Triple-S had earlier trained the board members on how to facilitate parish dialogues. What followed was intense community mobilisation. The boards started visiting point sources, urging WUCs to collect user fees and submit the required percentage to the board. In order to enhance transparency and accountability, the boards were required to open bank accounts into which the fees collected would be deposited. They were also required to print receipt books and issue receipts whenever the WUCs made payments.

Achievements so far

In April 2014, IRC/Triple-S working with the DWOs organised reflection and review meetings in Lira and Kabarole districts. Board members from the eight pilot sub counties were able to enumerate a number of achievements that they had attained since their inception in 2013. Kicwamba sub county in Kabarole district and Lira sub county in Lira district were remarkably ahead of the other sub counties. The achievements explained below are mainly exemplified by the experiences of those two sub counties.

In all eight sub counties, interim boards have been fully constituted to drive the piloting of the model. Later on, when all stakeholders are fully on board, substantive boards will be elected, following the guidelines in the handbook drafted by IRC/Triple-S and the MWE. Some boards are actually making effort to hold regular meetings as in Lira and Kicwamba sub counties.

Out of the eight pilot sub counties, the majority have opened up bank accounts where the money collected is deposited. In Lira, Buheesi and Kicwamba sub counties bank accounts were opened and receipt books were printed.

Board members have been conducting community sensitisation. Although some communities are still reluctant to join, at least they are aware of the presence of the SWSSB model. In fact many communities have stepped up collection of water user fees and remitted a percentage to the boards.

Through community sensitisation the boards have also been able to revive non-functional WUCs. During the reflection meeting, board members reported that in their areas WUCs that were long dead were now more active. As a result of the WUCs revival, the boards have also been able to register all water users per source. This makes it possible even for the board to project how much money to expect from each source per month. On average each household pays up to UGX500 (USD0.2) per month.

WUCs were especially spurred on by the prospect of improved accountability and the fact that the sub county authority was behind the initiative. Apparently, they trust a more authoritative structure like the sub county board as opposed to their locally constituted WUCs.

The boards have also been able to contribute to the rehabilitation of some sources which paid up their monthly fees. In Lira sub county, Okello Adwar borehole, users testify that with the board in place, it takes a shorter time to repair a faulty source. They reported that when their borehole had a problem in January 2014, they reported to the Health Assistant who is also the board secretary. A hand pump mechanic was sent to assess the situation. It was found that the source required minor repair. It was repaired using some of the funds kept by the WUC treasurer. They reckon that even if the source had required major repair, the board would have provided the funds. Okello Adwar borehole is one of the sources that have been consistent in remitting a percentage of user fees to the board.

Since the initiation of the SWSSB model, more partners have expressed interest in joining to support the boards, the WUCs and the sub counties. For instance in Lira sub county, the NGO Divine Waters was planning to rehabilitate some sources. They joined hands with the SWSSB and agreed that they would only

repair sources which had contributed their monthly subscription to the board. That jolted some sources into action. They quickly collected water user fees and remitted the required percentage to the SWSSB. Divine Waters contributed to the rehabilitation of sources through the board.

Similarly in Kicwamba, a local NGO Health Through Water and Sanitation (HEWASA) supported the sub county board to improve management of the Kicwamba Gravity Flow Scheme. Constructed in 1998, the Kicwamba scheme had been severely mismanaged and was on its last leg. With the SWSSB in place, HEWASA intervened and provided them with resources to extend the piped scheme for an additional distance of 2.5Km. The board mobilised community members to dig the trenches where the pipes would be laid. The board also revived and trained tap stand committees and the collection of user fees. Currently, the Kicwamba GFS is the most reliable source of water and the board is getting ever increasing applications from people who want their houses to be connected to the scheme.

Key challenges

Community mobilisation remains a challenge for the SWSSBs. Although some sub counties have made progress, it is still difficult for them to break community barriers especially relating to attitudes. Board members reported that most communities have a negative attitude towards O&M issues. They do not want to pay their user fees. Some of them still front the view that water is given free by the government and they see no need to pay for it.

Some of the negativity is anchored in the mistrust that exists with WUCs. For a long time the WUCs were entrusted with the management of water supply facilities but often they did a poor job. Most of them were not accountable to the water users. This discouraged the water users from contributing funds towards O&M. Now with the WSSBs, the mistrust persists. Some water users think that the board is yet another level of bureaucracy through which more funds will be mismanaged. That situation is compounded by the poor record keeping at source level, which makes effective accountability hard.

Inadequate transport facilitation: Most sub counties cover vast areas which the board members may not be able to traverse. Some sources are located in hard to reach areas which require appropriate means of transport like cars or motorcycles. But most boards cannot afford such means. Even the funds collected so far cannot facilitate them adequately.

Possible contradiction with other approaches: Various actors have introduced different approaches to try and enhance O&M and functionality of water facilities. Often times these are all implemented in conjunction with the DWOs and sub county authorities. The introduction of yet another approach makes some communities wonder which of the many approaches they should adopt. For example, in Kabarole District, Joint Effort to Save the Environment (JESE), a local Non-Government Organisation has already introduced the Water User Association (WUA) a structure which is very similar to SWSSBs, because it brings together all the Water User Committees under the association. Similar to the boards, the WUCs submit a percentage of fees collected at source to the WUA account and they apply for it when their sources need attention. But the different actors gave assurance that since all approaches have the same vision, their differences should instead be harnessed for the attainment of that vision.

In other areas, some sources had adopted the approach of using the water user fees for a loan scheme at the source. Members would borrow funds from the WUC and use the loans to start small businesses or attend to critical family needs. Such sources had even opened accounts where they were banking their accumulated fees. Such sources are reluctant to join the SWSSB scheme.

Like WUCs, SWSSBs are voluntary. The failure of WUCs was blamed on the fact that they were purely voluntary, hence low morale. Even SWSSBs are still voluntary. There are prospects of them being facilitated and given some allowances if they collect enough money from the Water User Committees. But for now, some members are already showing signs of being demoralised. The issue is for boards to mobilise water users to pay their fees so that the boards can become self-sustaining, and be able to facilitate the members better.

The challenge of private and institutional sources: Board members reported that they are finding it hard to collect fees from sources which are owned privately yet accessed by the general public. For example, some boreholes are on private farms but community members still access them. They may pay a fee to the owner. Others are owned by institutions like schools or clinics and they do not charge water user fees. Sub county authorities and the SWSSBs cannot convince owners of such sources to contribute to the board fund. Meanwhile, community members abandon the sources in their neighbourhoods and instead collect water from these privately owned sources because they are better maintained and always assured of water supply.

Over dependency on assistance: communities are used to being given aid and assistance by government and development partners. Although policy requires water users to always make a capital contribution if a source is going to be installed in their area, some development partners do not follow that. They just donate the sources. Communities in receipt of such donations do not appreciate the need to own the source. When it breaks down, they expect the donor to come back and rehabilitate the source.

Emerging issues and lessons learned

Transparency and accountability remain central to the success of any interventions at community level. Communities are still suspicious that their fees will be mishandled. There is need for regular feedback to the WUCs. There is also need to impart skills in financial management and record keeping in the boards. This will enhance the confidence that people have in both the WUCs and the boards. The board members should also keep encouraging community members to participate in O&M activities so that they are updated on board activities and they can also demand accountability for their funds.

The issue of political interference persists. While the boards are trying to encourage water users to collect user fees, some politicians send a different message in order to gain popularity. There is need to involve political leaders in the SWSSBs approach. So far all boards have a representative of the sub county political leadership.

Over-dependence on external assistance. This stops community members from contributing to the O&M of their sources even though they could afford it. It is recommended that stakeholders who intend to install any sources at community level should go through the sub county boards. Sub county level coordination of WASH actors should be strengthened and meetings held regularly. That is when all actors will identify common areas that need intervention and also agree on how to go about the numerous interventions.

High community expectations: Some community members think that once they contribute a percentage of their water user fees to the board account, that should entitle them to almost anything. They expect that as soon as their sources develop faults the SWSSBs should be on hand to rehabilitate them. But it may not always be possible. To manage such expectations it is important for the board to keep sensitising the communities about their roles. They should also register all water users so that they know who is paying and who is not paying.

Community resistance to change: In spite of the efforts to sensitise them, some community members are still not receptive to the new model of service delivery. Some members openly discourage others from contributing towards O&M. But the board members should be persistent and continue with community sensitisation. In some sub counties they have decided to ride on the back of already existing programmes. In Lira, whenever the HA and CDO are working on other development programmes like distribution of mosquito nets, they integrate the message about SWSSBs. They also take the opportunity provided by the agriculture programmes under the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS). When agriculture sensitisation programmes are going on, the extension workers also use the opportunity to sensitise communities about WASH issues.

Conditions necessary for the effective performance of SWSSBs

- All sources should have functional WUCs to help with community mobilisation and collection of fees
- In the district five year development plans, WASH should be prioritised and SWSSBs should be institutionalized to manage the facilities
- The hand pump mechanics should be supported to be able to reach all sources whenever they require assessment. They could be capacitated with transport facilitation.
- The boards should be equipped with the necessary financial and management skills.
- Political leaders should be actively involved. They play a key role in mobilising communities, although sometimes they may also be detractors.

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