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**WASH actors in a post-conflict context: the revival of
coordination and harmonisation in Lira district, Uganda**

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One of the key challenges hindering effective delivery of WASH services is the lack of effective coordination of sector actors. This often presents challenges which mainly manifest in form of fragmented policies and implementation, resulting in inefficient use of resources, duplication of roles and lack of alignment with government policies. The situation becomes more complicated in emergency situations where actors focus on meeting the immediate needs of the affected populations. Such was the situation in Lira district, northern Uganda, which until 2009, operated in an emergency situation owing to a protracted armed conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda. Since the return of Peace in 2007, the district has steadily transitioned to the development phase. In terms of WASH, the transition has resulted into the steady return of effective coordination of WASH actors in the district. This paper captures the experience of reviving WASH coordination in Lira district, the benefits accruing and the efforts to continuously improve coordination.

Background

Lira district was one of those affected by the armed conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The insurgency mainly ravaged Acholi and Lango sub regions and resulted in massive internal displacement of entire populations. Up to 1.8 million people were displaced by the conflict and were forced to live in Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camps. The Government of Uganda and the LRA signed the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CHA) in 2006 which ushered in relative peace allowing the IDPs to return to their pre-war home areas. The situation has continued to improve over the years, with the LRA rebels completely flushed out of Northern Uganda. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), out of the 1.8 million people displaced at the height of the war, only 29,800 were still living in IDP camps as of May 2015. In Lira district alone over 310,000 of the estimated 350,000 IDPs had left camps to return to their home villages by end of 2009.

The war affected all service sectors in the affected districts and Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector was not spared. In a very specific way, the coordination of WASH sector actors in such a volatile environment was affected. But to keep up with the demands of operating in an emergency situation, UNICEF and UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) were always in charge of the coordination of all actors. WASH service providers in the district were coordinated under the WASH Cluster which was headed by UNICEF. However, when peace returned the emergency interventions ceased, ushering in the development phase. UNICEF and UNOCHA eventually left Lira District in 2009, leaving a coordination gap, which lasted close to a year.

The coordination gap

When UNICEF closed its Lira District Office in 2009, coordination of WASH actors in Lira district suffered a setback. UNICEF had led the WASH Cluster since 2006, through which humanitarian agencies discussed and planned for emergency WASH interventions. The return of peace in the region not only marked the end of the emergency period, it also presented a new dawn, particularly in the area of coordination and

harmonisation of WASH interventions. Lira District provides a good case on the trials and triumphs of coordinating actors in a district transitioning from the emergency to the development phase.

The District Water Officer, Engineer Hudson Omoko recalls that the WASH Cluster, with over 20 actors was very well coordinated by UNICEF and UNOCHA. They were always quick to respond to emergency needs. Prior to the WASH Cluster, the District Disaster Management Committees had been in charge of all coordination. However, when peace returned to the region most actors started leaving the district.

Having been under the emergency phase for nearly two decades, the district did not have much experience in coordination. They had to realign themselves to focus on coordinating the actors that had remained in the district.

During the months that the district was operating without a coordination platform, some things were going amiss. For example:

1. It was not clear who was doing what in the district.
2. Some humanitarian agencies left the district without informing anyone.
3. Some agencies stopped operating but kept office premises in the district, while others continued to work without reporting their activities.
4. Some took advantage of the void and hurriedly did shoddy work on water and sanitation projects.
5. There was constant movement of partners and beneficiaries with the latter mainly returning to their pre-war homes
6. The period was also characterised by poor record keeping and lack of close supervision by district authorities.

In October 2010, the Lira District Water Office (DWO) working with Technical Support Unit (TSU2), Sustainable Water Services at Scale (Triple-S) Project and other actors revived the Lira District Water and Sanitation Coordination Committee (DWSCC). The process was spearheaded by Triple-S, a learning initiative that seeks to address challenges constraining the sustainability of rural water services and recognises that coordination of actors is one of those key challenges.

“When Triple-S came into the district in 2010, we put our heads together and we convened the first meeting where we shared ideas with everyone. We discussed with partners on the need to transition from emergency to development and the need to follow set standards,” Engineer Omoko recalls.

In the beginning, Triple-S served as the Secretariat of the DWSCC, undertaking major coordination activities like mobilisation of members, compilation and dissemination of minutes, following up of resolutions, formation and updating of the committee database, and organising learning events. But once the DWSCC was firmly established, Triple-S handed over to the District Water Office, whose mandate it is to coordinate the committee. Since then, the committee has held quarterly meetings, as stipulated in the Ministry guidelines and the District Implementation Manual. Only in 2015 has the DWSCC reduced the number of meetings to one every two quarters, owing to steady improvement in the district and scaling down or exit of non-government actors.

The benefits of effective WASH coordination

The biggest achievement arising from the revival of coordination in Lira district is the creation of a forum where all actors can meet and discuss issues of WASH. With such a forum it is possible to know who is undertaking which intervention in the district. This reduces concentration and duplication of efforts and resources and has ensured equity in allocation of services. It ensures that actors’ efforts are directed exactly where they are most required. The DWSCC platform has also led to improved reporting and compilation of more accurate data. All of this enables better planning for WASH services in the district.

Improved coordination in the district has also increased stakeholders’ willingness to improve service delivery. Because of the open information sharing in the DWSCC meetings, partners are more eager to report about their interventions in the districts so that they are not viewed as “not performing”. Therefore actors put effort in improving their interventions so that they can share confidently in the coordination meeting, and also have something to show during the field learning visits in which all actors participate.

Key actors are now abreast with developments in the sector while also the target communities have become more aware of their needs and responsibilities. Through the DWSCC the SCWSCC, sector actors are constantly reminded of and held accountable for their roles in the sector. Coordination especially at sub county level has ensured greater involvement of lower-level actors like hand pump mechanics, Water User Committees, and community leaders. Resultantly, there is better understanding of roles that different leaders have to play to ensure sustainable provision of WASH services. There is greater sensitization of community

members for example about their O&M roles. All of this has resulted into improved service delivery in the district. According to the Uganda Water and Environment Sector Performance Report, access to water in Lira district has improved from 64% in 2010 to 90% in 2014. Functionality has improved from 74% in 2010 to 82%, which is comparable to the national average of 84%.

Even the Lira District Local Government leadership has thrown its full weight behind the revival of the DWSCC. For example, the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) is the one who chairs the quarterly coordination meeting. Technical personnel like the District Education Officer and the Director of District Health are all part of the committee. The District Chairman, the Resident District Commissioner and the Chairperson of the Works and Technical Committee are also active members of the coordination committee.

The DWSCC has placed a lot of emphasis on WASH sector learning, which has been effectively embedded in the committee meeting agenda. Meetings are organised to cover two days. Day one is for field visits where members go to see exactly what interventions and innovations have been implemented by different actors. Day two is dedicated to discussion of findings from the field and further sharing about what the members are planning to do.

The very first learning events organised under the DWSCC framework resulted in the affirmation of the DWSCC itself and the introduction of the sub county level water and sanitation coordination committees. The District Water Officer (DWO) with support from key WASH actors including Triple-S, Technical Support Unit 2 (TSU2) and SNV, organised learning visits to Amuria District and to Logiri Sub-County in Arua district. In Amuria District (Eastern Uganda) members of the Lira DWSCC learnt about effective WASH coordination at district level. In Logiri Sub-County, the Lira District extension workers learnt more about water and sanitation coordination at district and sub-county level. In fact, after the visit to Logiri, sub county level WASH coordination was initiated.

Through the learning approach partners have continuously identified, documented and shared innovations around WASH service delivery. Together, the DWSCC members have often discussed and endorsed innovations that are meant to improve service delivery. Some of the new approaches and innovations jointly agreed to be scaled up include: establishment of the district Hand Pump Mechanics Association (HPMA) to ensure timely assessment and repair of non-functional sources; establishment of the Sub County Water Supply and Sanitation Boards (SWSSBs) to professionalise community based management of water facilities; formation of source-level loan schemes which encourage water users to pay their monthly fees;

The DWSCC has also resulted into shared responsibility between WASH actors in the district. Because of the information sharing and joint planning, actors are able to each contribute resources to ensure that joint activities are undertaken successfully. For example, the field learning visits are facilitated with resources pooled by all partners. Together they raise resources for fuel, facilitation of resource persons, documentation, payment for meeting venues...among other things. A Google group was also formed to ease communication and information sharing between members.

Overall, the revival and continued improvement of district WASH coordination in Lira has contributed to improved access to and sustainability of services through: -.greater interest and commitment of all key actors; equity in allocation of services across the district; greater participation of water users especially in operation and maintenance; support from district local government technical and political leaders. All of this has resulted into improved service delivery in the district. Coverage has improved from 64% in 2010 to over 90% in 2014. Functionality has improved from 74% in 2010 to 82%, which is comparable to the national average of 84% (Sector Performance Report, 2013/14).

Challenges

One of the key challenges is that some WASH partners, and their target beneficiaries alike, are still stuck in the emergency phase. For example beneficiaries were used to receiving humanitarian aid for all their needs, including water and sanitation. Humanitarian agencies were always on hand to provide and maintain water sources. To most of the actors and the beneficiaries, transition to the development phase did not come easily. The district still has to shrug off this challenge of dependency syndrome.

Secondly, a number of WASH stakeholders and beneficiaries do not follow service delivery guidelines stipulated in policy documents issued by the Ministry of Water and Environment such as the District Implementation Manual. For a while, divergent mandates, strategies and approaches led to uncoordinated implementation of WASH interventions and scattered results. The DWSCC has changed this trend.

While the coordination meetings are called regularly, some sector actors have not been participating. Continued inequality in the distribution of actors and interventions across the districts is yet another

challenge. In order to attain total equity, it is important for all areas of the district to be served. Effective coordination and harmonisation is a first step to attain equity. The DWO is already compiling a comprehensive database of who does what in the district.

It is also worth noting that the district water office is understaffed and unable to reach every part of the district. This is attributed to the limited funding of coordination activities. The District Water Officer notes that overall funding for the sector is also shrinking and this definitely impacts on how coordination is done at district level. In the face of inadequate financial and human resources, the Technical Support Unit (TSU) is already focusing on building the capacity of extension staff so that they can carry out coordination and harmonisation activities at sub-county level.

Change of district leadership also affects coordination efforts. Recently at the beginning of 2015, the leadership of the district administration was changed. The former Chief Administration Officer (CAO) who was very supportive of the DWSCC was transferred to another district. Additionally, sub county and parish chiefs were also reshuffled. The new district leadership is yet to fully understand and appreciate the importance of the DWSCC. At sub county level, the movement of chiefs from one area to another also created some setbacks, especially since all sub counties were at different levels of progress in terms of stakeholder coordination.

After nearly five years of effective coordination, some of the WASH stakeholders are leaving the district. There is the general impression that Lira district has now fully shaken off the key effects of the war and is now back on its feet and on a steady development course. As such, many actors have scaled down their activities or closed offices in the district. The few remaining actors, especially NGOs are not able to raise enough resources to conduct regular coordination activities. For that reason, the frequency of coordination meetings has reduced from four to two a year. This is a double-edged development. On the one hand it is good that the district has attained that perceived level of independence within a few years. On the other hand, it is a challenge that only about five NGOs have remained to work with the DLG, yet there are still gaps to address in WASH.

Key lessons learnt

1. Coordination and harmonisation lead to systematic and agreed approaches to WASH service delivery, whereby all actors' efforts are directed to areas where they are most required.
2. In order to improve service delivery, WASH actors at all levels should be effectively mobilised and coordinated so that they each play their roles in contribution to a common vision.
3. Transition from an emergency to a development context need not be a daunting process. If each actor plays their roles as prescribed, post war districts can be supported to get back on their feet and provide WASH services to the people who need them.
4. The involvement of district technical and political leadership is key to ensure effective coordination, coherence and cohesion of WASH actors.

Recommendations

- It has been noted that divergent mandates, strategies and approaches lead to uncoordinated implementation of WASH interventions and scattered results. There is need to sensitise non-government actors about the guidelines so that everyone reads from the same page. The DWSCC provides an opportunity for all actors to develop joint strategies.
- In the face of inadequate funding and human resource capacity, there is need to focus on building the capacity of extension staff so that they can carry out coordination activities at sub county level.
- It is important to retain the quarterly schedule of DWSCC meetings. Partners should therefore integrate coordination activities in their plans and budgets. This will provide for sustained information sharing; better planning and ultimately improved WASH services.
- Whenever district leadership is changed, WASH actors should take steps to give the incoming leaders orientation about WASH sector in order to secure the leaders' interest and buy-in.

Conclusion

Coordination and harmonisation is a continuous effort. But in Lira district, the DWO notes that they aspire to reach a situation where every partner knows and plays their role. *"If we all know our roles other issues will be easy to address. Through coordination we should be able to put our heads together, identify and agree on the needs at community level. We should also put the issue of sustainability of WASH into*

consideration. Together we should aim at universal coverage and 100% functionality, because everyone needs water,” Engineer Omoko concludes.

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Note/s

The revival of coordination in Lira district was spearheaded by Triple-S Initiative, an initiative of IRC – International Water and Sanitation Centre.

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