

Realising the human right to water, sanitation and hygiene: lessons from Southern Africa

A human rights-based approach to water, sanitation, and hygiene

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WaterAid launched the 'Human Rights-Based Approach Action Learning Initiative' in June 2013, in which eight country programmes began work on projects developed and run according to the principles of a human rights-based approach. This approach to development centres on international human rights standards and interventions are directed towards the promotion and protection of these rights.



Women from area 23 in Lilongwe, dancing with visitors from WaterAid. Photo: WaterAid/ Dennis Lupenga.

In July 2010, the United Nations explicitly recognised the human right to water and sanitation, and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realisation of all other human rights. Similarly, WaterAid has put human rights at the centre of its own global strategy for 2015–2020. The following case studies from Malawi and

Madagascar—part of WaterAid’s Action Learning Initiative—shed light on what a human rights-based approach to Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) looks like in practice.

Community mobilisation: the Mpira Balaka Water Scheme in Malawi

The Mpira Balaka Water Scheme, in Balaka District of Malawi, presents a clear example of how individuals’ rights to water can be eroded because of poor policies and dysfunctional institutions. The Mpira Balaka scheme was constructed between 1987 and 1992, targeting a population of 360,000 people across the districts of Balaka, Mangochi, Ntcheu and Neno. Communities were required to contribute to the construction of the scheme by digging trenches, with all community members set daily targets for excavation. In return, the Government provided water from the scheme free of charge.



Women, girls and livestock from surrounding villages accessing water from the school borehole, Mgoma Primary School, Dumba village, Nsanje, Malawi. Photo: WaterAid/ Dennis Lupenga.

However, the ability of rural communities to access this water began to be eroded in 1993, when the Government diverted a proportion of the scheme’s water to meet the needs of the growing township of Balaka, without providing an alternative source of water for communities in the rural areas. Subsequently, because of the World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programme introduced in 1981, the Government was ‘coerced’ into relinquishing control of the scheme and established the Mpira Balaka Water Trust to take over its operation and maintenance. This transition

further eroded rural communities’ access to water. Firstly, they were now required to pay a fee for water they received. Secondly, the transition in the management of the scheme was not accompanied by awareness raising or capacity building, and as such the newly established trust could not effectively manage its operations.

When WaterAid and our partner, the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), began working with these communities in 2013, more than 150,000 citizens who had contributed to the construction of the scheme had no access to water. The reasons for this were varied, but can be summarised by two main barriers: (i) the scheme was being badly mismanaged by the Mpira Balaka Water Trust; and (ii) the communities felt disillusioned and lacked the confidence to question those in positions of authority whose duty it was to safeguard their access to water.



WaterAid and NICE employed a 'citizen action initiative', which focused on promoting citizens' human right to water. The initiative invested time in understanding the experiences of the community members both past and present and worked with communities to identify the various stakeholders in the scheme, and their respective roles, interests, and power.

Rhoda Sankhani, in front of a water point, Matewere village, Machinga, Malawi.
Photo: WaterAid/ Dennis Lupenga.

A number of media clinics were conducted with communities, documentaries were broadcast on television and radio, during the 2014 election, and the 'Keep Your Promise' campaign was launched to directly target politicians and government officials. The campaign received the support of Shanil Dzimbiri, a local MP and former First Lady of Malawi. Finally, having raised the profile of the issue, 'interface meetings' were held to bring together MPs, councillors, water boards, Mpira Balaka Water Trust, government officials, traditional authorities, and local civil society organisations.

Through these meetings, the stakeholders discussed the challenges faced and decided collectively on the way forward. As a result of the intervention, a joint action plan was developed by the various stakeholders to tackle the challenges faced by the scheme. Community members became better organised and more confident to demand their rights to water, and the Mpira Balaka Water Trust developed a greater appreciation of the need for accountability to community. Ultimately, these changes led to 53,000 citizens regaining access to water through the Mpira Balaka scheme.

Disability and WASH: implementing the rights agenda in Madagascar

People with disabilities in Madagascar, as in many other countries in the region, have disproportionately low levels of access to WASH. This is despite the fact that the Government of Madagascar has developed a National Plan of Inclusion for People with Disabilities, which specifically references WASH access. Awareness amongst policy-makers of the rights of people with disabilities is therefore not a major obstacle. Instead, it is the limited implementation of accessibility standards that is denying people with a disability their rights to WASH.



Grandma Razafindrasoa, drinking safe, clean water in her village in Andranomalaza. Photo: WaterAid/ Ernest Randriarimalala.



Girls from Belavabary village dancing to celebrate the water arriving in water point, Moramanga district, Alaotra Mangoro region, Madagascar. Photo: WaterAid/ Ernest Randriarimalala.

To tackle this issue, WaterAid partnered with the Platform of the Federations of People with Disabilities in Madagascar (PFPH) – a group of more than 300 associations that seek to promote the inclusion and full participation of persons with all types of disabilities.

The first step, undertaken in August 2012, was to work with excluded groups in local associations, as well as with local authorities, to analyse the nature of power relationships and the blockages which were undermining the implementation of accessibility standards. This analysis was used to identify capacity gaps in both groups, and allowed a capacity-building plan to be tailored to meet these gaps. For local associations, this included training, technical assistance, and the provision of equipment with a focus on building the groups' ability to defend their rights. For local authorities, training was provided on appropriate support mechanisms for different types of disability and support provided in understanding the policies and regulations which govern accessibility standards – the focus was on building the local authorities' ability to put these standards into practice.



Dadabe Rakotoarivony, with local communities dancing to celebrate water arriving in water point number three in Belavabary village, Madagascar. Photo: WaterAid/ Ernest Randriarimalala.

Following this, capacity-building, local associations were supported to identify specific actions that would increase their visibility and encourage local authorities to prioritise the realisation of their rights. Although there has not yet been sufficient progress on specific WASH issues, these are now being taken forward with confidence: lessons are being disseminated and efforts to promote the implementation of the National Inclusion Plan are ongoing.

Lessons learned

- Good-quality **analysis** is central to a rights-based approach. Continuous analysis was a key feature of both projects, and is a prerequisite to achieving the systemic changes that are needed to allow human rights to be realised.
- Increasing the **confidence** of community members was an important step in both cases. Communities need to feel secure in the ability to question decision-makers and to publicly demand their rights.
- Building the **capacity** of duty bearers—such as local authorities or service providers should not be overlooked, and is a vital step in developing sustainable services that protect the rights of all.
- **Awareness raising** is a necessary step, but in isolation is not sufficient to bring about the realisation of the human right to WASH. Greater awareness should be augmented through processes such as 'interface meetings', where stakeholders can discuss their different perception of issues and forge joint action to overcome common challenges. The **right partnerships** can make all the difference when working with communities and decision-makers.



Cynthia, washing her hands at one of the new six water points in Antsesika village, Madagascar. WaterAid/ Ernest Randriarimalala.

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