

# Putting our heads together

Debating the potential strengths of partnerships for WASH



**A report designed to encourage discussions around NGO-government-private sector-community partnerships, and with a focus on a WaterAid-woreda level government collaboration in Benishangul-Gumuz – one of Ethiopia’s most marginalised regions.**



## Putting our heads together

### Why this report?

NGO-government-private sector-community partnerships have great potential to carry out innovative, effective, cost-efficient and sustainable development work. Such partnerships also risk being over-complex, inefficient and conflict-ridden. Partnership is a process and needs working at. By focusing on a water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) partnership in a remote region of Ethiopia, WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE) seeks in this report to share lessons learnt and encourage debate amongst colleagues.

Inserted in the report is a page of questions you may find useful for workshops. The reverse side provides space to write your views. If you would like to send them to WAE they can be included in future WAE publications on partnership.

## Life on the edge

Situated 800km to the north-west of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, the National Regional State of Benishangul-Gumuz (BG) occupies a not-insignificant percentage of the total land mass of the country (50,380km<sup>2</sup> or 5%). However, lying so far from the centre and sharing a long stretch of border with Sudan, it has been an area severely marginalised by its geography and also in investment and development terms. Although there are road and air links into the regional capital Assosa (see maps, page 5), around 79% of the ethnically diverse population lives in extremely remote, sparsely populated rural communities and subsists predominantly from small-scale agriculture and small-scale traditional gold mining.

Now named an "emerging region", together with similarly distant parts of the country, BG is receiving greater focus from the government

as it aims to bring such populations back from "life on the edge" with equity of services and opportunity.

### A challenge within a challenge

Amongst the many challenges facing Benishangul-Gumuz is the seriously inadequate water and sanitation provision for the isolated region's 580,000 or so people. The Strategic Plan of the Water, Mines and Energy Resources Development Bureau (WMERDB) in 2003 indicated that water supply coverage in BG is 32.18% and sanitation 20%. Various other reports on the region back up such statistics, suggesting that 84% of rural people defecate in the open, and that around 29% of urban and 71% of rural households fetch their water from unsafe sources.

The challenge represented by WASH provision in BG would always be significant, but there lies an additional challenge within the fairly recent strategy of government decentralisation. Through this local government offices are given full responsibility (and the budget) to organise their own service provision. Such regional – even woreda-level – empowerment may be good in the long term, but the transition in the short and medium term can be hard. Most notably in marginalised parts of the country, the fact may be that government staff simply do not have sufficient skills, budget or resources to manage the scale of the job.

### Going it alone?

But the government is not alone. Community, NGO and private sector can be and are involved in WASH too. This report shares lessons from such a partnership in BG, and invites readers to join in the debate it generates.

## Acronyms and local terms

**BG** – Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State  
**BOPED** – Bureau of Planning and Economic Development  
**CHP** – Community Hygiene Promoter (WAE-instigated)  
**EcoSan** – latrine system using faeces later on as fertiliser  
**EOC/DICAC** – Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and InterChurch Aid Commission  
**ESRDF** – Ethiopian Social Rehabilitation Development Fund  
**HEW** – Health Extension Worker (government)  
**IRC** – International Rescue Committee  
**IWRM** – Integrated Water Resources Management  
**kebele** – village (group of Peasant Associations)  
**LMDGI** – Localising Millennium Development Goals Initiative  
**MDG** – Millennium Development Goals  
**NGO** – non-governmental organisation  
**PA** – Peasant Association  
**PHAST** – participatory hygiene and sanitation transformation  
**PRA** – participatory rural appraisal  
**TPL** – traditional pit latrine  
**WA** – WaterAid  
**WAE** – WaterAid Ethiopia  
**WAE-BG** – WaterAid Ethiopia Benishangul-Gumuz sub office  
**WASH** – Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene  
**WASH Boards** – previously termed Water Committees now changed to WASH Boards. The name change reflects a change in their roles and responsibilities.  
**WB** – World Bank  
**WMERDB** - Water, Mines and Energy Resources Development Bureau  
**woreda** – Ethiopian administrative district made up of several kebeles

## Partners in WASH

Working with the Ethiopian government is not new for WAE. Broadly, NGOs work to complement government's own WASH efforts in some way and each of WAE's projects across the country require permission, liaison and collaboration with government staff at higher levels and also at the grassroots: with kebele chairmen, health workers, teachers, and so on. Working in direct partnership with community members themselves has always been central to WAE. WAE's stance on local involvement and ownership in WASH is best expressed on page 4 here, with an extract from its Guiding Beliefs and Values. Building partnerships with the private sector is a newer direction for WAE. This shift is in recognition of the scale of need in the WASH sector, and the urgency for national and local businesses to invest if country-wide water and sanitation coverage are to be achieved and maintained.

### A new kind of partnership

What is different about the situation in Benishangul-Gumuz is the type of partnership that WAE and the local government have established together. As an international NGO working in Ethiopia, WA usually links up with a local NGO as its implementing partner for a WASH project, and WAE has long-standing relationships with several such NGOs across the country. In BG, uniquely, the implementation work of the WASH project is shared between WAE and the woreda-level government itself, with WAE playing a strong supporting role. This partnership is discussed further on page 3. Page 5 provides an over-view of the project itself.



### Background

#### A melting pot of cultures at the western border of Ethiopia

On the border with Sudan, Benishangul-Gumuz is an isolated but also unique and fascinating region. Several groups of people are indigenous to the area - the Berta, Gumuz, Shinasha, Mao and Komo. Since a generation or so they were joined by settlers from other parts of Ethiopia, including Oromo, Tigre and Amhara families. The area is potentially fertile with rich soil, a lot of flat land, a long rainy season, many avocado and mango trees and numerous gold deposits. However the reality is different. Being far from the capital most people have had little exposure to new knowledge; government and private sector investment has been limited; the soil is poorly protected and open to erosion; livestock ownership is low, and poverty levels high. Some people have close links to Sudan, through culture, the Muslim faith and trading carried out by men. Responsible for most farming tasks, domestic work and small-scale gold mining, women carry an exceptionally heavy burden.

## Starting to consider partnership...what does it mean to us?

*partnership, noun*

1. a relationship in which two or more people or groups operate together as partners.

2. the status of a partner  
• offered her a partnership.

3. a business or other enterprise jointly owned or run by two or more people, etc.

### definition

Chambers English Dictionary

## A unique opportunity

In the past WAE has tried working closely with government on WASH activities but in general this did not go well - hence the strategy to seek implementing partners amongst local NGOs. With a shortage of specialised WASH expertise within Ethiopia WAE even helped establish two NGOs for the purpose: WaterAction and the Water Unit at the EOC-DICAC.

Becoming aware of the severe water and sanitation situation in the emerging regions of Ethiopia, WAE decided to make it a part of its new strategy to start work in one of them. A request from the Regional President of BG to WAE stressing the urgent needs started a process of visits, baseline surveys and agreements. However there were no WASH-related NGO partners in BG that WAE could work with. Rather than see this as a barrier it became an opportunity: to pilot a *new* way of working in partnership with government and this within the new decentralised framework. As a large organisation purely dedicated to WASH provision, could WAE bring its experience to the woreda and build the capacity of local staff to implement improved WASH work themselves? WAE would offer to work with government colleagues to identify possible gaps in their skills base or weaknesses in systems. Through training they would work together to overcome all kinds of blockages. These might be: good staff limited by a lack of exposure to new ideas, offices struggling to implement new decentralised policies, or places where the chain of information from the centre to the regions had broken down. For WAE the BG government partnership would provide a unique understanding of

how government works and how NGOs and government might start to complement each other better.

## Where capacity meets practice

Early meetings revealed the real capacity limitations at woreda level in BG. Therefore WAE chose to establish a small satellite team in the region with a main office in Assosa housed within the Government Bureau of Health and a smaller base in Menge town at the centre of Menge woreda where the WASH activities would be carried out. In brief, in the rural areas WAE would implement water and sanitation and liaise with government staff such as Health Extension Workers (HEW). Meanwhile in Menge town implementation would be handed over to the government staff as a pilot project. Building the capacity of government colleagues was established as an integral part of the WASH project. This would co-exist with the usual practical work of delivering water supply, training for latrine construction, community mobilisation for labour, and the establishment of WASH Boards. Thus the community partnership for WAE would follow the successful model of years of WASH projects. The final player in the partnership for BG was the private sector. Although WAE found no significant local investors involved in WASH they did find an underused resource in the form of "Hiwot Hand Pump Installation and Spring Development Association": an association of artisans originally trained through ESRDF funding. More about Hiwot, and about Tatek Lesera, a later private player, can be found on pages 6-17 where numerous aspects of BG's partnership are considered, and grouped under questions for clarity.

## ..Debating partnership...



- Local people should make informed choices about the water and sanitation services that best suit their needs and, where appropriate, should be involved in the building and ongoing management of their projects
- Local organisations, which understand local needs, are best placed to implement projects to ensure long-term, sustainable change in a way that champions the voices of poor people
- With ultimate responsibility for water and sanitation services local and national governments must be involved in decisions concerning their provision.

**Extract from WaterAid's Guiding Beliefs and Values, 2008**

## The BG WASH project partnership members

From the earliest days in 2003/2004 when the BG WASH project was first conceived and baseline studies carried out a great variety of individuals and groups have been involved. These have included WA-UK, WAE head office staff, consultants and BG government staff.

For the duration of the project (2004-2009) a **core partnership** has been established consisting of:

- the local community (including WASH Boards)
- Menge woreda staff (including HEWs and seconded sanitarians)
- WAE BG staff

Based in Assosa office:

1 Project Co-ordinator (Sanitarian)

1 Finance/Admin Officer

Based in Menge office:

1 Geologist, 2 Drivers, 78 CHPs

- Hiwot members (14)

A woreda **WASH forum** has been set up for representatives from the core partnership to meet monthly. Oxfam GB staff are also members as they are working in Menge too (on alternative basic education and water supply for schools). Individuals attend from:

- Woreda Administration
- Woreda Water Desk
- Woreda Information and Communications Office
- Woreda Education and Capacity Building Office
- Woreda Agriculture and Rural Development Office
- Regional Finance and Economic Office
- WAE BG staff
- Oxfam GB staff
- WASH Board (community)

## Background

### The project – a brief snapshot

The BG WASH project is centred around Menge town 58km north-east of Assosa town. Some of the project areas, however, are at the furthest reach of Menge woreda and some 125km from Assosa. The region is characterised by bamboo, forest and extensive fertile land. The main crops are sorghum, maize and millet, but poor farming technology means output is low. Although regional water coverage prior to the project averaged at 32.18% (WMERDB, 2003) and sanitation around 20% or lower (both well below the national average), in Alhamer, one of the project kebeles, access to safe sanitation was at 0%. The main practical interventions are to increase water supply coverage, increase water technology options, reduce incidence of diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases and increase sanitation coverage. In brief, WAE employed their increasingly standard mode of working with the community: mobilising villagers for building work, employing Community Health Promoters (CHPs) to move house-to-house for hygiene promotion,

setting up school sanitation clubs and forming WASH Boards for long-term management. Readers can request earlier WAE reports for more detail on such methods.

What makes the BG project particularly unique, of course, is the close partnership (upon which this report focuses), and in particular WAE's role in capacity building with their woreda-level government staff colleagues. Other capacity building work focuses on the Hiwot – the association of artisans and the potential private sector partners in the region. The project also involves a wider advocacy component, working with government at all levels and also with other NGOs and donor agencies. Returning to the practical work, aspects that are especially interesting in the BG project include the introduction of rope pump technology as seen on an exposure trip to Malawi and Mozambique; and the piloting of eco-san whereby human faeces is safely composted and later used as a fertiliser. Several of these project components will be discussed in detail over the following pages.



**Putting marginalised areas on the map:** the blue squares show (very approximately) the area discussed. Left: map of Ethiopia showing Benishangul-Gumuz's position and, right: a closer view of where this region is situated.

## Question 1.

*How can we ensure that partnerships involving more players do not create divisions but enable unified outcomes?*

### A snapshot of the WAE-government “exchange of services” that the BG partnership involves

**Local government (mostly at woreda level) provides support to WAE as follows:**

- support in carrying out baseline surveys
- community mobilisation and translating
- coordination re. land use, site selection, prioritisation between woredas
- supports schemes for when WAE phases out
- occasional vehicle loan
- secondment of sanitation staff
- region hosts WAE office in Assosa compound
- support for training WASH Boards
- sharing of resources e.g. training manuals and toolkits for Hiwot artisans
- region and woreda help with Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
- region provides GPS equipment and expert

**WAE provides:**

- training to woreda staff, e.g. sanitation club formation, finance, water quality testing, PHAST, PRA, gender, citizen’s engagement
- knowledge-sharing, e.g. WASH Boards system, exchange visits
- occasional vehicle loan

*BG and Question 1.*

## The sum of its parts

When multiple actors are involved in a partnership (as in BG) the ideal is surely to create a “whole that is greater than the sum of its parts”: where difference is a source of creativity and not a source of tension or even conflict. The reality of working with our differences inevitably throws up as many challenges as it does opportunities. This section considers some of the practical scenarios the BG WASH partnership is working with as it strives for excellence, and asks readers to consider how we can work better within partnerships that bring different working cultures together for a common aim.

### Streamlining different systems

WAE has worked with Menge woreda’s Health Office from the beginning of the project. The partnership agreement requested that the woreda second health

professionals to the project. WAE would then take the leading role in the implementation work but pay “top-ups” to the seconded staff – money additional to their normal salary in view of the extra work they would undertake. After a year WAE decided to test the partnership further, hoping to learn too how similar collaborations might work better in the future. WAE started by transferring health-related budget into a woreda separate account and then occasionally monitoring progress. Meanwhile WAE requested that the Health Office took full responsibility for the implementation of sanitation and hygiene activities in two kebeles (Kudyu and Belmuga), and also carry out all the financial reporting. This move gave more ownership to the office. As one office staff person said: “The direct implementation is a good experience as we own the plan and this gives us opportunities to learn

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## *Related issues for consideration*

### **One size should fit all?**

In BG, the partnership model is not identical across the project. In Menge's rural kebeles WAE uses the Hiwot artisans for construction work, it employs CHPs, it manages the finances and all work is overseen by WAE's Project Coordinator. Meanwhile the "hardware" of water supply for Menge's town kebeles is provided by WAE, but the sanitation and hygiene work was handed over to the Health Office, with funding from WAE given directly to the office. Are varied models within a project a means to test different capacities, reveal gaps, enable learning and increase flexibility, or do they create confusion and conflict?

### **Solving funding delays**

Why do woreda pool funds not work smoothly as yet? For example, if the Water sector is ready to purchase cement to start construction, it has to wait for Education to request the release of funds for books etc. Is the flaw in the system or due to insufficient staff capacity to respond to individual requests?

### **When conflicts spill over**

What can be done when conflicts between groups in a region have the potential to damage a project and also create challenges within the partnership? In BG, at present, conflict in some kebeles of Menge woreda is impacting negatively on the entire project's progress. As the partnership embraces many players - government, NGOs, private sector and community - WAE's neutral non-profit-making, non-political status does not stop it being barred from the kebeles as well.

## *BG and Question 1, continued*

how we can make changes if provided with resources, and learn from actual implementation." They also commented that they could lead the process without "political influence": a reference to a problem in BG that some administrators are elected to roles for which they are not professionally qualified.

However when the report research team visited BG, both WAE and the Health Office staff said the new decentralised systems needed improvement. They explained that from the outset fund transfers from WAE required a lot of paper work from the woreda Health Office. Even once the money was transferred to the office's account, the bureaucracy involved in any procurement delayed actual work. Government policies request money from donors goes into a woreda pool fund that is co-ordinated by their office of financial and economic development. Some NGOs still prefer a separate account with the woreda, or fund and carry out all implementation themselves. WAE absolutely supports the woreda-level remit to decide on local funding allocations and advocates linked plans and budget, not the creation of parallel processes, but it sees the system is not working to its best. Because the pool fund system requires all sectors to produce funding requests at the same time (see box left), budget for single planned activities can be held up. It was this situation in Menge that forced WAE to take back the woreda's implementation role in the two kebeles to try and complete the work on time. The joint work also created staff tensions: finance staff believing they should receive salary

"top-ups", while for WAE only the seconded sanitation staff had new responsibilities that merited higher pay. Thus the 2-kebele situation highlights the way different working cultures can impede progress and even create division when the vision is actually a shared one. Looking back, could either WAE or the woreda have found ways to improve systems earlier on and handle salary issues better?

### **Reading from the same text?**

The challenges faced in BG highlight the need for all those working in partnerships to analyse very closely certain assumptions that they might make. Individuals or groups may struggle to work well together due to discrepancies in their skills level, in the flexibility or inflexibility of the systems they work with, or due to having different levels of commitment. In trying to ensure the sustainability of the project and build local capacity, WAE organised training and exposure visits for government employees. However a problem in BG was the fact that the good salary offered was not necessarily sufficient incentive to stay in a remote area, with some staff leaving and taking their newly acquired skills elsewhere. Thus WAE faced new recruits needing training in such areas as financial reporting. Meanwhile, there was the issue of unskilled individuals elected to positions when better qualified professionals were available, something both inefficient and demotivating. How can two players, here government and NGO, work with such issues and increase accountability and fairness? And how can we assess the incentives (or disincentives) for motivation in any given case?

## Question 2.

*Should there be a shift in emphasis in the role of NGOs in NGO-government partnerships as regards capacity-building, gap-filling and funding?*

### *Related issues for consideration*

#### **Supporting business?**

Whose capacity are NGOs supposed to build: Government, other NGOs, or even local private sector businesses?

Do non-profit making NGOs really need to support actors whose existence is profit-making? What would be the added value for NGOs as sector players and the community for whom they are working?

This same column on the next page describes two BG-based private sector players WAE has worked with.

### *BG and Question 2.*

## **Building capacity**

From its inception, WAE's way of working has been to work in partnership with community, local NGOs and with government. It also sees its role clearly in building the capacities of community members and implementing partners to ensure the sustainability of projects, and thus essentially multiply its impact within the sector.

Over the last six years the Ethiopian government has been starting off on its decentralisation process. As one of the emerging regions BG faced particular challenges in development work and especially due to capacity limitations amongst government staff. A baseline study conducted in 2004 revealed that 39% of posts in the Regional Water Bureau were vacant. This situation was even more acute at the woreda level. Hence, for WAE the work in BG was an opportunity to pilot a relationship with the woreda level government above all. Project agreements outlined the roles and responsibilities of all partnership members as far as kebele level.

#### **Setting up a base together**

Working in a marginalised region and opening a sub-office was a new move for WAE. In addition, the absence of any local implementing NGO partners required huge investment for WAE. To reduce these costs and also as part of the partnership modality, an office was given to WAE first of all within the Regional Health Bureau and presently with the woreda Water Desk. At the woreda level WAE with Oxfam built an office in Menge town to be shared by WAE, Oxfam and woreda level water and health offices and also the Wash Forum.



#### **Acknowledging skills gaps**

Following the decentralisation process, the BG region started decentralising planning responsibilities. However, the woreda capacity to undertake needs assessment, prepare project plans and proposals and submit budgets was limited. Also, the base line study highlighted an extremely high rate of non-functionality of water supply schemes in the region and very limited availability of spare parts.

All these findings revealed the critical need for capacity building and support to the regional government so it might play its role as a facilitator. The first move by WAE in BG was to arrange an exposure visit for representatives of water and health offices to Malawi and Mozambique to see different WASH technologies used in different countries and the challenges faced by colleagues elsewhere. The visit also helped build relationships within the partnership as it included different partners and WAE staff. Thereafter WAE facilitated a visit to Tanzania

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## Focus on the private sector

### Hiwot – a small success

Hiwot Hand Pump Installation and Spring Development Association, based in Assosa, is an example of successful grassroots private sector involvement in the WASH sector. Since its establishment in 1999, the association has completed more than 100 hand dug wells, pumps and spring developments and 40 rehabilitation projects. It was formed by 20 unemployed men with no previous experience in the sector after they received training from the Ethiopian Social and Rehabilitation Development Fund (ESRDF) and start-up capital. The training and start-up funds together with the existence of client organisations like WAE have helped Hiwot's success.

### Healthy competition

While small actors like Hiwot find it difficult to compete with large firms, some competition is healthy. Following the growth of Hiwot, WAE helped a number of individual masons form the association Tatek Lesera. WAE offered training in hand and rope pump installation and maintenance, VIP latrine construction and financial management. WAE provided start up money, supporting letters and their first small contracts. Today both Hiwot and Tatek Lesera work with WAE and also with other NGOs in the region.

Measurable benefits in BG from the involvement of such small cooperatives are that the price of installing pumps has decreased by one third. Meanwhile clients prefer the small-scale operations, saying they are more responsive, more flexible, produce better work and adapt to local conditions.

## BG and Question 2, continued

for staff from the Regional President's Office, BOPED and the Water Resources Bureau. This trip included regional advocacy meetings around funding for the sector and attending the IWRM workshop. On further assessment of the woreda level capacity needs WAE provided a series of trainings on data collection and analysis. It also provided ongoing support to help woreda staff with modern planning management cycles and processes – all this with the aim to enhance woreda level effectiveness and resource mobilisation, and increase accountability. The training was theoretical but also included practical exercises relating to the formal planning process of the woreda. Training in proposal preparation helped bring government staff from different offices to prepare these together. Following on from this a large regional bazaar was organised to raise funds for the implementation of the different proposals prepared for the region. The capacity building also focuses on helping the government partners understand budget allocation processes. This, WAE believes, helps them see how they can influence the process and attract more money to the WASH sector.

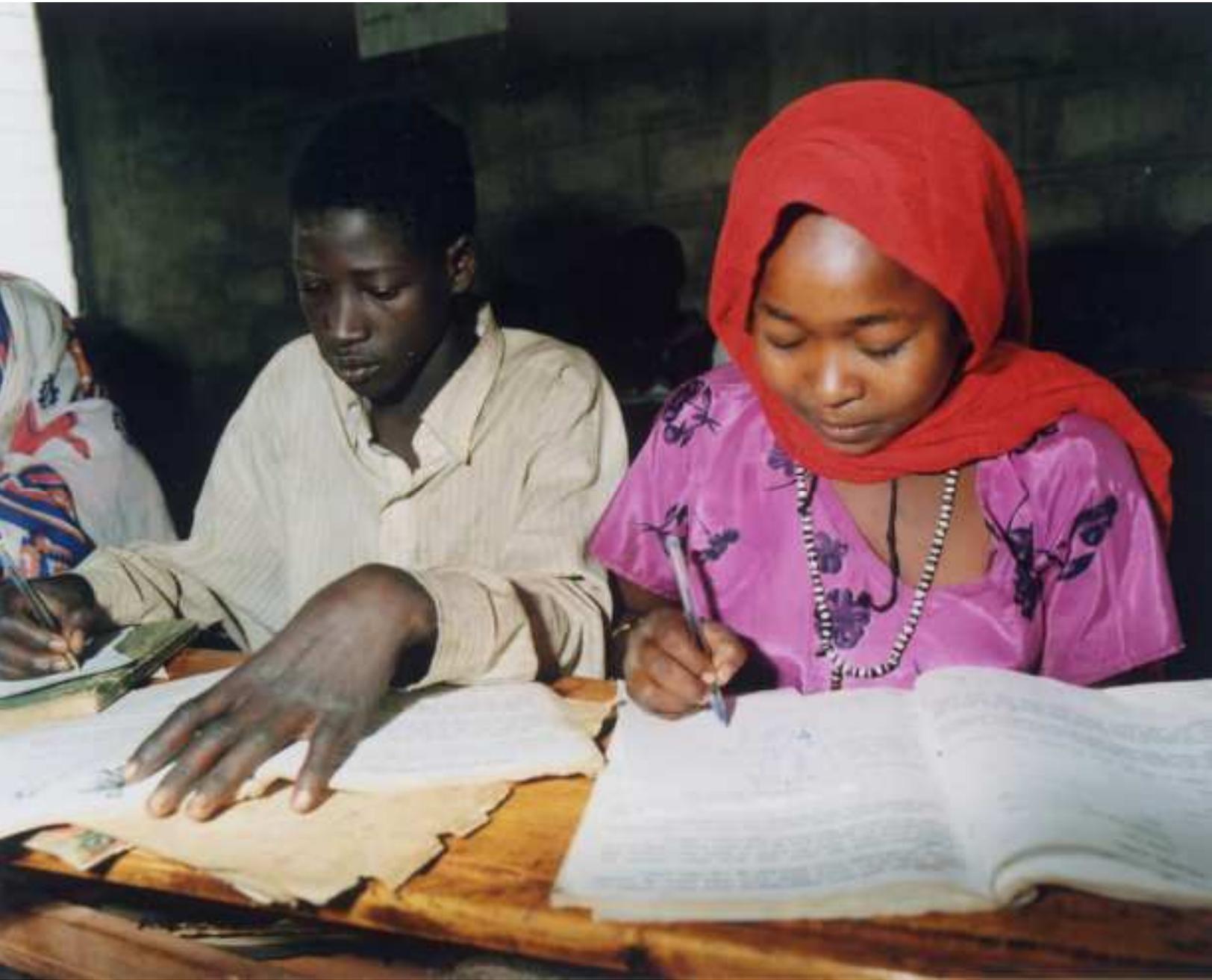
### Involving the private sector

Another issue that makes working in BG challenging is the lack of private sector involvement. Although there is very little participation of private sector in the WASH sector generally, the small-scale nature of the projects in BG mean there is little to attract the profit-making sector to move there from other parts of the country. On the other hand, the only local

cooperative engaged in the water supply sector when WAE first arrived in BG – Hiwot (see left) – was finding it difficult to compete with the few larger contractors due to the capital investment costs required to obtain a construction licence. Acknowledging the importance of the private sector's role in WASH, WAE encouraged Hiwot by giving them small contracts and building their financial capacity through training. Later WAE helped establish a competitor, Tatek Lesera General Construction Association (see left).

### The challenges ahead

The WASH sector in Ethiopia as a whole faces many different challenges. National water supply and sanitation coverage is only 52%, and compounded by the lack of capacity, resource limitations and inadequate sector co-ordination, meeting the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 is likely to be difficult. The fact is a number of NGOs and donors choose to continue focusing on project implementation in order to increase coverage. But surely as a sector we need to focus our efforts on other equally crucial aspects of WASH, e.g. ensuring the sustainability of water supply schemes and within this, address issues such as the availability of spare parts. In considering the challenges ahead the issue of capacity comes up time and again. The sector needs to debate whether a role for NGOs is indeed in capacity building, and if so, how long should they engage in this before moving on? A different view might be that NGO's should limit themselves to funding and implementation only? Is the NGO role as gap-filler or equal player in a wider partnership?



## A good partnership?

**From WAE's perspective some characteristics of a good partnership are:**

- ◆ Shared visions and goals
- ◆ Both parties in the partnership gain, for the ultimate benefit of the poor
- ◆ Mutual respect, trust and understanding
- ◆ Equal footing
- ◆ Compatible approaches and methods
- ◆ Clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- ◆ Good communication
- ◆ Transparency and accountability
- ◆ Long-term and institutional commitment
- ◆ Shared responsibility for nurturing the partnership

### Question 3.

*How can partners work together to improve their communication?*

#### Joined up work in a decentralised Ethiopia?

Undulu kebele Health Clinic are measuring the positive impact of better WASH provision on health. Staff analyse data from the patients treated and keep a record for selected diseases. However, to date the clinic has prepared reports for WAE only and not for the woreda. However if such activities were integrated into the activity plans of the health offices and fed into the woreda database, the information could be a powerful tool – for example in allocating budget for specific priority health problems. Undulu is just one practical example of the need to improve weak links between woreda offices and regional bureaux.

#### Related issues for consideration

#### Communicating well?

As a sector, do we take the trouble to share information with our colleagues about successful innovations we have made that improve communication? Do we miss chances to comment on the work of other actors and influence their work because of lack of communication? Do we communicate in the right language? This may be in terms of information written in English and not a local language, or in terms of having the courage to state things as they really are.

#### BG and Question 3.

### Keeping it flowing

Successful partnerships depend on information flowing correctly. Maintaining good communication in the BG project is especially crucial when individuals may live and work over 100km from other members of the partnership. Things work relatively well in BG, but the three examples on this page show there is still room for improvement.

#### Getting everyone together

One noteworthy achievement in BG is the establishment of a woreda WASH Forum, which meets at the Menge Council office. The forum was set up to support WASH sector coordination after serious gaps in coordination were identified during the baseline survey work in BG.

The forum now includes representatives from government offices and NGOs (see list on page 5) and meets monthly to discuss achievements against the plans of each office. The Office of Finance & Economic Development has the role of giving financial updates on spending and liaises with regional colleagues. The forum has been useful in bringing elected officials to discuss with technical people on development issues and inform the cabinet on strategic directions. It is however unclear whether the forum discusses all development activities in the woreda or just WASH and if discussions are being shared with non-forum members. The fact that minutes are kept in the WAE office also suggests that not all players in the forum are taking it seriously, and begs the question whether the forum would continue to operate after WAE leaves? Nevertheless the WASH forum is unique by giving an opportunity for government to comment on and feed into NGO work, and likewise,

importantly, for NGOs to comment on government work. In other areas where WAE has been working (see *A healthy debate*) NGOs working in neighbouring woredas have not communicated due to the absence of such forums. Even so the Menge WASH Forum does need strengthening. Roles need clarifying, action plans need to be developed and mechanisms found to improve information flow. Forum members might also need training in planning and monitoring to help them be more effective in promoting sector priorities in the woreda and region.

#### The region-woreda gap

WAE is working closely and successfully with the Health Office at the woreda level. Joint activities focus on hygiene and sanitation promotion. This collaboration started with a baseline survey and continued to cover the formation of school sanitation clubs, training of CHPs, water quality testing, and the promotion of latrines (including different latrine options like EcoSan and TPLs).

However it seems that the regional level Health Bureau believes WAE is only focusing on water and not on sanitation, as the WAE total sanitation approach and its intensive hygiene promotion mechanisms are not known by the office. “There is no clear agreement between WAE as we do not plan together. Their reports are sent to the training department in our office which is the office that clarifies roles and responsibilities and the kind of collaboration we need to have. We are asked to comment on WAE plans but we really do not monitor their activities or deal with NGO agreements and contracts”, said Sister Amleher, in Assosa.

## Question 4.

*To what extent can we enable partnerships to be a catalyst for joined-up thinking and learning that requires each player to live up to their own part in the process?*

*BG and Question 4.*

## Joined-up work

Clearly the NGO-government partnership in BG has opened the door for a number of successes; the main one being efficient utilisation of resources. For example, government second staff to WAE projects and the latter pays only a per diem or “top-up”, instead of having to employ staff and pay full salaries. Likewise, government partners and community members have benefited from WAE’s resources, which are exclusively dedicated for capacity building.

Information sharing, learning and adaptation of lessons have also been possible within a relatively short period of time. As in WAE projects, the woreda Water Desk is now integrating cattle troughs as one component of water supply schemes, and the Health Office has adopted EcoSan models in their sanitation activities. Equally,

WAE learnt to use mud blocks for latrine construction from the government and used government structures like schools to promote hygiene and sanitation. Members of teacher-parent associations in schools who served on committees in WAE project areas are now managing and maintaining the schemes. Some teachers have even become responsible for monitoring the impacts of WASH provision on school attendance.

## Living up to our obligations

Much is being achieved in BG, and this demonstrates the way forward to more fruitful joined-up thinking and learning. However the fact remains that it required more energy and commitment from each member of the partnership to fulfil their roles and responsibilities than ever before. No matter how smoothly relationships are running at present, and how well project work is going, unless everyone continues to play their role, then the work, the commitment to the community and future longer term relationships will suffer.

In BG, woreda level commitment and achievement is very strong. Nonetheless, the perception from WAE is that regional offices are not acting at the speed required of them. The fact that very little monitoring is being carried out and no evaluation or feedback given to reports submitted to them might require further discussion to understand the reasons. Is this an instance where all members of the partnership need to acknowledge limitations and find new ways of working, or is this another gap where WAE needs to invest more resources in capacity building?

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## *Related issues for consideration*

### **Whose job is it anyway?**

Whose responsibility is it to ensure that a partnership continues to work in a joined-up way as regards thinking and learning at the day-to-day level, and whose responsibility is it to ensure the learning achieved through capacity building is not lost but institutionalised for the long-term?

If the concept of partnership and the emphasis on capacity building are so key in a project like BG, why are there not professional staff ensuring the smooth running of these processes? If there are professional Geologists and Environmental Health Officers employed, why are professional Liaison or Learning Officers not employed? Do we expect too much from technicians and office heads to manage new functions alongside their work or is it in fact a key part of such a way of working, that everyone sees maintaining the partnership and sharing learning as part of their work – that everyone shares responsibility and a more holistic way of working evolves?

A Liaison Officer could be dedicated to sharing information, following up loose ends and building strong linkages between the different players? Could this make a real difference in collaborations like BG or would the partnership become too dependent on one individual (who might move on) and the working relationships they establish?

What is the best way to institutionalise knowledge?

## *BG and Question 4, continued*

Another issue that has arisen in BG is when staff seconded by government have been pulled out in the middle of the project work. This delays work and WAE has been forced to take up the government's role, even whilst knowing such actions can in one way or another endanger the partnership. Perhaps this means we have to be firmer about certain shared obligations, and formalise them in writing? Is there a case for a legal contract with penalties for non-compliance, even though partnerships need to be based on mutual respect and understanding?

From the government point of view, staff at the Menge Health Office do not feel they have been fully involved in the project planning, although they are making an enormous contribution in implementation. A staff member said, "WAE is a partner and we do things jointly. We spend a considerable amount of time, for example, providing trainings for the project when needed. However, though they share their annual plan with us for our comment and inputs, they don't clearly show our intervention in advance or invite us to plan together".

These situations highlight the need to identify the root cause of any blockages in the partnership. Are they the result of people not fulfilling their role properly, the result of insufficient time or skills, or due to newly introduced systems not quite matching the challenges that exist? And do staff at all levels clearly understand the partnership requirements and agreements?

### **Evaluating learning**

A related issue is whether the



different exposure visits and trainings organised have brought meaningful changes to previous practices? Given the range of training experiences that the government and WAE have shared (see page 6), do we have evidence that learning is adopted and institutionalised? Clearly this is an issue to focus on in final project evaluations, but the report research already highlights areas that need further work as the partnership process continues to evolve – more evidence that partnerships are not static but need constant reassessment and renewed commitments to shared responsibilities and joined-up work.

### **Taking responsibility for ourselves**

A picture of health: hand-washing (previous page) and face-washing (photo above) are crucial for good hygiene. Many people in BG are Muslim and the rituals of their faith mean bathing is a regular habit, but such washing is often more symbolic than effective. The project is training in the need to hand-wash properly with soap (or ash) at the critical times: after using the latrine and emptying a child's potty, and before handling food.

## Question 5.

*How can working in partnership increase the sustainability of WASH activities whilst guarding against any dependency whereby improved systems and capacities decline when one partner moves on?*



### Thinking of the next generation

If BG can attain a good WASH situation then that will be the foundation for better things for the once marginalised region. Can it fulfil its potential as a fertile agricultural area and seek a development and investment route that is environmentally sustainable and includes all fairly?

*BG and Question 5.*

## The long view

One of the potential advantages of working in partnership is to increase the sustainability of the project that partners are collaborating on. Experiences and skills gained through the partnership are assumed to sustain and facilitate future development interventions. However, whether this happens or not depends on a variety of situations, and on the actors themselves. Some examples from BG relating to sustainability of project work and partnership are highlighted below, to help facilitate discussion on this crucial subject.

### On target?

The Localising the Millennium Development Goals Initiative (LMDGI) was set up by WaterAid to help localise and clarify woreda-level targets to reach the national Millennium Development Goals. In BG, the process is led by the WAE-BG staff with long-term training focusing on strengthening the capacities of government staff to understand MDG targets and processes. In particular lessons were brought from other WA country programmes and a consultant was hired by WAE to give six months' dedicated time to LMDGI issues. As well as helping woreda level staff familiarise themselves with modern planning processes, the training has brought together government employees from different sectors to plan and mobilise resources for the region. Such initiatives should help them meet frequently, prepare joint plans and share resources. The question is, how good are any of us at maintaining the relevant skills in ourselves and giving priority

(personally and organisationally) to continue existing initiatives, as well as actively engage in similar activities in the future? Would such initiatives as the LMDGI be worth replicating or scaling up? In BG this would mean replicating in woredas beyond Menge, but readers may consider the value of this in their own area or at a national level.

### Management for the future

As part of the strategy for sustainability in BG, community members elected representatives to WASH Boards, which were then established in Menge woreda and Undulu. Board members are trained in financial management and in the technical maintenance of schemes. Part of their training involved a visit to Oromia Region to learn from Hitosa - one of the oldest WAE projects and one that has been successfully managed by the community for over 10 years. WAE then employed trained technicians in BG and provided a stock of spare parts to strengthen the boards' capacity. The boards now have full responsibility to sustain the process and overall BG scheme. They work independently and manage themselves.

### Covering its own costs

Charging communities for water is becoming common in many parts of Ethiopia. In Menge woreda, community members are charged one birr per household (or per wife in polygamous marriages). This money is used to pay the salaries of water point guards and the rest saved towards maintenance work.

### Teamwork creates ownership

Almost all the WAE financed schemes and hygiene and sanitation activities in BG are jointly

*continued over page*

## Digging deep for sustainability

At the most practical level of water supply, the partnership has been able to increase sustainability. As with all technologies, digging water wells requires seasonal checking and may mean deep digging, depending where the water table is. Receiving abundant rainfall in the long wet season, BG gets extremely dry in other seasons. The Menge woreda Water Desk staff say that previously they did not bother to dig deep as long as they reached water. One of the lessons they gained from the partnership is to check the water tables in different seasons and to dig the wells (and dig them deep) during the dry season. This, they say, greatly reduces the non-functionality rate. Now the wells produce water all year.

*Related issues for consideration*

## Financing the future

The importance of supporting local structures to ensure the sustainability of WASH is highlighted by the positive role played by micro-finance institutions in BG. Such institutions give loans to associations or individuals to start up small businesses. WAE was able to offer the two associations Hiwot and Tatek Lesera (see page 9) letters of support to show they had given each contracts. In this way both could secure loans and strengthen their capacity. The Water Boards have been able to save the water fees with the micro-finance institutions and receive interest. Otherwise they would be forced to put their money in the hands of individuals, paying no interest and with some risk involved.

*BG and Question 5, continued*

implemented with government staff. This, many believe, has helped develop a sense of shared ownership amongst community members and local government workers. Uniquely in BG, government staff are choosing to buy spare parts to maintain the water schemes while WAE is still involved in the project. Usually WAE is depended on for these until the project hand-over.

## Using local structures

Both WAE and the government water and health desks are using government structures such as schools and clinics to facilitate project work. School sanitation clubs have been instrumental in promoting hygiene among students and also their parents back at home. Parent-teacher associations are now working as WASH Boards helping the management and maintenance of schemes; and teachers are involved in studies on the impact of WASH on school attendance. The original aim of these initiatives was to facilitate project work, but their existence can now pave the way to sustain not only the project work, but also long-term learning.

## Rebalancing gender

As mentioned on page 2, women in BG carry multiple burdens in daily life but are granted little or no decision-making power. Such a situation is grossly unjust. It is also inefficient. Working with only 50% of the community is no way to ensure future sustainability of projects, not least when WASH is so central to women's lives. Thus in BG women are being involved with the project in all aspects, participating in work, training and decision-making. Gender issues are discussed further on page 17.

## Conflicting strategies?

In BG a variety of donors and NGOs are now involved in capacity building with government staff. Some focus on providing training, others channel funds for training. However do the different strategies of organisations (which share the same aim) risk undermining the efforts of their colleagues in the long term? One key player in capacity building is the World Bank (WB). It has established a scheme to train government staff to act as skilled contractors in the woredas. WAE's policy meanwhile generally aims to support government "in situ", providing staff training and exposing them to new learning and technologies. It could be argued that while the WB is training staff it then takes them out of their institutionalised role to work more like consultants. Is this a preferable and more efficient model, or does it risk "creaming" off staff and leaving government offices deskilled? Is there a need for all involved to debate more together to find better ways to coordinate efforts, share resources and ensure they do not confuse government staff? Can we be sure our actions do not create a new dependency?

## Where next?

The initiatives here highlight efforts to increase project sustainability in BG. But what initiatives are needed to sustain learning, and prepare an area for when donors move on? Can we, as donor partners working with woreda staff, empower them sufficiently so they can continue to communicate freely with their managers, identify capacity gaps and plan pro-actively? Who in the partnership should be responsible to maintain systems and impetus once the donors leave?



## A good partnership?

From WAE's perspective the objectives of a WASH related partnership could be:

- ◆ To increase coverage
- ◆ To increase impact
- ◆ To increase efficiency and effectiveness
- ◆ To increase advocacy voice
- ◆ To share human or financial resources, information, knowledge, contacts, skills
- ◆ To build on comparative advantages
- ◆ To build capacity on both sides of the partnership
- ◆ To promote WA's vision and mission, not the organisation itself

As it works towards an understanding of partnerships, WAE sees that they may be **complementary** (combining different strengths for greater effect); **cumulative** (combining similar strengths for greater effect); or **influencing** (working alongside others to share ideas and approaches).



**Women as mothers, but also educated for other work:** The BG project is promoting appropriate latrines in schools. For girls, coping with menstruation without proper latrines at school contributes to their drop out rates and stops them reaching their rightful potential in life.

of water further, it is notable that, in general, men only engage in the once-every-two-year or so digging of traditional wells. However water collection can occupy 2-3 hours of a woman's day. This includes waiting time for recharge and queuing at the water points. Although the WAE project will not directly impact on the wider social division of labour that militates against women, it is certainly expected to reduce the amount of time spent fetching water. The project is striving to reduce waiting times by about 90% and cut the distance walked by situating new water points as close as possible to communities.

### **Women get equally involved**

Many in the sector now acknowledge that WASH programmes will only be sustainable if they engage all society and the activities and processes are owned by all. Thus women are not only being involved in project work (e.g. building work) but in decision-making. In BG women constitute 50% of WASH Boards. They are also trained and are now working as Community Hygiene Promoters (CHPs). Training on gender was also given to all community members at the project beginning. Bringing about change in BG demands a lot of effort, but there are some notable successes: women CHPs are now allowed to move around with their male co-workers, and men and women see it as normal for women to drink in the presence of their in-laws – something previously unheard of. Such issues prompt the question: in which ways do we all lose out by sidelining women and if we over-come fears, can a good partnership of both genders create a better life?

### **Question 6.**

*Focusing on gender – and a different perspective on the term partnership.*

*To what extent do we consider women as equal partners in the development process, and how can both genders work to rebalance their roles and relationships?*

*BG and Question 6.*

## **A Partnership out of balance**

This page focuses briefly on gender relations in BG, as a form of partnership, and in relation to the WASH project partnership. In BG, as in so much of Ethiopia, women traditionally carry a huge load in work terms, but have virtually no power in decision-making terms. This is not only an injustice against women, but means vital skills that women can contribute in managing people and resources, in facilitating team work, in problem solving and strategic planning (all of which they use in every day life) are lost to all society when they are not involved in public life.

### **A woman's work is never done?**

According to Oxfam (2000), the percentage distribution of workload on BG household members shows nearly 95% of the water-fetching burden resting on women. They also carry out 96% of cooking, 94% of firewood collection and 78% of farm work. Considering the issue

### **Small steps in the right direction**

In Benishangul-Gumuz encouraging changes in gender relations are taking place. Initially people were uncomfortable with the idea of women working with men to promote hygiene house-to-house, but this has recently changed. Perhaps the excellent work done by male-female teams will help any residual feelings of threat, prejudice or fear disappear?

## In praise of partnership

### Summing up this report

*Putting our heads together* does not aim to give a complete picture of the project work in BG, nor a detailed academic assessment of the partnership. More detailed technical reports are produced regularly by the different partners as part of the project process and interested readers can request further information from WAE. However it is hoped that this report will serve its main purpose - to stimulate debate around partnership, and be accessible to a wide range of readers.

Certainly the over-riding impression gained from all involved in BG is that the partnership is good, and it is working. It may not be working perfectly, but it is making strides forward and positive changes are taking place. The test for BG will be how well it modifies and improves on what exists now and to see how things look further down the line. For WAE, and others also working on capacity building, the proof will be in seeing local government better able to manage WASH (and other development work) once the donors have moved on. For government at national and regional level it seems the challenge will be to maintain good communication with their woreda-level colleagues and support new systems and learning.

This last page of the report pulls out just a few points that seem key to take forwards, but many others are likely to emerge in wider debates. WAE would appreciate any feedback or ideas-sharing on the subject. With thanks.

“BOFED has written a letter of appreciation to WAE in Benishangul. Their work is very effective and focused...”  
Tesfaye Ejigu, NGO desk, BOFED, Assosa.

“Working as partners with local government is crucial for sustainability. Government is the biggest player in the sector. For WAE it is an advantage to learn from them and to share its own practical lessons..”  
Shibabaw Tadesse, Project Coordinator, WaterAid BG sub-office.



## Realising potential

In many instances NGO-government-private sector-community partnerships demonstrate the potential for development work that is more sustainable, more thorough and has greater integrity. However, most people would agree that all partnerships also present numerous challenges. To better enable WASH partnerships realise their potential, some key points coming from the report might be:

- ◆ **WASH NGOs need to work in partnership with government**  
Most NGOs involved in WASH don't work closely with government. Things may be more complicated at first and go more slowly at times, but WAE sees that NGO-government partnerships are worth working at, and WASH work will be much more sustainable as a result.
- ◆ **It could be beneficial if NGOs/donors who are working with government coordinated their capacity building work more**

What is the best way to support woreda level staff adjust to new decentralised policies from amongst the different models that organisations are working on? Can we share more lessons learnt and establish best practice models, and also find ways to support each other's efforts? Can government at higher levels work actively with the woreda/ NGO systems once the NGO/donors move on? How can region-woreda linkages be strengthened, especially when the relevant desks are organised differently at each level?

- ◆ **Marginalised areas of Ethiopia would benefit considerably from joined up efforts by NGOs, government and private sector**  
How can we better support marginalised or emerging regions to reach equity in WASH and help foster an environment that encourages skilled people to stay and attracts private investment to the sector?

**Other questions that have arisen throughout the report are noted on the enclosed workshop sheet.**



WaterAid Ethiopia  
Debre Zeit Road  
PO Box 4812  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Tel: 251 114 661680  
Fax: 251 114 661679  
Email: [info@wateraidet.org](mailto:info@wateraidet.org)  
[www.wateraidethiopia.org](http://www.wateraidethiopia.org)

WaterAid  
47-49 Durham Street  
London  
SE11 7JD, UK

Tel: 020 7793 4500  
Fax: 020 7793 4545  
[www.wateraid.org](http://www.wateraid.org)



WaterAid – water for life  
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**Report research:**

Tseguereda Abraham - WAE  
Manyahshal Ayele - WAE  
Mahlet Mairegu - WAE  
Wegayehu G/Emmanuelle - WAE driver

**Report writers:**

Manyahshal Ayele - WAE  
Polly Mathewson – independent consultant

**Photographs:**

All photographs copyright Kate Graham /WaterAid. Photos are of community members and life in Menge woreda.  
Explanations for certain images:  
Page 1: traditional hand-dug water point  
Page 4: WAE-BG staff-community meeting  
Page 16: rope pump technology  
Page 18: household latrine  
Back cover: wedding celebrations, Undulu

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# Putting our heads together... Debating partnership..



## Discussion areas for workshops

- ◆ What should an ideal partnership look like?  
Do partners need to have equal levels of “power” or access to resources and be able to contribute equally for the partnership to work well?  
Or is difference actually a benefit?  
What difficulties might be encountered and in which ways can they be overcome?
- ◆ What is your experience as a government staff person working with NGOs or as a NGO staff member working with government?  
In which ways did you find the culture or perspective different?  
Do you think you had prejudices or misconceptions before working together, what were they and did they change?  
Did certain strengths or weaknesses become clear about your own working environment?
- ◆ To what extent do partnerships need to draw up agreements when working together or can they function simply on mutual respect and shared values?  
Have you experienced difficulties within a partnership of others not fulfilling their obligations? What are the reasons that this came about? Were responsibilities made clear enough at the outset, or were helpful systems put in place?  
Do partnerships need the back-up of written agreements and even penalties for not fulfilling one’s obligation?  
What other kinds of systems can help the smooth running of partnerships – e.g. meetings involving a wider group, newsletters, awards that recognise contribution etc.
- ◆ What is your observation of WASH work in your region in terms of existing or potential partnerships? How have NGOs/donors/government/private sector/community worked well (or unsuccessfully) together or neglected opportunities to work together? Do you think that the WASH sector would benefit from partnerships or is it better to work as an individual organisation where responsibilities and technologies are kept clear?
- ◆ How do you view the partnership between men and women in society? Do you think it is changing? Do you think it needs to change? Do you have any experience of men and women working together as equals on WASH projects? What has been your impression of this partnership personally and how do you think others in the community have responded? In which ways might we lose out as a whole society by marginalising women in decision-making and public life?

