

Sustainability of Water Projects



Lessons from Kitase/Gyankama

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Background

The Government of Ghana in 1994 launched the National Community Water and Sanitation Programme for accelerated, equitable and sustainable delivery of potable water and sanitation facilities to rural communities and small towns.

The Programme focuses on decentralization of services under District Assemblies. It also operates under the Demand Responsive Approach where service is provided in response to demand for such services that communities are willing to pay for. A basic understanding of the DRA is that a stronger sense of ownership will be displayed when communities apply for services themselves instead of just supplying them without their involvement and resource commitment. Another key component is that the communities are in charge of the operation and maintenance to sustain the project.

Many community water and sanitation service providers especially NGOs adopt various sustainability approaches through the formation and training of community based institutions to manage facilities.

A WaterAid Partner organisation in Ghana, Akuapem Community Development Programme, with financial support from the British High Commission, facilitated the provision of water facilities in a twin community – Kitase and Gyankama, in the Akuapem South district of the Eastern Region of Ghana.

This paper focuses on the sustainability approaches that ACDEP adopted and how they are impacting on the facilities and the social make up of these twin communities.

Kitase/Gyankama

Kitase and Gyankama are two separate communities located close to each other with a very thin boundary between them. The two Akuapem Twi speaking communities are located about 35 kilometres North East of Accra along the Accra – Aburi road in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The total population in the two communities is estimated to be around 1,800 according to the 2000 population and housing census, majority of who are small-scale farmers. Others also engage in small-scale businesses usually trading in foodstuffs. Given the population size, it must be emphasized that they needed more than the two hand-dug wells that ACDEP and the British High Commission provided them.

Project History

Honestly, under CWSA codes, Kitase/Gyankama, by their population size, qualifies for a small town water facility, as hand-dug wells fitted with hand pumps would not be appropriate. However, to save a desperate situation, ACDEP decided to help with two hand-dug wells since the communities were not in a position to bear the cost of a small town project, neither was ACDEP capable of providing such form of support. In 1999, ACDEP submitted a proposal to the British High Commission for support to the communities in the form of providing two hand-dug wells fitted with hand pumps. In this particular project, the focus was basically on water, operation and maintenance interventions. Sanitation and hygiene promotion were not part since it was just

a direct water facility intervention to salvage a desperate situation. In addition, the community was not made to make any upfront cash contribution. This was because the funder bore the full cost apart from labour, which the community supplemented with communal labour.

ACDEP

The Akuapem Community Development Programme (ACDEP) is a local NGO that specializes in the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene promotion services, among other domains such as capacity building and agro forestry, to deprived communities in the Akuapem area of the Eastern Region. It is one of the eight partner NGOs of WaterAid. ACDEP was in charge of managing the Kitase/Gyankama hand-dug well project. The organisation was in charge of community mobilization, training, facilitating the formation of community management institutions, and the construction of the two water points provided in the two communities. ACDEP also, abiding by the NCWSP sustainability regulations, equipped the communities with facility management and maintenance skills and managed to generate a sense of ownership of the facilities among the community members.

Approach and methodology of study

The study employed in-depth interviews with some individual community members, site attendants, and officials from ACDEP; focus group discussions with some opinion leaders, ordinary community members, water and sanitation committee members, and observation as the main tools.

Objectives of study

The study documents the impact of sustainability considerations that had been put in place a few years after ACDEP had left the communities. Had the community fully understood the management, operation, maintenance, financial, and regulatory mechanisms? What answers were available for the following basic issues?

- ⇒ Access to funds to carry out repairs
- ⇒ Access to skills to repair pumps
- ⇒ Community involvement in decision-making
- ⇒ Role of women in decision-making
- ⇒ accountability
- ⇒ Maintenance of law and order at the water point
- ⇒ Sense of ownership
- ⇒ The state of the facilities at the time of the study

Management Mechanisms

The Traditional Authorities

Like all other communities in Ghana, Kitase and Gyankama have their traditional rulers – Chiefs and Elders. They are indeed the leaders and custodians of the land and all other communal properties. There are also the Unit Committees as decentralized units of the District Assembly concept. Then the Community Meeting, which is the “General Assembly.”

The WATSAN Committee

Though the water facilities belong to the chiefs and their people, and they would have been in charge of their management, they rather supervised a 15-member joint water and sanitation (WATSAN) committee, whose election was facilitated by ACDEP. As the operation and maintenance of the facilities were the responsibility of the committees, this responsibility had been vested in the WATSAN committee. They had to ensure that the pumps were properly handled, the sites were clean, broken parts were fixed, and reports were made to the District Assembly in case a particular technical problem was beyond their control. The committee also, with the assistance of the District Assembly and ACDEP, drafted some byelaws to regulate activities at the well site. They derived their authority from the community, the Police and the District Assembly (even though nationally, WATSAN Committees have no legal backing).

The WATSAN Committee received training in facility management and maintenance, community animation and bookkeeping. They reported to the chief monthly and accounted to the community every three months. They proposed amendments to the byelaws as and when necessary, and this required a Community Meeting for approval.

Community understanding of management structures

The study showed that members from both communities understood the management structures perfectly and accepted the WATSAN Committee concept. There were no remarkable tensions between the Unit Committees and the WATSAN Committee like what happens in other communities. There was harmony between the traditional authorities and the WATSAN Committees.

Financial matters and facility maintenance

As a national policy, the community had to raise its own funds for operation and maintenance. In this respect, the WATSAN Committee proposed to the traditional authorities and the Community Meeting to sell the water to raise funds to manage and maintain the facilities.

The study showed that though the proposal was agreed by consensus, there were still a few people who simply did not like the idea. Some respondents said that at the Committee Meeting, no objections were raised after the WATSAN Committee had explained the rationale for the proposal. Yet out of anger, some citizens even preferred buying water from a private borehole water vendor at a price five times the communal one. Their reason was simple; the communal water was meant for the community. The donor and ACDEP provided it free of charge and since these agencies were not demanding any reimbursements, why should they buy? It was gathered that this assertion was not totally true since the community provided some amount of labour.

Another controversial issue was pricing. Initially, a 12-litre size bucket was sold at 50 cedis. After a year, the price was adjusted upwards to 100 cedis for the same volume of water. This decision, though taken at a Community Meeting level, did not go down well with many more people opposed to the idea of selling the water even though an overwhelming majority was in favour.

It must be remarked that if these “opposition minority” did not have a sense of ownership, they would not have complains about the sale and even the price. They still admitted that it was about 80% cheaper than buying from the private man. Their concern was that it was theirs so it should not be sold. They rather submitted that funds could be raised to repair them as and when they broke down. It took the steadfastness of the WATSAN Committee to implement the new price. “Admittedly, you cannot expect 100% support for any idea in any democracy,” said one of the Committee members.

The well attendants,

Though voluntary work to serve their communities, the two attendants, each of them caring for one well, were given an average of 120,000 cedis (about US\$13) each per month as enticement allowance. This allowance is usually a third of the total sales made during the period. Sometimes they spent up to 14 hours a day at the site during the dry season. They were very strict with enforcing the byelaws and regulations. They maintained order at the site and ensured that the pumps were handled with care and would report any troublemaker to the WATSAN Committee.

Accountability

The attendants were mandated to sell the water at the approved prices. At the end of each day (they normally close at around 6:30pm during rainy season and 8:30pm during dry season where other sources of water dry up), they rendered account to the Treasurer on the WATSAN Committee, who kept a bank account on behalf of the community. Part of the money was used to pay allowances of the attendants, sitting allowance for the Committee members (who also buy the water), and any maintenance costs. The Treasurer accounted to the Committee on weekly basis, the Committee to the Chief on monthly basis and to the Community every three months. At the time of the study there had not been any serious maintenance expenditures apart from buying locks and routine checks on the systems. This meant that they still had a lot of money at the bank.

Community involvement in decision-making: pricing etc

Though the WATSAN Committee, from management experiences, generated most issues bordering on the management and operation of the wells, all major decisions were taken at community meetings. The community, right from the onset, adopted byelaws drawn by the WATSAN Committee with technical support from ACDEP. These byelaws had served as the main operational tools for the attendants and the WATSAN Committee in making sure that people do the right thing as far as usage of the facilities was concerned. Some of the main highlights of the byelaws were maintenance of cleanliness at the well site, respecting the orders of the attendants, paying for the water fetched, and physical handling of the pumps. These byelaws are updated every three years, as well as upon recommendations from the WATSAN Committee whenever necessary.

In addition to the byelaws, all community decisions in relation with the wells are taken through open discussions at community meetings. The Committee

suggests issues to the traditional authorities. These authorities in turn convene a community meeting for general discussions on the issue.

The major problem associated with community meetings was the low participation. Generally, few people attend the meetings and make decisions that bind every citizen, and this sometimes raises the question of legitimacy of decisions. But some respondents argued that it was in the interest of every citizen to participate in decision-making. Therefore failure to take part was equivalent to self-disenfranchisement. The arguments continued that the community meeting was the only platform for major decisions and every community member was free to take part. It would therefore not be surprising that many people would reject the idea of selling the water; they were not part of making the decision and must have missed the justifications for the decision. It would equally not be surprising for a community of nearly 2000 citizens, many of who are migrants from other parts of the country staying there and working in Accra daily, to experience low participation at community meetings. The important thing to note is that however low the participation was, everybody still abided by decisions made at community meetings and this resulted in the effective management of the water facilities.

Role of women (and children) in decision-making and facility management

Women played equal roles in decision-making and management of the facilities. They were open and frank at taking some of the major decisions especially the decision to sell the water and fixing the prices. It was learned that many of the women supported the idea to sell since they were convinced that that would be the only way to sustain the facilities. They were tired of roaming the bush in search for water during the dry season and would do everything to protect the facilities. Some of them also openly and frankly showed their dislike for the price increase. Yet since it was a majority decision at a legitimate forum, they all had to abide. It was also of interest to note that both attendants were women, providing the day-to-day management of the facilities and enforcing law and order and maintaining cleanliness at the site. Women also constituted about 40% of the membership of the WATSAN Committee. Children generally played no role apart from benefiting from a shortened distance and availability of water at all times. They were mostly in charge of fetching water, like any other rural community in Ghana.

Impact of the sale on the people

The decision to sell the water was taken by the entire community with some resistance by a minority. The study showed that indeed the decision to sell was initially more popular than the decision to increase the price after a few months of introducing the sale. Some respondents, however, still believed that since some people were able to buy water five times the price of the well water, the price did not matter much in the lives of the people. To many of them, affordability was not the issue. It was nevertheless noticed that some people were limited by the sale in their water consumption rates, while others were also compelled to explore other sources especially rainwater harvesting and storage during the rainy season. There were also a few people who still fetched from an unprotected stream. But these were generally isolated cases.

Majority of them actually patronized the well water, which they were convinced, was a safer source.

Community understanding of mechanisms and decisions

During community mobilization, ACDEP managed to create awareness of the necessity of the management functions of the community especially through the WATSAN Committee. It was made clear to the community members that they would raise their own funds to repair and maintain the facilities.

Interactions with community members during the study revealed that the formation of the management structures with facilitation by ACDEP was the best in sustaining the facilities. The citizens generally accepted the other mechanisms like the byelaws put in place, the concept of and procedures for the formation of the WATSAN Committee, locking of the wells and rationing during dry seasons, and the sale of the water.

Conflicts: Causes and management

No major conflicts were reported during the study apart from a few instances where people would like to jump the queue during rush hours. On some occasions too some people refused to wash their lining at the designated places in defiance of the byelaws. The attendants basically dealt with these and they hardly became issues. The major source of conflict was with the price increase but with the accent of the chiefs and majority of the people, the rest had no other choice than to comply or shut up. As a principle spelt out in the byelaws, for management of conflicts, the attendants would report any malfeasance to the WATSAN Committee, who, with backing from the traditional authorities and the Police, would apply the byelaws and deal accordingly with such a person. Where the culprit would still prove difficult the one would be handed to the police. To make this work, a copy of the byelaws had been lodged with the district police administration.

Implementation challenges

It was quite unusual for ACDEP, noted basically for implementing projects in rural communities, to perform such an activity in a larger setting. The first and biggest challenge, according to ACDEP officials, was community mobilization. People appeared busier than their counterparts in smaller communities with populations ranging between 100 and 400.

Another challenge was trying to combine two 'sovereign' communities under one management structure and bringing two sets of traditional authorities under one platform on a number of occasions without any serious tensions usually associated with twin communities. Sometimes it was difficult to select a venue for community meetings, as each community would not easily surrender the pride in hosting joint community meetings.

Another challenge was how to facilitate the election of a WATSAN Committee fairly representative of both communities and ensuring gender balance.

General observations

- The pumps had never undergone any repairs after four years of installation except routine checks by the pump supervisor who was trained by ACDEP to perform that action every three months.

- The committee had saved about ₦10m (about \$1,100) through the sale of the water towards erection of standpipes to connect to the GWCL mains, which had just been laid across the communities toward Aburi and other towns on the Akuapem Ridge.
- There was a great deal of commitment from the Committee members to serve their communities. Indeed they were fifteen at the start but after four years, only eight more committed members were visible in the activities of the committee. The work was sacrificial but, sometimes, there were some unnecessary confrontations from opposing community members on certain issues that needed only a committed person to continue to serve on such a voluntary committee. More so as they also bought the water at the same rate as any other citizen.

Lessons and conclusions

Sustainability of water facilities has become one of the most difficult issues confronting sector donors and service providers, as well as policy-makers. This is because a lot of facilities and systems break down a few months after the provider quits the community. There have been arguments that communities, in the past, had little or no sense of ownership of the facilities and thought it was the duty of the provider to maintain them. So the moment the provider refuses to go back, the facility breaks down.

Current rules are viable

Contemporary thinking has established that community involvement in decision-making and project implementation, as well as commitment in the form of capital cost contribution and the assumption of full responsibility in the management, operation and maintenance of the facilities, would create the needed sense of ownership for the facilities.

These assertions, with regards to our Kitase/Gyankama example, have proven to be viable to a very large extent. Otherwise, facilities meant to serve only 300 people, by CWSA standards, would not have endured the pressure from more than 1,800 people for four years without even replacing any part. However, care must be taken that it is not just the rules and prescriptions that matter. It must be noted that development workers just have to be very tactful in complying with some of these rules and conventions in order to generate the needed result. It takes a lot of patience and commitment, as well as perseverance to be able to create behaviour change in people glued to certain traditions for centuries. ACDEP, for her two-year stay in the community, therefore needs commendation for her ability to set up the right management structures that has worked so perfectly.

Capital cost contribution not the only remedy

We must also not insist too much on certain rules such as upfront cash contribution to capital cost especially in areas where the people may find it a barrier to their chances of accessing safe water. Again from our Kitase/Gyankama example, the communities made no cash contributions to the project. They only provided some amount of labour. Their major involvement in the project was planning, implementation and most especially management and yet, they have been able to maintain the facilities perfectly.

One key factor for their success story is the able and dedicated leadership of the Watsan Committee.

One must not ignore the issue of leadership. While some communities are endowed with people with superb leadership qualities and dedicated leaders, others simply lack them and no matter the amount of training offered them, they would still mess up. The community may have paid their commitment fee and contributed labour and material resources all right but if they lack able and dedicated leadership, operation and maintenance would still be a problem. When this happens, the service provider may simply have to keep a close eye on the facility if sustainability really matters.