

Opportunities and Challenges for Social Development in Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Projects

Water resource and sanitation projects cannot only rely on technical action but have to consider what and whom the work is for. How different people use water, why they use it and who makes decisions about water and sanitation are basic design issues. The water project will change the way the community works, and, hopefully, this will improve people's lives.

A. What are water supply projects for?

Water projects aim to improve people's lives, economically, socially and physically. To do this they need to take into account the requirements of users of the water supply system or sanitation facilities. Engineers are good at relating to the client – but who is the customer for a water supply project – is it the funder, the government or the people who are going to use it?

Social development is the bridge between the technical side of a project and the people that should benefit from the development. Social development aims to refine development work by ensuring it is:

Accountable to everybody Equitable to everybody Appropriate for everybody.

Social development looks at wider dimensions of development, such as:

- economics
- politics
- institutional analysis
- social relationships
- provision of infrastructure

This analysis occurs with people, households, communities and institutions. It looks at how they relate to each other, both formally and informally. For projects, the local situation must be studied prior to any planning and design. This applies to the water resources, the geology, the environment and the needs of the customer.

B. Why is social development necessary?

Understanding the various social groups, cultural and ethnic issues, economic and livelihood considerations, historical constraints and future possibilities helps the project team decide what is the best sustainable technical option and how it can be provided. The project will change the way society works; social analysis can help make sure the project makes the situation better for everybody and not worse for some. It can provide information for both practical and policy decisions. (Ref BN 7 and BN 11)

C. What are the aims of social development?

Social development aims to:

- understand how people use water, why they use it, whether different people use water for different reasons, whether there are seasonal variations in water use, who makes decisions, ownership, and so on.
- understand attitudes and behaviour towards water, the environment, sanitation and hygiene. Different people have different beliefs that need to be understood so public information messages and infrastructure can be targeted accordingly.
- match people's water and sanitation uses, needs and attitudes (how? why? and by whom?), to the project, as this will increase the project's effectiveness and provide greater value for money.

The rich and influential members of society can normally explain what they want; the poor find it more difficult to get their voice heard. However water projects can have a dramatic impact on the lives of the poor, either by helping them increase their incomes or by inadvertently reducing their access to water. (Ref BN 7 and BN 11)

D. What can a social development plan provide?

Planning can:

- forecast what social changes the new water supply will help bring about. By understanding people's attitudes to urbanisation, increasing competition for water (in some areas), declining water quality (in some areas) and changing patterns of employment (e.g. migration or more women farmers), the plan can help people cope with change. (Ref. BN 6, BN 7 and BN 8)
- show how these social changes will impact on the project. With increasing health and hygiene messages, for example washing hands after using a toilet and encouraging more frequent bathing or washing of clothes, the demand for water will increase. At present the rural poor rarely have a bath and wash their clothes because of the shortage of water and the costs involved. A social analysis will predict these changes and help provide solutions to managing resources, including finances. (Ref BN 8 and BN 10)
- look at who will manage the project in the future. There are different ways of running projects and some traditional methods can overlook some sections of society, so their needs for water and their potential contributions to management are not taken into account. (Ref BN 8)

E. The principles of social development

Engineering is based on clear facts and rules; society is far more complicated. Social development is based on the idea of human rights and the knowledge that people are not all the same. Some groups of people have less of a say in how communities are run. It is difficult to see who is missed out from projects if they are not involved in making decisions. (Ref BN 8 and BN 11) There are social characteristics to identify groups of people who are often excluded from decision-making, such as the poor, disabled people, ethnic minorities, the aged or women. (Ref BN 11) If a water project does not meet the needs of just about everybody in the community, then it is not completely successful.

Social development works in several ways; it:

- identifies the social and cultural factors that affect improvements in people's lives,
- gives a voice to people who normally are not asked their opinion – especially poor people and women, by encouraging them to be involved and included in the project,

- ensures people's rights are considered, and
- ensures that the design of water and sanitation services meets everybody's needs.

F. Some ways of managing social development

Engineers can manage water in different ways (treating, pumping, piping, storing). Social development professionals also have specialised methods of working with the community.

Stakeholder analysis: This identifies people who will be affected by the project (stakeholders), understanding how they relate to the project, their interests and needs and the opportunities and potential threats the project may bring. Engineers, government officials, pump mechanics and householders are all involved in the project in some way. (Ref BN 5)

Mainstreaming: This makes sure a particular sector of society (for example women, ethnic minorities) is included in *all* aspects of the project. If their needs are only looked at separately, they may miss out in the general benefits of the project. The project provides an opportunity to address current inequalities in access to and control over water resources. (Ref BN 11)

Participatory learning and action: Just installing a pump is not going to provide a water supply unless there is somebody who can operate and maintain it. The same is true of social development. If the community analyse their own situation they can then put this learning into action in the future. The analysis can include observation, diagrams and mapping, focus group discussions or histories. This qualitative research also provides the project team with an in-depth understanding of a community or a situation. (Ref BN 8, BN 10 and BN 12)

G. Working with social development professionals

Social development as a profession is growing in China and it can be studied at university but does not yet have a long history of application in the field. As yet there are few experienced, trained staff, and most of the qualified staff work in academia rather than working in rural areas for any length of time. To overcome this skill shortage, staff can be brought in from outside the local area, or even from outside the country. Whilst they may not have an immediate understanding of the local cultures, they can use baseline questionnaires (Ref BN 5) and social surveys to find out about the social conditions. (Ref BN 8) This is standard practice, as even local social development staff would have to do this, as no two communities are the same. In a similar way, geologists may know the general rock type but always want to do a local site investigation.

Water projects often concentrate on the technical aspects and can forget their customers' needs. As many engineers are educated men, it can sometimes be difficult for them to understand the needs of poor, illiterate women. (Ref BN 11) Social development professionals need to explain these requirements adequately to the engineers, making social development relevant to the project and not just an add-on.

Social development takes time, especially in collecting community information, not because of ignorance about China or the province or locality but because everyone in the community needs to participate and confidence and trust needs to be established. In any community the social development professional will collect data from the people who are involved in the project, either as users or suppliers, as you cannot base decisions on assumptions which may be incorrect. If stakeholders are not asked their opinion and decisions are made about their views, needs and abilities then this excludes them from having a say in what they need and how it can be managed and so does not lead to sustainable development for all. (Ref BN 7, BN 8 and BN 11) Water resources managers may have years of records to base decisions on; social development professionals are not so fortunate!

H. Social development in China

Water scarcity and poor access to water reduce China's capacity for poverty reduction and sustainable development, especially in western and northern parts of the country where water scarcity is most acute. This lack of access to water has serious effects on the livelihoods and health of poor people. In both rural and urban areas, poor people particularly suffer the indignities of inadequate water and sanitation. This results in high rates of water borne diseases that severely affect health. In addition, the time spent to collect water is a double burden, as it means less time is available for the productive activities on which subsistence economies depend. Inequality is growing in China and poverty will become increasingly concentrated among marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, the elderly and disabled persons, not only in terms of monetary poverty but lack of access to services, land and water (Ref BN 7). In a PRA exercise in Nan Hua the findings were that the poorer households within a village are being excluded from access to resources on the basis of ethnicity, disability and gender and from opportunities to participate in projects. Access to water can help alleviate poverty and water resource development programmes are taking centre stage in China's poverty alleviation development plan.

In rural areas there is an increasing trend of men moving out to urban areas to seek employment. These migrant workers only return back to their villages once or twice a year from the city and women are left behind to take all responsibilities. It is important, therefore, that women are included in decision-making and have access to training and credit, as they are the ones continuing to farm and manage their households when the men are away. (Ref BN 11) Social relationships and roles are changing and it is important that these changes are taken into account when planning for development.

Water conflict is acute in some areas (Ref BN 13). There are conflicts between national, regional and river basin management, business versus domestic use, small versus large, industry versus agriculture, big agriculturalists versus small, and so on. Bigger users tend to have more influence over decisions, especially as there are no clear water rights. The laws and regulations are still lacking for river basin management, multiple purpose use of water resources and collection of water abstraction fees¹. There are increasing problems of environmental damage such as pollution from fertiliser and pesticide use. It is important that these issues are understood and those affected can take part in decisions about resource management. As demands for water increase, and water quality deteriorates, competition for water will become more intense. Users from marginalised groups, such as the poor, will be most affected, having little ability to influence decisions concerning allocation.

The Poverty Alleviation Office is giving the opportunity for many ministries and organisations to work together; such as water, health, education, social services, environmental management; and the involvement of others in decision-making which can help support government pro-poor policies. Working with others can help provide a wider view of water management; to look at the relationship between policies, practices and poverty, how different sectors influence each other, and what issues have an impact on both poverty and water supply.

I. Project experience

Social development is now a standard part of international water projects, and it is important that it is explained, understood and accepted by the whole team, so they know why and how the "customers" of the project should be involved. Technical matters are easier to relate to than the less well-defined social factors, which are often pushed to one side. On this project a full time social development team member joined the team 18 months into the programme; this missed the opportunity for the community to contribute to the major project decisions made at the start of the design phase. Taking time to find out what people wanted and how they could take part in decision-making should be carried out when all the other data collection is done, this is important to inform the project of all social issues and take into account community's requirements

Water supplies began to be built before social analysis had been carried out and decisions made before the customers had been asked what they wanted. By not giving enough attention to community participation, the social development aspects of the project and the impact on the poorest were not considered in detail, which can lead to inappropriate and unsustainable decisions.

Social information was gathered through baseline surveys, focus group discussions, and stakeholder analysis, but insufficient was analysed and passed on to help make decisions. The stakeholder analysis did show other Ministries and the private sector needed to be involved. The information gathered did not consider wider issues outside standard social matters, such as source protection (quality and quantity of water), environmental issues and competition between domestic and other users. These affect different sectors of the community, women, the poor and ethnic groups, and they could be involved in finding solutions. In one group discussion the community wanted to plant trees to stop desertification, but because of the shortage of water and poverty they were unable to do this.

J. Lessons for the future

- The policy commitment to social development needs to be put into practice;
- The roles of technical design and social development in a project needs to be explained and understood by all other team members and government officials from the outset;
- Social surveys need to be seen to contribute something to the whole project, especially the technical aspects, otherwise it can be viewed as either irrelevant, or even worse, a cause of unnecessary delay to the project;
- Social analysis from the start helps include everybody in decision-making, for example, finding out when and how women can participate in meetings;
- Decisions and progress need to be monitored. The community and suppliers can do this with project support until it is properly established.
- Links between all relevant agencies, such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, Poverty Alleviation Offices, and NGOs need to be built into the project framework.

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The Water Sector Development Project (WSDP) attempted to pilot different aspects of IWRM in four Chinese provinces. The project began in 2001 and was a technical cooperation project between the British Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Chinese Ministry of Water Resources (MWR).

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Ministry of Water Resources (MWR)



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