

# Using Advisers: The WaterAid Experience

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This note does not describe a project, but outlines ways in which Advisers have been used to assist in programme and project formulation and management.

## Starting up

WaterAid was formed in 1981 with the support and encouragement of the (then) Water Authorities. Initially, it had a minuscule permanent staff – the Director and a secretarial assistant – and relied (and still does to a less degree) on the generous help of voluntary workers. Among these, were some senior engineers (more recently retired, but some giving their spare time and holidays), who, working with the Director, helped to initiate WaterAid's overseas work – holding discussions with Government organisations, identifying local partners and assessing potential projects. These, and later volunteers, became WaterAid's Country Advisers', reporting to the Director and making regular visits to their allotted country to vet proposals, monitor progress, advise field staff and support local partners; other volunteers assisted with procurement and other administrative work and gave general technical advice.

## Evolution

As the extent and scale of projects increased, WaterAid developed a more formal management structure. From 1986, field staff, reported to a London-based Head of Overseas Operations and the Country Advisers became in effect assistant managers and, in 1989, a fulltime Procurement Officer was appointed. In the mid 1990's, experienced field staff were appointed as Country Representatives, with considerable delegated authority, and three Regional Managers based in London were appointed to assist the Head of Overseas Operations; the volunteer Country Advisers then relinquished their managerial functions.

## The adviser group

This transition of function was crystallised by the formation of a self-managed Adviser Group, whose roles may include, inter-alia:

- support to Regional Managers
- making field trips as requested
- advice on policy and procedure documents
- comment on designs, specifications and agreements
- reviewing research and literature, and assembling best practice statements
- answering technical enquiries
- assisting with recruitment, training and professional qualifications
- representing WaterAid at meetings and functions
- assisting with evaluations.

The group has been functioning for nearly two years. There are 14 Advisers, mostly senior engineers or associated professionals, and a number of specialists who can be consulted as needed. The group meets three or four times a year, together with senior staff, for information, presentations and discussion.

## **Advantages and disadvantages**

The functions of volunteer staff in a charity need to be carefully defined. The quasi-managerial role of Advisers became inappropriate as the scale of WaterAid's work widened, but the quality and experience of group members enables them to support WaterAid in a variety of ways not normally associated with volunteer assistance. It is perhaps too early to say if the present system will best meet WaterAid's needs, but perceived advantages and disadvantages to date are as follows.

### *Advantages*

- 1) Collectively, the group forms a powerful resource, able to give WaterAid technical and managerial advice and support over a wide range of functions, at minimum cost.
- 2) Advice given is independent and unbiased.
- 3) The group is a pool from which evaluators etc. can be selected.

### *Disadvantages*

- 1) Since the group was formed, members have made few field trips, and group members find it difficult to maintain contact with field staff, be familiar with project work and be aware of changes in policy. They feel, therefore, less able to give informed advice and those Advisers who formerly had detailed contact with individual countries find less 'job satisfaction' and motivation.
- 2) These problems may lead to difficulty in recruiting new group members of the necessary quality.
- 3) Conversely, Country Representatives and other field staff are not in close contact with group members and (perhaps because they are reluctant to recognise a need for advice) are not making full use of the resource offered.