



---

## Scaling up community management of rural water supply

---

Author: Ton Schouten, April 2006

Quality assurance: Sandy Cairncross

Edited and produced as a PDF document: May 2020

---

*Community management is the leading model for implementing rural water supply systems. It is regarded as the best way to secure sustainable water supply in rural areas. However, many communities struggle with their management tasks and many water systems break down after some years. "Scaling up" is a new approach, set out in a number of recent documents (see References below), which seeks to strengthen community management. It advocates continuous support to communities in the management of their water services, and seeks to expand coverage from the current "islands of community success" to larger areas, reaching entire populations.*

---

### Water supply is more than only installing a pump or taps

When we think about improved water supply for people in Developing Countries, we normally think about pumps and pipes. But with installing a pump or a tap the job is not done. There are too many things that can go wrong.

- The pump works well during the first years and then it breaks down; there are no spare parts in the area; there is no one in the community who knows how to repair the pump.
- The women in the community complain about the location of the pump; the women were not involved in the site selection.
- The water does not flow to all households in the community; the poor people cannot pay the water fee.
- The members of one of the families refuse to pay the water fee because the family leader was not elected as the chairman of the Water Committee.
- Four months after the official inauguration of the pump the water stops flowing because 10 kilometres down the road a big irrigation scheme pumps out all groundwater.

In short, the pump or the tap on its own does not guarantee a sustainable water service for all. Making sure that the water flows continuously is much more complicated.

### Communities managing their water supplies

During the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD) in the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of pumps and taps were installed in developing countries with the support of international agencies. A good percentage of this infrastructure, however, some say 40%, broke down after some years. The governments of the countries did not have the funds, did not have the experts and sometimes did not give sufficient priority to maintaining the pumps and piped water supply networks. The solution to that problem was to ask the communities themselves to maintain the infrastructure. That is how the concept of community management came into being.

## Elements and levels of community management

Over the last three decades community management has evolved to become a leading management model for rural water supply. Very few rural water supply systems are being implemented today without some kind of involvement or participation of people from the community. The objective always is to make the community responsible for the operation of its own water service after the implementing agency has left. One can distinguish different levels of community management.

- For some, community management means that community members help to construct the water infrastructure. They dig the trenches and they supply and carry the local materials such as stones and sand.
- Another important element of community management is that the people in the community contribute to the costs of the water supply infrastructure (in general some 5 to 10%) and pay 100% of the money needed to operate and maintain the infrastructure. The community's willingness to pay, supposedly demonstrates its willingness to accept responsibility for the water supply.
- For many, community management requires participation of a cross-section of the community in the process of developing the water supply service, most importantly in the design of the water scheme, the choice of the service level (only hand pumps or a piped network), how the costs for operation and maintenance should be recovered etc
- For most agencies community management is putting in place everything that is needed to enable the community to manage its water service indefinitely. The most important elements of such a management system are an elected water committee to take the important decisions, effective systems of book keeping and minute taking, by-laws prescribing the rights and obligations of the users, an operator to maintain the water system etc. This set of institutions and capacities is needed for the community to manage its water supply service over a prolonged period of time.

### Box 1. The core of community management: governance

What is the core of community management? If the community does not pay 5% of the capital costs, is it still community management? If the community hires a contractor to dig the trenches and carry the materials, is that still community management? Some would say yes because they consider the core of community management to be the community taking the major decisions about the water service. This is the governance function, being executed by the water committee. Besides being governed, water services must be provided. That is the provision function. It is doing the daily job of operating and maintaining the water infrastructure, the plumbing, the surveillance, buying the spare parts etc. Providing the service (doing the daily job) can be done by someone from the community, but the water committee, exercising the governance function, could also decide to hire someone from outside the community.

*Source: Schouten and Moriarty 2003*

## Community management: mainstreamed

Nowadays community management is seen as the best way to guarantee the sustainability of rural water services after the construction of the water system and after the implementing agency has left the community. Over the years of its application a range of methods, tools and manuals have

been developed to prepare communities for their management tasks. More and more examples of community management can be found around the world, and Uganda, Ghana, South Africa, India and Tanzania have all made community management a key concept in their national water policies and laws.

## Communities struggle with the management of their water supply

Despite the widespread uptake of community management the application of the model is by no means problem-free. Even if the community has been trained, even if the water committee has been installed and the operator appointed, communities often struggle with maintaining their water supply services. The most important factors that can lead to problems are the following.

- Limitations within the community. These include community dynamics, political or social conflict, failure to generate sufficient tariff income, failure to account transparently for funds generated, lack of preventive maintenance, lack of community cohesion and lack of capacity.
- Constraints external to the community. These include poor design of water systems, poor construction, political interference in planning and resource allocation, lack of spare parts, lack of supportive policies and legislation and, very importantly, failure to support communities who are attempting to deal with major repairs, conflicts and other problems with extension and upgrading. (Thematic Group 2005).

Some communities manage to keep their water systems going. For most communities sustainability of their water services still is a distant dream. As a community member in Bokito Rural, Cameroon comments: *“When they came to build the water project we said ‘this is Father Christmas coming with his gifts, but when we encountered the first problems with the pipes, we found out that Father Christmas had left to go back to the Pole.”* (Schouten and Moriarty 2005, p.91)

### Box 2. Spreading rumours

Doña Eugenia from Belén in Guatemala says: *“It’s not known what was done with all the money that was received from the sale of the new taps. The committee doesn’t give information about how much has been obtained with the sale of the new connections, nor about the investment of this money. Neither do they inform us about the total number of beneficiaries. It would be good if those in the committee informed us about everything that happens so that people don’t go around spreading rumours.”*

Source: Schouten and Moriarty 2005, p.115

### Box 3. Illegal connections

In Campoalegre, Colombia, the committee struggles with illegal connections as new settlements are built. Campoalegre and nearby Montebello are the only communities with their own water supply systems. New settlers have forced connections through to these systems. Some 150 illegal connections have been made to the system causing loss of pressure and water shortages. These problems caused conflicts in the community and the users could not agree on solutions.

Source: Schouten and Moriarty 2005, p.122

The communities of Bokito Rural, Belén, Campoalegre and many more rural communities in the world need external support if their water supply is to be sustainable. Obviously, they will sometimes need *technical* support from a hand pump mechanic, a spare part dealer etc. But they will also need *institutional* support, including training, financial management support, help with conflict resolution, moral and if necessary judicial support in enforcing sanctions (e.g. against non-contributors of the water fee) etc. Support to community management after the pumps and taps have been installed and the water committee inaugurated, is one of the key pillars of “scaling up”.

## Scaling up community management: the objectives

Scaling up community management aims to strengthen community management, not to do away with it. Its two objectives are:

- Ensuring that community managed water services are sustainable and that adequate institutional support and policy arrangements are put in place to support community management indefinitely.
- Expanding coverage from the current “islands of success” to larger areas, reaching entire populations.

### Box 4. Uganda a district support programme to scale up community management

Responsibility for the delivery of basic services in Uganda lies at the District and Town Council levels. WaterAid developed a District Support Programme with the participation of local governments, beneficiaries and all the implementing agencies in the districts. ‘Memorandums of Understanding’ were signed making the District Governments the leading partners in the programme. WaterAid assigned staff to facilitate the work with local government to improve the planning process and increase their effectiveness in co-ordinating and monitoring implementing agencies on the ground. Mr Kato Salongo, the director of Kyakulumbye Development Foundation (KDF), a community based organisation, confirms the benefits of the programme. He says *“now in the new approach, the district officials respond to our requests and we are even invited to their planning meetings. They support us in base line surveys and understand why we need more than six months for community mobilisation. The officers concerned regularly visit our projects and they give us technical support. Now I feel KDF is contributing at the district level.”*

*Source: WaterAid Uganda 2001*

## Scaling up community management: adaptations to current practice

“Scaling up” aims to build upon the successes of community management but advocates adaptations and additions to the model. The most important adaptations are the following.

- To look beyond the two to three year life cycle of a water implementation project. Community management cannot mean that, following the installation of the pump or the taps, outside agencies drive off into the sunset and everyone lives happily ever after. A lot needs to be done in the years after construction. People who leave their positions must be replaced, water committees must be audited, conflicts resolved, major repairs carried out, systems expanded and one day replaced.

- To move decision makers away from the short term, system- and project-focussed approach towards a service delivery approach which takes into account the whole life cycle of a water service: from design and construction to eventual replacement and everything that needs to be done in between to keep the water flowing from the taps.
- To strengthen the institutions and capacities at the intermediate, decentralised level e.g. at the level of districts, departments or provinces. It is at this level that service delivery should be planned and community institutions supported. In addition to decentralised government agencies, local NGOs and private entrepreneurs should be involved or share responsibilities.
- For effective service delivery from the intermediate level, approaches, systems and tools must be harmonised. The current practice of every agency (government or non-government, local or international) using its own approaches, systems and tools is counterproductive for scaling up community managed water supply.
- Despite the fact that community management has been mainstreamed in policies and projects, it is often not legally recognised or formally integrated in national institutional frameworks for water service delivery. For sustainable water services, a community should not be considered as some artefact from the old days of participation, but as a legal, institutional entity for water service delivery. (Davis and Iyer 2002; Lockwood 2002; Thematic Group 2005)

### **Box 5. Aquacol: support organised through an association of community-based organisations**

Decentralisation in Colombia has caused the disappearance of national agencies from the rural water scene. Municipalities fail to establish support to community managed systems and they lack financial resources. 27 community-based water supply organisations in south-western Colombia serving 75,000 people, decided to create an association to:

- improve the quality of their water supply and sanitation services;
- generate “economies of scale” for training, spare part acquisition, project development etc.
- have a better access to funding;
- act as a communication bridge between communities and local, departmental and national institutions;
- influence national policies for water and sanitation

## **The challenges of scaling up**

### **Scaling up takes time**

It takes time to build the necessary institutional support mechanisms, to strengthen policy and legislation to foster a service delivery model based on community management, to coordinate, plan and act together, and to change mindsets.

### **Scaling up aims at sustainability and coverage at the same time**

The reason that these challenges are so great is because experience has shown that it is precisely the actions that make community water services more sustainable (taking time to build community

institutions and capacities) that also make it more difficult to scale up in space i.e. serving the most people in the quickest way.

### Scaling up requires commitment

Although the experience with community management is great and many lessons have been learned, they are limited to the single community level. Putting in place the capacities and systems at intermediate level to support communities will be a major effort for all stakeholders.

### Scaling up requires learning and compromise

Harmonisation and standardisation of approaches, technology and planning in particular at the operational intermediate level are needed to make rural water services sustainable and to extend coverage more quickly. Only by breaking through the current practice of “every agency is doing its own thing” and replacing it by joint planning and joint implementation, scaling up can be achieved. (Thematic Group 2005; Davis and Iyer 2002).

## References

*Community Water, Community Management; From System to Service in Rural Areas*. Schouten, Ton and Moriarty, Patrick (2003). ITDG Publishing, London, UK.

*Institutional Support Mechanisms for Community-managed Rural Water Supply & Sanitation Systems in Latin America*. Harold Lockwood (2002). Strategic Report 6, Environmental Health Project, Washington, USA. [http://www.ehproject.org/PDF/Strategic\\_papers/SR-6.pdf](http://www.ehproject.org/PDF/Strategic_papers/SR-6.pdf)

*Scaling up Rural Water Services; sustainability through support for community management. A Joint Vision*. Thematic Group Scaling Up Community Management of Rural Water Supply (2005). <http://www.scalingup.watsan.net/>

*Scaling Up Rural Water Supply; A framework for achieving sustainable universal coverage through community management*. Thematic Group Scaling Up Community Management of Rural Water Supply (2005). <http://www.scalingup.watsan.net/>

*Scaling up Community Management By Institutionalising Community Management in a Decentralised Government System; The WaterAid Uganda Experience*. WaterAid Uganda (2001). <http://www.irc.nl/page/672>

*Taking Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services to Scale: A Discussion Paper*. Jennifer Davis and Parameswaran Iyer (2002). WSP, Washington, USA. [http://www.wsp.org/publications/scaling\\_up\\_press\\_20\\_03\\_03.pdf](http://www.wsp.org/publications/scaling_up_press_20_03_03.pdf)

Waterlines Special Issue “Scaling up rural water supply”. Vol. 23 No. 2 October 2004. [http://www.itdgpublishing.org.uk/content/wl23\\_2.htm](http://www.itdgpublishing.org.uk/content/wl23_2.htm)

