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Convincing people to pay for water: Nkouondja in Cameroon

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• Introduction

Nkouondja village in Cameroon was suffering from a collapsed water management committee and a water supply system that functioned only partially. It is now transformed into a system that wins the confidence of donors and serves as a famous example in the area. The changes in management, and the rehabilitation of the physical system, were as a result of the experimental approach taken by the PAR (Participatory Action Research), which allowed people themselves to develop improved approaches to fund raising, good record keeping, accountability and transparency.

• Learning the hard way

Before the arrival of the PAR project, the village already had rules and regulations for the management of the water supply system. These specified that each household pays 100 CFA Francs (US\$0.17) each month. This contribution was made without keeping any records. The management of the Water Management Committee (WMC) took advantage of the situation and embezzled the money. As a result, maintenance ceased and the supply system collapsed. The people had no choice but to stop contributing and go back to some of their natural water sources.

This situation became clear to the PAR team when they first arrived in Nkouondja in 1995, *'like God sent'*, as an old woman whispered to the team, when they came out of the first village meeting for a break (she could not be in the discussion hall where the men were). *'My children, you people should really help us out.*

These men like that are not serious. We contribute money, but they do not write it down and afterwards they said we never contributed'. Although the PAR team could have gone straight into solving the problem, they preferred the people to do it themselves and learn from it, which was the main principle governing the experimentation concept in the project.

In Nkouondja, a village walk helped to make community members aware of how they had neglected and abused their water resources. Lots of leaking valves and dysfunctional sections of the system were observed. Even chemical cans were found around the catchment area. After some initial hesitation, the participating community members were able to present their findings in pictorial form, and this generated much interest among the community members – many asked for more paper to copy their personal map to take home. The exercise exposed them to the problems of members in other parts of the community. In particular, the household visits provided an opportunity to hear the voices of women in this Muslim society. Their main concern was the lack of water during some months of the year, when the falling water table means that they have to obtain their drinking water from unprotected springs far away. Women were most interested in water issues and were willing to contribute labour and cash to improve the existing system. The PAR team made several short visits to Nkouondja and the other PAR villages Nyen/Mbemi and Baneghang to jointly identify problems. The team learned that the efficiency of the tools used depends on the availability and willingness of the audience to participate and learn, and the capacity of the PAR team to grasp urgent concerns.

Sometimes, a village walk provided an interesting and relaxing way of obtaining details without strain among community members. The resulting transect was often combined with the village map for presentation. Venn diagrams often helped the team to pull loose ends together, showing the partners involved in the water supply. It also reinforced the idea of self-reliance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Villagers discussing a Venn diagram (Photo: M. Lammerink)



Participants were excited to realise how much power they could exercise in decision making and how much responsibility lies in their hands. Most leaders attended the closing session in Nkouondja, and this helped in the resolution of some conflicts between two communities over the use of the water system.

New collection system

Later in the process in Nkouondja, a new funds collection system was tried as the first improvement suggested by people under the PAR process. This was after restructuring of the water users committee, for which the community elected new members. In this system the collector wrote down the names of any contributor on a list. However, this list was never signed by any of the contributors. This went on for some time. During their monitoring and evaluation meetings, some complaints emerged, including:

- some people contribute but their names were never written down;
- the collectors embezzled some of the money since the contributors have no means to prove they ever contributed;
- those who do not contribute are seldom identified and punished;
- no information was given on the management of the money; and,
- the water committee could not estimate the amount of water used and had to come back to the community several times to ask for higher contributions.

In the light of all these problems, the management system was redeveloped. With the knowledge and ideas after involvement in the PAR project, the people modified almost everything: from how they organised themselves, to improving their fund collection, accountability and transparency.

This time the water committee bought receipt booklets and a stamp, which were kept in the custody of the chief alone. He stamps and signs receipt booklets, which are distributed to the neighbourhood leaders. The neighbourhood leaders collect the money from their respective quarters against a signed receipt given to the contributor. The money and the stubs of the receipts are submitted to the chief. The chief gives these to his private secretary (a villager who is literate and chosen by the village), who counts the money and checks against the receipts stubs before handing over the money to the treasurer. The stubs of the receipts are sent to the financial secretary, who is also the minute secretary of the committee, to record the sum and update his records. This process continues in the

village now and seems to be one solution to their financial management problems.

Finances in the open

No matter how good a fund collection method is established, without proper accountability and transparency, the system is doomed to fail. The people of Nkouondja know this and have developed their own way of ensuring this, as we shall see next.

The secretary of the Water Management Committee (WMC), Mr. Mama, keeps all records relating to finance. He has developed a system which seems quite convenient to the community. He started by establishing a list of all people eligible for contribution from each quarter. Knowing the levy per person, it was easy for him to estimate what is expected from each quarter. At the same time, he keeps the list of contributors and defaulters. During prayer sessions in the mosque, where almost the entire village converges on Fridays, he reads out the financial report which shows the income, expenditures and balance left. The names of those who have not contributed are also read.

The chief uses this method to monitor the participation of various quarters. He counts the stubs of receipts from different quarters and compares the level of participation of the various quarters. He reported once about the recalcitrance of Mapoche quarter, where the president of Village Development Committee lives, and asked him why, but no clear answer was given.

The women use these receipts to control those who can collect water. One person is chosen to monitor each tap. Those whose names were read out for not having paid have to show their receipt before collecting water. In this way the fund's collection is improved. However, a major obstacle to this control method is the fact that some private connection users give water to these people.

The new financial system helped the WMC to forecast and plan the improvements to the water supply system. The system allows them to estimate the contributions likely to be made, and to identify the extra money needed, which can be applied for from donors. For example, a

representative of the committee was sent to Gabon, where some of their wealthy village elite are working. The committee member returned with a donation of 500,000 CFA Francs (US \$833). This was more than could normally be expected in the typical culture of Cameroon officials keeping strong links with the village of their origin, where they usually also retire. With this money their project, which was partially funded by Helvetas from Switzerland, was quickly accomplished.

It is interesting to see people taking control of their development after they have developed the capacity to do so.

No 'angry' food

After going through the diagnosis and experimenting phases of the PAR project, the people of Nkouondja decided to construct a new water catchment. The village had been promised financial support from Helvetas worth five million CFA Francs (about US \$ 8330) In return, the village was expected to contribute 1,200,000 CFA Francs, approximately US\$2000, which is less than 30% of the project cost. This was discussed with the people and agreed.

Helvetas sent a team to evaluate the project before the contract was signed with the executing agency, which could be any reliable NGO. However, this team did not show interest in the people of the village, and gave the impression that the village would have to accept just anything since they were looking for help.

During a subsequent visit to Nkouondja, the Helvetas team were shocked by the friendly reception the villagers gave to the PAR team, who arrived coincidentally in the village while the Helvetas team was there. When the Helvetas team arrived, one could sense an atmosphere of tension. In a combined meeting the chief took the floor and rejected the behaviour of the team from Helvetas during their last visit and questioned the amount Helvetas finally accepted to assist them. He spoke bitterly, though in a gentle low voice, but any one who knows him will understand how disappointed he was. As he put it:

'We know that we are requesting for help, but that does not mean that we will die if you do not help us. When somebody gives you food with anger you will never feel like having eaten something. These PAR people from Buea do not bring anything, but when they arrive everybody is happy, even children and women. It is not because they bring us money, but for the love, interest and respect they have for us'.

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He went further to express his discontent with the amount finally decided, which was reduced from five million to three million CFA. At this point one of the Helvetas team members explained that they had had problems locating the water catchment that day, and because they were tired, they may have behaved impolitely to the villagers. For this, they apologised. He then explained the reasons behind the reduction in the funding from Helvetas, which was because they had managed to obtain cheaper pipes at duty free prices - this would not affect the community's contribution or the scope of the project.

The key issue here is not who is right and who is wrong, but the extent to which the villagers know now that they have a right to decide on their destiny.

'Things seems to have changed in this village', a Helvetas team member said *'the people are talking with so much confidence'.*

• **Conclusion**

Convincing people to pay for water is not often easy in communities. The people of Nkouondja used accountability and transparency to convince the community members to contribute to the maintenance fund. This enabled them to extend their water supply system, and to improve management and maintenance of their system. In addition, they now command a lot of respect from outsiders. How stimulating and committed leadership contributed to the Participatory Action Development process in Nkouondja is described by the same authors in a second article in this issue.

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