

Improving Urban Water and Sanitation provision Globally: through information and action driven locally

Introduction

Despite huge investments in the water and sanitation sector over the years, millions of urban poor communities still remain unserved with adequate water supply and improved sanitation services. Part of the problem has been the failure to give attention to indicators, financial mechanisms and institutions that are designed by local organisations at local level. The dominant response to water and sanitation problems, has been to look to internationally comparable indicators to monitor progress, international financial mechanisms to fund improvements, and internationally endorsed institution shifts (e.g. more private sector participation) to drive improvements. There are many innovative and inspiring examples of locally driven initiatives that improve water and sanitation provision in deprived urban areas, including some that have reached considerable scale. Efforts to replicate local successes or models have been disappointing. But there have been important advances in local information collection, financing, and organisation.

The Project

Currently, IIED and its partners in Angola (Development Workshop -DW), Argentina (IIED-America Latina), Ghana (People's Dialogue Ghana - PDG), Pakistan (Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute – OPP-RTI) and India (The Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centre – SPARC), are working on a Sida, Danida and DFID funded project entitled: Improving Water and Sanitation Provision Globally, Through Information and Action Driven Locally. The partners were identified because they are engaged in innovative efforts to improve conditions in urban poor communities, including local water and sanitation. The aim of this project is to enable the partners to learn and share experiences directly from each other, and influence the efforts of international agencies to improve water and sanitation in deprived urban communities. Although the teams may have different strategies, there are striking similarities and common principles. All the partners work outside the water sector, but have a deep understanding of the conditions and politics of urban poverty. Each team has designed their part of the project so that it contributes to the local agenda, but also so that they can all combine to have an important impact internationally. Building on these advances and sharing them among localities are critical to achieving international water and sanitation targets. Although most of the partners are already performing well it is hoped that through this project, the teams involved in the network will increase their capacity to address local water and sanitation deficiencies through what they have learned from other successful initiatives. It is also hoped that the network as a whole develops a better understanding of how to identify and support successful locally-driven initiatives to improve water and sanitation provision.

Methodology

The project evolved from an international workshop held in London in December 2004, which brought together a number of international water sanitation researchers and practitioners. At the workshop, it was concluded that there was need to develop a better understanding of how to identify and support successful locally driven initiatives to improve water and sanitation provision in urban poor communities. To allow for effective dialogue and sharing of information between the teams working on

this project, a web based discussion forum has been set up. The discussion forum offers a platform through which any common themes, common approaches, sharing of experiences and resources can be debated and the knowledge shared easily. The sharing of ideas also enables the teams to inspire each other. It is also planned that the experiences will be documented and disseminated more widely through various media.

In order to help focus the work, four key issues in the water and sanitation sector have been identified and agreed upon by the participating teams. These issues have made it easier for the teams to link the more group-specific issues with those of other teams at the international level. Papers will be written based on the issues by the teams as a way of disseminating the research findings. The issues are:

- Working in collaboration
- Loans, subsidies and financing water and sanitation improvements
- Using information to drive local action and monitor improvements
- Going to scale

Working in Collaboration

Partnership has always been recognised as a key component in the achievement of development in communities. Community-driven water and sanitation improvements are very limited if they are pursued by communities acting on their own. The same applies to private, market-driven improvement efforts, and to government-driven schemes, at least when it comes to improving conditions in the most deprived urban areas. Much depends on the relations between these communities, government authorities and water and sanitation providers, both formal and informal. A great number of development projects are designed and implemented by professionals which permit urban poor groups no influence and which rarely produce the hoped for improvements in water and sanitation. However, new and interesting methods and institutional structures have emerged in urban poor communities, sometimes leading to unusual partnerships, the establishment of new institutions such as water boards or community-based organisations with legal standing, and the development of new “paperwork” (including contracts, charters, licences and regulations).

Financing Water and Sanitation

Financing and cost recovery are key issues for sustainable water and sanitation schemes. Considering the importance of household and community action and investment in improving water and sanitation, there is need to develop appropriate finance schemes. The impact of better local financial systems on improving the provision for water and sanitation may be direct - as they fund these improvements – or indirect as, for instance, they finance urban poor communities acquiring official tenure of their land, which then allows official water and sanitation utilities to serve them.

Using information to drive local action and monitor improvements

One of the major reasons given by government agencies for their failure to extend services to slums and squatter settlements has been the lack of baseline data about these settlements. To counter this problem some partners on this project, have used locally gathered or processed information to help drive local action. Some involves using high-tech equipment such as Geographic Information System (GIS), but much

of it is map-based, and almost all of it serves a clear strategic purpose. Through mapping communities have been more knowledgeable about their situation, and empowered to challenge and find solutions to the issues they face. The improvement of data collection at community level could also complement a new initiative that promotes *benchmarking* of urban water and sanitation facilities. Benchmarking involves identifying industry best practices, measuring and comparing one's own performance against others, identifying key areas for improvement and upgrading to match the best (WSP, 2007)¹.

Going to Scale

A common criticism of community-driven water and sanitation programmes, is that they cannot deliver at scale. The international development community is therefore currently promoting scaling up of successful water and sanitation projects especially those initiated by local communities. It is hoped that by doing so more people will have an opportunity of gaining access to water and sanitation facilities in the near future. It is also believed that this is an effective way of fulfilling the MDG targets on water and sanitation by 2015. In many low-income urban settlements, local groups have been able to collaborate to improve water and sanitation services, often under very trying circumstances. What is needed therefore is for the authorities and donors to find ways of supporting such initiatives. Some successful initiatives may be difficult to scale up because of the varying local conditions and the policy environment.

Dissemination

The project aims to ensure the widest possible dissemination of the research findings to people outside the project network through several means. There are plans for presentations to be made at the Stockholm Water Week, 4th Urban Forum in Nanjing China and the WEDC Conference in Ghana and other similar initiatives. The papers that will be written by individual teams will possibly be published in a special 'Environment and Urbanisation' journal in October 2009. The research findings will also be disseminated via the internet and reports. Keeping in mind that information from a single research project may not be the most suitable focus for knowledge transfer, it is hoped that the findings will also be integrated with those of other organisations such as WaterAid and WEDC.

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¹ WSP (2007) 'Benchmarking of Urban Water and Sanitation Facilities Gains Momentum in India' article. WSP website: <http://www.wsp.org/news/featured.asp?id=81> (Accessed: November 5, 2007).