

Exiting the platform: can communities sustain domestic water supplies? Reflections from Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Rural domestic water supply has become one of government's priorities in a bid to improve rural people's living standards and re-distribute land¹. The current economic environment² has resulted in poor maintenance of water points, impacting negatively on rural water supply. There is reduced agriculture and farming practices resulting in increased levels of rural poverty. The government's maintenance support for public water points has dwindled and communities are required to sustain their water supply on their own.

Sustaining water supply implies user-participation. User participation advocates for 'user pays' principles which depend on the capacity of the communities to plan, develop and manage their supply sources. This paper explores whether communities can maintain, manage and sustain their water supply in rural Zimbabwe (Kadoma district), with minimal support from government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It also highlights whether the strategies prepared by government and NGOs can result in sustainable community based management of water points. The paper is based on the assumption that water users are now not just seen as recipients and participators but as investors in water development.

Funding for water and sanitation activities has lapsed (?) and the main donors have withdrawn after the completion of the Integrated Rural Water Supply programme (1985-2000). There has been a five-year period of droughts in the country and this is affecting water supply in general. Hence unsustainable water supply has become a cause of concern particularly in communal and resettlement areas³.

The IRWSS programme: Government and NGO Roles

The Zimbabwe government implemented the IRWSS programme which was coined a success⁴ as it improved people's access to safe drinking water in rural communities (UNICEF, 2004). As elsewhere in Africa, the control of water provision by the Government in Zimbabwe has resulted in inefficiency, mismanagement and lack of community participation.

The IRWSS programme funded by international donors led to the installation of over 30,000 boreholes around the country (UNICEF, 2004). The main goal of IRWSS initiative was to supply rural people with access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities by 2005. This is evidenced by the increased number of domestic water supply sources from 23% coverage to about 72% by 1997 (Gunby 1997).

The implementation of IRWSS initial phase presented a top-down approach whereby projects

¹ Prior to independence, the history of Zimbabwe was based on unequal land distribution. The white Zimbabweans occupied 77% of the arable land while constituting 3% of the population leaving 23% for the black Zimbabweans who depended on peasant farming.

² The Zimbabwean economy is facing challenges. The inflation rate is over 3 million % and high unemployment rate (29/05/08; The Standard).

³ Communal areas are public owned pieces of land whose title remains under the jurisdiction of the resident chief on behalf of the government. Water points in these areas are boreholes and deep and shallow wells. They are publicly or communally owned. Resettlements are those areas occupied by people who have been resettled from other crowded areas during the Land redistribution in Zimbabwe.

⁴ IRWSS managed to improve the water coverage rate from 23% to 100% in rural Zimbabwe by 2000. Boreholes, deep and shallow wells were constructed. Some family wells were upgraded and by the end of the programme the living conditions of the rural poor had improved due to increased nutrition from adequate water supply. Other family in districts like Kadoma, Marondera, Shamva, Mazowe and Bindura benefited from tapped water schemes.

were initiated by the government and donors, although the intention was to be a bottom-up approach (demand from the people) that involved community members. The government installed boreholes and constructed surroundings for the people, then handed them to the Rural District Council (RDC) through a ceremony. Community members attended the ceremony and were informed that they now “owned” the water point since RDC is their representative. Communities viewed the infrastructure as belonging to the government. They saw their participation as symbolic as they only provided local available materials such as bricks.

A Community Based Maintenance system was established to support the handed over water points. This was expanded into a three tier maintenance system whereby the first tier represented the community; pump minder, the second tier and the district maintenance team, the third. However, there were no clarifications on what “owning” the water point implied to communities. The communities were suddenly expected to maintain the water point which they were not used to. However, because the new facilities resulted in increased demand for hand pump maintenance and because of the lack of community involvement in that maintenance system failure was almost inevitable, the result was non-functioning water points and lack of adequate water supply. Thus a more sustainable system was required to maintain the water supply in rural areas given the dwindling support from the government.

The Kadoma case confirmed that government is not always capable of sustaining services such as water supply (Ostrom, 1990; Wade, 1988). 50 per cent of water points were non-functional and the number has increased since the government financial base deteriorated.

Handover and Takeover: Lessons Learnt



Basically community management of water supplies comes with the possibility of sustainability. The issue of concern in this regard is whether and how communities cope with the infrastructure handed over to them by government and NGOs. Previously the government had the capacity to provide enough funding to construct, maintain and manage all water points. For communities to take over they will require more resources, skills and generally increased capacity to manage the infrastructure (hardware and software). Communities lack adequate information about the benefits that would accrue to them if they participate and before they take over and manage water points. Capacity building would be another way which will form a continuity of operating and maintaining the water points. On the other hand people’s wishes and expectations are too diverse and several.

Exiting the platform?

The current policies on water supply management, in Zimbabwe lay a defined exit strategy for the government and NGOs. The government is committed the CBM strategy. Although it currently lacks funding it has created structures for implementation. It also collaborates with those agencies whose objectives promote community participation. The government has also created a Water Environment and Sanitation cluster (WES). The WES cluster spearheads water management by communities among its objectives.

The research showed that, although women are the main users of water points, they were never consulted about designs and choice of technology. Although this could be more technical, CBM advocates consultations before introducing new technology. However, a new C-type water pump was being introduced but with no consultations being carried out. The implementers assumed that the B-type pumps had failed and hence they required a different one. It also appears that the government and the NGOs impose designed technology and try to make users adjust to suit the technology rather than designing the technology around the situation where it will be applied. The process of consultations has been inconsistent and only done when a project package is already in place. In some areas, the NGOs are now rehabilitating the non-functional boreholes with the same technology that has worked for only a short time or has never been maintained.

In rural areas the situation is grave since the state is expected to subsidise water supply, while the involvement is based on collective bargaining and the willingness to get involved. In both cases the conditions have led to the deterioration of the service.

Conclusion

While community management seems appropriate, communities rarely have the capacity to operate and manage domestic water supplies and the nature of the community is dynamic and heterogeneous. Therefore, with modernity, it is questionable whether communities will be motivated to sustain the service. The involvement of community members at every stage of the project cycle is conventionally acceptable as discussed earlier, but as governments, donors and NGOs change their roles, communities still require support in developing the institutions that would take over the roles of financing, technical assistance, maintenance and rehabilitation.

In practice more questions arise than have been answered: what are the costs of Community Based management in deteriorating economies? How best can communities' participation balance the need for water and the investment cost? Can water users be investors as well?

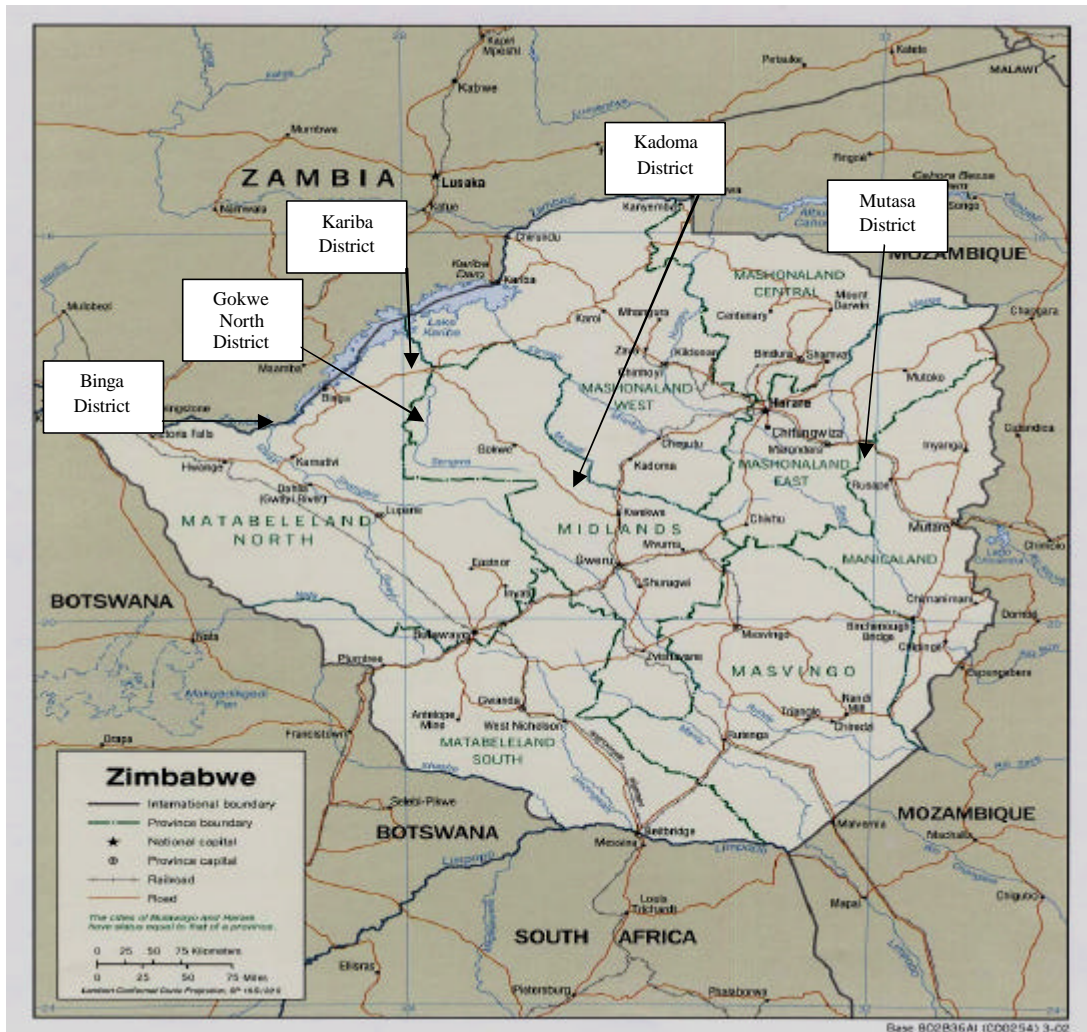
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Appendix

A Physical Map of Zimbabwe showing the some of the Districts and Provinces



The map shows some of the areas in which the Integrated Rural Water Supplies in the country. Zimbabwe is a country of 12,236 805 million with an area of 390,580 square kilometres in the east of Southern Africa. The country has experienced a decade of harsh economic conditions, precipitous hyperinflation (over 3million %), consecutive draughts and unstable political set up. It has a 91% level of literacy rate, 66% population is agricultural based, 80% unemployment rate and 0.6% population growth rate. Its economic growth rate is currently -7%. The provision of basic services such as water has deteriorated.