



OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES:

Community-Focussed Partnerships: Unpacking Sustainability

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Recent years have brought increasing emphasis on the need to 'scale up' successful development approaches such that their impact can be felt more widely, something reinforced vividly by the scale of the Millennium

Development Goals. Growing interest has also been shown in partnerships between different sectors as a way to better reach poor communities.

Common to both is the major challenge of how to reach more people faster, without foregoing sustainability or wasting scarce resources.

In the water sector the large international NGO, WaterAid, has been in the vanguard of discussion on both issues. In Singida, an urban district in Tanzania, it has recently started a project that looks to test some new ideas – on both partnerships and on scaling up – by working with the local government, local NGOs and local private sector to bring water and sanitation services to nineteen peri-urban communities.

Although the project is not yet complete some interesting lessons are emerging from their bold merging of an inclusive partnership approach with the scaling up of community-centred methodologies. This note tries to capture some of that early learning.

INTRODUCTION

Singida District is in the centre of Tanzania where there is little surface water and most drinking water is obtained from wells. Singida Town is the largest urban centre in the district and acts as a hub for local

economic activity. Outside this there is a large peri-urban area, traditionally poor with little access to services. Ongoing decentralisation and sector reform have both had an impact on Singida, most notably with the re-zoning of the town and decentralisation of responsibilities to this level, along with the creation of an autonomous public water and sanitation provider in the town, SUWASA. Though the town government has traditionally focussed on the urban core, nineteen villages in the peri-urban area now fall under its mandate, as much due to the politics of local redistricting (having sufficient population to qualify as a town) as any other reason. In terms of water and sanitation these villages share many characteristics of clearly rural settings, for instance their low capacity levels, their community dynamics and the availability and nature of services provided.

PARTNERSHIP ROOTS

For the last few years DFID's Urban Authority Partnership Project (UAPP) has been helping Singida Town Council (STC) prepare for Tanzania's local government reforms. Their support has included work with poor communities in the town to identify their most pressing needs – something that revealed a strong demand for water services in the nineteen peri-urban villages. Nominally it is the job of the town utility to serve these communities, however with less than fifty percent coverage in the core urban area, limited experience at working with peri-urban or rural communities and with a requirement to move towards financial sustainability, it seemed unlikely that SUWASA would be able to meet these demands any time soon. Initial talks had taken place with another international NGO, raising some expectation that these communities could get some external help, but when these discussions faltered DFID turned to WaterAid to ask if it could help.

PUTTING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

At the time the national government was formulating its new rural water supply and sanitation (RWSS) strategy with assistance from the World Bank. Working within the framework of the decentralising local government reforms, this strategy places the onus for service delivery on local government (LG) and encourages it to work through NGOs and the private sector in order to bolster its capacity. In doing so they would 'contract out' their delivery role and move towards general oversight and support.

Both DFID and WaterAid are broadly in favour of this principle but have both shown interest in more inclusive 'partnership' strategies. In other countries (with similar approaches supported by the World Bank) WaterAid has advocated for a partnership approach which focuses more on building up local capacity rather than the strict 'contracting out' of services. The idea is that partnerships would prove more flexible, better integrate software (community engagement processes) with hardware (infrastructure installation) and allow more effective engagement with communities.

In Singida UAPP encouraged such a partnership-based approach and WaterAid proved keen to co-operate. Its involvement would be grounded in WaterAid Tanzania's success in working with other local governments through 'WAMMA' teams¹ – these bring the extension staff of different departments into an integrated structure to deliver water and sanitation. Moreover, in Singida UAPP encouraged WaterAid to try scaling up its successful approach to community engagement, seeing if this could be stretched to cover more people in less time and thus better contribute to the Millennium Development Goals. WaterAid's proposal to DFID and STC therefore built on these two principles.

The proposal also used the government's emerging RWSS strategy as a reference point (including the 'contracting out' model), for two main reasons. The first was to ensure that progress in Singida would be broadly in line with the new strategy. Secondly, WaterAid could use lessons from the Singida

experience to inform government policy as it began to be implemented elsewhere.

'BUILDING ON ASSETS'

With its proposal approved, WaterAid started to look for partners with whom it and STC could work. With the 'contracting out' approach as its point of reference, it advertised in the national press for interested parties, rather than just work directly with NGOs it already knew. It modified the next stage however – rather than invite tenders and then award contracts, it chose to hold a local workshop to which interested parties could come and suggest how they could potentially contribute.

By doing so WaterAid was elaborating its version of a concept termed 'building on assets': the idea that projects can be more successful by building on local skills and competencies rather than predetermining a set of roles and then looking for organisations to fill them. Skills and experience also remain in the local area and can help sustain projects once the initial implementation is over. The inclusive process is also the first step in building a partnership.

In Singida the successful applicants were selected partly on the understanding that priority would go to local actors. To coordinate the nascent partnership a new body was created within the Town Council – SAMME (based on the same principles WaterAid used for its WAMMA teams). A team of five extension staff, drawn from community outreach, health and education joined two WaterAid staff and a water engineer seconded from the Regional Water Engineer's office. SAMME and the newly selected partners together framed the overall goal of the partnership, to "*improve health status and reduce poverty of the peri-urban population through improved access to adequate and safe water*" (Badru et al., 2003). They refined the project methodology suggested in the original proposal, developed an action plan and operational manual. Relations between the partners were encapsulated in Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs).

A set of mutually-agreed objectives guided their planning. These fall into five rough categories:

¹ See http://www.wateraid.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/54.asp for further details of the WAMMA programme.

- 1) infrastructure provision;
- 2) building community capacity and demand;
- 3) developing local capacity (of LG, NGOs and private sector);
- 4) integrating Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) approaches; and
- 5) strengthening LG capacity to provide ongoing support.

These objectives reflect a strong emphasis on capacity building – something that WaterAid hoped a partnership approach would favour – the aim of which is to ensure that sustainability comes hand-in-hand with the rapid implementation demanded by scaling up.

KEY THEMES & EMERGING LESSONS

The partnership is now two years into its initial three year lifecycle. After eighteen months, at the time of the mid-term review, progress on installing new or rehabilitating old infrastructure was going well with 54 out of the 61 water points addressed. Small delays had had some impact but all partners were sure that by the end of the project the hardware would be in place (189 water points in all). The partnership had divided the target population into three categories and started with the worst off – those villages where coverage was at less than four percent. Progress with the software was proceeding, though perhaps lagging behind the hardware.

It is too soon to attempt to evaluate the successes and failures of the partnership approach or WaterAid's attempt to scale up. However the innovative approach WaterAid has taken in setting up the Singida WATSAN project is already shedding some interesting light on widely accepted partnership and policy 'best-practice'. This seems worth sharing now, especially with Tanzania just piloting its new RWSS strategy.

The emerging lessons (in bold below) cut across a number of key water, sanitation and poverty themes. These themes of decentralisation, delegated service delivery, demand responsive approaches and the role of external support are now looked at in turn.

Decentralisation

One of the aims of the UAPP programme was to help the poorer constituents of Singida Town Council articulate their basic needs and to reinforce the accountability of local

government in meeting these. This dramatically highlighted the fact that peri-urban communities in Singida (and seemingly throughout Tanzania) currently fall into what amounts to a legislative void. Although effectively rural in nature, these villages pay taxes to the town council and come under its mantle. Meanwhile the body responsible for urban water and sanitation (SUWASA) is neither well equipped nor, given its current challenges, particularly interested in providing these outlying villages with a service.

With decentralisation peri-urban communities often become the responsibility of urban water and sanitation authorities. These authorities are typically ill-equipped to meet their needs and thus the communities risk falling into a service vacuum.

The Town Council is also poorly-equipped to meet their needs, its water staff having become part of SUWASA. As peri-urban communities are not part of the mandate of district level staff that deal with water and sanitation in rural communities, the result is that health extension workers become the closest government presence. The partnership itself has ameliorated things a little by incorporating within SAMME a member of staff seconded to STC from the Regional Water Engineer's office. However without a dedicated water budget the town council finds it difficult to institutionalise this role.

The creation of autonomous urban water providers often leaves local government without staff dedicated to water issues. Should health departments take the lead in delivering integrated water and sanitation services to peri-urban communities?

Delegated service delivery

While basing much of the project approach on the nascent 'contracting out' policy in Tanzania, WaterAid have tried to follow what they see as a more inclusive and flexible partnership approach. The table overleaf elaborates a few points of comparison. The suggestion is that partnership has some advantages over a contracting approach, notably by building on local knowledge, allowing more flexibility and strengthening local capacity to support communities (both now and in the future). Over time the piloting of the nascent RWSS strategy in three other

districts within Tanzania may allow a rough comparison (although this would obviously not be a ‘controlled test’). More time will no doubt be necessary to see if partnership’s professed advantages lead to improved, cheaper or more sustainable services on the ground. In the interim though lessons are emerging on how this sort of partnership handles some of the inevitable challenges inherent in scaling up.

Partnership may have some advantages over contracting approaches but in Tanzania time will be required to see if these are borne out over the long term

Scaling up Challenge	Aspects of Partnership	Aspects of Contracting
Rapid provision of infrastructure through a demand responsive approach	<i>Both use NGOs & private sector to bolster weak LG capacity</i>	
	Builds on local actors that better understand community needs Over time integrates the community into the partnership to promote downwards accountability	Minimises costs through competitive tendering for services Contracts are likely to drive both the activities and accountability of providers
Turning water and sanitation provision into actual health benefits	<i>Both take an integrated approach to service delivery</i>	
	Integrates delivery through flexible partnership structure and inclusive planning mechanisms Allows flexibility in dealing with individual communities and promotes a focus on outcomes	Relies on LG to integrate delivery via contract award and management Flexibility may be constrained by contract but accountability is clear (in terms of inputs and maybe outputs)
Getting communities to sustainably manage their own services	<i>Both build demand and capacity at a community level</i>	
	Capacitates and incentivises local actors to support communities over the long term Builds early warning mechanism into partnership so preventative support can be given	Relies on communities being able to contract future support services themselves Responsibility for oversight falls to LG

One of the major distinctions WaterAid wished to draw with the contracting out approach was its emphasis on using local actors to the greatest extent possible and including the building of their capacity in the partnership objectives. Along with WaterAid and STC the partners in Singida include the NGOs SEMA and HAPA and the non-profit organisation CBRC. Local contractors are occasionally used but are not considered formal partners – this was not due to any ideological decisions taken by WaterAid and STC but reflects the lack of local private sector capacity in the Singida area.

Both SEMA and HAPA are locally based – HAPA is responsible for education and awareness, the more technical SEMA the hardware. CBRC handle the formation of Water Users Groups (WUGs), though based 400 kms away in Shinyanga. No local actor

could be found with sufficient experience, skills and resources. Interestingly while SEMA has some of the skills that the project is using via the much smaller HAPA, it decided not to propose these at the initial stakeholder workshop.

The ability to ‘build on assets’ may be constrained by a lack of local capacity, while it is difficult to delegate when local NGOs or the private sector are very weak

A common expectation about the role of NGOs in partnerships is that they provide an easy way to enter and work in communities. In Singida it has been interesting to note that despite the engagement of local NGOs much community liaison relies on a central role for SAMME. Early on, SAMME members provided the entry point for the later arrival of the other service providers – the communities

seem to know and trust the SAMME extension staff. (This seems partly as a result of the UAPP funded work to determine community needs. While this has provided a solid base for the community-focussed partnership it may be hard to replicate, even though spreading the work across sectors has lowered the relative cost to each.)

Singida thus shows that leveraging government capacity through NGOs is not necessarily as straightforward as hoped – the need for SAMME to first introduce service providers to the communities acts as a bottleneck to rapid delivery. Long-term though, the use (and capacity building) of local NGOs should be a boon, especially in supporting communities once infrastructure has been installed. This contrasts with a contracting approach which prioritises existing capacity and value for money – if NGOs so selected were not locally based the value of establishing relationships would be greatly diminished. Through partnership the actors have been able to adjust to the need for SAMME to make introductions – without this flexibility the NGOs may well have arrived in communities with little or no introduction.

While NGOs may be skilled at community engagement, even local NGOs may not have strong links to all communities in a region. Therefore both partnership and contracting approaches that engage communities may be less effective at leveraging local government capacity than policy-makers hope.

By ‘building on assets’ the Singida project has attempted an inclusive process to find partners. This is all very well in a world of no corruption. However such a system, by prioritising local providers and muddying the criteria by which they are selected, is naturally open to abuse as well as accusations of being non-transparent. Even more telling, the approach may clash with national procurement laws which emphasise open competition in the name of transparency and probity. Such procurement rules and their underlying rationale thus pose a significant challenge to the concept of building upon assets (which may need to be elaborated accordingly), especially if we are interested in wide replication and scaling up.

An inclusive approach that builds on local assets has significant advantages but may clash with national procurement guidelines

or be open to abuse when applied at a larger scale.

Demand Responsive Approaches

At the outset the project intended to construct 115 service points in all. This was the figure determined in the early needs assessments and corresponds roughly to that suggested by a demand responsive approach (DRA). However, the annual review started to reveal tensions between applying a DRA at scale and the national guidelines for minimum service levels. These state that, “*the basic level of service for domestic water supply in rural areas shall be a protected source, with a year round supply of 25 lts of potable water per capita per day, through water points located within 400 metres from the furthest household and serving 250 persons per outlet*” (Badru et al., 2003). When the regulations concerning both distance and number of people were applied the target figure for service points had to be revised upwards to 189.

The concern is that some of the new water points, those demanded by the minimum service levels, may prove unviable in practice. Demand assessment suggests that the peri-urban residents (who live in a dry area and are fairly dispersed) are willing to operate and manage a lesser number – providing more than this may start to undermine the principles of ownership and sustainability which DRA is built upon. This could either mean that capital expenditure is wasted as points fall into disrepair or that an external agency will have to step in to cover the extra operations and maintenance costs that communities are either unwilling or unable to afford. If other WUGs see their neighbours being ‘bailed out’ they may well follow suit, which would pose a severe threat to long-term sustainability.

Strict application of national minimum service levels may undermine demand responsive approaches once high levels of coverage are being reached. This may in turn impair sustainability.

Existing research suggests that it may be extremely difficult for demand responsive approaches to work for sanitation (see Mulenga and Fawcett). Several observations from Singida tend to confirm this view. Firstly, willingness to pay for sanitation services is significantly lower than for water. Partners have also observed that behaviour

change requires a lot of time, often more than was anticipated. In some cases the progress on software has lagged behind that on hardware, exposing a 'software - hardware' gap. Communities have tended to treat funds in the group account as purely for water rather than for 'water and sanitation'. Choices and behaviour regarding sanitation often take place at a household level rather than the community level (at which decisions on water supply are made).

This 'divide' challenges integrated service delivery, with tension likely to build when demand exists for water but not for sanitation. If a true demand responsive approach is followed sanitation coverage will tend to lag well behind, while if this is to be avoided sanitation provision will by necessity become supply-driven (something that may clash with a DRA to water provision).

It may be difficult to follow a demand responsive approach to sanitation. This will put strains on partnerships for integrated service delivery.

This challenge to an integrated approach has interesting ramifications for Singida and for partnerships in general. A partnership for delivering and sustaining sanitation provision may look very different from one that delivers and sustains water services. This was graphically demonstrated at a workshop in Singida when partners sketched out the roles and responsibilities for water and contrasted these with sanitation. The mix of partners may even be different - the mid-term review called for the involvement of micro-credit organisations and maybe small-scale craftsmen to boost sanitation coverage.

Partnerships for sanitation may look very different (and need to evolve differently) than partnerships for water services. Integrating the two may be difficult or occasionally inappropriate.

Central to the demand responsive approach is the concept of communities taking charge of their own affairs. Service providers, whether local government, NGOs or the private sector, are there to help them do this and then provide them with ongoing support. However, one of the common problems identified is in making these service providers accountable to the communities they serve, during both delivery and then operation of new infrastructure. One of the main drawbacks of the contracting approach is that

service providers often remain accountable to the party issuing the contracts (typically local government) rather than to communities themselves.² This undermines local ownership and can reduce responsiveness to local needs or the quality of the services provided.

In the Singida partnership the community, though prevalent when roles and responsibilities are mapped out, is not a formal partner from the outset. It is equally important here that downwards accountability goes hand-in-hand with a transfer of responsibility. In order to strengthen this downwards accountability (from service provider to communities) as the partnership matures there is a plan to create Village Water User Authorities – these will bring together a selection of WUGs – and then to combine them into one or more Water Users Associations that would officially register themselves (as NGOs).

Progress has so far been slight and there has been an ongoing debate over whether or not to include village level politicians. Local experience with village water steering committees – which excluded local politicians and were thus undermined – suggests that structures that allow communities to become a stronger partner over time should not be created in isolation of the local-level political process (as long as sufficient safeguards against capture and nepotism can be developed).

Instituting mechanisms whereby communities can hold service providers accountable is important. Community-focussed partnerships especially need to evolve, building capacity and structures that ensure communities become a more robust partner over time.

The role of external support

If scaling up is going to be a reality in a decentralised system, the external agencies looking to support water and sanitation provision – whether donors, national agencies or large NGOs – are going to have to put the emphasis on capacity building (perhaps accompanied by a burst of intensive short-term support).

² Clayton (1999) suggests that "public service contracts encourage accountability towards the body that awards the contracts ... and ultimately to the donor ... rather than the community served"

If they choose to work in partnership with other actors, local government included, it will be important to gradually hand over responsibility to those partners as their capacity grows. In Singida there has been some frustration within SAMME as external events have slowed capacity building and the process whereby WaterAid transfers responsibility over time (for instance on budgeting) has been unclear. This reinforces experience elsewhere showing that it is important to monitor the progress of capacity building and incorporate clear milestones and triggers for transfers of responsibility – this allows momentum to be maintained and avoids misunderstandings between the partners. The key is for all partners to plan for the evolution of the partnership, especially given the short-term intervention of an early champion.

Plan for evolution. External partners need to plan exit strategies carefully and include clear monitoring, milestones and triggers. Capacity building should be accompanied by a gradual handing over of responsibility.

In Singida WaterAid has in effect created a project vehicle – SAMME – to co-ordinate partnership activities and integrate different departments within the Town Council. This may be good for early implementation but it will be important to ensure that the expected future roles and responsibilities of SAMME are mainstreamed within the STC structure, especially as WaterAid itself will withdraw from SAMME.³

Discussion is perhaps overdue on whether SAMME will become a permanent inter-departmental mechanism or whether an individual department should take over responsibility for future activities. The mid-term review revealed that the other partners welcome a strong role for STC but are concerned about how their liaison will work once WaterAid leaves SAMME. Early planning is crucial as budgets will have to be set up in advance (STC is being encouraged to reinstate some budget for water and sanitation activities).

Creating special partnership structures within local government to co-ordinate and

manage delivery may provide short-term gains, but care must be taken that these are locally ‘owned’ and functions mainstreamed within existing structures to ensure long-term institutional stability.

During the mid-term review the partners in Singida split into two groups and mapped the actors across various functions, such as the provision of hardware or software, monitoring and evaluation, regulation, etc. One group mapped the actors largely according to the roles each played, the second largely according to on-paper responsibilities. The fact that the two maps they created looked dramatically different emphasised an often overlooked point – namely that roles and responsibilities should not be conflated.

Where external support is provided – especially financial support as in Singida – this may well provide many of the initial incentives for other actors to collaborate. Such incentives go a long way to explaining why the roles differ markedly from on-paper responsibilities. For instance, on-paper it is SUWASA’s responsibility to provide water and sanitation to the peri-urban areas but the role is now being undertaken by the partnership, of which SUWASA is not a part.

For ‘scaling up’ to become a reality across Tanzania, external support needs to be both limited and to taper off. In Singida, as early champions such as DFID and WaterAid exit the partnership, both roles and incentives are likely to change. Resources are thin on the ground and over time it is likely that roles will gravitate back towards on-paper responsibilities (unless the incentives to continue otherwise remain in place). In Singida this suggests that once implementation is largely complete and WaterAid withdraws, that any ‘partnership’ for sustaining the new services will bear more resemblance to a partnership based on on-paper responsibilities than one based on roles during implementation. Practically this raises the question of where SUWASA fits in, both now and in the future, and the partners have recognised the need for more dialogue between the two.

Roles and responsibilities should not be conflated. External support allows roles to differ from on-paper responsibilities in the medium term but over time these are likely to revert closer to these ‘written’ responsibilities.

³ Davis & Iyer (2003) consider that such temporary arrangements have “potentially detrimental implications for the institutionalization needed for long-term scaling up”.

Moreover, while partnership may be a useful tool for implementation it may not be necessary once sustainability is the key issue. If the partnership is to continue then partners must review future roles and responsibilities in advance and discuss how to enable the transition.

CONCLUSIONS

Singida is currently the setting for a bold attempt to scale up a demand responsive approach within the framework of delegated service delivery. An inclusive partnership approach has been followed with the hope that this not only better utilises and builds local capacity, but will ensure that services are better owned by communities and thus more sustainable over the long-term. Peri-urban communities that have been neglected within the local government reform process are now receiving services that would otherwise have remained elusive.

Although it is too early to say whether the project's goals have been successfully achieved, several important lessons are already emerging from the experience. These should be noted by policy makers in Tanzania and elsewhere concerned with delegated service delivery and the impact of decentralisation on service provision to peri-urban communities. Those interested in the potential of partnerships to deliver affordable, appropriate and sustainable water and sanitation services to poor communities can also learn much from the Singida experience.

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