



Working in partnership – water services for Colombo's urban poor

D.G.J. Premakumara

A partnership approach between the NGO Sevanatha, community-based organizations and the water board has led to the establishment of individual household water connections in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Over half (78 000 households) of Colombo's population is estimated to live in 1614 low-income communities,¹ and although most of these communities have been existence for more than 50 years, they are characterized by high levels of deprivation. Only 44% of households in these densely populated settlements have access to an individual water connection; the balance relies on public water taps, generally 40–50 households per tap on average. One-third of households have to send someone to walk over 500m to collect water, spending 1–3 hours a day queuing and fetching and carrying from the public taps. The issue is not only one of accessibility, but also reliability of the existing services. A larger number of communities suffer from water shortage almost continually due to low pressure and leakages. The water availability to half of the low-income communities in Colombo varies from ten hours a day to a few hours every few days.

In this context, Sevanatha implemented a pilot project for the provision of individual water connections in three selected low-income communities in the Colombo North area: 323 Aluthmawatha, 312 Madampitiya, and Kadirana Watta-Stage II. This project is part of the Town East – Water Supply Project of the NWSDB, which was funded by the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation and the Japan International Cooperation Agency in 2000. The pilot project was conducted with a view to testing an alternative strategy for reaching the urban poor and sharing lessons that emerge, and making these available for planning and implementation of further projects. The project was designed, implemented and

monitored through a participatory approach, in which the local communities, NGO and the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) together discussed issues, decided courses of action, and shared the responsibilities and the cost of the construction. This is a different concept to the conventional provider-based approach often used by the service utility agencies in the provision of basic services in low-income communities.

The constraints

At a half-day workshop with representatives from both communities and the utility agencies organized by Sevanatha, the following constraints to improving individual water connections were identified:

- *Illegal status.* The majority (55 per cent) of urban poor do not own the housing plot on which they live.² They couldn't apply for individual water connections, because the NWSDB provides such connections only to those who can provide proof of property ownership and a recent receipt for payments of property tax.
- *Limited capacities of the service delivery agencies.* The technical staff of the utility agencies have very little expertise in working in partnership with civil society organizations. These officials often perceive community mobilization and community participation to be too time consuming.
- *Political interest.* The provision of public water taps has historically been an important means by which local political leaders win popular support. The NWSDB established

that over 7000 public water taps are available in the city of Colombo. Among them, about 5187 (74 per cent) are located in low-income settlements providing water free of charge following the requests of elected representatives and local political leaders.³

- *Willingness to pay.* The urban poor in Colombo expressed their willingness to pay for water to ensure a better or more reliable service. However, it was clear that they are often unable to pay for the very high one-off connection charges.
- *Geographical location.* It was recognized that most low-income communities are located in low-lying areas that are often far away from the existing service lines. Moreover, the irregular layout pattern of the community causes problems when it comes to providing water lines.

New partnership approach

The new approach proceeded in the following stages.

Community organizing. Project activities began with a series of community meetings to introduce the new project to the people. At the early stage, it was difficult to convince people due to their bad experiences with past development activities and their lack of faith in utility agencies as well as the facilitating agencies like NGOs. However, these meetings eventually led to getting the commitment of the people to participate in the project and to strengthening the existing structure of the community development council by organizing the community into water committees.

Planning. Following the community organizing, Sevanatha started the



Over half of Colombo's population lives in low-income settlements like this

negotiation between the communities and the NWSDB. As a first activity, a meeting was organized in the community inviting officials from the relevant institutions and the community development council. This meeting was very helpful for partners to discuss their role, responsibilities, expectations as well as limitations. Subsequently, a community workshop was held involving both community and officials to draw up an action plan for project implementation. Later, another community workshop was organized to finalize the layout plans, engineering designs and cost estimations. This workshop was helpful for community members not only for clearing the technical design and cost estimations but also to understand the procedures that need to be followed for getting individual water connections.

Project management and co-ordination: A team of senior officials representing the NWSDB, the Colombo Municipal Council, land-owners and Sevanatha held regular meetings with the Secretary of the Ministry in order to brief him on the progress of implementation, and to get the necessary policy decisions. As a result, the pilot project was able to get a few innovations made to regular application procedures and the connection charges.

According to the new requirements, applicants must obtain a letter from the Divisional Secretary of the area certifying their residency and must pay a refundable deposit of SLR1000 (US\$10) with the application. The staff

of NWSDB arranged a mobile service to provide the necessary assistance for filling up the complicated applications. In the normal circumstances, the individual connection charge is about \$110, but this was subsidized to bring it down to \$41.60, with an initial deposit of \$10 and a 30-month repayment period for the balance, under the condition that community members provide unskilled labour for excavating and backfilling the pipe-work inside the community. After making the payments, the NWSDB signs the agreement with the individual householders.

Monitoring of construction: The construction works were carried out at three different levels:

- *Level I – Offsite construction.* The NWSDB implemented the laying of water pipes to the settlement bearing the total cost of the activity.
- *Level II – On-site construction.* The community and the NWSDB shared the project cost for laying water pipes inside the settlement. The community members provided unskilled labour for excavation and backfilling in inner lanes and paid the cost for the road cutting and reinstatement for the offsite connection by the Municipal Council, while the NWSDB incurred costs for materials and skilled labour for the installation of the distribution pipe.
- *Level III – Individual connections.* Each household was provided with an individual water connection with a water meter. The cost of individual connections was paid by each householder, who also provided unskilled labour for excavation and backfilling. The NWSDB provided skilled labour for making the connections.

Key lessons

The following key lessons were learned from the pilot project:

The urban poor are willing and able to pay for water. The people have demonstrated their strong commitment and willingness to pay for individual water connections. However, the degree of their commitment depends on their



Local people participate in the planning meetings so that they become fully committed to the water supply project



The work is discussed on site. To bring connection costs down householders themselves dig the trench and backfill it when the pipe is laid

satisfaction with the level of the services, capital cost incurred on obtaining the individual connections, pricing system, and the income level of the community.

Community ownership is vital. A strong community ownership is vital to successful implementation and follow-up activities in order to assure the co-operation of the community members in the project.

Women play a central role. This is because typically women are the ones who suffer most due to a lack of water in their houses since it is they who have to get up very early and wait in long queues to draw water from the common standposts.

The co-operation of utility agencies is vital. The commitment, flexibility, willingness and adaptability to the situations by the officers of the utility agencies were extremely important for implementing the water supply projects in urban low-income communities.

Mediation is an effective strategy in building partnership. Motivating the community, strengthening the community development council, forming the water committees, and providing the relevant education, training and information were vital inputs in the new approach to convince the target groups about the project on the one hand and

to develop an effective partnership between communities and the officials on the other. In this process, Sevanatha's role as a facilitator has been one of the keys to project success.

Follow-up activities and policy changes are required for sustainability. Follow-up activities and policy changes are vital to ensuring the sustainable operation and maintenance of the project. As an outcome of the pilot project, a comprehensive implementation manual was produced for extending the work into other low-income communities in Colombo. A separate unit called Non-Revenue Water Reduction Unit was established under the NWSDB to provide individual



The water connection and meter is fitted.

water connections to the urban poor and to speed up the water supply implementation activities throughout the city. The Ministry then took a policy decision to provide subsidized individual household connections to all low-income communities in the city, targeting 33 000 households.

By July 2005 an estimated 10 000 new connections had been provided in 65 low-income settlements in Colombo. As a result, non-revenue water in the city was estimated to have fallen from 57 to 47 per cent, with substantial benefits to the living conditions of the people who live in these poor settlements. (Non-revenue water includes leakages, water from standpipes in low-income areas and illegal connections.)

Conclusion

Providing individual water connections to the urban poor is a relatively easy task, if the water utility agency is ready to understand the barriers within the existing service provision system; is willing to recognize the equal rights of the urban poor in the city to safe and reliable water; and flexible enough to adapt its management procedures to enable the urban poor to gain access to safe water. In this context, the partnership approach seems to be more appropriate than the provider-based approach that is generally preferred by utility agencies providing services including water supply to urban low-income communities.

About the author

D.G.J. Premajumara is a research student at Nihon Fukushi University, Japan.

References

- 1 Jayaratne, K.A., H.M.U. Chularathna and D.G.J. Premakumara (2002) 'Poverty profile – city of Colombo', Sevanatha-Urban Resource Center, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 JICA (2001) 'The detailed design study for the project for reduction of non-revenue water in the greater Colombo area in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka', NWSDB, Sri Lanka.