

A The PLA Initiative *is for Action*

Recognizing the linkages between user participation and sustainability of services, Vellangallore Panchayat initiated an innovative intervention drawing on resources from the community and service institutions in a mutually supportive framework.

Community Profile

- Vellangallore Panchayat, Thrissur District, central Kerala, India.
- Area 26.61 sq km population 32 816 (1991 Census), 13 wards
- 8,900 households
- High poverty and water scarcity
- 919 households with private tap connections. 368 public taps used by the poorer section of the society

The relatively rich households also have perennial wells that they use to create their own water pumping and internal plumbing systems



Self-assessment at a tap stand

The opportunity to see the action underlying the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) Initiative has come earlier than expected. A new and experimental project was launched in Vellangallore panchayat in Thrissur district of Kerala in June 1999. Its aim is to solve water shortages by saving, recharging and better distributing and managing the available water resources through a partnership of women, men,

the council and the KWA. Impressed by the women's creativity and the commitment of all parties to turn their informal water management into a formal partnership for managing water as a social and economic good, the Netherlands Development Cooperation (NEDA) has allocated support for implementation as well as documentation of the experiment for the forthcoming Second World Water Conference.

Because of the shortage of manpower in the rural water supply schemes, the Government of Kerala has limited the number of staff to operate, maintain and manage the rural distribution of water in the Mala Water Scheme.¹ The result: KWA cannot appropriately allocate the limited amount of water. This clearly is a cue for communities to take their destiny in their own hands.

Areas on higher ground in Vellangudi do not get water at predictable times and when they do, it is inadequate, often for only an hour at a time. This affects especially the poorer households, which use the public taps funded by the local council. Better-off households have private taps. Most rich farmers have also built storage reservoirs attached to their water connection that automatically fill up and do not require manual supervision. Households without private connection have to wait till water comes on in the public taps. This makes it hard for the women to manage their time and work.

The women concerned have resorted to informal lane-based water management to combat this problem. They leave a pot below the tap, and the woman living nearest to the tap listens for the sound of the water trickling to the pot (if she lives within earshot) or looks out for the falling water (if she lives within sight), or otherwise regularly checks for water flow. Sometimes a young child (often a girl) is posted near the tap, as is done in other parts of India. (This is one reason, perhaps, why fewer girls than boys attend school.) She then warns others that water is coming so that all may fill their pots. The informal water management works but is extremely inconvenient. It makes people reluctant to pay for water and contributes, together with other administrative factors, to the poor cost recovery for the management of the scheme. *A vicious circle has been created in which poor service and poor payment have become mutually reinforcing.*

Insight of this kind, earlier known only to those directly concerned, was revealed in the participatory group processes used for the Learning Assessments in August–November 1998. The Learning Assessments were sponsored by the WFP and IRC as phase I of the PLA Initiative. The local partner was the Social Economic Unit Foundation (SEUF). The methodology helps communities to assess social, technical and institutional aspects of service establishment and delivery, and

includes gender-appropriate socialization, and a list of issues for women to keep in mind in the assessments.

The men and women participating have the freedom to agree or disagree with the social and technical findings and strengths and weaknesses of the existing and planned service and to use the findings to help plan on a basis of their own improvement.

As with any social assessment and learning and evaluation tool, the methodology is not complete as a package and without a follow-up strategy by those who have participated in the analysis. As with the regular community participatory approach, it becomes completely useless when the different interest group communities, as well as the project agencies that have established the service, ignore the findings and do not act on them. This often includes recognizing inequalities and then negotiating compromises based on a mix of development interests over and above that the water and water development goals and moving beyond blaming others.

THE FIRST STEP

The first task for the Vellangudi village was to identify the root cause of the water shortage. Waste and uncontrolled use of water was identified as the main problem and the source or destination of the waste was identified as the origin of the problem, as well as solutions.² The problems identified were:

- ❖ an excessive use of water, including for unintended purposes such as irrigation, and spillage/wastage
- ❖ overconsumption by an estimated 10% of the house connection holders
- ❖ leaks springing in the distribution net

Stakeholders for the First Intervention

- Women and men from the community
- Panchayat members, of which one third are women*
- Staff of KWA (the water agency managing the scheme)
- TLO (the Dutch-supported Technical Liaison Officer)
- Staff of the SEUF (the social support organization)
- IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (the backstopping organization)

*A *panchayat* is a democratically elected local government body at the village level.

¹ This is a Dutch-supported water supply scheme covering six panchayats.

² Kerala Water Authority, the water agency managing the scheme.

³ UNDP–World Bank Water and Sanitation Program, South Asia.

⁴ IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, The Netherlands.

⁵ These problems in a piped water supply in a hilly area are common not only in Kerala but also in other similar areas in India and globally. They take on increasing importance with the growing consumption of drinking water, the increasing shortage of fresh water and the tendency of water agencies and communities alike to expand systems and build additional systems rather than manage the water already available.

Voice and Choice for Women

Water is their business

The modalities of the intervention will be worked out in a direct dialogue between women representatives and the KWA at the site of the central works of the scheme. This will also provide an opportunity for the KWA to familiarize the women and the supporting men representatives with the layout, operation and constraints of the scheme.

A woman councilor of Vellangalore panchayat and the head of the WID section in SEUF will manage the intervention. The other partners will assist the project management in the process. Significant active participation by women can already be seen at all levels in Vellangalore: in the community, the panchayat, the SEUF and the Kerala Water Authority. Since the women feel the issue most sharply and have already undertaken informal management measures, management within the panchayat will also be through a representation from the women. However, men also have a role in using (and misusing) water. Hence the women may wish to invite men whom they feel can support their work without marginalizing them. Organizational arrangements for the purpose will be made with the help of the SEUF. SEUF has earlier made a pioneering effort to train women masons in Thrissur in building toilets; some 300 are now employed in environmental sanitation and the local building industry.

Since the users, especially the women, will provide inputs for the saving of water but will not immediately notice the effects of these efforts on their own water availability, the intervention will address other factors influencing the quality of the service, such as repair of leaks and mechanical failures.

There are several other important reasons why water often fails to reach the consumers. These are:

- infrequent and slow repair of leaks, which is related to level of preventive maintenance and presence of resources — equipment and funds — and the authority to execute speedy repairs
- mechanical failures in the pumping system
- cuts in the electricity supply
- gaps in operation

THE OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of the intervention are:

- to test the potential to effectively address these problems by joint problem-solving actions by all stakeholders
- to recognize women's needs, commitment and management by enabling them to lead the process. This is being approached in a gender-sensitive way, that is, with men also taking their responsibilities and sharing the burden as well as benefiting from the results.

THE INTERVENTION

The package of interventions that has so far emerged from the discussions between all stakeholders at the panchayat and scheme level consists of:

- reducing water wastage and unauthorized use through participatory learning and peer control
- augmenting available water resources through recharge from rainwater harvesting pits
- building alternative systems in the sections that can technically never be well reached, using improved traditional rainwater harvesting as a base
- measuring the effects through a combined monitoring system of KWA and users (users will report on change in water levels in traditional wells)
- improving reliable delivery and acceptable quality of water by improving communication between the consumers and KWA

SUBSEQUENT STEPS: GIVE AND TAKE

A host of activities are planned to facilitate the give and take between all stakeholder groups to move towards solving the problem jointly. Moving beyond the 'blaming the other' paradigm, the intervention is a close collaboration where all the actors join hands to solve their problem collectively.

SEUF

- Besides preparing a detailed work plan, the SEUF will, in close cooperation with the KWA and the TLO, organize

a meeting of the women's representatives and the operational staff of the scheme, to arrange for the modalities of the joint water-saving effort.

- It will assist the panchayat and KWA in working out, in a joint meeting, a system of cooperation on local repairs of leaks and pipe/tap damage, curbing of illegal connections and pipe breakages and timely and proper payment of consumer and panchayat charges towards covering the O&M costs of the scheme.
- The SEUF will organize neighbourhood groups (40-50 households) to take up simple operation and maintenance.
- It will also monitor physical and non-physical effects of the intervention in cooperation with KWA and TLO and liaise with other panchayats in the Mala Scheme for information and possible support to the project.

KWA

The KWA will cooperate and provide technical support in monitoring water consumption before, during and after the interventions. It will monitor water delivery to Vellangalore from the end of June 1999 to March 2000, providing data on water delivery to the area for the last three years and listing households with private connections that consume more than the planned 50 lcpd. It will also provide an overview of panchayat payments for the consumption from and upkeep of the community taps.

At the initial stage, data showing the improved availability of water will be more significant to the engineers than to the users. However, it is expected that during the summer months the effect of the cooperation between users and the KWA will become visible and can be extrapolated to the effect that can be achieved when the approach is expanded over the total scheme.

Other areas identified for strengthening the relationship and cooperation between the KWA and the users are communication and accountability with respect to:

- agreement on the service hours
- adherence to the service hours
- a good chlorinating system
- repairs by local craftsmen/women authorized and controlled by KWA

Addressing these issues through improved relations with the women representatives will be part of the project.

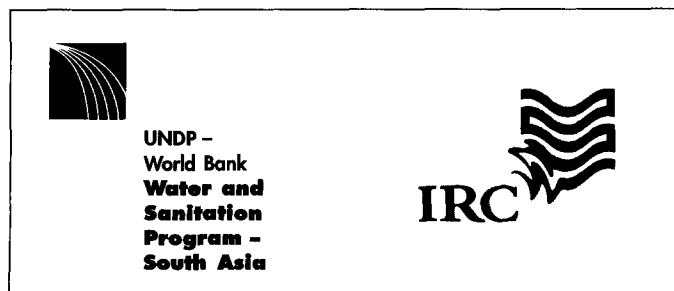
PANCHAYAT

- The panchayat will form a gender representatives committee under the authority of the Panchayat Act.
- It will take follow-up actions in support of the gender committee's work, notably dealing with curbing of illegal water uses and appropriate payments for water delivered through house connections and community taps.
- It will address the work burden for women as volunteers, for example, combining work on water management with other women's work for the panchayat (e.g. savings collection) and providing expenses.
- It will supplement the system with improved traditional water sources, digging of new wells, watershed management and constructing mini water supply schemes besides addressing poverty and gender issues in the rainwater pit campaign.

IRC

- Backstop on gender and water management
- Liaise with the organizers of the Second World Water Conference on the projects, including the possibility of a live video conference between the delegates at the conference and the women in Vellangalore
- Assist in the documentation of the process and outcomes of the project

Since the intervention is aimed at only one of the six panchayats in the Mala Scheme, benefits from it will be less marked than if the issue had been addressed at the same time in all six panchayats. Nevertheless, the experiment will be very useful as it will address the solution of growing water shortages through cooperation between all stakeholders. This is an issue increasingly on the agenda in Kerala, India and the world and the main theme of the Second World Water Conference in March 2000. The results and impact of this intervention will be documented and presented on the Gender Day of the Second World Conference in the Hague on March 2000 in a video conference. No doubt the community will have an "action"-packed story to tell, of learning together and working together. ■



This note has been prepared by Christine van Wijk, Rekha Dayal and Shalini Sinha for a Clinic on Sustainability Monitoring, PREM Week, July 14, 1999.