

# A mandate to manage — Hitosa's large-scale gravity-flow water-supply scheme

by Keith Wright

**Ethiopian villagers enthusiastically grasped the concept of community management; regional-government officials were less impressed. Representative decision-making structures must perform effectively if bureaucrats are to be persuaded to hand over the reins of power.**

HITOSA WOREDA IS a fertile area of Ethiopia. Fields of wheat and barley stretch up from the plains of the rift valley floor to the high slopes of Mount Bada. This mountain range of over 4000m forms a huge water catchment.

Hitosa Woreda is composed of three zones which are delineated by their altitude and rainfall. The area as a whole has very few reliable water sources, the lower zones becoming progressively worse off. The lowlands below 1900m are hot and very dry, with no permanent surface water. The main water sources here are large earth

## Community management

The term 'community management' is used to convey that the local leaders of the scheme were selected by the users themselves. It also refers to the fact that the water-supply hardware, spare parts, office and office equipment, vehicles and motorcycles are owned by the user community. The leadership group decides on all matters relating to:

- water connections, both public and individual;
- the water-supply system, for example, business use, ensuring supply to all

scheme is self-sufficient;  
 the scheme's employees.

From the start, this scheme was designed to be managed by the user community; an approach supported by both the national and regional government authorities, as well as the local leaders. A similar scheme in neighbouring Dodota had already demonstrated how successful community management on this scale could be. The Dodota scheme, operating under the management of local women, has supplied an estimated 87 million *insira* (20-litre water pots) since 1984. The strategy adopted in building the community-management system was to:

- involve representatives from the user community right from the start;
- include representatives from every village in the management system;
- train local people to carry out practical administration and maintenance;
- provide leaders with both general

## Project background

### ● Why?

The Hitosa Water-Supply, Sanitation and Health Education Project was launched in April 1993 to assist the people living in the District's villages and small towns by bringing clean piped water from springs above the escarpment to the lower lands where, previously, water was in such short supply that, on a typical day, women and girls were spending three hours collecting water for domestic use.

### ● How?

The project aimed to provide clean water close to home, to both ease the burden of collection, and to improve people's health, through a reduction in the incidence of W&S-related diseases. The gravity-flow system was designed to be operated and maintained within the resources available; another primary objective was work-

ing with the communities to develop their confidence and management capacity.

The water for the scheme — on which construction was completed in June 1996 — comes from two springs, Bukito and Boru, producing 34 l/s (litres per second) and 8 l/s respectively. The amount captured is 66 per cent of the dry season output of the springs. The system, which currently serves 62 236 people, takes the water through 140km of pipe to 122 public waterpoints and 143 private connections. The scheme was designed to supply 67 000 people with 25 litres per day.

### ● Cost?

Total cost, including regional government and community contributions = £1 million. WaterAid's total contribution will be approximately £850 000.

valley dams. The middle-level plains are extensively farmed for wheat, barley, and oil-producing crops and this is where 70 per cent of the Hitosa water scheme users live. Previously they collected their water from a few shallow rivers and one spring. Water supplies reached Iteya, the largest town in Hitosa Woreda, with a population of just over 12 000, by cart or donkey from a spring 11km away. The higher area, above 2300m, forms the lower slopes of Mount Bada. Cereal crops are also grown.

the public waterpoints, and watering animals;

the repair and maintenance of the system: it carries out repairs and maintenance, decides when to get help for bigger repairs, as well as the type of assistance required;

finance: it agrees on and maintains all financial procedures, determines when to obtain assistance on financial matters, and contacts relevant partners for advice;

water charges, and it ensures that the



WaterAid/Andy Hutchison

*These Hitosa men end the day by carrying pipe 2km to Yabo.*

management training and specific water-scheme management training; and to

enable the line ministries to see that their role is to support, rather than control.

## Attitudes

The experience in Hitosa has shown that building local management capacity is relatively easy. Creating the attitudes within the user community to enable the local management group to manage was more difficult, but the most difficult and unpredictable part of the process has been to convince the



*Real job satisfaction — Abebech Girma works on the pipeline in Boru Ankato (above); Mererat Gudire, Genet Getah, and Mashasha Makwria dig the pipeline trench for Burketu (below).*



regional and district line-ministry staff to relinquish management powers to the users, and to give the community-management structures the official powers and mandate to carry out their management functions.

### Organization and structures

The user community's role has been central from the outset. The project has been designed in two phases, each with a different management structure. In the first (construction) phase, the scheme was managed by the Project Steering Committee, which was responsible for overseeing the construction of the system, and the building of the community-management structures. The Committee was composed of zonal-level government officers from the bureaux responsible for water, health, and agriculture, a representative of the donor organization,

and six representatives of the user community — mainly local leaders or well-known people.

A number of other groups were also set up: the Project Steering and the Woreda Water Committees; the Water Administration Office; and the Village Water Committee. The Woreda Water Committee is composed of two representatives from each Village Water Committee and has a small executive Committee. During the construction phase, the Woreda Committee has been responsible for collecting cash contributions from households, and banking the money in the project account. This money was used to supplement construction costs. The Committee was also responsible for co-ordinating community labour, nominating trainees, ensuring the security of the staff and project property at the project site, and encouraging attendance at health-education sessions.

The Water Administration Office has

six staff — Manager, Finance Officer, Meter Reader, Storekeeper, Cashier, and Technical Officer. The role of this office is to manage the tap attendants, ensure the water service at every waterpoint, collect and account for the money from the water sales, and to organize the maintenance of the whole system. All these officers are members of the user community, and have been trained by the project.

Each waterpoint has a Tap Attendant managed by the Water Administration Office and supervised by the Village Water Committee.

The Village Water Committees were formed at the very beginning of the project. At that time their main function was to organize village labour.

When the construction was complete, the Project Steering Committee disbanded and handed over responsibility to the Woreda Water Committee, whose name and composition have both changed. The new grouping, the Woreda Water Management Board, includes representatives of the local council, and the local agriculture and health officers, in addition to two representatives from each Village Water Committee. The Board makes all the management decisions and supervises the working of all the staff in the project. The Water Administration staff are full-time and salaried while the Board and Committee receive expenses. All management costs are financed through the water charges.

### Leadership and operations

There are two types of management: leadership and operational: *Leadership*

- management* functions include:
- monitoring the demand for, and supply of, water;
  - deciding on a policy for water uses other than household use;
  - deciding on the limit for private connections;
  - setting the charges for water;
  - regularly checking income and expenditure; and
  - supervising staff.

*Operational management* responsibilities include:

- daily management of the system;
- maintenance and repairs;
- supply of spare-parts; and
- accounting for the income.

In Hitosa, operational management has received the most attention. Now that the user community has taken over full management responsibility, the need for training and support in leadership management has been highlighted.

## Establishing community management

The most significant elements of the process were that:

- it was clearly stated from the very beginning that the scheme would be managed by the users;
- from the outset, the user community was represented on the main management committees;
- the steering committee was officially autonomous and able to make independent decisions: it was not controlled by the Water Bureau. This arrangement was set out in an official agreement signed by Water Bureau and local government officials, the user community, and the donor. This document gave the Steering Committee a legitimate role and it officially recognized the role of the user community in management;
- a similar agreement is to be signed legitimizing the role of the new Woreda Water Management Board;
- all the people who carry out all the main functions, both leadership and operational, are members of the user community, trained by the project;
- the project co-ordinator, who is a government officer from the Water Bureau, has always been very supportive of community management; and
- the representative of the project's donor had worked on the neighbouring scheme in Dodota and was well-respected and trusted by the Hitosa community.

## Government context

Although the Ethiopian Government's policy of decentralization officially sanctions the role of user communities

as managers of their own water-supply systems, many detailed local decisions depend on the personal attitudes of individual government staff. In fact, decentralization allows individual attitudes to be influential. In a centralized system, the decisions of the central office are carried out by all staff. In the decentralised system, many levels can choose to retain power in some form. In the case of Hitosa, the staff of the National Ministry of Water are very supportive; at the Oromia regional level, there is much less enthusiasm. They would prefer the community to fulfil a mainly operational role, leaving the leadership management and policy decisions to the Water Bureau. The Water Bureau does not consider the official agreements binding.

## Support

At the moment, Hitosa's community management is operating the scheme



*Without the right technical back-up, no scheme can be sustainable.*

and is able to keep it working. But without the full support of the government — and of the regional Water Bureau in particular — it will not be able to function effectively over the long term. It will lack the technical back-up that, eventually, will become essential, including a source of supply of spare-parts and, most importantly,

the mandate to enforce decisions with regard to water charges or water use, and to refuse to supply people who do not comply. Without this type of support and official recognition, the

## But what does the community think?

The attitudes of the users make or break any community-management system. In Hitosa, the people were extremely positive — a perception confirmed by the findings of a recent evaluation of the project.

### Main reasons

- it solves a very big problem — shared by everybody;
- maintenance of the whole system is seen as a personal benefit;
- people feel strongly committed to take responsibility for the maintenance and protection of the whole system;
- there are willing volunteers — for example, for the Village Water Committee — for the common good of the water supply; and
- the money from water sales is not misused.

### Secondary reasons

- The project is trusted: people accept its decisions and requests;
- the people respond to the requests of the project;
- the price of 5c for 60 litres is considered reasonable;
- the local people have shown that they have the potential to manage and maintain the water system;
- there is sufficient income to pay staff a reasonable salary;
- a steady income enables salaries to be paid regularly;
- there is enough money to pay for maintenance;
- employees provide a reliable service;
- good records are kept of all the scheme's activities;
- the scheme's leaders are responsible to the users;
- the leadership is committed and trusted;
- the Water Bureau provides support, enabling the community management to operate effectively on its own; and
- the supply system is well designed and constructed.

WaterAid/Caroline Penn

capacity of the community management will be limited.

*Keith Wright acted as team leader of a Hitosa-scheme evaluation carried out in early 1996. At the time of writing this article he was an independent consultant specializing in community management and primary health care. Keith is presently working with Unicef in Uganda.*