Abstract

Nowhere in the world is poverty more visible, more destructive and more pervasive than in Africa. Too often, Africa is associated with stories of failure and pessimism, of wars and famines, floods and unrest. Africa appears to be slipping back on many development indicators, even as other parts of the world move ahead.

In 2003, however, there are prospects of achieving progress in water, sanitation and hygiene in Africa. Across the continent, there is a strong sense of the need for peace, democracy and co-operation. Through the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative, industrialised countries are finally proposing to write off a significant part of the debt into which the poorest countries have fallen. Many African countries have written Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which give clarity and direction to the development work in those countries. Within the water sector itself, the African Ministerial Conference on Water (AMCOW) has been formed to share ideas and lessons and to provide mutual support and active direction. Recent meetings, especially the World Summit on Sustainable Development (August 2002), are giving fresh political impetus to this work.

This paper suggests five priorities for achieving the water and sanitation Millennium Development Goals in Africa. It relates them to practical examples of inspiring and positive initiatives in water and sanitation from across the continent. These examples have worked, or have the potential to work, at a large scale, are demonstrably sustainable, and do not benefit from too many unique local conditions. These characteristics enable the lessons from these examples to be useful for other people in, and indeed outside, Africa.

Keywords: Africa; Drinking water; Hygiene; Millennium Development Goals; National programmes; Positive lessons; Sanitation

1. Support governments

The public sector is still overwhelmingly the main player in water and sanitation in Africa. Governments have the duty to provide policy and leadership; in many countries the national and/or local government structures are also the main service providers. Critics assert that African governments are
inefficient or, worse, corrupt. However, there are several good examples of governments reforming their structures, separating their roles in policy, regulation, service provision and even asset ownership, and implementing effective large-scale programmes.

The Ugandan Government has been reforming the water and sanitation sector for the past few years. This reform is linked to the government’s poverty alleviation plans and financed largely by debt relief funds. The government has led from the front, building a high level of trust and consensus with its sector development partners and with civil society stakeholders, and initiating progressive and innovative reforms throughout the sector. The key strategies include more decentralised delivery of services, increased private-sector participation and the need for a programmatic, sector-wide approach.

South Africa is one of the few countries in the world that formally recognise water as a human right. Its national water and sanitation programme, which is one of the largest such programmes in Africa, aims to deliver sustainably on that right. The key elements of the programme include: a policy and legislative framework within which the work can be implemented; a capital works programme which, between 1994 and 2002, has provided infrastructure intended to meet the basic needs of over seven million people; a “free basic water” policy, which aims to ensure that affordability is not a barrier to access to safe water; and devolution of responsibility from the national government to local government, acting through community-based approaches.

In little more than a decade Ghana has transformed the structure and strategy of its rural water supply sector. In 1990 external support agencies, NGOs and a government parastatal organisation planned and constructed rural water supplies, and the parastatal was also responsible for maintaining them. By 2000, local governments and communities played a significant role in planning supplies, the private sector had become active in drilling and other water supply services and communities had full responsibility for maintaining their supplies. This reform process had started with an extended dialogue with the major stakeholders in the sector, out of which a new rural water and sanitation policy was developed. The policy was then implemented in several large pilot projects, supported by a number of external agencies, and finally the lessons from those projects were incorporated into the national programme itself.

2. Deliver services through new partnerships

While governments remain solely responsible for policy, they are not alone in their service delivery work. Civil society and NGOs, external support agencies and large and small private sector enterprises all have roles to play. They are creating new support mechanisms, new methods for financing services, even new contractual systems. The common feature is that they are all making these innovations in partnership with governments, not in isolation or opposition to them.

South Africa’s Mvula Trust is a large NGO focused exclusively on water and sanitation provision for the poor, with an annual operating budget of over US$10 million. There are very few indigenous NGOs of this size working in water and sanitation in Africa. The Trust balances two roles: the more traditional NGO role of community empowerment, advocacy and promotion of innovation; and the role of national implementing agency with capacity in most poor rural areas in South Africa. In recent years, the Mvula Trust has forged a close and cooperative working relationship with the South African Government, which enables it to have a significant influence on government policy. The Mvula Trust provides South Africa with an alternative national delivery mechanism for poor rural communities.
Social funds are development programmes that help local governments and communities to build the basic infrastructure such as schools, health centres and water supply schemes at relatively low cost. Across Africa, social funds have supported a large number of small-scale water projects – from wells to capped springs and piped water supplies – which serve several million people. Social funds can start projects quickly and disburse their funds with a minimum of bureaucracy or delay. They mobilise the resources of the communities themselves and they train people to manage their own projects. The institutional arrangements enable communities to choose the appropriate levels of service and technology. They increase the capacity of the communities for other development work at the same time as helping them to improve their infrastructure. In effect, social funds take the development philosophy pioneered at a small scale by NGOs and apply it at a much larger scale.

Millions of Africans live in small towns or peri-urban areas. These places are generally too large for community management to work effectively, but too small to warrant the involvement of large private companies or water utilities. With appropriate professional support and regulation, both non-profit organisations and commercial companies can provide good water services in small towns. In Mali, voluntary-sector Users’ Associations manage water services in the peri-urban areas. A parastatal organisation gives them technical and financial advice and support. Its costs are covered by a levy paid to it by the Users’ Associations, calculated in proportion to the volumes of water that they supply. In Mauritania, young graduate entrepreneurs provide water services to individual towns under a contract from the government. Working with the communities, they extend the distribution systems and install private connections. In Niger, a medium-sized private company has financed the rehabilitation of particular small-town water supplies and has taken over their operation, without any external financial support. In Tanzania, Uganda and parts of Niger, small local private-sector companies have won tenders to manage or lease water systems.

Throughout Africa small-scale water service providers are becoming recognised as useful allies, not nuisances. This applies mainly in urban water and sanitation, but also in the supply of spare parts, goods and services in rural areas.

3. Support community and household-level management

Community management has become an established and accepted concept. Governments and external support agencies recognise the need to help the people themselves to plan, implement and manage their water and sanitation services. However, this process can be taken one step further, to the household level. For some years, sanitation has been regarded as a household issue; now, in a few places this concept is also applied to water.

In Ethiopia, Malawi, and Kenya, large-scale community-managed piped water supplies have been successfully implemented for many years. The principles of community management are applied differently in the three countries. However, their experiences yield several clear conclusions regarding sustainability. First, social cohesion gives rise to the clarity of purpose and sense of ownership that ensure sustainability. Second, sound financial management, including the authority to set tariffs, the use of metering and sanctions against non-payers, is important for financial sustainability. Third, the viability of community management systems improves if they have paid staff, good training for the community members and the management committees and ongoing access to technical and professional support when needed.
Most drinking water programmes of governments, NGOs and external support agencies concentrate on public supplies for domestic purposes only. In Zimbabwe, however, the upgraded family well programme dates back many years and has grown to a large degree across the country. It has two particularly interesting features. First, each household invests in and manages its own water supply without depending on the government for maintenance, which avoids the problems of ownership and decision-making associated with public water provision. Second, the same water source is often used for both domestic and productive purposes, which can considerably increase the incomes of poor people. The individual wells are simple, convenient and reliable and can provide enough irrigation water for small-scale agriculture, which contributes directly to the alleviation of poverty.

4. Increase emphasis on sanitation and hygiene

The Millennium Development Goal for sanitation in Africa is much more difficult than that for water. Yet, in the past, water has generally been given more attention and more resources. So sanitation and hygiene will need particular emphasis in the future. The WASH campaign, led by governments and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, is generating political and media interest and resources. The African Sanitation and Hygiene Conference (July 2002) brought together the continent’s leading professionals and produced many practical ideas for increased action.

Sound principles for sanitation policies and programmes have been discussed and documented for years, but there are very few countries that have actually put them into practice on a national scale. Lesotho is one such example: its national programme dates back 20 years but is not well known outside the country. The programme shows how determined government leadership, limited subsidies and private sector capability can lead to large increases in national sanitation coverage (from approximately 20% to approximately 53% of the population in 20 years). The three outstanding features of the programme are: it is a permanent and budgeted part of the government’s work, independent of external support agencies; its financing rules are clear, including no direct subsidies for building individual household latrines; and householders employ private-sector latrine builders, while the government concentrates on promotion and training.

In Mozambique, the national sanitation programme produced more than 230,000 latrine slabs between 1985 and 1998, benefiting more than 1.3 million people in a country that was emerging from decades of destructive civil war. This work gained international recognition for two main reasons. First, it was a pioneering programme in peri-urban sanitation on a large scale and reached a significant proportion of the peri-urban population of the country. Second, the domed latrine slab and its derivative “sanplat” (sanitary platform) were technically innovative and have since been copied widely around the world.

The ventilated improved pit (VIP) latrine was invented at the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health’s Blair Research Laboratory in 1973 and subsequently adopted as the standard sanitation technology promoted by the Ministry of Health. The VIP latrine is known and used in countries all over the world. Within Zimbabwe itself, the VIP latrine is a national institution. It is still the sanitation technology of choice for most rural households. Its success demonstrates that well-supported local research can produce innovative technologies that are ideally suited to local conditions and that home-grown technologies can generate significant political and popular support.

After years of debate, most people working in water and sanitation now agree that hygiene promotion is vitally important. But even now, many programmes and projects either ignore it or do it badly. African hygiene promotion programmes that have successfully used new approaches include Programme Saniya...
in Burkina Faso and ZimAHEAD in Zimbabwe. They have both concentrated on understanding how people actually behave and hence how to change that behaviour. Changing human hygiene behaviour is a long process that is difficult to measure and both of these programmes still have obstacles to overcome. However, this work indicates that systematic and carefully managed hygiene promotion programmes can achieve improvements in hygiene behaviour and hence a reduction in diarrhoeal diseases.

5. Focus on urban water and sanitation problems

Although currently the majority of unserved African people live in rural areas, the continent is urbanising rapidly. Its urban water and sanitation problems will become increasingly important and difficult over the next few decades. Most past innovation has been in rural work, which gives extra urgency to solving urban problems. There are already some useful examples.

The water services in small towns and peri-urban areas in Côte d’Ivoire are much better than in its neighbouring countries: Abidjan, the largest city, has a high household connection rate and good service. The main reason is that the government provides strong policy guidance and a clear separation of the roles of the various organisations involved, while the water services themselves are managed by a private company (SODECI) that has the managerial and financial strength to implement the government’s pro-poor aims. It applies three mechanisms to help the poor: subsidised household connections (in effect, a recognition of water as a social good), a rising block tariff and licensed water resellers in informal settlements. The subsidy for the household connections comes from a surtax on water bills administered by a public-sector fund. This internal cross-subsidy avoids dependence on external funding sources and can be maintained in the long term. The rising block tariff is another type of cross-subsidy from large consumers to small. The licensing of resellers in informal settlements enables SODECI to exert an indirect influence on the cost and quality of service in such places, in which its own contract forbids it to work directly.

In Burkina Faso, the Ouagadougou Strategic Sanitation Plan (PSAO) offers a practical example of a city-wide integrated sanitation programme. It is implemented by a parastatal (ONEA) with some work sub-contracted to a local NGO (ADRA) and a regional training centre (CREPA). It recognises that conventional sewerage is not an affordable option for the entire city and expects 80% of the city’s residents to adopt on-site solutions for their sanitation needs. Through PSAO, thousands of people in Ouagadougou have been able to upgrade their latrines and install soakaways. Householders are informed about the technical options available. They negotiate the work with artisans trained for that purpose. Some subsidies are available if needed. ONEA’s promotional work and subsidies for on-site sanitation are funded by a surcharge levied on water bills.

In many countries the small-scale independent water service providers have innovated and tackled water and sanitation problems, especially in informal settlements and peri-urban areas where poor people live.

6. Conclusion

Over 300 million people in Africa lack drinking water and sanitation. So global achievement of the Millennium Development Goals requires African achievement. The examples used here to illustrate how to achieve those goals are not perfect, nor lack problems. Some
are old but perhaps not known to a new generation of decision-makers. Others are still under implementation. Clearly we should not make hasty claims of success before sufficient time has elapsed to allow for a mature judgement. On the other hand, time is pressing and we must take every opportunity to share good ideas; we must not wait so long to verify them that the targets slip further away from our grasp.

Africa’s future solutions may draw from experience around the world, but they will be approaches that have the trust and confidence of African consumers, African governments and African leaders. Where better to find approaches that work than within Africa itself?

7. Acknowledgement

This paper is based on the author’s consultancy work as Series Editor for the Blue Gold series of Field Notes, published by the Water and Sanitation Program – Africa Region. WSP-AF’s permission and support in writing this paper is warmly acknowledged. The Blue Golf Field Notes are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Blue Gold Field Notes published to date.

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