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Interview with Alexander Bakalian, the Water Practice Manager for the World Bank in West Africa

By Isaiah Esipisu

What does your job entail at the World Bank?

We have 14 practices within the World Bank, and my Practice is the Water Practice, which covers rural water, urban water, sanitation, waste water, irrigation water, and water resource management. I'm responsible for 15 countries in West Africa, most of them Francophone.

Mention some specific water projects that are supported by the World Bank in some of those countries.

We have a team here sharing some experiences we've had under a new project on rural water supply in Benin. The project is really breaking some ground on innovation in terms of bringing in the private sector, with private funding. So the World Bank is leveraging private funding to help public funding to extend services to rural areas mostly in small towns and villages.

The project is building on a pilot project which was funded recently, where there was good success in terms of private operators raising funds from local banks at a tune of 25 percent, to complement public money. So we have come in to expand the project.

That is an innovation we are very excited about. As you probably know, the current thinking is that, we need to professionalise services in water particularly in the rural areas where people have been relying on local governments and communities.

Senegal is as another example, where the government has decided to pick on a region, and bring a private company to manage water services in all the villages in the entire zone. This is a professional company with professional managers who will now continue with operations of investments, instead of leaving it to community members, who sometimes have limitations.

We hope that model will be stronger and sustainable in the long term.

How are communities going to sustain these professionally built infrastructures after you withdraw?

We hope that by collection of some tariffs, they will maintain the projects. It is clear that people have accepted that if they are getting good services, then they are willing to pay.

There is a computerised system in Kenya for example, where water is pumped using solar power, and people use a tokens to buy water. The operators can then monitor what is happening from the comfort of their offices.

Because the system is effective, people are willing to put money in their tokens so that they can keep enjoying the services.

Will it be realistic to have the very poor marginalised communities with very limited means access safe water and sanitation services by 2030?

We hope so, because that is the whole idea of the Sustainable Development Goals. The most important thing is that countries should come up with strategies. What is also important is financing those strategies. That's one of the reasons why we are here, to learn from each other on how to make projects more sustainable. That's the difference between SDGs and the Millennium Development goals. Unlike the MDGs, we are costing the SDGs.

Which innovations do you think have been outstanding in this forum?

There are many, I think hearing people talk about professionalism in provision of water services is a good thing. There was a misunderstanding about what the private sector is supposed to be doing, but now we are beginning to understand that the private sector has a know-how that can be put to use for providing the services and managing them on a professional level.

Innovation technology is also growing. Solar water pumping systems today have reached a point where they are very competitive with other techniques. So we need to expand the use of solar particularly in rural areas where there is no electricity. For me, solar technology will guide us to a new revolution in the next 10 years as we move towards the SDGs.

Success keys Community water resources management: financial analysis and community empowerment

Community water management has reaped various levels of success in various countries. Service continuity and sustainability requires community involvement. In the session on working with community organisations, several successful approaches were shared on how to manage water more effectively at community level.

Financial analysis is the focus of the first approach whereby the different costs are determined: investments, operations, monitoring. This is followed by an assessment of community capacity to bear each and every category of cost. In any case, no one recommends the use the facility unless the communities are able to bear the operations costs as this is critical to sustainability. Generally, NGOs carry out baselines data but these are not enough to assess community capacity. In fragile countries where this approach was piloted (e.g., DRC), it is relevant to include the monitoring costs. When the poverty level of the communities cannot allow them to pay for these costs, then income generating activities are resorted to help support the facility O&M costs.

Community empowerment as a key to sustainable services

Astor Suominen de Ramboll shared an approach piloted in Ethiopia where communities are at the heart of the institutional set up. He said «we must at all times listen to communities who should always have a say…in all we do».

This approach places communities as drivers in managing their water points. Indeed, they fully take care of financial resource management while the local governments act as facilitators. In addition to this pivotal role in management, this approach promotes accountability.

Community General Assemblies are used to monitor the daily management of water points and related resources which are kept in a bank account or micro credit institutions available locally. The approach allows every citizen to involve in the way water points are managed. This approach has the dual advantage of ensuring higher water facility functionality and improving local governance or democracy.

Alain TOSSOUNON (Bénin)

Sand-dams proves to be sustainable source of water for dryland dwellers

By Isaiah Esipisu

After almost one year of dry spell in Kenya's Makueni County, rains have finally come down. Now, everything looks green, very green. But residents know, for sure, that this is a very short-lived spectacle, because two days after the downpour subsides, all seasonal rivers will dry up, and in two months, the sun will be burning with vengeance, upon perched thirsty sandy soils.

That's why they have invested in sand-dams, as their magic bullet for harvesting the rain water, and using it for another set of months after every rainy season.

The dam is simply a reinforced concrete wall built across a seasonal riverbed. When it rains, the concrete wall gathers sand, which becomes a reservoir for water.

As residents in the entire semi arid Eastern Kenya rush to propagate their seeds following the pounding rainfall, women in Songeni village are completely relaxed. One thing they are sure of is that their sand-dam constructed across Tawa River has already captured millions of litres of water, which the entire village will use for domestic purposes and irrigation for the next one year – if it doesn't rain again.

"It is the most appropriate way of harvesting water from seasonal rivers in dryland areas," Simon Middrell, the founder of Excellent Development, a nonprofit organisation that supports rural, dryland communities to work their way out of poverty told delegates at the ongoing Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN) forum in Abidjan.

Since February, when it last rained in Makueni, villagers of Songeni have been farming French beans for export, and other crops for domestic consumption using water from their sand-dam.

And now, Middrell, whose organisation supported the construction of the sand-dam used by Songeni villagers through a local NGO known as Africa Sand Dam Foundation (ASDF) wants the 'gospel' of sand-dam construction in dryland areas spread all over the world, especially in developing countries.

However, said Middrell, it cannot be a copy and paste tech-

nique. "Sand-dams do not work everywhere. If the place has a lot of clay soil, then the dams are likely going to be silted, and as a result, they will not help the residents," he warned.

It therefore calls for a feasibility study, so as to be sure that the dam will be able to amass sufficient sand, which acts as a cover for water underneath to protect it from evaporation. It also calls for appropriate technicians to construct it, because the intensity of rainfall in dryland areas is likely to break poorly constructed dams.

"The sand-dams have numerous advantages," said Middrell. "They form the best bridges in dryland areas because culverts always break during floods. They recharge ground water, water from the dams is safe for drinking, can be used for domestic purposes and by animals both domestic and wild," he added.

However, Middrell cautioned that without involvement of community members, sand-dam projects are bound to fail because they will lack ownership. "You need to involve the surrounding community, and have them own the project. That way, they will protect it as their property, hence, they will maintain it sustainably," he told the water form.

So far, Excellent Development has supported construction of over 900 sand-dams in nine countries in Africa, supporting over one million households.

Systems for effective water service delivery in small towns and peri urban

Currently, the systems and approaches to deliver water service in small towns and peri urban areas have shown their limits. But at the 7th RWSN forum, several successful and effective initiatives were shared.

These approaches include, but are not limited to: delegated management, co-financing with private sector, public management at province/district level.

The learning from the Haiti unsuccessful experience of community management in small towns (0 to 10,000 people) in the 80's has led to a shift to professional management of water service. The approach is a contract involving the local government, private operator and users and water is paid per quantity/volume. Despite its challenges - finding qualified operators and payment of water service by users, this approach has proven effective in ensuring continuity of the service. In Niger, the presentation by Idrissa Moussa (SwissAid Foundation) shared the effectiveness of a multi community system.

The lease contract approach was appropriate in this country with 50% water coverage. Through Public Private Partnership, the private operator is responsible for the O&M of facilities. This approach has achieved some results including the fall of operation costs at LG level, reduction of break downs to 3.16%. But similar to Haiti, the following challenges exist: low capacity of some operators, compliance with contract requirements, and reluctance of some communities to the delegated management system.

Unlike these two approaches built on PPP where the private operator contributes to the investment, in Madagascar, the operator contributes to financing the facility construction. The operator called "investor and manager" contributes by 15% against 85% from the project. Hertiana Alain R. from Helvetas said that under this approach, various stakeholders' responsibilities are defined as follows: LG sets the water tariff and facility construction standards; the operator is in charge of O&M; users and the project support. While acknowledging that profit is required to engage in this, profit can be seen only from the fifth year of operations. This means that the private has to be bold enough to invest and users ready to pay for the service delivered. In Vietnam where the private sector is not well developed, management of water service by public institution at province/district level has proven effective through social marketing. This two-fold approach involving supply and demand succeeded in supporting 150,000 users. Selling of water has improved and connection rate to water system grew from 43% in 2013 to 102% in 2016.

In a nutshell, the PPP seems to be increasingly an approach to improve water service in small towns or peri urban settings. However, public management may be more effective using a social marketing.

Alain TOSSOUNON

Closing of RWSN forum 7: Committed experts for water access to all in rural

The 7th RWSN has closed doors today December 2nd. At the official closing ceremony, participants have renewed their commitment to address issues and blockages preventing the rural communities from access to safe water.

Prior to the final statement of this Forum gathering experts from different places of the world to demand action for the poor, there has been a summary shared with participants followed by vibrant verbal testimonies. All those who attended the 1st RWSN some 30 years ago admit that there has been a lot of change such as issues and challenges which are now different! We used to talk of community water management but now, several themes have been discussed and including PPP, water resource monitoring, role of local governments, use of ITC, human rights, etc. Increasingly, people are convinced that «SDG 6 cannot be met without implementing the rights to water and sanitation». All the participants have been invited to reflect on key issues and challenges worth addressing to ensure access to all in rural areas. First, universal access should not leave anyone behind. Though a lot of progress was made over the past years, policies and strategies must include everybody without exclusion. The second challenge is improving the quality of service: to avoid water chore happening, we should ensure that water is brought in households and not only in the community. Sustainability is the other challenge which requires effective solutions. Finally, data must be available and reliable to support good decision making, monitoring and cost assessment.

In summary the 7th RWSN has provided an opportunity to discuss emerging issues faced by sector experts and stakeholders of rural water sector. The key message to take is that all the successful approaches and experiences must be used to improve service quality and ensure professional management of the water service. Issues like climate change, water quality should not be overlooked either

Inspired by the enthuse, passion and engagement of all participants, the director of RWSN secretariat, Dr Kerstin Danert said that in the future, the network need to open to other members and new solutions «the efforts to seek best practices and approaches must continue» she said.

In his closing remarks, the representative of the minister of economic infrastructures, Mr Berté Ibrahima commended all participants for the fruitful discussions. He said that the RWSN has been for Côte d'Ivoire a real learning opportunity on new and successful approaches which can be used to improve the strategies and policies to ensure greater professionalism in the sector for the benefit of the rural communities.

The Forum will continue on Friday 2nd with a field visit and a few sessions with a high level of hope for rural areas where water access to all is a reality.

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