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Discussion group report: Operation and maintenance of water supplies

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13th WEDC Conference

Rural development in Africa
Malawi: 1987

DISCUSSION GROUP REPORT

Operation and maintenance of water supplies

Chairman: W.J. Lewis

Rapporteur: K.W. Lesoana

KEY ISSUES FOR RURAL WATER SUPPLIES

1. Organisational Structure (Community Participation)
2. Income Generation
3. Preventive Maintenance
4. Reporting
5. Training

1. Organizational Structure (Community Participation)

The group felt that any rural water supply scheme was doomed to failure where the community did not have a sense of ownership of that scheme. A community had to perceive the need for an improved water supply and see this as a priority.

The group realised that the village committee played a vital role and therefore the composition of a committee was an important factor. The committee had to be based on the national leaders of a community either from the party or from traditional committees. After completion of a project it was vital to maintain close contact with the committee to ensure their continued interest in the project.

2. INCOME GENERATION

In addition to the self-help component, the group were of the opinion that the community should contribute some cash each year to purchase simple spares for maintenance, the caretakers salary and, in some countries, diesel. Delegates from Lesotho reported that their policy was to get the community to contribute before the scheme started as a sign of commitment.

The group felt that management of the fund was often problematic and government could play an important role by administering the fund on behalf of the community.

The whole question of affordability to maintain a scheme was often not fully appreciated and donors are often reluctant to invest in projects which government could not afford or a community could not maintain.

3. PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE

The group stressed the importance of the repair committee being completely familiar with the whole distribution system. The construction phase should be used as a training period and also for the selection of people with an aptitude for this kind of work.

The division of responsibility had to be clear but the community should be encouraged and permitted to do as much as possible and government taking care of the major repairs or those beyond the skills of the repair committee.

Regular inspection of the system by the community was also felt to be a key issue. This had to be supplemented by periodic inspection by a government official. Again familiarity with the system was important for trouble shooting.

Provision of an adequate stock of spares was another key factor. It was recognised that these spares should be readily available. The group were of the opinion that the government should purchase the spares since they could buy duty free and then sell to the

community using a revolving fund.

4. REPORTING

The group were unanimous in their opinion that the chain of reporting should be as short as possible. The composition of an efficient reporting organisation was thought to be:

Tap Committee - Consumer

Repair Committee - Simple Repairs

Monitory Assistant - Government employee, more difficult repairs but with manpower provided by the community

District or Regional Supervisor - Government major repairs.

It was recognised that government involvement at district or regional level was the weak link in the chain either due to manpower, material or transport constraints. Failure by central government to act swiftly was an important cause of loss of credibility in the scheme.

It was suggested that the community should be allowed to mobilise their own resources where government could not respond to the community. The question which remained unanswered was how to give the community the necessary resources.

TRAINING

The group felt very strongly that training should be conducted from the bottom upwards. The construction phase was the most important with regard to training.

Training should consist of formal training, on the job training, and continuous training at a series of refresher courses. It was realised that training was a cost and this should be built into the project so that donors could assist.

Communication or interchange of experience with other groups was also thought to be important. Training at all levels was required, for instance it was recognised that professional engineers often lacked the necessary training in community participation skills. It was suggested that this type of training was best handled at local level.