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Serving all urban consumers - a marketing approach to water services in low- and middle-income countries: Book 3 - PREPP - utility consultation with the urban poor

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Chapter 6

PREPP overview

6.1 Introduction and overview

PREPP — Participation-Ranking-Experience-Perception-Partnership is a consumer consultation process primarily developed for use with low-income residents in informal settlements. PREPP provides a **rapid means** of getting information about these consumers' experience and perceptions about their water services, together with an expression of their preferences for new or alternative service options.

The PREPP menu

PREPP takes place in focus groups with small groups of consumers. A series of questions are asked to find out what consumers think about various aspects of their existing water supply and the range of future services that the service provider, usually a utility, wishes to introduce. The different topics are discussed with the help of visual and participatory tools. Table 6.1 shows the topics and tools that form the PREPP menu. This menu is *the minimum framework* for effective PREPP work. The menu can be adapted to suit different situations and consumer groups.

Table 6.1. PREPP - the menu

Topic area	Tool used to facilitate
Knowledge of local low-income area(s)	Observation walk
Existing experiences (sources, supply and coping strategies)	Water ladder, group probing and discussion
Existing preferences (exploration by type)	Household voting, group probing and discussion
Consumer perceptions (of the utility)	Questions and probing
Service option preferences (existing options compared to new)	Costed option ranking Pocket chart voting

PREPP and marketing

The market segment that PREPP is developed for is the urban poor. As discussed earlier, PREPP can assist the development of the right marketing mix for this customer group. Here the 7Ps marketing tool is useful and Table 6.2 provides an overview of possible outputs.

Table 6.2. PREPP outputs in relation to the 7Ps

	Potential outputs of PREPP
Product	Knowledge of existing provision - from all suppliers (vendors, small-scale operators) and traditional sources Knowledge of type of service and payment options preferred by consumers and the comparative advantages to existing sources
Price	Knowledge of existing informal and formal tariff structures and seasonal fluctuations Cost of provision for storage, queuing, treatment and scarcity (coping costs) The relative preferences of community groups for costed service options Knowledge of attitudes toward connection schemes and payment options
Promotion	Knowledge of existing communication patterns between utility and consumers, and potential marketing opportunities that exist Potential for active on-going customer-utility dialogue Enables the development of future targeted promotion strategies for each area
Place	Knowledge of where alternative providers operate, where new potential markets exist Better sense of specific local problems and living conditions, to enable the development of realistic solutions Improved estimates for service option take up in each area
People	Knowledge of present and potential customers, income distribution, behaviours and practices, resistance to change. Knowledge of community groups who are interested in collaborating in shared management arrangements
Process	Establishes the beginning of a consultative planning process between utility and the communities, as part of realistic negotiated demand
Presence	Establishes a means for future mutually beneficial exchanges Improved utility corporate identity and image

6.2 PREPP techniques

Focus groups

A focus group is a small group of individuals (8-10) with a similar social, cultural or economic background. They are brought together to work with a trained facilitator to explore a particular issue. The facilitator asks about attitudes, experiences and perceptions. The technique is inexpensive and relatively quick, lasting between one and two hours.

The facilitator probes the group based on their initial answers to semi-structured questions that have been worked out beforehand. This allows the facilitator to gain an insight into the participants' preferences, knowledge and understanding. Specific reasons why a utility should consider using focus groups are given in Box 6.1.

As with all participatory approaches focus groups have benefits and limitations (see Table 6.3). However with good planning and preparation a focus group is a positive way to conduct consumer consultation. A good facilitator can minimize the limitations.

Focus group composition

Ideally each PREPP focus group should involve two concurrent groups: one of women and one of men. Each group should have no more than 8 or 10 members. The women and men should be picked randomly, usually on a first come, first served basis, amongst people who live within the area under consideration. However a men's group that is

Box 6.1. Reasons why a utility might use focus groups

Focus groups help a utility to be actively 'customer orientated', more 'demand responsive' and innovative. Using focus groups can also help to reduce the risks associated with having insufficient baseline data prior to making investment decisions. Focus groups provide potential and existing customers with a voice, and importantly the utility with an opportunity to listen. The technique is particularly appropriate when communicating with residents in informal settlement areas and low-income communities, for example when:

- new or improved service options are being developed and new market segments are being investigated;
- shared and community management options are being planned, monitored and evaluated;
- the views of specific water users, especially women, are not sufficiently heard through the use of conventional survey methods;
- involving civil society and other stakeholders, for example NGOs, in new and on-going project collaboration;
- feedback is required about a recent element of improved service provision, for example local utility payment offices;
- specific supply problems or technical considerations that cannot be easily explained;
- previous communication between the utility and its customers has been closed or problematic, for example following extensive disconnection activity;
- new ideas are being planned or promoted, for example the introduction of an illegal connection amnesty; used in conjunction with other customer survey methods, for example household questionnaires, to validate data and confirm trends or preferences; and when
- literacy levels prohibit and alienate people from participating in questionnaire surveys.

Table 6.3. Benefits and limitations of focus groups

Benefits of using focus groups	Limitations of focus groups
Customer perspectives can be gathered quickly, cheaply and effectively.	The discussion becomes side-tracked or dominated by a few.
The utility is able to assume a 'human face' and present itself away from the traditional office environment.	Participants may be suspicious of the reason behind the discussion, particularly if service payment is being explored.
Shared information provides the consumer and the utility with power to jointly act, improve and find sustainable solutions.	There may be a risk of 'hearing what you want to hear' or making inappropriate generalizations for a whole population.
Barriers, misunderstanding and poor communication can be challenged and improved.	The information can be difficult to analyse and the comments must be interpreted in the context of the group.
Unanticipated issues can be explored.	
Extreme and false assumptions can be openly challenged.	

heavily dominated by younger males may not be as successful in generating relevant information as one that has a mixed age range. This is not necessarily the case in a female group as women, the main users of water regardless of age, are more able to express demand.

The reason male and female groups are used in PREPP is to enable women in particular to express their opinions and preferences free from cultural and social norms that often inhibit participation. This does not prohibit the use of mixed gender groups in PREPP, however the decision to do so should be based on knowledge of the likely participation rates of women.

Drawings

Drawings to show different aspects of water supply are used throughout PREPP. Drawings are an unthreatening way of focusing group interest in a specific topic. When a group of people collectively looks at a drawing there is not a concentration on one speaker. People are less intimidated and more likely to contribute to the discussion and are generally more relaxed and less inhibited. Drawings do not require literacy skills, are cheap to produce and easily made relevant to different situations. They can also be adapted on the spot if necessary.

The use of drawings should be approached carefully. Visual literacy (how we see things) is different from one group, one culture and one society to the next. A picture of a woman lifting the keystone plug from a Sanplat squat hole in a VIP latrine in Zimbabwe may be interpreted as a woman lifting a heavy iron in another country!

Drawings should always be pre-tested. For advice on how to work with an artist and conduct pre-testing see Annex 1.

Guided questioning and probing

During a PREPP focus group the facilitator uses a prepared list of questions and topic areas to ensure that the discussion retains a useful structure. This is important to:

- enable the discussion to be systematically recorded;
- make best use of limited time;
- keep the participants focused on the issues;
- help the facilitator to keep the discussion going;
- make sure all the main topics are adequately covered;
- ensure that the information generated in one focus group can be meaningfully compared with others; and
- enable easy analysis.

In addition to the questions the facilitator also 'probes' the group. This involves exploring in more depth interesting issues or asking for the clarification of statements that are either unclear or which do not agree with the general consensus expressed by the group.

Multi-disciplinary facilitation

A small team of people with different skills and professional backgrounds facilitates PREPP. The typical PREPP team comprises:

- one or two engineers
- two social scientist or community development workers
- one local artist
- two assistants

Each team member has a different role to play in PREPP facilitation. The engineer is responsible for the presentation of technology and management choices and for explaining the form these service options may take, including the predicted cost. The social scientist or community development worker is responsible for managing the whole process, facilitating the discussion and interpreting the results. The local artist is useful for on-the-spot material development and refining the use of drawings. The assistants are responsible for recording the discussion in a format that can be easily understood and analysed. In addition to having clear roles and responsibilities there are a number of other reasons for bringing this team together, including:

- Providing engineers with the opportunity to understand water supply from the perspective of the users. This can have significant benefit on the future design of technical options, the management and operation of community schemes and ultimately service sustainability.
- Providing social scientists and community development workers with an opportunity to apply their skills to a utility-led process. This enables them to see community issues from a different perspective - that of a commercial asset.
- Allowing key professions to pool their expertise and experience, share skills and understand each other's perspective so that effective problem solving can take place and ultimately a more demand-responsive service can be delivered.

Facilitation logistics

As stated it is usual that two focus groups, one male and one female, will run concurrently. It is advisable to plan for each group to have a main facilitator, usually the social scientist or community development worker and one assistant to record the proceedings. The engineer, if only one is available, and artist can work between the groups.