

Citizen Feedback Drives Performance Improvements in Kenya's Water and Sanitation Services

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Synopsis

With support from the World Bank and the Water and Sanitation Program, the government of Kenya is working to address water shortages. The Kenya Water and Sanitation Services Improvement Project (WASSIP) is targeting major infrastructure investment, as well as strengthening governance reforms. As part of its project appraisal document (PAD) it committed to partner with the Water and Sanitation Program in strengthening social accountability. The strategy adopted by the Water and Sanitation Program is to assist the Water Services Regulatory Board (WASREB) to put in place community Water Action Groups, introducing citizen scorecards, and using information and communication technologies (ICT) to create a feedback platform that enhances the accountability of local utilities.

Challenge

Access to sustainable water supply and sanitation services remains a challenge in water-scarce Kenya. Substantial investments in water production, treatment, and distribution have been constrained, but reforms are focusing on addressing lack of transparency, poor delineation of responsibilities, and inconsistent enforcement of regulatory standards among water service providers. Unfortunately, when services fail, the poorest are those who suffer the most by paying higher prices and receiving less reliable service.

Although the Kenyan government has embarked on a series of water and sanitation sector reforms the lack of a strong presence at the community level has created substantial hurdles for the Ministry of Water and Irrigation's Regulatory Board WASREB in protecting consumer interests and ensuring service delivery standards.

"You can have infrastructure investment in pipes and sewer treatment, however ensuring proper service delivery requires project mechanisms that listen and respond to consumer preferences," says Rosemary Rop, World Bank Water and Sanitation Specialist.

Approach

The social accountability component complementing the WASSIP is implementing a three-pronged approach that includes establishing Water Action Groups, use of water and sanitation report cards, and launching a real-time feedback mechanism using ICT tools.

In order to better engage citizens, the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Program is helping the Water Services Regulatory Board (WASREB) to reach out to communities and establish Water Action Groups- local committees made of community representatives that act as intermediaries between consumers and service providers. The committees facilitate feedback by holding quarterly focus groups and biannual public hearings. The Water Action Groups provide citizens with a grievance redress mechanism by ensuring that unresolved complaints can be effectively taken up the chain-of-command from water service providers to Water Services Boards and then to the national regulatory agency.

In addition, the project has introduced water and sanitation report cards. Project team members distribute surveys to individual citizens and allow them to rate the quality of the water services they are receiving. The report cards are then collected, analyzed, and used to identify service gaps.

However, as Rop notes, "it was very time consuming to work with these manual feedback mechanisms and Water Service Boards often contested the accuracy of the feedback received from citizens." As a result, Rop and her team (the core members are Rosemary Rop as TTL, Daniel Kamiri, Dickson Marira, Anthony Nyaga, Halima Murunga, Michael Kane, Sheryl Silverman, Maximillian Hirn, Toni Sittoni and Jecinter Hezron) launched an ICT tool for feedback collection--"MajiVoice" ("Water Voice"). This new tool enables beneficiaries to submit real-time feedback on service delivery using SMS, an online website, or unstructured supplementary service data (USSD) – a service popular in Kenya that facilitates two-way data exchange.

Through these channels, citizens can report corruption, submit a complaint, request explanations for their bill, or provide suggestions. As Rop explains, “the automated system is complemented by a ticketing system. As soon as the consumer sends a complaint they get a reference number and can track the progress of the response to the complaint.” The ICT system was developed through country wide user consultations, having been built on a prototype demonstrated during the water hackathon in Nairobi). Prior to its launch it is being tested with the support of the World Bank’s Web Program Office and Office of Information Security.

Beneficiary Results

The Water Action Groups have met with overwhelming success. In the first two years of the pilot, the community groups solicited a total of over 400 complaints and successfully resolved 97% of them, some which had been outstanding for over 3 years. Overall, the project has broken new ground when it comes to community engagement.

“The Water Utilities and Boards involved in the project have experienced unprecedented citizen attendance at public hearings and an unprecedented level of engagement from the community,” said Rop.

However, the true secret to success has been the ability of Water Action Groups to guide unresolved complaints up the chain-of-command. Rather than allowing complaints to languish at the local level, water utility officials are now incentivized to fully respond to consumer concerns and investigate complaints. As a result, the community’s concerns are taken significantly more seriously.

“The water utility has accepted what we report to them is a genuine situation and now they have become very responsive,” said Morris Mae, Mombasa Water Action Group member.

The introduction of MajiVoice allowed to further scale up the project and engage in it larger numbers of beneficiaries. Instead of requiring Water Action Groups to manually collect feedback from local communities, beneficiaries can now directly send it to the Maji Voice system, and Water Action Groups review the complaints and follow up first with the Water Companies and then if unresolved with the Water Services Boards and the regulator, WASREB with regard to their resolution.

World Bank Contribution

The Kenya Water and Sanitation Services Improvement Project was funded by an initial US\$150 million loan from the International Development Association (IDA), the World Bank’s Fund for the Poorest. The World Bank provides funding and technical assistance to support development of essential infrastructure, legislative and regulatory institutions, and water sector management capacity. As part of the project strategy, a partnership was forged with a trust fund, the Water and Sanitation Program. The feedback mechanism began in the 3 board areas of the project, namely Coast, Athi and Lake Victoria North Water Services Boards. Based on the lessons learnt, the feedback mechanism is being scaled up in 2012 in all 8 Water Service Boards in the country.

The World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Program was able to leverage its global networks to promote South-South knowledge exchange. In 2008, they sponsored Kenyan officials to visit Zambia to learn about the use of citizen monitors.

Partners

There are four partners essential to the beneficiary feedback project:

- the Water Services Regulatory Board (WSRB) sets water service standards for the country and protects consumer interests.
- the Water Services Boards (WSBs) are the asset holding institutions responsible for water locally. The project is currently working with three WSBs in Athi, Coast, and Lake Victoria North.
- commercial water companies provide water and sanitation services directly to citizens. The project is currently being piloted with four of these water companies.
- Water Action Groups are committees made up of citizens and seek to provide civic education on water sector reforms, promote citizen participation, and facilitate group discussions and meetings to solicit feedback.

As part of the MajiVoice pilot, the project also is partnering with Safaricom, the largest mobile provider in Kenya, to widely advertise the tool and take advantage of Safaricom’s reach and customer network.

Moving Forward

While the project has been successful in winning support, if the current work is going to be successfully scaled up it will require additional support. Some utilities still view the Water Action Group committees with distrust, which means the project will need to begin looking at creating organizational incentives to overcome this distrust. In spite of this in September 2012 WASREB has scaled and completed up the appointment of Water Action Group committees in the largest utilities of every Board area in the Country.

With support from the Water and Sanitation Program and GIZ, the sector now has a regulatory guideline for citizen engagement that outlines how citizens will access information, participate in service delivery and seek redress on unresolved complaints through WAGs and MajiVoice. The more immediate priority is to fully integrate MajiVoice in the operations of the feedback component of the project. This will allow the project to mechanize its monitoring system and not only save time, but also allow for rapid assessment of how operations are

unfolding on the ground.

“The telecommunications platform will make the project far less cumbersome,” said Rop. “Collecting feedback data manually would require hundreds and thousands of water group members which would not be sustainable.”