

Cameroon: “One Hand Does not Tie a Bundle”: Women’s Participation Transform Water Management -Nkouondja

This case illustrates:

-Women’s involvement in local water management increases creativity

In 1995, Nhouonda’s community water management system was sliding towards breakdown. The village’s water management committee was not functional. Both the physical condition of the system’s structures and the mentality of the people had degenerated. The committee’s president never called meetings. He took unilateral decisions and carried out irregular spending. The caretaker deliberately disrupted the water supply to certain parts of the village because he received no motivation from users. There were many leaky spots in the pipeline and frequent breakdowns of taps, resulting in shortage of water, especially during the dry season. This resulted in serious conflicts amongst members of the water management committee and between Nkouondja and Fosset, the two communities sharing the water. There was an acute shortage of funds to carry out maintenance on the system, as the population refused to pay when there was no system of transparency and accountability.

The women of Nhouonda were not members of the water management committee. They were therefore more alienated from the decision-making, and more adamant in refusing to pay their monthly contributions.

“Those who are charged with collecting the money are not honest,” one told an external observer. “They ask us to pay while they and their wives do not pay, and they expect those whose husbands have no position to pay.”

Each member of the community was supposed contribute an amount equivalent to 17 US cents every month. But no records were kept. A new system had been tried, in which the collector made a list of the names of contributors. But this list was never signed. People said their contributions were never recorded, the collectors embezzled some of the money, no information was given on the management of funds, and the management team could not even estimate what was expected.

“These men are not serious,” one old lady said. “We contribute money but they do not write it down and afterwards they say we never contributed.”

Villagers were no longer fully participating in the supply of local materials for the construction of a new catchment, meant to fulfil increasing demand by increasing the flow in the system.

This began to change when a Participatory Action Team (PAR) entered the village to help the community analyse its problems and prioritise the actions to be taken. The village chief called all his Quarter Heads together to discuss the halt in work on the new catchment. Various reasons

were put forward for the lack of participation. Then the chief called on the PAR team to make a contribution.

The PAR team let the women of the village speak. Soon, the real causes were identified as well as the core solution. The community agreed to resume work on the catchment the very next day. The Quarter Heads said they would inform all members of the community that night that they should turn up for the work, and a monitoring system was set up to know who was not going to participate. The president of the women's group volunteered to supervise all the women and promised to remind them very early in the morning.

“Since you have been coming here,’ the village chief remarked to the PAR team, “you have talked to us about the importance of involving women. But we never could imagine the difference we now see. We wish that you continue to train them as much as possible. I would like to see them drive a car like the woman I saw in Foubot town.”

It was the start of an attitudinal change that was followed by physical changes. New pipes were bought, and all the old, leaky ones replaced. The technique of rationing water during periods of shortage was reversed so each Quarter received water two days a week. Broken taps were repaired punctually since management was decentralised to the Quarter level and even by standpipe. Some people in the Quarters were elected to collect monthly contributions and any other funds necessary for development of new installations. A new system was devised for keeping the surroundings of the standpipes clean: all the women living around a standpipe organised to clean in turns.

All of this has been achieved though the combined efforts of the men and women in the village. The women appreciated the respect they started getting from the Water Management Committee’s President, and so they contributed labour to improvement work.

“This project has come at the time we are very busy in the farm,” one woman noted when the new catchment project re-started. “But the way the president takes time to talk to us is such that you would not hesitate to participate.”

The Committee President retorts that he couldn’t possibly succeed without the help of the president of the women’s group.

Internal village fund-raising, good record keeping, accountability and transparency have become standard – resulting in the gradual improvement of the physical system. The entire system of funds collection has been tightened.

Women’s Voices Now Heard

Today, the women no longer peek from the window when officials connected with water come to the village. They actually attend joint sessions with the men and take part in decision-making. When a representative of the International Centre for Water and Sanitation visited the village in April, 2001, the women came out in numbers to welcome him. The Chief said:

“You have been having only bones when you come here, but today you are going to have the bone and the meat on it. Yes you have been hearing and seeing only what the men are doing, but today you are going to hear and see what the women are doing.”

Amidst clapping and cheering, they welcomed Aminato, the dynamic president of the women's group to the stage. She came out boldly and stood in front of the crowd and read a prepared speech. At a later meeting, when the men insinuated that they would not cooperate with some of the decisions the women had taken in respect to raising their own contributions, the women openly and boldly said that they had ways to sanction them if they refused to give them support. They said they would refuse give them food. This led to a major debate between women and men. A young man expressed fear of women knowing too much, which could lead to divorces in the village. A woman stood up and challenged him, saying there had been divorces before. The young man backed down.

The village's attitude towards donors has also become more assertive and self-confident.

“We know that we are requesting help,” the Chief told representatives of a major aid organisation at a public meeting. “But that does not mean that we will die if you do not help us. When somebody gives you food with anger you will never feel like having eaten something.”

The youth association is also taking more assertive action in the community's water management programme.

“We have learnt that one hand cannot tie a bundle,” one of its members explained.

Source: Unknown. If you the reader know the source of this case study, please let us know.