

Zimbabwe:

The initiative on gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation projects through the well sinking programme

Introduction

Zimbabwe has been implementing integrated rural water supplies and sanitation programme (IRWSSP) since the late 80s. The programme focuses on three components - water supply, sanitation and hygiene. It was initially largely implemented through inter-ministerial committees that are found at national, provincial and district level. The inter-ministerial committee at the national level known as the National Action Committee is a policy formulating body, defining standards, operational approaches and monitors the national programme. The broad objectives of the integrated rural water supply and sanitation programme have been:

- ❑ To improve coverage and access to safe portable water.
- ❑ To improve access and coverage to sanitation.
- ❑ To improve livelihoods of the communities through engagement in water and sanitation related work as well as through skills development.

The integrated rural water supply and sanitation programme implemented throughout the 58 districts of Zimbabwe was funded by a number of donors through bi-lateral and multilateral agreements. Some of the cross - cutting issues that the programme has tried to address have been gender, HIV and AIDs, poverty reduction, and decentralization.

The case study describes some of the initiatives that have been undertaken under the IRWSSP to try and improve the role of women moving them from performing unpaid, unskilled labour to paid water related employment. The gender task force of the national action committee recommended a set of interventions that would ensure gender mainstreaming. One of these interventions was the training and utilization of women as well sinkers and latrine builders. The pilot training and use of women as well sinkers was undertaken in Mt Darwin while women latrine builders were in Zvimba.

Importance of the issue

Women and men should share the benefits and burdens that come with improved water supplies and sanitation. The common feature has been that women usually perform unpaid, unskilled labour while the male counterparts perform the paid semi- skilled to skilled labour related to water and sanitation. Poverty eradication will depend on improving the livelihoods of both men and women. Assumptions that look at household as a singular unit tend to mask differences within the household. Women normally do not have access to financial assets and yet are the ones responsible for paying water bills and for other communal obligations. Programmes that do not pay attention to improving the lives of women risk alienating women from the mainstream development.

The case presents valuable and interesting lessons for approaches to gender mainstreaming. Mainstreaming is in itself a learning process that should involve local and national institutions. There is no scientific answer to it and will evolve as a process, a

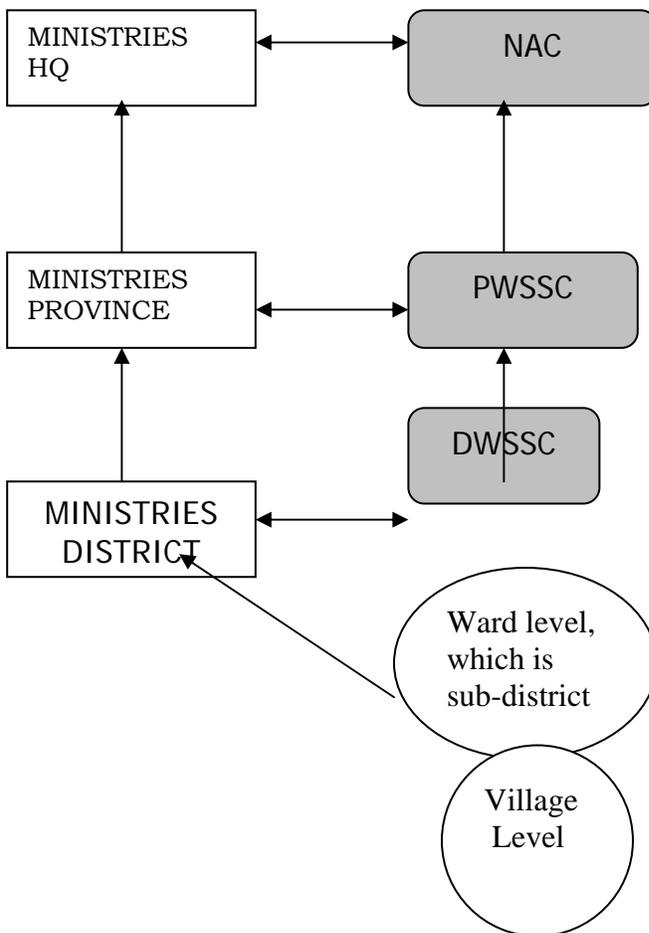
process in which there is self-evaluation and course correction. Gender mainstreaming should not be viewed as women’s issues as this isolates and sometimes antagonizes men. In this case study, women were treated as a special group and the use of single women further stigmatized the initiative with men viewing it as a “ an initiative of divorced women”

The case

Background to mainstreaming gender

In the late 90s the National Action Committee (NAC) through its gender task force decided to come up with strategies as to how they could mainstream gender within the national programme of water supplies and sanitation. The national action committee comprised of different ministries that were implementing water and sanitation and is responsible for policy formulation research setting standards monitoring of the programme and sourcing of funds. Below the NAC are the provincial and district committees who implement the projects. At the ward level there are extension services that assist in the implementation of community monitoring and offer extension services

ORGANISATIONAL FRAMEWORK IRWSS PROJECTS



One of the problems that were identified was that women were performing unskilled and non-paying jobs at the water point level. To address this anomaly, the NAC decided that

women should be trained as well-sinkers. The first experiment was carried out in Mount Darwin where four women were trained as well sinkers. Well sinking is a semi-skilled job that earns a salary. The trained women were paired off with men and sent out in the project areas. Ideally well sinkers spend up to three months without visiting their homes and are generally paid on completion of the given number of wells. The well sinking teams were also provided with protective clothing – an overall and tents (which are generally shared).

Challenges

When the NAC went to review the initiative, they found that women were now performing the roles of cooking and cleaning the tent and the men were digging. Challenges that were faced were as follows:

- ❑ Women were issued with overalls, which traditionally are meant for men and therefore would not accommodate the female structure of hips and breasts. During digging, the wells get very hot especially from 15 meters and diggers usually half strip their clothing and in this case this could not happen, as the groups were mixed male and female.
- ❑ The salary is depended on completion of a task and not weekly or monthly remuneration. This caused problems with families and women needed their salaries to maintain families that have remained back home.
- ❑ Shared accommodation also posed challenges as the tents were issued to teams and not individuals.

The NAC went back to the drawing board and decided then to form an all women team. Soon allegations arose that the all woman team (who were all single) had been selected for their beauty and not their ability. Furthermore, the supervisor who happened to be a man was also accused of visiting the women team more regularly than other teams. On the part of the women, they also felt that they still did not have privacy as the supervisor could visit any time when they are not fully clothed.

The NAC again went back to the drawing board and they decided to form an all women team comprising of married and widowed women. These were expected to spend three months sinking wells away from their families. This was the first milestone. Secondly, the women were then given work suits, which again were traditionally designed for men and therefore are tight around the hips. The women flatly refused to wear these. The NAC then decided on overcoats which when buttoned up are tight around the breast, are short and therefore not suitable for bending. Because the women had to visit families regularly, it took them long to finish the wells and therefore it also took long for them to get paid. Consequently the women dropped out of the well sinking teams. The NAC perceived that their experiment had been a failure and dropped it.

Consultations with communities

The NAC finally decided to consult with the local committees and communities and asked how women could be involved in paid jobs. The communities indicated that training them as latrine builders would ensure that they stayed within the village, would

be paid faster and the skills would extend to benefiting areas other than sanitation. Previously women had been excluded from training as latrine builders because the recruitment requirement needed “people with experience in building” which excluded a lot of women. It was then agreed that the NAC would relax its requirements and allow women with interest even if without experience to train as latrine builders. To date, some of the latrine builders in Zvimba area who have received prizes for the best quality of work are women. In fact, Zvimba district boasts a lot of successful women builders and the community feels that women were more compassionate towards the less privileged even accepting payment in kind.

Lessons learnt

There are several lessons that emerge from this case.

- ❑ The initiative on gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation projects through the well sinking programme had very good intentions of increasing the income of women through paid employment. However, the initiative neglected to provide an enabling environment that would offer psychological and physical comfort and well being. Consequently shelter while out on site became a problem, clothing was inappropriate, and the system of rewards not beneficial to families. It is important therefore to review the environment and create one that would allow men and women to participate in water and sanitation projects as equal partners.
- ❑ Another key lesson is on the approach that was taken to mainstreaming gender which was more or less that of an engineering formula without adequate consultation from the affected people.
- ❑ Contrary to the belief that women are not interested in taking up, paid jobs, it is the conditions of the paid jobs, the social norms and pressure that discourage them from participating. Furthermore, the demands on their times through their triple roles of reproductive, productive and community management means their participation has to be closer to their homesteads to allow them to juggle all these roles. This has implications within the sector that seeks to promote improved livelihoods through productive use of water. If irrigation sites are located faraway from homes, it may compromise women who may not be able to take up that irrigation if it means neglecting some of their other chores.
- ❑ Women latrine builders were more acceptable to the community as the latrine building jobs are performed at the lowest unit i.e. the village. The women are therefore able to look after the family and because payment is done per completed toilet unit, income is regular. This lesson has implications even for capacity building initiatives in that if venues are far away from the homes then women may not be able to attend.

Key points for sharing Knowledge and Replicability.

National level policies for gender mainstreaming are important. These must be backed by support from the local level and this support is through consultations. Prescriptions from above, even with good intentions may sometimes have negative impacts on the culture and social fabric of the community.



Gender mainstreaming should not be seen as a science which has formulas for its application, rather it is both an art and a learning process.

Recognizing the triple roles that men and women perform is important. Women need to attend to reproductive, community work and productive activities. Projects

that take women away from their homes are bound to fail .

Photo by Fungai Makoni

Both men and women can perform water and sanitation jobs. It the environment that either enables them or discourages them from participating. Women builders confirmed that they had more disposable income for use within the household. They also acknowledged that they tended to be more understanding towards those who could not pay up front and thus could be losing some money. On the other hand, they were also using the newly acquired skills to improve their homesteads thus contributing to the national vision of better housing infrastructure.

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