

# Civil Society Involvement

Civil society includes all stakeholders with interests in the water sector (consumers, NGOs, academics, journalists, etc.). These stakeholders are important because, ultimately, the pressure (on governments) for necessary reforms is going to have to come from civil society, not development agencies. The first step in this process is for civil society to become much better informed, which was the main finding of *Water in Asian Cities—The Role of Civil Society*, the regional consultation held at ADB in October 2002. This chapter starts with what consumers are saying, looks at special findings from the regional consultation, then deals with issues of governance. It goes on to explore what can happen when the consumer is in control, expands on public awareness and transparency, then identifies some specific roles for NGOs, academics, and journalists. Appendix 1 contains views from civil society.

Water projects supported by ADB will incorporate carefully designed components that promote the participation of civil society in identifying needs and issues, designing solutions, and establishing mechanisms for monitoring and dispute resolution.

### A. What the Consumers Are Saying

The following is a summary of the main points learned from numerous interviews with consumers in Asian cities conducted in 2001.

- Poor water quality is the main complaint.
- Intermittent supply (including power cuts) is the next complaint.
- Low pressure means household pumping—waiting in queues.
- They have difficulty in paying the water bill.
- Connection fee is high (corruption).
- There is a lack of consumer awareness about the issues and solutions.
- Groundwater levels are falling.
- Piped water service coverage is low, but there are tens of thousands of applications.

- People are willing to pay for good service—up to \$10 per month.
- There are too many standpipes and not enough connections.
- Illegal connections abound.
- Meter reading is sometimes inaccurate.
- Utility staff fear they will lose their jobs if privatization comes.
- Unions and NGOs are against privatization—they say it will bring higher tariffs.
- High benefits to utility staff result in fewer illegal connections.
- Those not connected have no idea when they will get piped water.
- Paying the connection fee over 6–12 months is OK.

The conclusion is that governance and tariffs are the core problems, and promoting public awareness of the problems and solutions is the first requirement.

### B. Regional Consultation Findings

Special findings from the ADB regional consultation in October 2002, *Water in Asian Cities—The Role of Civil Society*, are given below to further enhance stakeholder understanding and awareness.

- Large water supply projects can be completed by the private sector within 18 months.
- Use city forums (coalition of civil society groups).
- Consider rainwater harvesting in cities (India's Chennai is an example).
- Civil society can give a voice to the poor.
- Filmmaking can help, but target the audience and message.
- It is not just government boards that interfere in water utilities.
- Remove the biggest polluters from the cities.

- There is a need to protect watersheds—users must pay for this.
- Correct public utilities and be careful not to jump to PSP.
- Operators must have a social dimension and involve their customers.
- The rich and middle class get subsidies, not the poor.
- We must recognize SSWPs.
- Utilities should get involved in bottled water.
- Water and human values and water and culture are important.
- Property titles should never be an impediment to piped water.
- Development agencies should work with local governments and help attract local financing.

### C. Issue of Governance<sup>17</sup>

If poor governance is at the root of the problem and government is in control, government cannot be asked to reform itself. There is too much vested interest, and people are too comfortable with the status quo. Efforts must be made to go outside government to the people who are most affected, such as the urban poor not being served who pay \$5/m<sup>3</sup> to water vendors. Civil society must put pressure on government, if reforms are to happen. This can be done when issues are understood and civil society is interested in doing something for the poor and the ill-served. **We can begin with a transparent policy and a civil society that holds government accountable for implementing that policy.**

### D. When the Consumer is in Control

Information technology has allowed consumers to make informed choices and hold governments more accountable. In this context, the word “consumers” refers not only to those already receiving a service but also to those with the potential to receive that service.

*Customer relationships count. Their experience matters. And they are in control when they have access to information.* (Seybold, 2001)

When consumers are in control through paying the full cost of water service delivery, (i) corruption is minimized, (ii) there is more accountability for finances and water, (iii) there is more efficiency in water service delivery, (iv) there is more transparency regarding information, (v) there is more staff responsibility, (vi) service is more equitable, (vii) a consumer society will likely be formed, (viii) service levels will be reviewed, (ix) performance benchmarking is encouraged, and (x) there is pressure to improve service.

### E. Public Awareness and Transparency

ADB will promote wide-ranging public awareness and community education programs—especially among women, youth, and farmer groups—to broadcast the message of water being a resource that needs prudent management. In particular, education that helps communities understand the links between water, sanitation, health, and productivity will be encouraged. ADB will incorporate components that educate industrial consumers on the efficient use of water and the need for higher prices for water use and efficient treatment and discharge.

The Internet helps civil society become better informed about the world. Once it is informed, civil society can help create the necessary public awareness to pressure governments into the right policies (those that will ensure that water is provided equitably) and encourage leaders to use the right strategy to implement these (for example, tariff reforms). Civil society can include all stakeholders—development agencies, served consumers, the urban poor not being served, utilities, the private sector, unions, civil servants, politicians, NGOs, journalists, and academics.

#### Objectives of Public Awareness

These may include the following:

- helping the public understand water service levels;
- educating the public about water use, including how to reduce waste in the home, and promoting good hygiene;
- educating the public about water conservation;
- helping the public understand where the cost of water comes from and why tariff increases are necessary;
- keeping the operator on its toes in terms of performance responsibilities;

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<sup>17</sup> There is some repetition here from other parts of the book, but this ensures that due emphasis is placed on important matters and that this chapter can be more readily understood by itself.

- letting the public know about government policies and plans;
- informing the public about development agency funding and its requirements; and
- encouraging people to compare their water utility with others in the region.
- publishing comparative data from other utilities;
- publicizing activities and views of the principal regulator; and
- encouraging consumers to write to newspapers and regulators.

### Scope of Public Awareness Activities

These may include the following:

- appointing a public relations firm to prepare materials and programs;
- undertaking consumer and school surveys to test public knowledge and awareness;
- using media (radio, television, newspapers, and the Internet) at least monthly;
- explaining tariffs to the people;
- publishing the main findings of water utility annual reports;
- preparing textbooks for schools and educating teachers;
- forming consumer associations;
- explaining the role of the regulatory body to the public;
- explaining PSP to the public;
- surveying homes for water use and waste;
- establishing a consumer complaint response center;
- maintaining a utilities Web site and updating it daily on news and status of services;
- establishing a service for low-income consumers, which gives special attention to the poor;
- inviting the public to follow up on leak repairs;
- conducting public meetings with special interest groups;
- making short videos on different water supply situations to encourage public discussion;
- hiring an independent consultant to check operator performance;
- publicizing widely and continuously government policy and the status of its implementation, especially with regard to serving the urban poor;
- proactively preparing feature articles on water supply issues for the media;

## F. Role of NGOs

NGOs have a vital role to play in ensuring that the interests of the poor, those not connected, and the ill-served are safeguarded and that their voices are heard in public and private sector debates. NGOs can be initiators of consumer societies. In cooperation with academics, journalists, and regulators, they can monitor the implementation of government policy. The example of the NGO Forum for Water Supply and Sanitation in Kathmandu (Nepal), which was initially established with support from WaterAid, is one that could be replicated elsewhere. This organization has clearly demonstrated that, when they are well informed on the subject, the views of NGOs will be respected.

## G. Role of Academics

Academics can keep an eye on the big picture. They can analyze subsidies in particular and report the amounts going to the poor or the rich. They can analyze tariffs and tariff structures. They can discuss questions of governance and PSP. They can analyze the water balance to see where water is being used and lost. And they can analyze the service levels and payments for water by urban residents. Recent studies on SSWPs have clearly identified the need to investigate these areas.

## H. Role of the Media

Journalists can focus on the poor, the people not being served, tariffs, water utilities and their efficiency, the performance of governments in implementing their declared policies, and private sector involvement. But first they should spend time and effort in becoming educated on the subject. In every major city, at least one journalist could become an “expert” on water. While much material is available on the Internet, including the Web sites of water utilities, it is up to the media to bring this to the attention of those who do not have access to computers, which can be done by passing on this information via newspapers or radio.

### Civil Society Involvement in a Nutshell

- Consumers indicate governance and tariffs are core problems.
- Focal points are NGOs, academics, and journalists. City forums help.
- Civil society needs to be better informed.
- Starting point is involvement through key stakeholder consultation in formulating government policy.
- Public awareness and transparency are keys to civil society involvement.
- When consumers pay the full price of water, they will be in the driving seat, which is the objective.
- Civil society should interact with the regulator.
- NGOs can champion the poor and can form consumer societies.
- Academics can investigate facts, especially concerning subsidies.
- The media can be powerful, but first it must be well informed.
- Civil society involvement promotes good governance by monitoring the implementation of government policy.