



FOSTERING PARTICIPATION

Water Management by Local Communities

WATER for ALL
WATER BRIEFS

What is community management?

Community management of water supplies is a situation where communities have control over the management of their water resources and services – whether it be for drinking, irrigation, sanitation, or other uses. It can also mean control over aquatic ecosystems that provide vital goods and services to the poor.

The Importance of Community Management

While sound water management requires action from all levels, managing water at the local community level is of particular importance.

With one-third of the world's population likely to face severe water scarcity within the next 25 years, it is more vital than ever to get the most from the water we have. As the *de facto* resource managers and protectors of the environment, communities are at the heart of effective water management. From consumer associations and community action groups in urban areas to water-user groups and irrigation cooperatives in rural areas, communities are becoming increasingly involved in providing water services and managing water resources throughout Asia.

The international agenda also recognizes the importance of community management and decentralization, with one of the six 'Bonn Keys' from the 2001 International Conference on Freshwater, stating that '*Decentralization is key. The local level is where national policy meets community needs.*'

Scales and Forms of Community Management

Community management can be based on an ethnic group; a distinct social group, such as a caste or village; or a political entity. It can take many forms. It ranges from rainwater harvesting in Chennai, India; fog catching/cloud harvesting in Nepal; wastewater treatment in Cambodia; or the arrangement of payments to the municipal utility in Manila, Philippines.

In some cases, local strategies can offer alternatives cheaper and more effective than the large-scale, centralized approaches that have dominated in the past, with traditional knowledge working side by side with the latest water management technology.

All Levels Working Together: Good Governance

Communities can do much but not everything. They must not be left in a vacuum and must complement wider-reaching water management approaches.

Scaling up of community management activities requires widening of focus from the community to the larger

environment. Only through good governance can the fullest potential of local water management be realized. Good governance that takes into account stakeholder views ensures transparency, and monitors results.

Making Community Management Work

Community management approaches need to be scaled up, in terms of coverage, sustainability, and quality. This can only be achieved within the right enabling environment.

- Communities need all the necessary **information** to make sound decisions, for example, when setting user charges, when developing maintenance schedules, or when deciding whether to repair or replace something.
- Community management is centered on a **demand-based approach**. Communities must have the capacity to have their demands heard and have the ability to build networks to strengthen their capacity to advocate.
- The involvement of **women** is central to effective community management.
- Communities need support and training in **conflict management** in order to manage different interests.
- Communities need a **strong legal and regulatory environment** that formalizes their position, as well as areas of dialogue with other partners.
- Communities need additional **capacity and resources**, whether it be easy access to technical and managerial support or to equipment and spare parts. In addition, reliable monitoring and evaluation systems need to be established.
- Communities require a **strong local government** that can source financing and can identify, develop, and negotiate feasible and environmentally sustainable projects.

Making A Difference

In irrigation service and rural development projects, water users' associations have typically improved equity in water distribution, resolved water disputes, collected water service fees, and maintained tertiary networks. In Nepal, the rural water supply projects of the Department of Water Supply and Sewerage have been handed over to communities for operation and maintenance. Water users' associations were established, enabling communities to decide how much water they need, how much they are willing to pay, and how they would manage the facilities.

In Nepal, Pakistan, and Philippines, farmer-managed irrigation schemes are good examples of participatory approaches toward operation and maintenance.