



IDRC FEATURE

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IMPROVING WATER SUPPLIES IS NOT ENOUGH

by BOB STANLEY

Installing a clean water supply in a village is simply not enough, says Richard Feachem, a London-based public health engineer. Unless the water supply program has been properly designed and thought out, the benefits that are assumed to be brought by the improvements do not take place.

Because of the increasing emphasis on self-help and community participation in development projects, villages in Africa are often asked to take on far more than a village in Europe or North America has ever been asked to do, according to Dr Feachem, who headed a team which spent two years in southern Africa evaluating water supply projects in Lesotho.

Dr Feachem, who has also spent a year in Papua New Guinea studying water supply programs, says that many of the things a village in Africa has been asked to do would certainly not get done if you asked a village in England to do them. "We have documented precisely the same inability to carry out certain routine functions in villages in England as in Africa," he told a meeting at the International Development Research Centre in Canada.

Many African countries have gone for self-help and community participation in water supply, says Dr Feachem, and in doing so they have passed on to the villages responsibilities which they are not set up to cope with. So the new water supply soon breaks down.

The problem, he says, is that governments too often have not thought out which village institutions should be responsible for what, and what it is reasonable to ask them to be responsible for.

Governments also expect that if the village helps to install the water supply, it will also maintain it. This is the classic argument in favour of community development. In fact, says Dr Feachem, the reverse is often true. The villagers believe that, because they have contributed both time and labour to help install the system, then the government should maintain it, not them. "This was put to us forcefully time and time again," he adds.

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The problem is worsened by the fact that the villagers often believe their contribution to have been a far larger proportion of the total cost than it in fact was.

Also there is often no one in the village with the skills to maintain the system, so the rate of breakdown is quite high because of lack of maintenance.

Governments also expect that the initial participation in installing the water supply will "galvanize" the villagers to take part in other activities, such as communal vegetable gardens or rural industries. However, says Dr Feachem, the experience of dealing with government agencies over a period that may stretch to several years often proves to be so frustrating for the villagers that it tends to aggravate existing social and political tensions rather than bringing the community together.

The need for improved water supply in rural areas of Africa, says Dr Feachem, is urgent. A 1970 survey by the World Health Organization showed that 89 percent of rural Africans were without "reasonable access to safe water". And while the situation has improved somewhat in the past six years, the vast majority of rural people are still without safe water supplies.

However, Dr Feachem noted that the only measurable benefits that have been observed from improved water supplies are a saving of women's time and a reduction in the number of injuries to women as a result of having to carry heavy water containers over long distances. This was borne out by a detailed survey carried out in Lesotho, and similar studies in East Africa.

In order to achieve the other potential benefits, such as improved general health in the village, better diet through the establishment of vegetable gardens, and the opportunity for increased income, it is also necessary to educate the people in matters of hygiene and the proper use of the water supply, and to provide training in the maintenance of the system. Otherwise it will be only a matter of time before the water supply breaks down: the villagers will go back to using their old, polluted source of water, and everybody's time and money will have been wasted.

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