

Towards a common goal. The challenges of sanitation sector in Zambia.

Mia O'Neill*

Ojavainionkatu 16 D 14, 33710 Tampere

email: mia.oneill@hush.com

ABSTRACT

This research aims at determining the main challenges of the Zambian sanitation sector. It defines the actors of the sector and studies their relations with one other. Zambia, as a developing country, is depending on donors and other international actors for assistance in its development processes. Also the local and international non governmental organisations play an important role as advisors and implementers. The abundance of actors makes the sanitation sector very complicated to map out. All of the actors are working towards the same goal but with different views of what is the best course of action and the effects desired.

It is the conclusion of this research that the national state of sanitation is unbalanced, yet improving. The national policies are being prepared and cooperation between actors is being developed. Also the communities are being encouraged to participate in the sanitation work in their own areas. It is, however, first and foremost up to the government to manage the entire sector. Eventually, it is a matter of good governance and cooperation.

Keywords: Actors, development aid, sanitation, Zambia

Introduction

I set out to study sanitation in Zambia when requested to do so by Global Dry Toilet Association of Finland (GDTF). As I headed to Zambia in June 2008, my main target was to learn *how to move on from pilot projects to long-term solutions*. To find an answer to this question, a clear picture of the sanitation sector needed to be formed and the main challenges recognised by it needed to be defined.

During my stay in Zambia I met with 13 different actors working in the sanitation sector. During the interviews, I learnt more of the actors' roles and relationships with each other. The interviewees told me of the state of the sanitation sector and concentrated mainly on the challenges they are facing at the moment. It turned out that there were problems with cooperation both within the government as well as between the actors involved with development aid; often it was a question of power and participation.

Methods

The data collected for this research consists of both interviews and written reports. The interviews gave a deeper understanding of the actual challenges and the formations of the actor

networks, while the reports and official programmes gave some insight to what the current situation is and to the official views of different actors.

The main data involves the interviews of 13 important actors of the sanitation sector. The interviewees were representatives of two ministries, Ministry of Local Government and Housing (MLGH) and Ministry of Health (MoH), the Embassies of Denmark and Finland, and several organisations and consultants including GTZ, WaterAid, NWASCO, COWI, UNICEF, CARE Zambia, DAPP and the Lusaka Water and Sewage Company. All the interviews were conducted during June – August 2008. The respondents are promised anonymity whenever they so wished and it is to be noted that their opinions are not necessarily those of the organisation they represent. The interviews play a critical role in this research. The goal is to not only map the actors of the sanitation sector in Zambia but also to understand how the actors themselves see the situation and challenges faced by the sector.

As the interviews do not always reveal everything, the material was backed up with several documents drawn by different parties. The draft of the National Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (NUWSSP) which was put together by the Sanitation Working Group was very useful, not to mention the publications of the NGO WASH Forum (2008), UNICEF (Harvey & Mukosha 2008) and WaterAid (Cumming 2008). Also the official documents by the Zambian government of the national decentralisation policy (Republic of Zambia 2002) and the additional information by courtesy of different ministries and organisations was very useful.

The actor networks and the relationships between different actors are formed and affected by the concept of power distribution. Zambia is implementing the programme of decentralisation, which aims to give the districts more power over the decisions of the central government. The National Decentralisation Policy was launched in 2004. The goal of decentralisation was to move the responsibilities from the government to the local authorities. The vision of the government is "to achieve a fully decentralised and democratically elected system of governance characterised by open, predictable and transparent policy making and implementation processes, effective community participation in decision-making, development and administration of their local affairs while maintaining sufficient linkage between the centre and the periphery" (Republic of Zambia 2002, 18). The use and distribution of power presents itself as an interesting conundrum when the actors have different opinions of the practical meaning of decentralisation. With the succeeded decentralisation process, also participation becomes an issue, as cooperation and involvement of different actors becomes necessary.

Decentralising a tightly centralised use of power is a complex procedure. To decentralise sanitation facilities, it can be assumed that local conditions and needs are taken into consideration in more detail than in the centralised system. In the case of Zambia, the success of the decentralisation process reflects not only to governance but also to the conditions of poor people living in rural areas.

The amount of actors operating in the sanitation sector is vast; national and regional authorities, commercial utilities, non governmental organisations, donor countries and several other actors are intimately involved in the development of sanitation in Zambia. In this study it is quite natural to observe the network and power relations between the different actors. It is to be

remembered that when speaking of actor networks, one is immediately simplifying the complex world. The actors are linked only in certain ways and the study of networks would be extremely complex without this simplification.

Results and discussion

The actors' views indicate that there is indeed an on going creation process towards a functioning network society in Zambia. The practices of good governance are being acknowledged more and the governance in both national and local level is forming complex actor networks. The policies are being transformed into more unified ones with the help of various experts and actors of different status. Also the goal of policy integration in sanitation sector should motivate not only health professionals but other experts as well into developing the sanitation sector. Both social and environmental aspects as well as authorities are to be included into the policymaking in the sector.

It is being acknowledged by nearly all the actors, that sanitation affects several areas of society. It is not merely about housing and convenience for people, but first and foremost it is about health of the population and the state of the environment. It is about community development and water management. It is about sustainable investments and capacity management. The actors most active in the sector acknowledge this, which indicates a brighter future.

However, several problem areas remain. As mentioned earlier, Zambian society and the system of government is going through a change as the decentralisation policy is going through implementation and the practices of good governance are becoming more common. The actors are facing conflicts especially in the distribution of power but also the entire process of policymaking has need for improvement.

As identified by Lenton *et al.* (2005) as well as Tipping *et al.* (2005), the problems with governance are one of the main impediments of sanitation sector. The ever-changing political system makes it challenging to create a lasting progress especially since the investments may not yield results during one term (Lenton *et al.* 2005, 64). While the problems in the sanitation sector are indeed many and the conditions tend to change sometimes even quite rapidly, they key for solving the sanitation crisis would “urgently require significant paradigm shifts towards integrated water resource management and the improvement of urban governance” (Tipping *et al.* 2007, 50). The interviews conducted for this research support the view.

The slow progress of the decentralisation process presents a problem in several ways. Firstly, the cooperation between different actors remains difficult and public participation is challenging to arrange. Furthermore, the ministries simply do not have the capacity to plan, develop *and* implement everything that is necessary. Once the ministries meet their limits, the progress becomes even slower and long-term goals are often put aside in order to achieve at least the short term goals. In terms of sanitation, this means more pit latrines instead of permanent toilet facilities and functioning wastewater management systems.

The National Sanitation Working Group, which includes participants from ministries, donor countries, NGOs and consultants, is a good example of cooperation and participation. The group works together towards a common goal but the participants may have different interests. Policy making is use of power, and those who can affect the policy are concretely using their power in the group. Compromises are to be expected but it is up to the relationships between the actors whether or not the policy will be finished and implemented on schedule.

Eventually, the conflict between water and sanitation becomes a key issue. As long as water and sanitation are under the same heading, they should be treated as equals. However, as the respondents said, water keeps getting more attention, resources and aid than sanitation. Sanitation is, though, a critical part of water management and should be treated as such. There is not much point to improve the source of the water supply if the water will get contaminated at some point due to inadequate sanitation. This is not a predicament of the government alone, even though the Ministry of Local Government and Housing and the Ministry of Energy and Water Development are mainly responsible for water and sanitation. In fact, the two ministries are a part of the problem, because it means water and sanitation are divided between them. Succeeded decentralisation will distribute power more widely from the central government to the districts but the increased range of actors working on sanitation might confuse the roles and leadership positions even further. Furthermore, the increase in actors from different backgrounds will affect the practices used for solving issues.

Compared to governance, development aid was easier for the stakeholders to agree upon. Everyone was pleased to see the level of commitment in the cooperation: the NGOs having their own area, the NGO WASH Forum, to share their views. The NGOs are the experts on sanitation, while the donors are mostly facilitating the process with the help of their own experts. The ministries do not have enough resources but through the working groups it is possible to benefit from the other stakeholders' expertise. Cooperation is benefiting all the parties involved.

In international networks the actors have different cultural and social background which in turn affects the practices. One of the greatest challenges of development aid is to find a common means to achieve common goals – and to define them. NGOs and donors supporting the government with sanitation do not always share the same views with the government. Before this was a problem: the governments of developing countries often complied with the suggestions of the donor countries, no matter what they thought was best. Today, the government of Zambia has acquired ownership over the development projects and has learned how to utilise the donors as a resource. However, there are still disagreements on certain policies, which is one reason why the national policies on sanitation are taking so long to be completed.

Cooperation, however, does not limit itself to power distribution between different levels. It is equally as much about partnerships, which are often viewed as the driving force for sustainable development (Tipping *et al.* 2005, 53). Partnerships between national authorities, international actors, civil society and communities have been increasingly promoted, and also integration of, for instance, economic, environmental and social aspects of development has been thought of as

one of the key elements for a holistic approach. Active participation by all sectors of society is required when targeting a particular challenge (Tipping *et al.* 2005, 53), such as sanitation.

Eventually, it does not matter who makes the decision and who provides the service as long as the work is done. It can be noted that the interviewees agreed with Tipping *et al.* (2005, 56) and that actions in Zambia are showing the potential of reaching the goals: “a truly participatory approach, including all the relevant stakeholders and possibly lead/governed/convened by government, might be the best approach” to tackle the problem. The interviews revealed some issues, such as lack of leadership and insufficient communication between the actors, but these issues can be dealt with only after they have been identified. The challenge presented by sanitation and the threats it is causing to public health, environment and entire societies is, in short, “a key governance challenge” (Tipping *et al.* 2005, 56).

Conclusions

The research shows that sanitation is in fact not that separate from other issues faced by the developing countries. The main issues consisted of power distribution, cooperation, communication and planning; all issues which could find a multitude of ways of presenting themselves. This supports the vision of integrating sanitation in other policies, having all the sectors and actors acting together for the common goal. The interviews conducted revealed problems in all these areas and many actors, regardless which group they belonged to, recognised the same challenges. Often it came down to responsibility: everybody acknowledged the problem but no one was ready to stand up and fix it.

However, the respondents did agree on success stories as well. The advances made in the field of good governance, the increasing possibilities of public participation and the continuous development of cooperation between different actors received positive feedback from many of the respondents. If there was criticism towards the implementation of decentralisation, there was praise on the idea itself indicating that not everything is amiss, and that they are on the right track.

Overall, the main issues appeared to revolve around governance, power use and, most of all, cooperation. The actors found that the biggest issues were those of dividing responsibilities and finding leadership. When operating with such a large number of actors, some compromises are required. In order to reach compromises, the actors must understand each other's needs and utilise their capabilities. Sanitation is a difficult subject to approach, not only because of the cultural taboo that is related to it in many parts of the world, but also because it is a complicated issue to tackle. Integration of sanitation policy to other policies would combine a variety of sectors that have been seen as separate ones before. By developing unified policies it is possible to approach issues from different view points while being consulted by experts from different fields.

Through interviews and observations the main challenges faced by the sanitation sector were determined and solutions were pondered. The main constraints involved governance and institutional practices and conditions, technical aspects and financial issues. These challenges

were also raised by other studies quoted in this paper, and thus indicating that the problems are real, serious and threatening the sanitation sector in particular. The issues such as education, policy integration and development of the political sector in Zambia reflect the need for sustainable social development in all sectors of life.

References

Cumming Oliver (2008), Tackling the Silent Killer. The Case for Sanitation. WaterAid, London.

Harvey Peter & Leonard Mukosha (2008), Community Led Total Sanitation. UNICEF.

Lenton Roberto, Albert M. Wright, Kristen Lewis (2005), Health, Dignity and Development: What Will It Take? Earthscan, London.

Ministry of Local Government and Housing of Zambia (2008b), National Urban Water Supply and Sanitation Programme 2008-2015 (2030), Background and Analysis. Second Draft. Ministry of Local Government and Housing, Lusaka.

NGO WASH Forum (2008), The State of Sanitation in Zambia. UNICEF, Lusaka.

Republic of Zambia (2002), The National Decentralisation Policy. Towards Empowering The People. Office of the President, Cabinet Office, Lusaka.

Tipping David C., Daniel Adom, & Anna K. Tibaijuka (2005), Achieving Healthy Urban Futures in the 21st Century: New Approaches to Financing and Governance of Access to Clean Drinking Water and Basic Sanitation As a Global Public Good. Publications of Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Helsinki.