

LEARNING BRIEF

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How can water and sanitation provision empower the urban poor?

Homeless International is a UK-based NGO working in long-term partnership with organisations of the urban poor to improve their lives and find lasting solutions to urban poverty. We support them in designing and implementing community-driven land, housing, infrastructure and slum upgrading initiatives. We believe that sustainable solutions can be created only if people have an opportunity to play a lead role in designing solutions that work for them and have access to land, finance, information, organisation and technology.

Background

Water and sanitation services bring a host of benefits for community development. They get girls back into school, women into employment, and improve health, dignity, wellbeing and independence (WaterAid, 2012). Globally, for every £1 invested in sanitation, at least £9 is returned to national economies in increased productivity directly linked to improvements in female wellbeing, health and better living conditions (Hutton et al, 2006).

Through the support of UKaid from the Department for International Development, **Homeless International** implemented a multi-country community-led project: *Water and sanitation provision for the urban poor in Malawi, Tanzania and Zimbabwe*.

The project enabled our long-term partners **CCODE** (Centre for Community Organisation and Development, Malawi), **DZ** (Dialogue on Shelter for the Homeless in Zimbabwe) and **CCI** (Centre for Community Initiatives, Tanzania) to provide access to improved water and sanitation for over 10,000 people. Improvements include training, hygiene promotion and the construction of household and community-managed public toilets using affordable loans from revolving loan funds.

This learning brief draws on experience from the project to examine how community-led water and sanitation provision supports and creates opportunities for social empowerment. The brief highlights the role of water and sanitation in: **removing barriers**; acting as a **social leveller**; and providing a **platform for change**. It also looks at the **challenges** involved in water and sanitation provision.

Empowerment: an outcome *and* a process

Although access to water and sanitation is considered 'empowering' due to associated health and wellbeing benefits, we recognise that empowerment is more than just gaining resources. To achieve sustainable change, empowerment should also be viewed as a process by which people reclaim power to shape their own lives and to influence the course of events around them (Kraft, 2000). This requires the urban poor themselves becoming involved in decision-making.



Communities gain new skills and a sense of ownership by building their own toilets.

It is clear therefore that it is people, rather than technical solutions, that are key to social empowerment. The technical solutions are the physical products through which people access resources, define their goals and act on them.

Water and sanitation provision often cannot be addressed individually, especially in high density urban areas, because of the requirements related to bulk infrastructure. It is essential, therefore, that people discuss, mobilise and work together. Our partners in this project use the 'federation' model to enable collective empowerment. Federations are national collectives of savings groups constituted at community level in informal settlements (Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2012). Federations achieve change by offering members access to a disciplined way to save, enabling forums for discussion of common problems, providing a safety net during adverse times, and allowing members to learn new skills and share knowledge with their peers. This process can be empowering in itself.

KEY LESSONS

Water and sanitation provision removes barriers and encourages collective action towards positive change.

Through this project, water and sanitation delivery provided a basis for communities to come together, identify common needs and agree on a way forward, thereby breaking down restrictive social barriers. This allows communities to establish an environment where members can discuss and overcome taboos by talking practically about their toilet needs and related issues including health, hygiene and HIV/AIDS. It promotes community cohesion as people share problems and realise that others face similar issues, thereby helping to reduce stigma, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Women usually make up two thirds of federation membership and take a lead role in the planning and implementing process, such as vetting and approving sanitation loan applications, drawing layout plans, constructing toilets and laying pipes. In Tanzania and Zimbabwe, around half of the builders trained during the project are women, giving them an increased social status as well as additional income.

Better involvement of the urban poor in the planning and implementing process ensures that the facilities delivered are appropriate and convenient to the end users. Through this process, communities have adopted techniques including boreholes in peri-urban relocation sites, community-managed toilets and shared toilets for tenant compounds.

Where it is difficult for individuals to get support from government, the collective voice of the federation encourages authorities to learn from the urban poor and, in time, to raise political consciousness and support



Through federations like this one in Gweru, Zimbabwe, women play a leading role in their communities.

sustainable change. Because this process is sustainable and replicable, it has a cumulative effect on other communities requiring similar improvements, helping to break down social barriers to make way for meaningful change.

Water and sanitation provision acts as a social leveller, creating more equitable urban environments.

Rather than relying on traditional bulk infrastructure, which favours formal and wealthier areas, this project has demonstrated the poor's ability to provide facilities for themselves using innovative solutions to address power relations and improve living conditions.

Access to water and sanitation promotes a sense of pride and self-confidence when, for example, people no longer have to defecate openly. In Chinhoyi, Bulawayo and Hwange in Zimbabwe, the Federation has partnered with the authorities to service new tapstands, which the local authorities could not afford. This proactive approach has helped to change perceptions of the poor. Similarly, in Mzuzu, Malawi, women had the opportunity to engage with traditional leaders to discuss and plan the provision of sanitation facilities, elevating them from the household level to play a greater role within their communities.

The positive social effects are magnified when people save for and build their own toilets. The project fostered ownership by providing facilities using community-managed revolving loan funds, whereby the full capital costs of facilities are recovered through affordable loans. Financial management training was also provided to ensure a corresponding increase in skills and to avoid repayment issues.

A sense of ownership is not only derived from paying back the loan but also from developing new skills to maintain the facilities. In Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe, the boreholes which provide access to improved water have strengthened social capital between the residents and neighbouring communities who also use the facility. This has created a stronger bond between the communities as well as providing improvements for the wider community.

Community-led water and sanitation provision as a platform for change.

Experience in delivering water and sanitation better positions the urban poor to influence political decision making: communities working together gain a stronger collective voice and together develop the confidence, skills and ability to address related issues such as land tenure, housing and the right to be accepted as citizens and involved in city planning decisions. In Malawi, the urban poor have gained credibility and visibility through sanitation



Completed ecosan toilets in Arusha, Tanzania.

promotion by building partnerships with market management committees, traditional leaders ('headmen') and local authorities. The project has fostered policy improvements and notable changes in the practices of local authorities, such as: acceptance of community contracting for solid waste management in Tanzania; the acceptance of ecosan in Zimbabwe and inputs into national sanitation policy discussions in Malawi.

Better water and sanitation facilities have also helped to leverage other improvements within settlements, including secure tenure, formal recognition of settlements and increased government investment. In Zimbabwe, the improved perception and increased influence of the Federation helped to secure land rights, with former tenants and 'squatters' becoming land owners who are able to invest in physical improvements.

Economic empowerment arises from opportunities created by: the demand for materials used in delivering sanitation; training opportunities; employment of builders and training in skills to make components used for constructing toilets, which in turn lead to more stable livelihoods. The fact that builders and carpenters come from the communities helps to change social dimensions and traditional viewpoints. In Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe, local female builders who constructed toilets for the community now have the capacity to use these skills to earn a living and are recognised for producing good quality work.

Women are also running new businesses as a result of water and sanitation provision. In Malawi, women charge a fee for the use of communal toilets and earn up to MWK 45,000 (£150) a month. In Tanzania, nine groups now provide paid solid waste collection services. In Zimbabwe, livelihoods are being improved as the compost from ecosan toilets is used for growing crops and herbs in local gardens. Compost from the ecosan toilets can also be sold. In northern Malawi, women earn about £20 per year – the equivalent of one month's rent – in this way.



In Tanzania and Zimbabwe, around half of the builders trained during the project are women.

Addressing challenges and possible disempowerment.

A recurring challenge is the vulnerability of tenants to rent increases once a landlord has constructed a new toilet. In order to avoid the poor being priced out of adequate settlements, our partners adopt a community-led approach, whereby landlords and tenants work together in supporting affordable solutions. The project has led to an improvement in landlord-tenant relationships. In Tanzania for example, CCI has discouraged landlords from increasing rents by offering them affordable loans, together with designs for shared and space-efficient toilets, and encouraging them to take part in focus groups to raise awareness of the health benefits of improved sanitation (Homeless International, 2011).

An additional challenge is the perception of individual household toilets: those who do not directly benefit from them may feel that they contradict

social cohesion and social empowerment. When improvements benefit only part of the community, those not benefiting may feel disempowered when unable to improve facilities themselves and inequalities may become reinforced. This highlights the value of community-led public toilets and shared toilets which can bring improved sanitation to many more within a community. Although this is a compromise, it is a step towards serving the wider community's needs in an affordable and sustainable way.

Finally, the choice of a full loan approach (as opposed to grants and part-grants) can create additional debt for cash-strapped families. The federation approach however uses in-depth appraisal of beneficiaries through an assessment of past savings and small loans repayment, ensuring both affordability and repayment. This also informs decisions about interest rates and monthly repayments. Recognising that community members are not all at the same level of the sanitation and tenure ladder, the project offered options at various stages: from public toilets for transient communities to shared toilets for tenant compounds and household toilets for families who could afford them. The federation groups also act as a safety net, ensuring loan repayments do not compromise household finances.

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