

The Triple-S Initiative 2008 to 2014

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre is leading a six-year multi-country learning initiative to improve water supply to the rural poor. **Sustainable Services at Scale (or Triple-S)** is an initiative seeking to support a move away from project-based, stand-alone implementation of water systems to indefinitely sustainable rural water services delivered at scale. Working with local partners, Triple-S supports a paradigm shift at the operational level for decentralised service delivery. The initiative will start in pilot districts in Uganda and Ghana, and later seek to expand to a further two countries in Africa and Asia up until 2014. It aims to achieve impact at national level by replicating approaches outside of the pilot areas, and at international level by bringing about a re-appraisal of how development assistance to the rural water supply sector is designed and planned.

Challenging business as usual for rural water services

After decades of huge investments, a billion of the world's poorest people still live with unreliable and unsafe water. Of these billion people, nine out of ten live in rural areas. From 1990 to 2006 coverage rates in 19 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have increased by just 10%, but the absolute numbers of un-served have gone up by 37 million to 228 million.

To make matters worse, many of those who supposedly count as having been 'served' actually have systems that are not working properly or have failed completely. Recent figures collated by the Rural Water Supply Network in 2007 indicate an average rate of 36% non-functionality for hand pumps across 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This level of failure represents a total investment of between \$1.2 and 1.5 billion in the last 20 years. The figures vary for different types of technology, but the same pattern is repeated across many other countries.

Community management has become the leading paradigm for water supply in rural areas over the last two decades and has delivered significant achievements especially in improving participation of users. But this model has rarely succeeded in supplying reliable, safe water supplies on a large scale. Moreover, long term sustainability of water services - either in terms of the infrastructure or management capacity - has remained an elusive reality for many.

Why have we been failing?

So why has there been such a consistent failure to achieve reliable and sustainable water services, when neither the technology nor the absolute financial resources are beyond us? The reality is that, in many developing countries, there is no common understanding of what a rural water service should look like, how it should be provided, or who is accountable for its provision. This failure is evident in three ways:

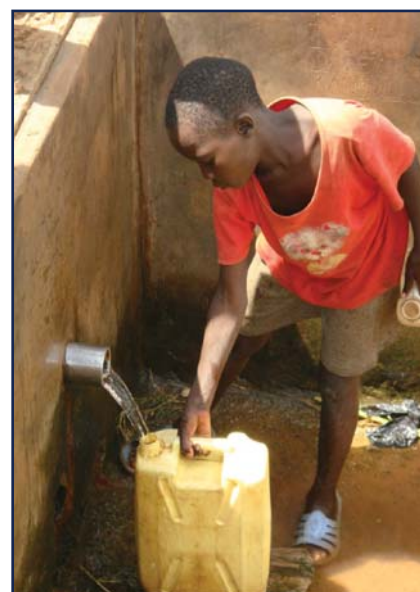
- A focus on the construction of new water supply systems with lack of attention to long term sustainability and post construction support, such as trained staff and training centres, availability of spare parts and supply chains and markets for rural water supply goods and services.
- A focus on 'projects' for 'communities' at village level, rather than services for populations within larger administrative units such as districts, which are much more effective building blocks for scale.
- A persistent lack of coordination and harmonisation leading to fragmented approaches and policies, focused on construction, and resulting in inefficient use of limited resources and in water systems that are often substandard and prone to premature failure.



Credit: IRC / J Smet

Sustainable Services at Scale – developing replicable, country-specific models for sustainable rural water services in pilot districts in two countries while catalysing the changes in sector behaviour necessary for the models to be widely applied at national and international levels.

- **Taking the long-view:** the Triple-S project will work in two initial countries – Ghana and Uganda – running from the end of 2008 to the end of 2014, thereby allowing for long-term learning and change. The project will apply action research methodologies involving a broad range of stakeholders, from government, to water users and small-scale private operators.
- **Testing new models:** pilot district activities will be developed to test new Service Delivery Models for rural water; these models will include agreed service levels, clear roles and responsibilities and realistic financing strategies that seek to address the full costs of service delivery and common planning, information and monitoring platforms.
- **Using action learning:** in each country Triple-S will work with local partners to facilitate forums known as learning alliances. They will be made up of representatives from water agencies, academic institutions, governmental agencies at national and district levels, civil society, consumers and the private sector. Where possible, Triple-S will work with existing groups. These platforms will drive the process to ensure that lessons are learnt and shared, and will oversee research into existing experiences with rural water services to learn about what works and identify constraints.
- **Scaling-up through replication:** Triple-S will promote the replication of successful models in other districts in Ghana and Uganda, and other countries where there is demand. This initiative will help to increase coverage and sustainable service delivery of safe water. The Triple-S project has the potential to change the way that governments and local authorities in developing countries work with communities to make safe and reliable water a daily reality.
- **Strengthening capacity and sharing knowledge and resources:** strengthening the capacity of service providers and especially of decentralised local governments to regulate and monitor services will be an important focus for Triple-S. Wherever possible, Triple-S will link up with other infrastructure projects in the selected countries to make the most effective use of existing resources and to increase their outcomes and impact. Triple-S will also support widespread training programmes.
- **Expected outcomes:** the expected outcomes will be an improvement in reliable and sustainable water services for rural communities, and through rigorous testing, the development and application of models that can be replicated and scaled up across Ghana and Uganda, and across other countries.



Credit: Aguaconsult / H Lockwood

The litmus test for Triple-S will be to show that new approaches can be embedded in the country, can survive when the project concludes, and can be replicated in other countries. The Triple-S project aims to reach over 500,000 people in communities directly, and seeks to change the way national and international water sector professionals think about service delivery. The result? A paradigm change in the way rural water services are planned, designed and delivered, from a project-based approach to truly sustainable, scalable and harmonised services.

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About IRC Since its foundation in 1968, the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) has facilitated the sharing, promotion and use of knowledge so that governments, professionals and organisations can better support poor men, women and children in developing countries to obtain water and sanitation services they will use and maintain.



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