

Action research on scaling up rural water and sanitation services in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The action research programme for scaling up rural water supply in Ethiopia is relatively new. It started in May 2004 with an awareness raising workshop for the major stakeholders in the water and sanitation sector. Although as an outcome of this workshop a National Steering Committee was created to guide the action research programme, it was only after the funding of a three year programme was secured and two staff members were appointed that the programme could take up speed. That was in December 2004. Lessons learned from the first phase of the programme are therefore limited and preliminary. However, experience so far shows that major sector stakeholders in Ethiopia realise that sustainability of water services needs much more attention and that concerted learning and action by all stakeholders will be needed to strengthen sustainability and improve water supply provision in rural areas. The action research programme is therefore a good format for bringing about change. The programme also comes timely since government and donors are now setting up large implementation programmes to fulfil the commitment to the MDG for water and sanitation. The action research programme, in which all major stakeholders cooperate, is a means to improve these big implementation programmes. Another important aspect of the action research programme is the contribution it will give to strengthening decentralised levels of water supply provision in Ethiopia (regions and woredas). So far the action research programme shows the need of the stakeholders to share experiences, compare approaches and discuss models and methods to improve rural water supply provision.

Country Background

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa between 3 and 15 degrees north latitude and 33 and 48 degrees east longitude and has an area of 1,132, 896 km² with a population of about 72 million (2005). It is divided into 12 river and lake basins with a total surface water resources availability of about 110 billion m³. Ethiopia has abundant surface and ground water resources but most of the rivers have Transboundary nature and flow to neighboring countries. Among these rivers the Blue Nile drains into the Mediterranean Sea crossing the Sudan and Egypt, the Omo-Gibe into Lake Turkana, Wabeshebele and Genale-Dawa to the Indian Ocean crossing Somalia.

The majority (85%) of the Ethiopian population lives in rural communities. Agriculture accounts for 41.8% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which is US\$ 6.7 Billion (2003) and employs 80% of the population and accounts for 90% of the exports.

It is estimated that only 24% of the population have access to sustainable improved water source and sanitation respectively (UNDP, 2004). The functionality of the systems in use is often doubted. Lack of access to safe drinking water places a heavy burden of morbidity and mortality on children who are especially vulnerable to diarrhoeal disease. The task of scaling up community managed water and sanitation systems is therefore immense.

There are many organisations working in the Ethiopian rural water sector including government, UNICEF, World Bank, international and local NGOs. There is therefore a long experience in rural water service provision and most stakeholders use community management approaches. These experiences are very relevant. They include successful community management of schemes providing water to 150,000 people and more. However, experiences are scattered, not shared and coordination is not optimal. For achieving the ambitious targets of the MDG for water and sanitation cooperation and coordination of the many (GO and NGO) stakeholders in the water sector will be needed.

Background of the action research programme

The idea to do action research to scale up rural water and sanitation services was born in an international thematic group⁶¹ that promotes scaling up community management of rural water supply and develops methods for scaling up. According to this thematic group scaling up has two main dimensions. The first one is scaling up in time which aims to increase sustainability of community managed water services to make sure that people do not have to fall back in service levels. The other dimension is scaling up in space, which aims to increase coverage of water and sanitation services to reach entire populations and not only a few happy communities. The major challenge to achieve these targets is strengthening the capacities of intermediate level institutions (district or province or region) to support community managed water and sanitation services.

The international thematic group on scaling up decided to try to start action research to develop the ways and means of scaling up in countries. Major research questions are: how should the institutional support for community managed water services look like, who should deliver them, how should roles and responsibilities be divided, which levels should be addressed, how should linkages between communities, districts and government be made, which capacities are needed at what level?

One of the members of the international thematic group, Plan, then invited its country offices to indicate interest in setting up action research programmes in their countries. Plan Ethiopia was one of the country offices that responded positively. A national workshop was then organised to explain and raise awareness for scaling up and to sound out interest among sector stakeholders to participate in an action research programme. The workshop, organised in May 2004, attracted some 40 participants from a wide range of sector stakeholders. Participants responded positively to the concept of scaling up and thought the initiative of Plan came timely.

The set up of the action research programme

One of the outcomes of the workshop was the creation of a National Steering Committee headed by the Ministry of Water Resources, with WaterAid and UNICEF acting as vice-chairs and Plan Ethiopia in the role of secretariat. A pilot district for the action research was also selected: Shebedino in the Southern region. Plan Netherlands decided to fund a three year action research programme allowing two staff members to full time work on the programme, one at national level and one at the level of the pilot district. The National Steering Committee in which some 16 organisations are participating also decided to create a steering committee at regional level (the Southern region) and an action research team at the level of the district Shebedino. All these committees are multi stakeholder partnerships under the lead of national and decentralised government institutions.

Objectives of the action research programme

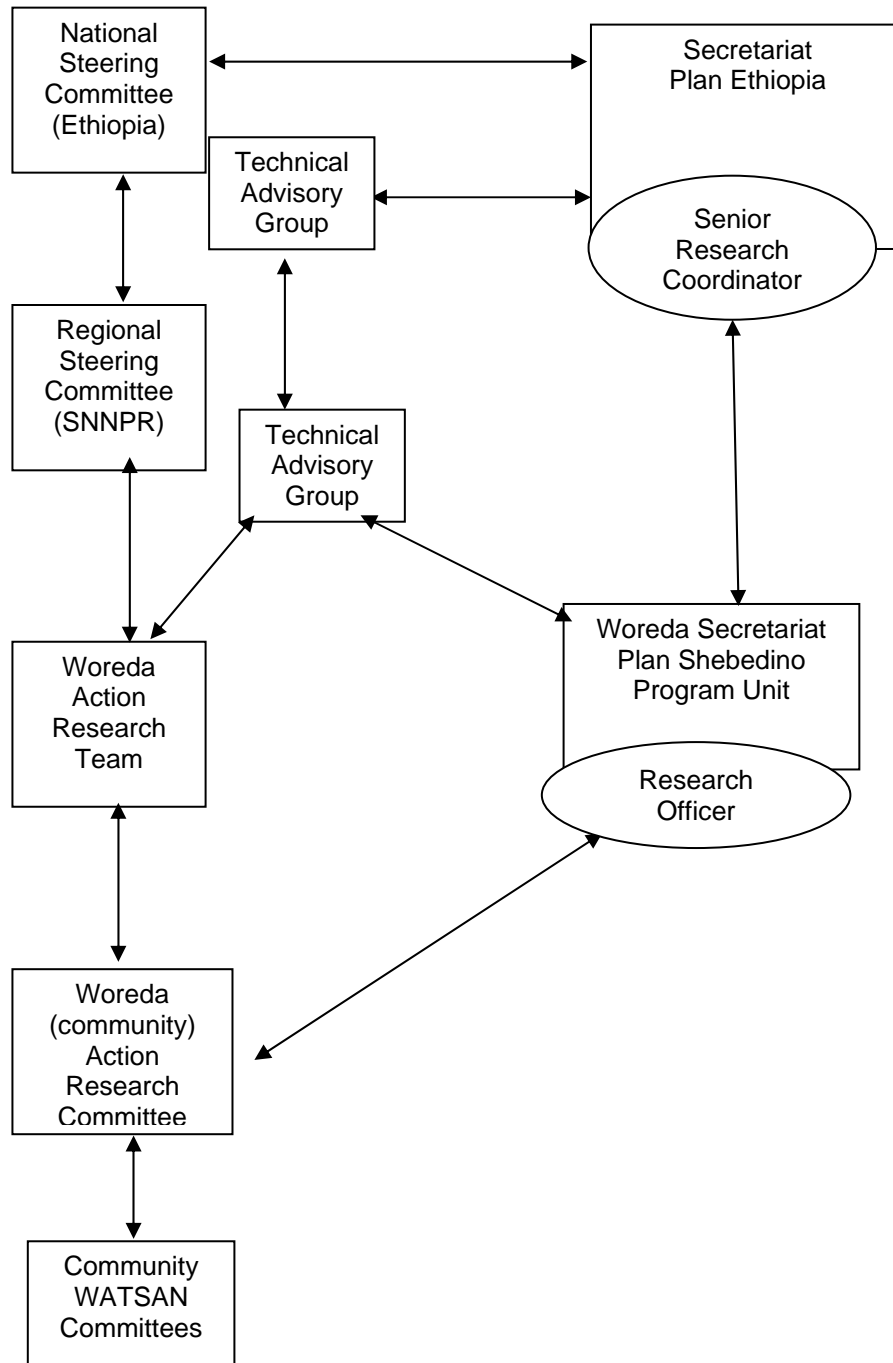
The direct objectives of the programme are:

- To secure long term sustainability of community managed rural water supply and sanitation services, not for the life time of a project or a system, but indefinitely.
- To rapidly serve more people with sustainable rural water supply and sanitation services, bringing coverage up to 100%.

This will be done through an action research programme to learn (reflect and act) what is needed to achieve the direct objectives in particular how to strengthen institutional support mechanisms for community managed rural water supply and sanitation services to be able to provide indefinite sustainability and 100% coverage to rural populations.

⁶¹ Organisations participating in the thematic group for scaling up community management of rural water supply are: IRC, IWA, Plan, RCAP, SKAT, Streams of Knowledge, WaterAid, WEDC, WSSCC, UNDP, UNICEF and Umgeni Water.

Figure 1: Organizational Structure of Action Research Project



Roles and responsibilities of the steering committees

The major tasks of the National Steering Committee are to guide the action research programme, to prioritise the action research agenda, to facilitate learning in the water sector, to disseminate lessons learned from the action research and to advocate scaling up.

The Regional Steering Committee recommends the research agenda, supports the research team in the district, identifies and coordinates participating organisations and disseminates findings.

The action research team in the district does the actual work e.g. identifies issues that affects sustainability, identifies best practices, assesses institutional capacities, makes sure that all stakeholders are involved, tests and implements outcomes of the action research process and informs the regional and national steering committees. Technical Advisory Groups have also been set up at regional and national level to provide specific technical assistance. There is regular communication between the different levels and groups.

Phasing of the programme

The action research programme is a three year programme (until the end of 2007). It has cycles of six months for research and testing after which one month will be spend on analyzing outcomes and sharing lessons learned with all stakeholders, documenting the process and disseminating findings to the wider sector community. In this intermediary month capacities of the action research team will also be built if needed. Joint analysis, documentation and dissemination are crucial parts of the programme and that is why every half year a whole month is reserved for these activities.

Inception workshop and action plan until November 2005

The first major activities of the programme were to carry out a meta-evaluation of recent evaluations of relevant water and sanitation programmes in the sector in Ethiopia and a situational analysis in Shebedino. The results of these assessments were presented and discussed in a national workshop in April 2005. The workshop participants also discussed which steps should be taken in the next phase of the action research programme and who should take them. Apart from further improvement of the meta-evaluation and the situational analysis, the following activities will be carried out a/o:

- Assessment of institutional capacities in the district of Shebedino and drafting a plan for capacity building.
- Assessment of available training programmes for communities and investigating possibilities to harmonise these programmes.
- Investigation of constraints and opportunities to legalise community water and sanitation committees.
- Assessment of all the costs of water service provision in Shebedino, including costs for long term support to communities and costs for expansion and replacement of water systems.
- Assessment of the technology options in use in the district.
- Assessment of support needs of community managed water services.

Documentation and dissemination

There are still many aspects of the programme that need to be improved. One of them is the systematic documentation and dissemination of the lessons learned in the programme. Outcomes must be documented quickly and made accessible for a wider audience in Ethiopia. In that way everyone can be involved in the debate on how to improve rural water supply and sanitation in Ethiopia. The programme has a provision for professional support to the documentation and dissemination activities. Several good ideas have been mentioned such as setting up a resource centre for the sector, creating a web site for the action research programme and making and distributing a Newsletter on the lessons learned.

Early lessons learned

Although it is very early to draw conclusions, an indication of lessons learned can be given:

- The process is insecure. There is no clear blue print for scaling up. The end result must grow out of the action research programme and the multi stakeholder cooperation at different levels.
- Most sector stakeholders realise that for moving forward and bringing about change, cooperation and coordination is a prerequisite.
- There is a great need to discuss approaches and improve them. Discussions are very detailed and relevant.
- The common experience and knowledge of the stakeholders is big and by bringing these all together, there are greater opportunities to improve practices and approaches.
- This programme has opened the door for discussion, reflections, joint learning and studying the details of water supply management. This is important in a sector which is characterised by many different organisations often working in parallel to each other.

