

# Strengthening capacity for decentralised water management: a dynamic process

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## Abstract

Since 2000 – two years before the end of Angola’s civil war – SNV Angola has been working in the southern region of Huila with the provincial water department, DPA Huila. While policy was still being developed at the national level the team at DPA Huila had worked out their own decentralised management system and were implementing it in two pilot municipalities.

Their subsequent success meant that the project could be replicated and expanded, in two more municipalities and one extra community in 2005. This time, however, SNV took on a different role, moving away from its co-management position with DPA Huila to one of support and the development of skills within the staff of the water department. As a result DPA Huila are now passing on their knowledge and expertise to locally organised water brigades, who now manage their own water points, with only a minimum of support from the provincial headquarters.

Word of this success is spreading throughout the country with the first exchange visit having already taken place between DPA Huila and DPA Huambo. And while it is recognised that this ‘Huila Model’ still needs to be developed further, there has been a lot of interest from other provinces and also at national level. In fact, many of the model’s concepts and ideas of decentralised management have since been incorporated into the new Angolan Water Law for implementation throughout the country.

## Keywords

Capacity strengthening for decentralised water management, decentralised social learning model, Scaling up

## Introduction

In the early 1990’s DPA Huila<sup>2</sup> (*Departamento Provincial de Água de Huila*) emerged as a new provincial water department in southern Angola. Due to great political instability in the country, caused by a long-running a civil war, DPA started with small emergency projects which mainly were implemented in the peri-urban areas of the provincial capital, Lubango, and its surrounding municipalities, which were all largely unaffected by the war. These projects were funded by UNICEF as well as with small funds from the Angolan government.

The war intensified throughout the 90’s and many of the people in the Huila province migrated to the peripheral neighbourhood centres of the municipalities near to Lubango. This led to an increased demand on the existing water supply services which were already insufficient and as a result the incidence of several diseases surged.

To address this problem DPA Huila decided to create a team of social mobilisers who would organise the community and encourage them to be responsible for the operation and maintenance of the public water points as well as the promotion of hygiene and sanitation at these water points and in their homes.

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<sup>2</sup> Text based on: Domingas M. (2006). *Pequeno historial da DPA Huila*. Informal note developed for a presentation at meeting of the European Union.

This process further evolved with the technical and methodological assistance from other partners, such as CARE, DRA (Disaster Relief Agency), ADRA (*Acção para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiente* - Action for Rural and Environmental Development), ACF (*Acção Contra a Fome* – Action Against Hunger), ZOA, SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and the European Union (*Programa de Apoio e Reconstrução* (PAR) - Programme for Reconstruction).

Although policy at national level was not yet developed the team at DPA Huila had worked out their own decentralised management system. The activities included the construction of new water points, the rehabilitation of a number of piped water supply systems in the communal and municipal centres, the introduction of cost recovery and the introduction of GAS (*Grupos de Água e Saneamento*) groups, or Community-based Water and Sanitation groups, for the management of the public water points. At the municipal level Municipal Water Brigades were also introduced.

After a short overview of the situation in relation to water and sanitation in Angola, this paper will focus on the aspects and the development of the decentralised water model as developed in Huila province, the role of capacity strengthening activities in this process and will present the main challenges which actors in Huila are facing. Based on these experiences the author will identify key lessons learned to establish an agenda for strengthening local governance for sustainable water and sanitation services.

### **Coverage in terms of numbers**

A recent overview<sup>3</sup> of the situation of the water supply in the rural areas of Angola, has been presented in the policy document “*Programa de Desenvolvimento do Sector das Aguas*” (January 2004), compiled by the Angolan Ministry of Water and Energy. Based on a Multi Indicator Study (“*Inquérito de Indicadores Múltiplos* – MICS II, 2001), this document indicates that the actual situation in the rural areas of Angola is worse than was previously thought: of an estimated total rural population of about 5,000,000 people, less than 40% has access to drinking water of acceptable quality. Moreover, this situation is probably even getting worse at the moment, due to the lack of maintenance of the infrastructure (handpumps and wells).

In the same document, reference is made to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development for developing countries (New York 2000 & Johannesburg 2002), of which the objectives are to implement sustainable services before 2015 to bridge 50 % of the present gap in the rural water supply coverage. For Angola this would mean that 50 % of the missing 60 % must be taken care of in a period of less than 10 years. This sets the target of rural water supply coverage in 2015 to 70 %.

In terms of numbers, this would mean that over a period of 10 years, the government should facilitate the creation of new or improved public water points for at least 1,500,000 people. With an estimated 300 persons per water point, this comes to 5000 water points over the coming 10 years; so about 500 water points per year must be created.

Apart from the challenge of the realisation of the infrastructure (handpumps and wells), the main challenge will be how to organise sustainable maintenance for these new water points. In other words, if these new water points will not be sustainable, another wave of deterioration will soon prevent these water points from functioning, as has happened in the past with the many water supply points that were created by NGOs to cover emergency situations.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from text: a proposal developed for UNICEF by SNV Angola, (2005). *Programme Support to DNA: “Towards sustainable rural water supply”*.

It is evident that this scenario creates a huge challenge for the government and requires a nationwide and integrated approach of all stakeholders involved. The MDGs may even be, for the moment, unrealistic for a country like Angola. However, the above referred document indicates the government's commitment that a serious effort will be made to create an enabling environment to increase the number of sustainable water services in the rural areas.

In this process the participation and support of all the actors and especially those of the water users in the communities will be of vital importance. Due to the long civil war the private sector, as well as civil society, remains underdeveloped and most of the players in the water sector still lack the knowledge and skills to take up the all the tasks required for this increase in the number of sustainable water services in the rural areas. Capacity strengthening activities for all actors at all levels and the further decentralisation within the sector will therefore need to be essential elements of all the national and provincial programmes which aim to increase the coverage of water and sanitation services in these areas in a sustainable way.

### **The changing character of capacity strengthening**

Since 2000 DPA Huila has had a good working relationship with the SNV Dutch Development Organisation which has for many years supported a Technical Assistance Program within DPA Huila to support the capacity strengthening in the various departments (social mobilisation, water department, the financial department). Over years the role and support of SNV has changed according to increase of capacity of the staff.

In 2000 – two years before the end of Angola's civil war – DPA together with SNV Angola started the rehabilitation of the water piped water supply schemes in Chiange and Chibia, a project which was financed by the Dutch Embassy. During the implementation of this project, DPA Huila, with assistance from SNV, further worked out a decentralised management system, a process which DPA started earlier in partnership with other organisations such as UNICEF and DRA. It involved the handing over of a number of roles and responsibilities to the newly formed Municipal Water Brigades, the Municipal Administrations and to the GAS groups, the Community-based Water and Sanitation groups.

### **The 'Huila Model'**

For each community water point there is a committee, a GAS (*Grupos de Água e Saneamento*). Overseeing them is a Municipal Water Brigade who has a contract with each GAS to maintain the water points. Meanwhile, at provincial level, is the regional government water department, DPA which trains the Brigades and implements national policy as directed by the national water department, DNA, part of the Ministry of Water and Energy. In this way each water point has a responsible group who, in the event of any problems, can turn to an increasing better trained and better equipped tier of information as the chain goes from community to municipal and all the way up to national level.

### **Changing role of SNV**

During the implementation of the project in the municipalities of Chiange and Chibia, SNV and DPA shared management and supervisory responsibilities. In terms of capacity strengthening the focus was on strengthening the technical knowledge and skills of DPA. As a result the staff received a great number of technical training courses on, for example, project management, technical design, social mobilisation and accounting.

More recently, through the EU funded PAR project, the role of SNV advisors changed to focus instead on hands-on training, enabling DPA staff to apply and implement the skills gained in earlier projects. Also DPA had the sole responsibility for implementation and budget control and had its own contract with the EU. The main aim of the SNV input was to strengthen the

skills of DPA staff to enable them pass on their knowledge and expertise to Municipal Water Brigades and other actors in the sector.

The focus of the SNV advisors now is to respond to the specific request for capacity strengthening. As such SNV advisors will in the near future facilitate a workshop to assess the working methods used for social mobilisation and to discuss new ways of involving communities. Also, at the request of DPA, SNV will assist them to improve their planning processes and with the development of a monitoring system at provincial level which can later be transferred in an adapted form to municipal level by DPA.

## **Opportunities for scaling up the Huila model**

The National Directorate of Water (DNA) as well as various DPAs from other provinces have a great interest in the experiences of DPA Huila with the implementation of the decentralised water management model. The first exchange has already taken place between DPA Huila and DPA Huambo, a province in central Angola. And while it is recognised that this 'Huila Model' still needs to be developed further, there has been a lot of interest from other provinces and also at national level. In fact, many of the model's concepts and ideas of decentralised management have since been incorporated into the new Angolan Water Law for implementation throughout the country.

During the implementation of the above mentioned PAR, which was financed by EU with technical assistance of SNV in 2005, it became clear that DPA Huila today has the capacity to execute projects as a result of a long term technical assistance of various NGOs, amongst others SNV. The main challenges DPA Huila is facing at this moment are linked to formalisation of the model, the institutional capacity development at various levels in order to achieve a sustainable management, the provision of water supply to the most poor families who don't have access to potable water and are living in the areas most affected by the war as well as the involvement and support of the all actors at various levels in all the activities related to water and sanitation.

The main challenges can be summarised as follows:

- Formalisation of provincial water policy: there is a need to review the legal position of the Municipal Water Brigades, the roles and responsibilities of the various actors, the existing legal documents as well as the financial aspects of the decentralised management scheme
- Revision and formalisation of the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the context of decentralisation of government institutes and adoption of the principle of the participation of the all citizens at the various levels
- Active involvement of the actors at municipal and communal level in the further development and implementation of the decentralised management model as to ensure their support for implementation
- The dissemination of information to all actors at various levels on the decentralised model and cost recovery, as well as discussions on the consequences of the model and its relation with the management of the water supply systems in the centres of the municipalities as well as in the rural areas
- Organisation of the distribution of spare parts
- Development and institutionalisation of a monitoring and support system for municipal water brigades
- The support to various actors (water brigade members, members of the municipal and communal administration and the water and sanitation committees) at municipal level with sufficient time on the following issues:

- Support to water brigades on financial management (including the development of an operational budget, identifying the operational cost, development of capacities to manage the water brigade as a business)
- Inventory and monitoring of all the water points at municipal and provincial water level
- Development of the database on all the water available in the municipality / province (type, year of installations, actual state, users, water committee and its functioning, etc.) and of the home connections for the water supply systems in the centres of the municipalities and the rural areas
- Support – monitoring of the management of water points and their water point committees
- Strengthening of the capacities of the water brigade members for the training of the water point committees
- Strengthening of the capacities of the water brigade members of financial management and the keeping of the financial means at municipal and community level
- Progressive actualisation of the price for a cubic meter to achieve the approximation of the real cost. During the actualisation of prices, at the same time it should be monitored how this will affect the access of water for the poor and solutions should be discussed how this can be addressed.

As can be concluded from the list above, most of the challenges DPA Huila is facing at the moment to increase sustainable coverage are linked to the capacity building of actors at all levels as well as at the support of these actors in the implementation of their activities.

### **Capacity strengthening within a context of decentralisation**

As a result of the introduction of a decentralised management model the roles and responsibilities at provincial, municipal and community level have changed. However, due to the low level of education and weak capacities at municipal and community level many actors do not have the financial resources, knowledge, skills and experience to assume these new roles and responsibilities. And since the roles and responsibilities only become clearer during the process of decentralisation it is not possible to fully prepare and equip the various actors beforehand so there is a continuous need to readjust the capacity development programme. It needs to be readjusted to the new insights in the decentralisation process and will need to adapt in each of the provinces and can not be replicated as such. Although there is no one model or answer which is applicable to all, lessons can be learned and processes can be scaled up and replicated if adapted to the local circumstances of a province.

### **Scaling up of capacity strengthening activities**

New capacities lead to new insights and thus to the request for new knowledge and skills (for example the social mobilisers of DPA Huila after years of practice have recently expressed their interest to learn new tools and methodologies to mobilise communities and to address hygiene and sanitation in the municipalities). New issues for capacity building emerge over time and as such it is a continuous learning process for the various partners. Accordingly, the role of SNV changed over time: moving away from its co-management position with DPA Huila to one of support and the development of skills within the staff of the water department.

First the focus of the capacity strengthening activities was on the development of new knowledge of skills of the DPA staff. Now that they have internalised these new skills and knowledge, some will be able to pass them on to Municipal Water Brigades. With the aim that this will enable the Municipal Water Brigades to pass their skills on to community based organisations and users.

Additionally, an increased number of water points will once again change the roles and responsibilities of the various actors and require the participation of more actors to achieve sustainability. With a higher coverage at municipal level, the existing Municipal Water Brigades are not able to provide maintenance services to all the water points. In this case new actors will need to emerge of which the capacity will need to be strengthened. So the developments in the sector are directly inter-related to the capacity development needs.

Unbalanced and new situations will raise the awareness of the need for capacity development. When people or organisations come across new challenges and new responsibilities they might identify the need for new skills and knowledge. This is the most favourable condition for advisors such as those of SNV where they can provide their services to an organisation which is receptive and ready for the implementation of the newly learned skills and knowledge.

### **From practice to theory**

This process as experienced in the province of Huila fits the decentralised social learning model as described in the article written by Jan Ubels et al. in their article "*Capacity Development: From theory to SNV's practice*" and based on the work of D. Ellerman. The key idea of a decentralised social learning model is that large scale change can not be implemented or rolled-out. Experimentation should be encouraged in the 'periphery' and in most situations is the source and motor for successful change. In a country the periphery can be defined as the arena below the level of national government and institutions, that is civil society, local governments and the private sector at meso and micro levels. It is there where innovation and learning on what really works take place. Development is usually based on small successes, which will in turn create opportunities for other successful actions. The role of the Centre (in this case the central government) is to create favourable conditions for fostering success and for promoting horizontal learning within the periphery. It can also play a role in up-scaling successes, using its resources to facilitate the work of the learners and actors on-the-ground. (Jan Ubels et al.)

The bottom line of this theory, and of the approach that results from it, is that the Government cannot engineer development but can facilitate what is happening. Development processes are too complex to be centrally invented. Dynamics at the local level are an important means to successful macro-level policies. The movement of change and learning is as much from periphery to periphery, or periphery to centre, as from centre to centre. The Centre comes to function as facilitator of society's learning, rather than as society's trainer. (Jan Ubels et al.)

The activities in the context of decentralisation which started in the Huila province proved so successful that they influenced policy development at national level. This again created favourable conditions for the expansion and up-scaling of similar practices. The activities also set examples for other provinces in the country and show how certain challenges can be addressed. They provide opportunities for learning between provinces.

DPA Huila is now in a position, albeit still with limited support from partner organisations, to extend their knowledge to these other provinces. It has been the role of the advisory organisations, in particular SNV, to first of all train the staff in specific skill areas, but once this was achieved it was then important to strengthen those new skills by applying them 'on the job' and developing them to such an extent that the DPA Huila staff are now proficient enough to pass on this knowledge to their colleagues in other parts of Angola.

Advisory organisations, such as SNV, have to continually adapt their role according to their partners needs and respond to changes, whether institutional, political, social or otherwise. They must be prepared to change initial plans and timetables and be flexible as the situation demands. By doing so they can help strengthen the capacities of partner organisations, or government departments, and make them too, a part of this dynamic process.

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