

Conference Issue Paper

East Africa Regional Conference
Accelerating Water Supply and Sanitation for the Urban Poor
29-30 May 2006, Nairobi, Kenya

Consumer Voice

What consumers really want is often overlooked by service providers and the planners of reforms

There is an urgent need to improve the accountability of governments and service providers to the users of water supply and sanitation (WSS) services. Many sector reforms are currently underway, but meaningful participation by the consumers is often overlooked despite the fact that their satisfaction is a key outcome.

1. Successful services require relationships in which clients can monitor and pressure providers (“client power”) and citizens can have a strong voice in policy making and regulation with politicians and bureaucrats (“voice”). While politicians and policy makers create the incentives for providers to service clients (“compact”). Ensuring both effective consumer voice and client power are thus key to accountability. While much effort may be put into improving provider capacity, be it a large or small, public or private provider, if the services provided do not meet the needs or expectations of the users, or if certain segments of the population are still not empowered to demand them, little is gained from the perspective of consumers.

Poor consumers are more likely to have their needs and preferences ignored

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that poor households have more difficulty in wielding client power or making their voices heard than non-poor households.

2. The poor may be the recipients of “free” services, and thus not have a client relationship with the provider. They may lack the right to access services, for instance through a lack of land tenure or installations such as public outlets. The staff and managers of the provider may ignore the poor, or certain communities. And finally, there may be a lack of alternatives in poor communities, preventing the poor from “voting with their feet”.

Consumer voice has been slow to develop in the water sector

Consumer voice has been heard with more frequency in many sectors in the last few years, in particular in developed countries where powerful consumer movements have demanded much greater accountability from manufacturers and providers of services. This has resulted in better standards, more enforcement, and the withdrawal of dangerous products from the market.

3. Efforts in consumer advocacy in the WSS sector in developing countries have often been caught in the political debates. Another disabling factor is the existence of a wide range of providers in a mostly unregulated sector. In some countries civil society has attempted to bring consumer grievances to the attention of policy-makers, but this has often been through extreme measures such as demonstrations and boycotts. A more measured approach has been found in places where the courts have been used (e.g. India). But there is a growing consensus that these judicial interventions have been at best “band-aid” solutions for individual grievances and have seldom

resulted in systemic changes. The introduction of regulation has helped to some extent for instance in case of GB's OFWAT and its "WaterVoice" Committees, in case of Zambia's NWASCO and the "Water Watch Group", also the water and power regulatory body in Tanzania will have a Consumer Consultative Council. These Committees / Groups also provide a feed back to the regulators from the consumers.

While consumer associations are developing fast, they need guidance and support to be effective in the water sector

4. Consumer associations' face many constrains such as luck of understanding of the sector, representing all consumers (connected unconnected) and access to information. They are also determined to maintain their objectivity and independence, which has resulted in a debate about whether they should accept a role within the regulatory agency. Despite these constraints, consumer organizations in developing countries have displayed a keen interest in increasing their capacity in the WSS sector, and wish to sharpen their advocacy skills, especially on behalf of the poor.

Effective tools and methodologies must be developed, tested and mainstreamed in the WSS sector

There is still a need to develop ways that the voice of the consumers of WSS services can be heard. Though there is an interesting array of potent civil society-led tools and approaches such as report cards, participatory expenditure tracking, community score cards, public hearing and social audits, few have been used in the water sector so far.

5. Objective methods for reporting and measuring corruption are vital. Policy-makers often need to be convinced with reliable data that willingness to pay for improved services exist, even (and sometime especially) among the poor, in order to be able to challenge the rhetoric surrounding the provision of low-quality services for free. Likewise, there is often opposition to allowing private provision of services in the name of protecting the consumer, when users may in fact be indifferent to the type of management as long as the services are affordable and meet their needs. Neutral, credible and apolitical information on consumer choices, preferences and concerns is thus needed to give the reform agenda in the water sector much-needed objectivity and focus, and to move the focus of consumer advocacy from anecdote to an informed debate.
6. There are a number of initiatives underway which develop tools and methods for strengthening consumer voice in Africa. These activities need increased and coordinated support.

Imprint: This issue paper was prepared by a collaborative effort of the convenors of the East Africa Regional Conference on Accelerating Water Supply and Sanitation for the Urban Poor: the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP), the Kenyan Ministry for Water and Irrigation (MWI) and the GTZ/MWI Water Sector Reform Program. This material may be copied for research, education or scholarly purpose only. All materials are subject to revision. The views and interpretations of this document are those of the individual authors and/or trainers and do not necessarily reflect the views of WSP, GTZ or the Kenyan Ministry.