Community managed water supply in Colombo, SRI LANKA

The problem:

Since the people were considered to be living illegally on public land, the various public utilities had refused to extend any services to 27 Watta to improve the water and sanitation situation there. A survey by the NGO Sevanatha in 2004, however, revealed that the residents would be more than happy to pay for a supply of clean and safe drinking water, but the rates charged were too high. In the earlier project, piped water was supplied from the common taps only. The people had to wait in long lines to collect water. There were not enough minimal amenities for the growing number of residents who had to wait in long lines to collect water.

Community continued to grow over time, those minimal amenities were not enough for the community. The open sewage within the community, especially when the rains caused flooding. So many health problems that arose from the minimal amenities.

Women’s Bank, which had already mobilized women’s savings groups in the 27 Watta community, was the NWSDB’s official partner contracted to help the community design and implement the water supply project and to act as “retail” water supplier to individual households.

The NWSDB, a state-owned utility, is responsible for supplying the bulk water supply for the community to the Women’s Bank.

UNESCAP subsidized the costs of constructing the water supply network within the community.

In 2004, UNESCAP implemented a pilot water supply project in an unsewered Colombo slum, Halhakumbura, in which the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) granted a concession to a private engineering company to sell water to individual households through a water supply system which the community built and managed itself. After the success of this project, it was decided to use some remaining UNESCAP funds to replicate the project in 27 Watta.

In 2004, the Water Distribution System which had already been implemented in 27 Watta was so small, only part-time staff could manage the project. The involvement of the Women’s Bank has been crucial to the success of the project, but since the number of households in 27 Watta is so small, only part-time staff could be assigned to manage the project. The cost of the project was Rs. 699,210 (US$ 6,925), 76% of which was paid for by a subsidy from UNESCAP and 22% was paid by community members partly from their savings (used to install the pipes and pay for the purchase of the individual water meters) and partly through the monthly water fees they pay to Women’s Bank, based on the national water tariff. Households which couldn’t afford the connection charges were allowed free water from the common taps until they could afford their own private supply.

The project was a win-win process for everyone involved. Besides providing much-needed water to some of the city’s poorest communities, it helped the NWSDB to reduce the amount of water being wasted or lost on the national supply grid. The project’s partnership arrangements and community management system guaranteed affordable water costs and prompt payment of monthly water fees.

Who did what?

Sevanatha, a local NGO, mobilized the community through a series of discussion and planning workshops, assisted in developing the project’s partnership arrangements and provided technical and organizational facilitation during the implementation of the project.

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UNESCAP subsidized the costs of constructing the water supply network within the community.

Who paid?

The total cost of the project came to Rs. 699,210 (US$ 6,925), 76% of which was paid for by a subsidy from UNESCAP and 22% was paid by community members partly from their savings (used to install the pipes and pay for the purchase of the individual water meters) and partly through the monthly water fees they pay to Women’s Bank, based on the national water tariff. Households which couldn’t afford the connection charges were allowed free water from the common taps until they could afford their own private supply.

What changed?

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But most importantly, the project has shown that when communities are given the right support, they can plan, build and manage projects which meet their own most pressing needs more effectively, more quickly and more affordably than most government or private sector driven programs.