

From Pure Aid to Demanded Support

An Outlook on Donor Approaches to Water Policy

With 36 years of professional experience in working with international water issues in the context of development cooperation, Mr. Ingvar Andersson, recently retired from the Swedish development agency Sida, is well-qualified to provide some unique insights on the impact – or lack of impact – of donor efforts in the water policy arena.

Retirement gives you a privilege never experienced before – unlimited time for reflection and the opportunity to express personal views detached from any institutional loyalty. You have the luxury of stepping back and trying to better understand why well-meant development efforts so often didn't achieve the intended results.

For me such reflection has given rise to a concern that donors are often too focused on short-term results and avoid the more difficult issue of monitoring and evaluating long-term and less predictable results. A more long-term, historical perspective can provide very useful insights.

Many shifts in vision have taken place over my 36 years in the water sector. The 1970s were marked by the recent independence of many former colonies and the decade was characterised by development optimism, solidarity and a strong belief, shared at that time by the World Bank, in the ability of central governments to deliver services to the poor.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as the main donor to the water sector, Sweden supported large rural water supply programmes in Botswana and Tanzania. Sida, the Swedish development aid agency, invested heavily in developing the institutional base of central ministries and provincial offices. Parallel to these efforts, Sweden funded construction of water supply projects and training of local engineers and technicians. There was a strong belief at that time in “transfer of technology” from North to South, and Sida recruited Swedish professionals to support training and construction.



Ms. Binta Seck (right) fills her water container at the end of a day in the rice fields. The new pump on Carabane Island, guarded by Mr. Abdou Diatta (left) is a welcome development; it is the first source of potable water for islanders.

Photo: USAID

Ironically, it was engineers trained in urban settings in Europe who were recruited to construct piped water supply schemes in rural areas in Africa. In hindsight, it was optimistic to expect that this would work well, and indeed it did not succeed in Tanzania. What is interesting and somewhat surprising, however, is that it did work very well in Botswana, which had achieved 80% rural water supply coverage at the end of the 1980s.

Lack of understanding of the local context

The negative outcome for Tanzania is worth exploring further. A variety of factors external to the water sector, such as deteriorating terms of trade, budget deficit and foreign exchange shortages, definitely contributed to the problem. However, an even more significant factor in explaining the failures in the sector is probably the lack of understanding of the local contexts in which development took place. The water schemes were built by the government for the people, with little or no consideration for ownership, participation, financial sustainability and long-term operation and maintenance. Another important factor was that too little was done to involve women on water and sanitation and to take their priorities, needs and contributions fully into account in planning. With hindsight, the piped scheme technology can also be considered inappropriate. It should, however, be noted that a decade later the hand-pump technology introduced as the remedy to this problem ran into similar difficulties with sustainability, operation and maintenance.

The relative success of Botswana's rural water development is often dismissed as irrelevant – the country has a small population and riches in the form of diamonds allow for social welfare policies such as free education, health and water services. What may be of equal importance to the success in Botswana, but is not always taken into account, is the fact that in the 1980s Botswana carried out a thorough decentralisation reform and developed institutions and capacities at the local level, including to construct, operate and maintain water services. Sweden contributed to the decentralisation process and one of the most successful “water projects” in Sida's history was classified “Public Sector Support.”

The very different outcomes in Botswana and Tanzania also illustrates the difficulties of successfully planning and implementing water projects if they are not fully aligned with national priorities and the development of other sectors. Sida focused its water sec-



Photo: USAID

tor support to Tanzania on building local government capacity and generously funded local water projects while other sectors got little or no attention. Botswana implemented an inclusive and broad decentralisation reform and water was not developed at the expense of other sectors. In the sector today we pride ourselves on integrating water, sanitation and hygiene. This is an important development, not easily achieved, but it is clearly inadequate. Water supply development must be planned and implemented in the broader context of rural and urban development. Integrated Water Resource Management, or IWRM, can be a useful tool to make progress in this area.

Ambitious goals

The United Nations Water Conference in Mar del Plata in 1977 set the stage for the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade (1981-90). The grand global targets for the Decade (more ambitious than the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs) encouraged countries to set unrealistic national targets. To reach these targets government agencies embarked on larger projects and programmes, planned from headquarters with a “transfer of technology” approach. The development in Tanzania illustrates the shortcoming of this approach.

One can argue whether the Water Decade was a failure or success. More people were reported to have access to water at the end

of the Decade than before. Critical achievements for long-term sustainable impacts of the Decade were, however, the hard-won lessons learned and the good practices established, for example in terms of strategies, methodologies and institutions. Many of the important outcomes from the significant investments made during the Decade have to a large extent been neglected and their potential value will be lost unless they are explicitly identified and incorporated into the MDG agenda.

Change in perspective

Over the past decades, donor policies have evolved from aid-focused and supply-driven approaches to demand-responsive country-owned programmes. There has been a shift in the role of government – from implementer to regulator/facilitator. Donor support to central functions has dramatically decreased – unfortunately, support to the training of water professionals at the national level has also decreased. Donors have failed to identify and adequately support “the new implementers” replacing failed central agencies. An “implementation vacuum” exists between the local government and the communities in need of support. Local organisations, supported by international NGOs, do a commendable job, but they are too few and too small. The private sector is assumed to play an important role at the local level but this development is slow. And donors seem to lack both incentives and mechanisms for effective support.

It seems particularly relevant for a retired water professional to point to the importance of learning from history. Past experiences can tell us how to develop more effective and sustainable approaches to water supply and sanitation in the context of the MDGs. Failure to look back in a constructive manner will mean that current well-intentioned efforts to achieve rapid results could lead to re-adoption of approaches which have failed in the past, with negative long-term consequences, not least in terms of sustainability.

By Ingvar Andersson
e-mail: ingvarandersson@yahoo.se

Note about the author:



In February 2007 Mr. Ingvar Andersson retired after 36 years of work with water and sanitation in the context of development cooperation. With the exception of 6 years as Senior Water Policy Advisor to UNDP, New York, his experience has been with Swedish bilateral development cooperation – as an engineer with the Ministry of Water in Tanzania, a researcher on rural development, First Secretary at the Swedish Embassy in Dar es Salaam and as manager of the water and rural development programme at Sida, Stockholm.