

Beyond training

Organisational and institutional capacity

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Capacity development means different things to different people. However, it is generally considered essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) relating to water and sanitation. The slow spread of safe water and sanitation is commonly attributed to a shortage of skilled people. Hence capacity development is predominantly associated with training staff in constructing physical assets such as toilets and water systems, particularly but not only in rural areas.

Strong organisations are needed?

Training is certainly a necessary component of capacity development. However, more is needed if we are to find a long-term solution to the water and sanitation problem. Trained workers can only deliver if they are supported by an enabling environment at the organisational and institutional level, meaning the legal systems, policies, customs and practices of a society.

The challenge for organisations in urban areas is to retain skilled personnel and ensure that they deliver. This requires adequate remuneration levels and a system of rewards and accountability to get the best out of workers. The greatest challenges are in rural areas, where the move to devolve responsibility for the construction and maintenance of water and sanitation systems from the central to the local government level is often not accompanied by the necessary transfer of human and financial resources.

?and enabling institutions

But for delivery to be sustainable and expandable beyond the MDGs, there is a need to overcome other factors at the institutional level, which are often left out of discussions on capacity development.

First is the ability to ensure adequate and timely finance, to develop and sustain the momentum

to increase coverage. This has less to do with the availability of development aid and more to do with the lack of capacity of the formal banking sector and indeed the informal sector to direct resources to the water and sanitation sectors at the household level. The lack of bank finance is not always about the high transaction costs of dealing with small loans; often it is about the lack of exposure, and the risk-averse orientation, of loan officers to new mechanisms to deliver small loans backed by group guarantees. And while there has been a remarkable growth in microfinance institutions, it is only available in patches and tends to be slanted toward finance for ?income-generating? activities. In both these areas there are notable exceptions that can pave the way for broader capacity development to provide finance to the water and sanitation sectors.

The second capacity at the institutional level that requires attention relates to the growing threat to the sustainability of water sources and the issue of deteriorating water quality. Institutional weaknesses, policy gaps and the inadequacies in the relevant science and technology exacerbate these threats. Multiple demands and the use of water for irrigation and industrial and individual consumption put an intense pressure on surface and groundwater sources, both in terms of adequate quantity and quality. Yet most mechanisms for water use policy development, consultation across government ministries and conflict resolution among stakeholders are weak.

The capacity to provide systemic solutions and mitigation strategies that can be applied quickly and broadly is a serious gap to be filled. It is in part because the science of groundwater is either inadequately developed or imperfectly understood. Overcoming capacity gaps in institutional cross sector planning and policy development, aided by accessible groundwater science and water quality measurement and mitigation approaches, is needed if these problems are to be solved. Fortunately there are number of good examples in all these areas that can point the way ahead.