

Community Water Management in Rural Uganda: A Woman's Predicament

Joyce Mpalanyi Magala

The following is a commentary by the author on an ethnographic study she completed in 2014. Participant observations, informal and formal interviews were employed during the study. This paper shows the conclusions of the study as well as author's observations on the implications of the situation in the village and for many African women on a larger scale.

Introduction

Traditionally, women are situated as managers of domestic water supply in the developing world. According to the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program Report (2012), women bear the main responsibility of collecting water in sub-Saharan Africa. This role extends further to Operations and Maintenance (O&M) of community water sources, and the concept of Community Management has been widely used to promote sustainability of investments in O&M projects such as water supply systems. In Uganda, Directorate for Water Development developed guidelines to facilitate O&M of water sources (GOU 2007). The guidelines included structures such as Water User Committees (WUCs), which emphasise the participation of both men and women, used to define the roles and responsibilities played by each in the management of community water sources. However, there are manifestations of gender inequities inherent in community water management processes that hinder women from effective participation.

Joyce Magala, a female PhD researcher from the Water is Life project, conducted an ethnographic study in the Nakanyonyi¹ village in southwestern Uganda. The study indicates that power and power relations inhibit women's participation in community water management. This paper makes an attempt to understand the impacts of power relations, control, and authority on women and water management from a gender perspective. The power issues are reflected through leadership, participation, and financial expectations, which are at the

¹ The real name for the village where the study was conducted is withheld for purposes of confidentiality.

core of women's engagement in the process of community water management (Magala 2014). A reflection on the roles and responsibilities as well as activities carried out in relation to Operation and Maintenance of the water sources is made. The major conclusions indicate that men play a minimal role in community water management, creating a heavier burden on women. Moreover, women's voices are rarely heard or given adequate attention due to the power dynamics within water management structures.

User Committees and Community Water Management

Community water management is explored in order to understand how it influences the lives of women. Water is of critical importance to women, given the social role that women play in domestic water management and related activities at the community level. In Nakanyonyi village, Water User Committees (WUCs) were established as the primary structures to facilitate O&M arrangements for the water sources at the community level. WUCs are elected by the community and require at least 50% of the chosen participants to be female. Women in these roles are encouraged to take on leadership positions (GOU 2007), however, Sultama (2009) asserts that, "while adding women to a project may seem to address gender issues stipulated in project documents, it does not necessarily address power issues between men and women, and among different women."

One of the functions of the WUCs is to mobilize the community members who use water to make contributions in cash and kind, to participate

in community meetings and to ensure proper maintenance of the water sources (UWASNET 2011). The functionality of the WUCs influences women's engagement and participation in decision making with regards to community water management. Community meetings are expected to occur on a regular basis to enable water users to discuss issues of operation and maintenance of the water sources, and maintenance of water sources is supposed to be a shared responsibility between men and women to ensure a sense of ownership (GOU 2011).

In this study, however, it was observed that women's presence on the committees was more symbolic than functional, as their views were rarely considered during the decision-making processes. It was evident in community meetings that concerns raised by the women were not taken seriously, and although women maintained their positions on the WUCs, they gradually became inactive. Men on the committees in collaboration made decisions with the local leaders who were also predominantly male.

This study also noted that community meetings were mainly attended by women. Men were usually stayed at home or in trading centers while village meetings were taking place. This demonstrates the socio-cultural obstacles to achieve collaborative water management despite efforts made by local leadership to raise awareness about the meetings. The absence of men from such critical forum negatively influenced outcomes such as men not making contributions toward the operation and maintenance of the water sources. This directly contradicts the GOU (2011) guidelines for operation and maintenance, which stipulate that both men and women must be active to ensure sustainable water supplies. Furthermore, the few men who did participate in community meetings presented with authority and dominated the discussions. Despite commanding the conversation at committee meetings, men rarely acted on issues relating to water source management. This reinforces patriarchal tendencies and cultural

values inherent in this society, which promote dominance of men over women. Women struggle with and discuss water issues on a regular basis, which rarely, if ever, translates into practical solutions due to inadequate support from men. However, women and children continue to carry out workloads related to water collection and maintenance, which takes a great toll on their time and activities. However, Magala (2014) noted that without support from men, women's contributions were not sufficient to effectively maintain the water sources due to limited incomes. Magala (2014) observed that poor maintenance of water sources produced thick vegetation around wells, and paths to the wells became overgrown. Thus, both children and women struggled to access water, which was often unclean due to contamination such as litter and mud.

Traditionally, water sources were dug by hand and maintained by the community. Men excavated and constructed water sources to ensure availability of water in the community, while women focused on making water available for domestic use. Increased developments in the water sector during the 1990s introduced new technologies and management structures (in this case, hand pumps and WUCs) to facilitate improved water management. However, the functionality of the WUCs has gradually diminished due to irregular convening of meetings and inadequate participation of members. Additionally, the responsibility for the maintenance of water sources has been increasingly taken over by women, given their cultural responsibility to provide water for household needs.

The Contradiction in Community Water Management

The male-dominated decision process and women's inability to influence it results in an inevitable mismanagement of water resources. Boucher (2006) indicated that the limited consultation of women, "whether it emanates from gender indifference or restrictions on women's participation ...can have negative consequences for women." According to a female

leader in Nakanyonyi village, women's role was more of a physical presence at meetings without any influence on the decisions made, such as when and how the wells in the community were repaired (Magala 2014). For example, at the time of the study, one shallow² well remained non-functional because the hand pump broke down frequently and the well was abandoned. The surrounding community gave up collecting water from this shallow well and opted to draw water from other sources, some of which were located far from the households.

The study noted that children often assist women in bringing water to homes. However, children were also associated with regular breakdown of hand pumps at the water sources due to their playful nature. The local council members, who have authority over conflicts related to water management at the community level, had not intervened appropriately to maintain order at the water sources. This resulted in the failure to maintain reliable sources from which women could access water and thus effectively perform relevant social roles.

For women, issues that were important for discussion during the community meetings were maintenance of the hand pump, children's behavior at water sources, and matters of leadership and governance. However, the limited involvement of women in decision-making relating to water management prevented appropriate resolution of such issues.

As the household heads, men were required to provide resources for the operation and maintenance of water sources, and women in Nakanyonyi village heavily depended on the provision of such resources. However, because of men's minimal participation in community meetings and the cultural association of water issues as women's domain, men rarely acted to maintain the water sources. Hence, the burden of making contributions to repair the water sources fell back to the women.

Conclusion

The functionality of a water source depends heavily on cooperation between men and women in a community. Inaction on the part of men pushes women to take over men's traditional responsibility of providing the resources required to maintain water sources. The limited response by the men towards maintenance of the water sources in this study largely stems from the patriarchal nature of this society, where it is the responsibility of women to provide water for domestic use. Inadequate maintenance of the water sources constrains women's access to water, leading them to travel long distances to collect water. The minimal engagement by men in water management, coupled with limited support from WUCs, has created additional obstacles to water access for women, as the provision of shallow wells is not in itself sufficient to ensure water availability. It is important to develop meaningful partnerships in community water management to ensure proper Operation and Maintenance so as to provide consistent availability of water within communities.

Consistent engagement of women in community meetings and Water User Committees (WUCs) demonstrates their commitment to ensure availability of water at the community level. However, despite constant efforts, their voices are not given adequate attention, especially when making decisions relating to community water management. This paper aims to illustrate a social disorder with regard to women and men's participation in community water management. The patriarchal nature of this society has led to neglect by men of their responsibility in provision of resources and maintenance of the water sources. Renewed attention from community leaders to increase men's engagement in community water management would greatly reduce the burden faced by the women and likely provide more sustainable and consistent local water sources.

² Hand dug and a hand pump is installed.

Works Cited

Amadiume, Ifi. *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*. London and New York: Zed Books, 1997.

Bouwer, Karen 2006. "Women and Water, Peace Review." *A Journal of Social Justice* 18, no.4 (2006): 465-467.

GOU. "Water and Sanitation Sector District Implementation Manual," Kampala: Ministry of Water and Environment, 2007.

GOU. "National Framework for Operation and Maintenance of Rural Water Supplies in Uganda." Kampala: Ministry of Water and Environment, 2011.

GOU. "Uganda Water and Environment Sector Performance Report, 2013," Kampala: Ministry of Water and Environment, 2013.

Magala, Joyce M. "Women as Principal Gate Keepers: An Ethnographic Research Study on, Water and Health in Rural Uganda." PhD Thesis, Dublin City University, 2014.

Sultana Farhana. "Community and Participation in Water; Resources Management: Gendering and Naturing Development Debates from Bangladesh." *Journal Compilation Royal Geographical Society*, 34 (2009): 346–363.

UWASNET. "A Summary of Key Legislation and Policies on Water and Sanitation in Uganda," Kampala, 2011.

WHO, and UNICEF. "Global Water and Sanitation Assessment Report" Geneva: World Health Organisation and United Nations Children's' Emergency Fund - Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, 2012.



Dr. Joyce Mpalanyi Magala is a Social Development Consultant and Researcher with a background in Sociology, Women and Gender studies. Her work experience extends to water and sanitation, child health, gender and HIV/AIDS, institutional and organizational development. She carried out her PhD studies at Dublin City University in Ireland in partnership with Makerere University-Uganda 2010-14 funded by Irish Aid. Her community-based research work focused on women and water management using qualitative methodologies. She has played an advisory role and provided consultancy services at international and national levels to government ministries, NGOs and the private sector. Dr. Magala can be reached at magala.joyce@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Irish Aid and Higher Education Authority partnership of the Republic of Ireland for the financial support provided to conduct this research through the Water is Life project.

