

Lessons learnt on providing sustainable services in Burkina Faso

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IRC has highlighted some useful lessons for the sector as the USAID West-Africa Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Programme is drawing to a close.

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The USAID West-Africa Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Programme (USAID WA-WASH) was implemented between 2011 and 2015 with the overall objective of sustainably improving access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene in Burkina Faso, Niger and Ghana. As one of the partners in this programme IRC was responsible for testing a Service Delivery Approach to improve the quality and sustainability of water supply services.

Low stakeholder capacities standing in the way of effective, lasting water supply services in rural areas

Before examining the obstacles, we worked to characterise the quality of drinking water services available to the people living in the target districts of the Sahel region. Our studies indicated that in 2012, in the districts where official rates of access to water are around 45%, less than 1% of the populations actually benefitted from national-standard water services (20 litre per person per day of water that meets WHO quality standards and comes from a source located less than a kilometre away from residential areas and is used by less than 300 people).

On this basis, the IRC team has worked to identify the reasons behind this finding. While our research initially focused on technical shortcomings (broken down equipment, a disconnect between supply and demand) and behavioural factors (the people's water needs and uses), our work highlighted major failings in terms of service management. Indeed, service operators responsible for operating and maintaining hand pumps lack the capacities required to fulfil their roles. The user associations and rural mechanics do not have the levels of education and training required to manage this infrastructure to a professional standard. For instance, none of these operators can keep operating records, a basic tool required for professional service management.

Our analysis also indicated that seeking the skills required at village level is not realistic. We also noted the low capacities of the rural municipalities, which have neither the technical nor the managerial skills to fulfil their overall coordination role. Developing and managing water supply services requires more than just an official

mandate, it requires a whole range of management, planning and supervision skills, none of which exist in our rural districts as a rule. Finally, we noted the insufficiency of support provided by the Government or other partners working with the districts and service operators to develop and manage water supply services. Their support remains focused mainly on equipment construction or rehabilitation with a lack of emphasis on effective management. The efforts to support service management remain limited to setting up management mechanisms (water user associations, contracts etc.). Significant problems are encountered when implementing these mechanisms and yet the municipalities have no support to resolve them.

The quality and sustainability of rural drinking water services in Burkina Faso are essentially compromised by the capacities and skills of the municipalities and service operators.

Professionalisation and monitoring of services: Two solutions to overcome the obstacles and ensure effective lasting services

Following this exhaustive study, the IRC team worked to develop solutions. These mainly centred around professionalising water service management; the local authorities and service operators were targeted according to their specific functions. This professionalisation encompasses skills building and the use of appropriate tools.

On the one hand, the team collaborated with the local authorities to review the indicators used to assess the quality of water services provided to users. The rate of access indicator used nationally was clearly inadequate to reflect the quality of services provided to users and was in direct contradiction with the opinion of users themselves. Therefore we developed indicators that enabled the district authorities to better assess the quality of water services and to gather accurate information on how well the management structures were performing. These indicators enabled a new district water service monitoring and evaluation framework to be developed. This framework was tested in the districts of Aribinda and Gorgadji, where we noted significant improvements in water service quality. It helped to reduce the duration of breakdowns from 30 days to less than 3 days in both districts, while enabling the district authorities and service operators (water user associations and mechanics) to better fulfil their respective roles.

However, significant challenges remain to be overcome, as despite the political commitment to transfer management skills to the local stakeholders, their limited basic education means they are unable to assume various functions, particularly the processing and analysis of statistical data. Despite significant improvements, it remains very difficult for water user associations to assume the financial management of their infrastructure, document their activities and analyse their balance sheets, all essential elements of maintaining effective and lasting services. The fundamental problem here is that the people given these responsibilities in the villages have very low levels of education and the voluntary system promoted by the regulations is clearly inappropriate for filling a role that requires a high level of technical skills and time. Thus we developed a hand pump management model that responds both to the need for

professionalism and to the need for cost effective and affordable services for rural communities. This model is essentially based on appointing a district-level or multi-district-level professional operator who manages a range of hand pumps.

Sharing our findings to benefit the people and the sector

We collaborated closely with the Ministry for Water over the four years of project implementation so that the solutions tested could feed into national water service management and development policies, strategies and programmes in Burkina Faso. To this end, we participated in all the strategic meetings organised by the Ministry to promote our findings based on the results of the project. We also trained 60 sector professionals in the monitoring and evaluation tools we developed. We organised an international seminar on the district management of water services which welcomed more than 200 participants from around the world to discuss the issues and share our experiences and those of others on this key subject. A [report compiling a certain number of our findings](#) is available online, and will serve to continue feeding into dialogue with the sector to identify strengths, weaknesses and solutions for effective and lasting rural water service provision in Burkina Faso. Finally, all our work is available online on this site and printed documents are available on request.

Our conclusion: What works in urban areas will work in rural areas

To summarise, the solution for effective and lasting rural water supply services in Burkina Faso is to professionalise service management. This is more than clear when looking at how water services are managed in larger towns. If there is an almost uninterrupted supply of water that flows from the taps in Ouagadougou it is because there are professionals working within ONEA at different levels, to fixed standards, and supervised by qualified and competent national authorities. The provision of sustainable water supply services in rural areas is no exception to this obvious finding. The efforts to professionalise service management in the districts of Gorgadji and Aribinda proved to be effective in this regard, but also highlighted the sheer extent of the task.

It is more than time for the sector and in particular the authorities to promote such professionalisation. This can take various forms; delegation of service management to local private companies, pooling of human and financial resources at an inter-district level, revision of national standards to include a service-to-user dimension, the use of mobile phone tools to report break downs etc. The good news is that the message has been heard and initiatives are increasing. Much remains to be done before a water service worthy of the name can be provided to the rural populations of Burkina Faso. Thanks to the USAID WA-WASH programme, IRC is well equipped to continue its research and advocacy work in collaboration with sector stakeholders.