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Decentralisation and the role of NGOs in combating corruption in the WASH sector

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This paper questions the assumed relation between the decentralisation and privatisation of the provision of WASH services on the one hand and increased transparency and accountability on the other. Practices in India and Africa show that this is often not the case. Accountability and transparency are sometimes lost when the contractual arrangements between decentralised government and the private sector actors do not lead to involvement and informing user communities and when the role of local NGO's is not recognised. As a result the quality of some work is poor, ownership of WASH services is low, and the equity principle is compromised. Nevertheless, these same decentralisation and privatisation processes create opportunities to empower communities and develop measures to combat private gain and increase transparency at the implementation level. In this paper some of these good practices are described. Particularly the role of the civil society in the promotion of accountability and honesty is crucial. NGO's could play an important role.

Introduction – corruption and accountability

CORRUPTION undermines water and sanitation services. It is those without voice, the poor, who are systematically deprived by corrupt systems. An estimated 20% to 70% of resources could be saved if transparency were optimised and corruption eliminated, thus freeing up most of the resources needed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for sustained water and sanitation services that reach the poor. [Shordt et al, 2006]

The pioneering work of Transparency International (TI), founded in 1993, has been instrumental in legitimising efforts to focus on transparency, corruption and honesty around the world. TI has stimulated international institutions – such as UNDP, the OECD, the World Bank - to develop policy and programmes, and is also one of the founding members of the Water Integrity Network – WIN (http://www.waterintegritynetwork.net/). [Shordt et al, 2006]

A milestone, in this respect, is the World Bank's World Development Report 2004 [World Bank, 2003], which proposed a new approach to address the failure of providing social services to poor people. This approach systematically considers the political and institutional dimensions that influence service planning, funding and delivery to the poor. Accountability relationships – especially between decision makers, service providers and the poor clients – are considered key to the success and failure of service provision. Traditionally, the analysis of public service failures had focused on infrastructure, staff, financial resources and commodities. The World Bank's "triangle of accountability" defined two routes linking the public in general with service providers.

On the short route, providers must report to their clients ("client power"). On the long route, they are responsible to the government bureaucracy ("compact") – the leaders of which, in turn, are made accountable in elections ("voice"). The World Development Report argued that strengthening accountability along these two routes would improve service delivery to the poor. In their commentary on the report, Villar and Dodd (2005) add that donors should also be fully considered when accountability relationships are mapped out, transforming the World Bank's conceptual "triangle" into a "rectangle".

The decentralisation trend

Since the end of the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (1981-1990), responsibility for water, sanitation services, and to a lesser extent hygiene promotion has shifted from centralised systems coordinated by national level government bodies to local and intermediate levels of government. Various factors, including the failure of centralised systems to deliver services, in particular to the poor, international conventions recognising the importance of decision making at the local level of government, and the processes of decentralisation and structural adjustment, have contributed to this shift. [Fonseca and Moriarty, 2006, 48].

In countries where decentralisation has taken place - and where most of the money comes from the national government in combination with donor money in the form of basket funding - local governments are increasingly in charge of planning and deploying the money for construction and service provision. Examples are seen in South Africa, Colombia and other Latin American countries. [Fonseca and Moriarty, 2006, 39].

Arguments for decentralisation

The implementation of decentralisation is usually motivated by two arguments:

- decentralisation can lead to an increase in efficiency
- under the right conditions (democratic local elections, a strong legal framework and a real delegation of power to local governments), decentralisation can lead to improved governance by enhancing accountability and the monitoring of government officials and decision makers. [Jütting et al., 2005].

Another argument for donors to support decentralisation is that it enables them to by-pass central government if this is perceived to be corrupt or abusing human rights. The World Bank is applying this new approach in Ethiopia where it will "provide $215 million of its new aid to hundreds of local governments, mainly for basic services such as water, health and education". The effectivenss of this approach will depend on whether the "right conditions" as mentioned above by Jütting et al have been met.. [Blustein, 2006 ; World Bank, 2006].

Changing roles and sector reform

As a result of ongoing reforms, which include decentralisation, privatisation and increased community involvement as key components of change, the role of the actors in the WASH sector has been entirely redefined. Among these changes are a refocusing of the state on its policy, legislative and monitoring function and a des-engagement from operational functions. In most cases there is a transfer of operational responsibility to the local level, a greater involvement of water users, and involvement of the private sector. Improved donor coordination and basket funding mechanisms are other aspects of these reforms.

Where decentralisation has not automatically improved transparency: India and Uganda

Empirical findings in India, comparing decentralised with centralised water services providers, show that centralised agencies were significantly more efficient. In a study under 6000 households and 200 water supply agencies Asthana found that more customers (51%) of decentralised systems paid bribes, especially to falsify bills, than those (41%) of centralised systems. There was also a notable difference when there were repairs involved. One of the major reasons for the higher levels of corruption given was the unhealthy relationship between staff members with politicians and local residents. Decentralised agencies are more subject to pressure and more accessible than centralised agencies. [Asthana, 2004 ; Davis, 2004].

WaterAid Uganda with support of Tearfund carried out a study on the impact of private sector participation in WASH service delivery to the poor in Uganda in 2003. While the researchers observe that the decentralisation and privatisa-

tion process did contribute to a greater coverage of service delivery in the water sector in Uganda, there is still much to be desired where sustainability, quality, community ownership and accountable equitable access were concerned. Projects are more and more about contracts between local government and private contractors and the user community is typically not a party in those contracts. They could not get back to the contractor for substandard work. Generally, community users could not even identify the contractor, they do not know what the contract is all about and site selection is often not done or only with a small group of people at the last minute. The potential users are often not involved in the choice of appropriate technologies and cannot make informed choices. [Barungi, 2003].

Own observations during my work in Western Uganda as advisor of NGO's active in WASH, (BvO) confirmed those findings of Barungi. Local NGO's in Uganda had often closer contact with user communities and were more focused on their development and empowerment and therefore served in general better the communities than private contractors did. But as a result of the privatization the NGOs are more and more left out in the implementation of WASH projects. In Uganda NGO's can register as private contractors and also apply for contracts. However the procedures involve generally seed money (sometimes 10% of the total bid) which they can't afford to pay to the government officials or politicians in charge of the selection of contractors, unless they hide this in their books.

Both examples show that the reform process, if not properly supported by monitoring structures, might contribute to the lack of transparency and could lead to the misuse of funds for private gain. It could also contribute to poor quality, while the poor remain unserved. This hampers the sustainability of WASH services which in the end challenges the MDG's.

Methods and tools to improve transparency

There are a range of good practices and tools developed, initiated or implemented by local NGOs which typically could be used for increased efficiency and transparency in the decentralisation process. While some of these tools and practices have been specially developed to prevent corruption, others were developed long before tackling corruption was on the development agenda and many of them are not unknown.

Community monitoring – Kerala, India

A range of tools to improve transparency was used in community-managed sanitation programme in several local districts in Kerala, southern India. An NGO called Socio Economic Unit Foundation (SEUF) working in partnership with local governments, carried out a household sanitation programme aiming to serve half the families below the poverty line in the targeted area with good quality household latrines and related hygiene and sanitation promotion. (Kurup, 1996.)

One of the first steps was to organise committees for each ward or village (300 to 600 households) whose members were representative of the different groups in their wards. It was found that if these multi-purpose water and sanitation committees represented only the most powerful, or only one of several political parties, then the benefits of the programme would easily be diverted. The way of forming committees followed agreed rules. All different groups in the neighbourhood were to be represented on a seven-person committee, including at least three women. The NGO staff and local government made spot checks to verify that the rules for committee formation were followed. In each ward they asked householders: What are the groups in this area (religious, political, service, caste groups and so on)? Who represents them on committee? Problems were referred to NGO and local government and in some cases committees had to be re-formed. Committee members were trained in programmes that involved making plans and practicing accounting and inventory procedures.

Most of the tools used to ensure transparency, governance and prevent corruption are fairly well-known. It is interesting to note that the programme described in this case study was developed before 1995, long before preventing corruption had a place on the recognized international agenda. What this may imply is that tools which enhance effectiveness also enhance transparency and prevent corruption. This also implies that the tools are known and have been applied often by local NGO's

Community mapping in Uganda
There are more examples of NGO's who developed tools which are very useful to improve good governance and equitable access. One of those NGO's is HEWASA (Health through Water and Sanitation), a local NGO in Western Uganda well known in the region for its sustainable and low-cost integrated water and environmental sanitation programmes. They developed over the years a series of tools and participatory methods which were also used in a pilot project instigated by the Directorate of Water in Uganda in collaboration with DFID.

As the earlier study by WaterAid (Barungi, 2003) showed, well established NGOs in WASH are better equipped to prepare communities for WASH service provision than private companies. The Software Pilot Programme (SPP) was aimed to improve the effectiveness of WASH services by involving local NGOs in preparing and supporting the communities to own and sustain their WASH facilities and services. A number of NGOs were selected to provide all the social infrastructure in the pilot while the private sector provided the hardware and were supposed only to start when communities had agreed site selection, had an O&M system in place, had contributed in cash and in kind and their representatives had signed an MoU with the contractor about each other's responsibilities and contributions.

HEWASA was the NGO selected to carry out the pilot in Western Uganda. An earlier project proposal served as the basis for the new pilot. The NGO started by providing detailed information about the project to the communities, conducting extensive transit walks and community mapping and soon it became clear that less accessible communities living uphill were left out in the earlier planning of the projects and some of the sites were planned near an already serviced area where politically influential people were living. The NGO together with the communities were constantly alert and had to re-negotiate with the local government and later on with the contractor to include poorer and less accessible villagers, and to make sure they got the services they had paid for. The community maps and the MoUs between the different parties proved to be important tools for the negotiations and to have quality services on the ground. [Oostrum, 2006 ; Baguma, 2005].

The evaluation report of the pilot programme in Uganda confirmed some of the above findings. Although not all the intended objectives were met in the pilot, the District Water Officer of Kabarole stated that beneficiaries placing greater demand for accountability and services from services providers was one of the unintended benefits. HEWASA itself felt that residents have increased their ability to demand for services through their supporting programme. Concerning the various MOUs forming the basis for the operational institutional framework of the SPP, other pilot Districts also confirmed the usefulness for the communities to demand for what was agreed and making the government more answerable to the community. [Nycander, 2005].

Water point mapping – experiences from WaterAid
WaterAid has used water point mapping (WPM) in their country programmes to monitor the effectiveness of their investments in service delivery, verify water supply and sanitation coverage, evaluate access and equity in rural and urban contexts and for strategic planning and advocacy at local and national government levels. In 2005, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and WaterAid embarked on a project to evaluate the use of WPM in WaterAid's country programmes in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Nepal, Pakistan and Tanzania (see http://www.odi.org.uk/wpp/Projects.html).

Using Global Positioning System (GPS) technologies to produce digital maps, WPM provides a way to visualise technical, socio-economic and managerial information, making complex information more accessible. Under several conditions, particularly the active participation of users and a system for updating are important, WPM can play a role in supporting decentralisation processes by helping to create downward accountabilities between district officials and water. [Welle, 2005].

Conclusions
Reforms in the WASH sector create opportunities for a more open and transparent service delivery, particularly they involve community ownership and management of facilities and pro-poor policies. Informing and involving community

members in community mapping, site selection and monitoring has proven to improve efficiency and sustainability.

There is a need to create monitoring structures at the community level. Water users have to be involved in site and technology selection, they need to know about contracts and contractors, warranty periods, materials used etc. Local NGOs have developed tools and mechanisms to support those users and community leaders in becoming informed and involved. The government of Uganda has taken the lead by starting a learning programme around NGO's supportive role in effective WASH service delivery in the decentralisation process. Donors and other National Governments should also find ways to support and help institutionalise the supporting role of NGOs.

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