

Providing Reliable Rural Water Services That Last

The Triple-S initiative 2009 to 2014

IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre

is leading a six-year multi-country learning initiative to improve water supply to the rural poor. Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S) seeks to move away from project-based, stand-alone implementation of water systems towards indefinitely sustainable rural water services delivered at scale. Working with national partners, Triple-S supports a paradigm shift at the operational level for decentralised service delivery.

The initiative will start in Uganda and Ghana, and later seek to expand to a further two countries by 2014. It aims to bring about a re-appraisal of how development assistance to the rural water supply sector is designed and planned.

Challenging business as usual for rural water services

That there is a crisis facing rural communities is not in doubt. After decades of investment, a billion of the world's poorest people still have unreliable and unsafe water - nine out of ten live in rural areas.

Between 1990 and 2006, coverage rates in 19 countries in sub-Saharan Africa increased by just 10%, whilst the absolute numbers of un-served have gone up by 37 million to 228 million. To make matters worse, many of those who supposedly count as having been 'served' actually have systems that are not working properly or have failed completely. Figures collated by the Rural Water Supply Network in 2007 indicate an average rate of 36% non-functionality for hand pumps across 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This level of failure represents a total investment of between \$1.2 and \$1.5 billion in the last 20 years.

Gaining an understanding of why this situation has come about can provide lessons as to what can be done to address meeting this most basic of human need.

Globally, approaches to rural water supply have gone through several major phases over the past few decades, starting with the UN's International Decade for Water Supply and Sanitation in the 1980s. This introduced the Village Level Operation and Maintenance approach, which was subsequently broadened to encompass community management with an emphasis on ownership, participation and decision-making.

Other management models have been developed and experimented with over the years, including public and private sector arrangements that typically provide support to community systems following construction. More encouraging experiences have emerged, but these are still limited in scale; examples include:

- National utilities supporting dispersed rural communities (Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal);
- Decentralised government support systems (Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Uganda);
- Delegated local private sector owner-operator

models (Viet Nam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Paraguay);

- Hand pump maintenance contracts (Burkina Faso, Angola).

But over the last two decades or so it is the community management model that has emerged as the leading paradigm for providing water to rural communities. Donors and large international NGOs have heavily supported this approach, often through parallel programmes that have by-passed national government structures.

The community management model has brought many benefits; however, in most countries around the world it has by and large failed to achieve the ultimate goal of reliable and sustainable water supply at scale. Following some twenty years of working with this approach, it has become clear that in reality most communities cannot manage all of the tasks that arise after the construction of the physical system, including more complex technical repairs, accounting, conflict resolution, addressing legal issues, and asset replacement.

Running parallel to these evolving approaches to rural water supply in the developing world is the process of the decentralisation of functions to lower, or intermediate, tiers of government (typically the district). Even when the legal mandate to deliver services is in place, progress towards decentralisation in its various forms - administrative, political and fiscal - is at best variable and in many instances leaves major gaps in capacity.

Despite compelling evidence that community capacity has its limits, questioning of the orthodoxy of the community management model has been rare until relatively recently. And yet, if we are to really deliver on the challenges of improving access and sustaining that access, there has to be a re-appraisal of the way in which rural communities are supported. We believe that under current approaches there are a number of fundamental barriers to achieving reliable and sustainable water services:

- Community management - and its variants such as Demand Responsive Approaches - are all based on interventions at the level of the community, which is inherently un-scalable;
- A continued focus on the construction of new water supply systems rather than support for sustainability, such as monitoring systems, training, back-up support and availability of spare parts and services;
- The isolation of the operational management models (or whichever type) from the broader enabling and political environment at intermediate and national levels;
- A persistent lack of coordination and harmonisation - often driven by donor and NGO agendas - leading to fragmented policies and implementing practices which result in inefficient use of resources and in duplication.

Policy points

- Sustaining safe and reliable water supplies has been problematic - globally a significant proportion, perhaps as many as 30%, of systems are not working at any one time.
- The predominant Community Management model has limitations and is inherently un-scalable; true life-cycle costs are poorly understood.
- Donors have driven the agenda in many countries, often resulting in a patchwork of uncoordinated programmes and projects.
- There is growing recognition that new approaches are required to provide long-term services at scale, rather than stand-alone projects at community level.

A Way Forward - From Projects to a Service Delivery Approach

We recognise that the delivery of sustainable rural water services, with access for all, is a complex problem. Providing a service relies on many different factors being in place and working together: 'soft' factors such as skills, behaviours, norms and practices; 'hard' factors such as human resources and suitable technologies; availability of finance for capital expenditure; and institutional factors that can provide for long-term support to community systems.

We refer to the **Service Delivery Approach (SDA)** as a concept which addresses all of these elements by putting the 'hard' and 'soft' systems in place. The SDA explicitly aims for full coverage within the logical unit for dealing with water services (that is the 'intermediate level' - a district, municipality, region or other depending on the context) by planning and working at **scale**. Secondly, the SDA works on the premise of **sustainability** of access; once access is achieved it should be maintained through a proper understanding of the full life-cycle costs and institutional support needs.

To shift from current projectised practices towards an SDA requires attention to issues of governance: who gets what service, when and at what tariff or level of subsidy? Of particular importance within governance are the issues of **coordination** and **harmonisation**. Recent advances towards aid effectiveness at national level must be reflected at intermediate levels, so that agencies move towards a more coherent and coordinated way of working together.

The difference for sustainability between most project approaches and the SDA can be illustrated diagrammatically as in figure 1 below. The top half shows the current reality for millions of rural people - following construction of a new system users have access to a given level of service. The new system initially functions well, but due to lack of support quickly starts to deteriorate until it collapses completely, to be revived at some indeterminate time by the construction of a new system, typically by another agency.

Figure 1: Water service delivery from the user perspective: repeated disappointment, or a service delivery approach?

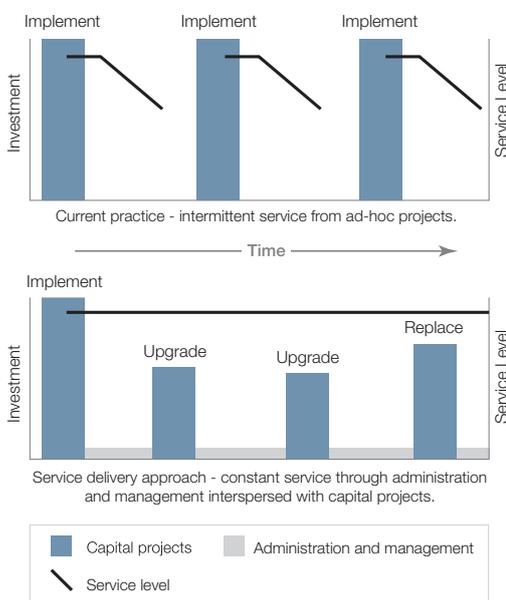
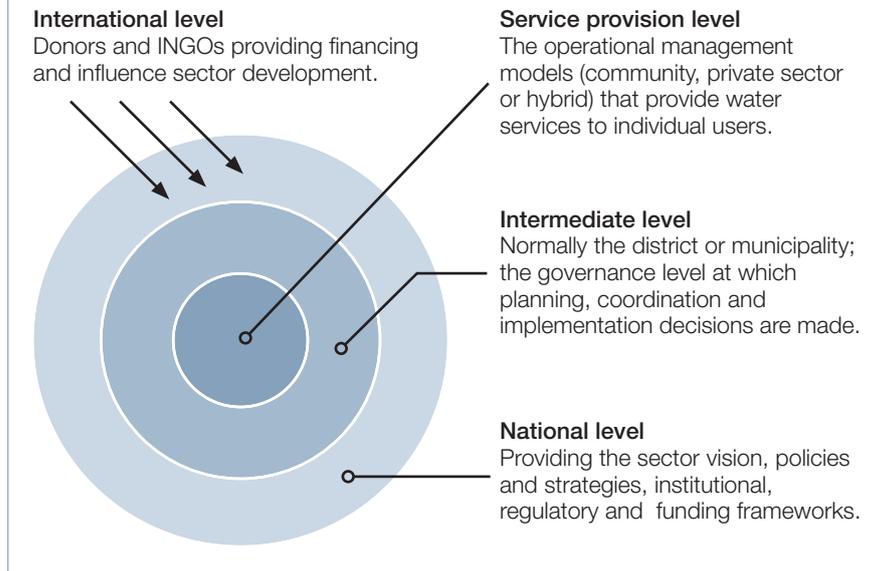


Figure 2: Roles and responsibilities within a Service Delivery Approach



The bottom half of the diagram shows the SDA where once a water system has been constructed, the service is maintained indefinitely through a planned process of low intensity administration and management with occasional capital projects for upgrading and eventual replacement.

Unfortunately there are many organisations - donor governments, international NGOs and smaller 'charity' or philanthropic organisations - which still adhere to the project-based way of working. Encouragingly, however, there are also now signs of a growing recognition of the need to adopt new approaches to the rural water sector. A number of donor agencies, including the World Bank and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and international sector agencies and NGOs such as the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) and WaterAid are starting to look beyond the community management model and examine what may work better. We feel that it is an opportune moment to carry out in-depth learning and research such as Triple-S to help inform these broader debates and galvanise sector opinion towards a shift in paradigm.

The Service Delivery Approach is a concept, a vision, for improving rural water services and to bring about greater sustainability. In practice, this approach must be researched, developed and made relevant to the realities of the specific country and service area, including the type of rural population, levels of social and economic development and relative strength of the public and private sector amongst other factors. We consider that decentralisation is a pre-requisite for applying such an SDA. Harmonisation is also necessary to the point where different agencies agree to work with commonly agreed approaches, which is not always easy to achieve as individual organisations have vested interests and agendas to support. In short, adopting an SDA calls for behaviour change by major stakeholders in rural water supply; in particular by implementing agencies, governments, donors and local and international NGOs. It also calls for organisational and individual flexibility and commitment.

Description of Activities in Uganda and Ghana

What will Triple-S do in Uganda and Ghana?

Triple-S will support a process of change aimed at strengthening existing service delivery models. We will carry out learning activities in Ghana and Uganda, two countries where there is strong interest in the problems associated with sustainability and where there are significant differences in both the extent of sector development and decentralisation.

In both countries the scope of Triple-S includes both dispersed rural populations and small towns or rural growth centres. We will also include both piped networks and point source technologies (hand pumps) in our research.

Our national partners are the Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) and the Directorate of Water Development (DWD) in Ghana and Uganda respectively. We will focus on improving sustainable SDMs for rural water services and strengthening harmonisation and coordination within the sector more generally. The focus of Triple-S learning is the Service Delivery Model - the governance at intermediate level and the service provision level - but we will also work at the national and international level to promote and encourage change in thinking and approaches. The main types of activities that Triple-S will carry out at different levels of intervention are summarised in the box 2 to the right.

Box 1. Comparing The Project Approach With The Service Delivery Approach

The Service Delivery Approach

- Plans for investment and construction of services on the basis of need for the entire district, as well as investing in support services and frameworks
- Considers financing requirements for full life-cycle costs from the outset to ensure asset replacement
- Operates within an unlimited time frame for continuous service delivery and accepts that individual systems will require different management and technical interventions at different times
- Always works to achieve full coverage within defined geographic/administrative boundaries
- Seeks to coordinate all actors to work collectively under an overarching strategy, including commonly agreed model(s) for different types of services
- Works with most appropriate management model for service delivery
- Aims to maximise efficiency of available resources

The project approach

- Works at the level of the 'system' or 'community'
- often executed by temporary project structures or staff
- Operates within a finite time frame linked to the project cycle
- Limited financial planning for initial investment and only small-scale repairs and replacement of parts
- Tends to focus on system construction, with limited attention to post-construction support
- Works within defined geographic boundaries but may not seek full coverage
- Different actors work bilaterally and often fund parallel projects, with different policies and intervention criteria
- Overlap and/or lack of coordination is common - resource efficiencies are rarely maximised

Box 2. Triple-s activities at different intervention levels

Service provision level

- Developing and testing improved management models within SDMs
- Research into life-cycle costs and benefits
- Measuring impact of improved SDMs on service delivery

Intermediate level

- Developing and testing improved SDM in pilot districts or regions
- Action research using learning platforms - encouraging behaviour changes
- Training and capacity building
- Advocacy and communications - district level stakeholders
- Measuring impact of improved SDMs at intermediate level

National level

- Introduction and dissemination of principles for Service Delivery Approaches based on global best practice
- Supporting sector learning and capacity development
- Establishing learning alliance platforms to guide action research at intermediate levels
- Training and capacity building
- Advocacy and communications - national level stakeholders
- Research and testing financing mechanisms
- Supporting adoption of the SDA to be applied at national level

International level

- Multi country global research study into current examples of Service Delivery Models
- Development of a principles framework for service delivery approaches
- Knowledge management and dissemination of learning from Ghana and Uganda
- Advocacy and communications - international level stakeholders
- Scoping for potential scaling up of improved SDMs to other countries

Triple-S Outcomes Framework

Outcomes framework

Triple-S is driven by outcomes which will be used to develop more specific strategies at different levels; for example at country level and for international advocacy. This management approach will allow for maximum flexibility at country level and will enable the initiative to respond to strategic opportunities when and where they arise. Outcomes will not only guide and inspire country and international level work, but will also provide a framework for impact evaluation and learning to improve the service delivery approach.

The emphasis of Triple-S is on learning and on strengthening systems and processes with the aim of playing a catalytic role in bringing together sector stakeholders to address issues of sustainability and harmonisation. The learning from the two pilot countries in Ghana and Uganda will be used to advocate for changes in sector policy and practice at the global level. Over the lifetime of the initiative we expect to see a number of concrete outcomes, as outlined in the box 3. Ultimately, however, Triple-S aims to improve the sustainability of water for users - as measured by the reliability, quality and quantity of their service. The outcomes that we are seeking to achieve range across all levels of intervention from the service provider to international policies, but again the focus of our impacts will be at the intermediate and service provision levels.

Box 3. Triple-S outcomes framework

Service provision level

- Improved sustainability of water services
- More profitable service providers with better access to capital
- Improved confidence of users and commensurate increase in payment for services
- Improved customer accountability
- Better public access to information on performance of service providers

Intermediate level

- Improved capacity to adapt, modify and continue managing context-specific SDMs
- Improved control over investment planning and coordination
- Adoption of commonly agreed levels of services and management models
- Improved skill-base for management of SDMs
- Greater efficiencies and cost-savings
- Improved monitoring systems and back up services
- Better regulation of service providers

National level

- Adoption of SDA and application in new districts
- Improved sector capacity to adapt, modify and continue managing SDA approach
- Nationally-led sector policy with better alignment of donor support
- Improved sector skill base - educational and vocational
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities
- Transparent policies for subsidies to ensure equitable access
- Funding policies account for full life-cycle costs of the SDA
- Stimulation of greater private sector involvement in service delivery
- Improved regulation and accountability frameworks in place

International level

- Greater awareness of and support for the SDA among global sector agencies, donors and research institutions
- Increased balance in funding support for non-infrastructure investments to support SDA
- Understanding and acceptance of need to support full life-cycle costs
- Improved harmonisation between donors and better alignment behind national sector policies
- Uptake of SDA approaches in more countries globally (2 new countries by 2014)

Triple-S Management Approaches

An emergent approach to learning and capacity building

We consider that the approaches to building capacity and promoting change in the rural water sector are as important as the content. Conventional methods of technical assistance have limits in terms of ownership and leaving a real legacy; that is they tend not to promote meaningful changes in perspective and behaviours which are ultimately needed to ensure that benefits can be sustained once a project is over. Although Triple-S would like to influence international thinking about service delivery, its main aim is to support processes of change toward increase sustainability and improved harmonisation in countries. In the end everything we will do at international level should also lead to more reliable services in countries. Doing this well involves respecting ongoing sector development in countries and working with existing platforms and initiatives. In short, respecting context.

Context in this sense is more than only the policy and institutional context needed to move towards a service delivery approach. Context is also the capacity of a sector in a country to learn, analyse and adapt policy and practice itself - we call this the **carrying capacity** of a sector. Triple-S would like to contribute to this more systemic change. Its legacy should go beyond its project resource and duration and together with sector stakeholders it will develop strategies to achieve this. To bring about these types of changes and impacts we will adopt a number of value-based approaches to guide our work, both within Ghana and Uganda, but also internationally - these are set out in figure 3 below.

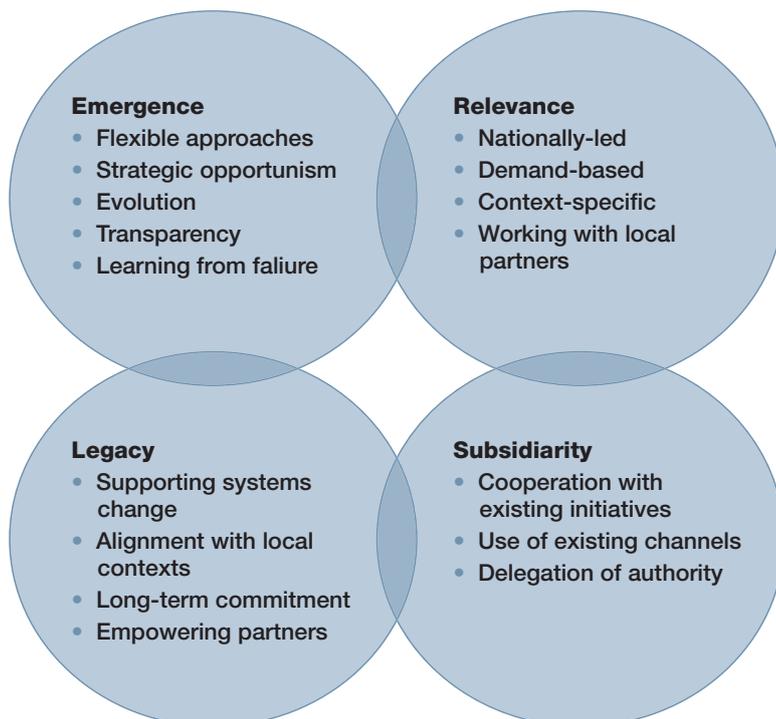
Current status of Triple-S

The Triple-S initiative started at the beginning of 2009 and is in the inception phase. The team has recently completed scoping studies in Ghana and Uganda and secured agreement from government ministries to carry out the learning and piloting in these two countries. From October 2009 to March 2010 the team will also carry out a series of study and scoping exercises in a range of other countries including Benin, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Honduras, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Nepal, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the USA. The outputs from these country case studies will be used to inform the development of a principles framework to guide the more intensive learning in Ghana and Uganda and possibly other countries depending on interest and demand. The case studies will be presented at an international symposium to be held in April 2010 in Kampala.

For further information on the Triple-S initiative see <http://www.irc.nl/page/45530> or contact Ton Schouten of IRC (schouten@irc.nl) or Harold Lockwood of Aguaconsult (h.lockwood@aguaconsult.co.uk).

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Figure 3: Guiding values for Triple-S' approach to learning and capacity



Triple-S Summary

- Action research and learning will focus on the intermediate and service provision levels; the focus of the initiative will be nationally led and defined;
- Triple-S will use an outcomes framework to guide all aspects of learning, impact assessment and management;
- Triple-S aims to improve carrying capacity by taking a systemic approach and to leave a legacy across the entire sector in Ghana and Uganda;
- Triple-S aims to play a catalytic role in bringing together sector stakeholders to address sustainability and harmonisation;
- Triple-S will not create new or parallel structures, but instead it will always seek to work within existing sector platforms and organisations.