



CASE STUDY

Romania: Lessons from Water Safety Plans for small-scale water supply systems as developed by schools

In rural areas of Romania, 70% of the population depend on small scale water supply systems, which are often exposed to human and animal manure. To combat this, the project Safe Sanitation, Health and Dignity was initiated. This project shows that programmes can connect local communities, regional and national authorities, and contribute to the realisation of the allocated targets of the protocol of water and health.

Background

Water related problems in Romania are not so much about the shortage of water but rather that of water quality. Having access to an improved water source does not mean that someone actually has access to safe water. The problem safe water is significant for rural areas. Although, Romania has adopted the European Union drinking water legislation, which does not cover the private wells in the villages. Thus, 70% of the population in rural areas that depend on small scale water supply systems notably wells, which are often exposed to human and animal excreta. Coupled to this, is the problem of low awareness amongst the population and authorities on the connection that prevails between man-made pollution of water sources, water quality and related diseases in rural areas. This case study will formulate the results of the WSPs carried out by 8 Romanian schools to get an insight into the water situation in rural Romania as perceived by the schools. The case study will give insight into the results of making use of childrens potential and strengths and into which results could best support the local, regional and national planning of policies on water and sanitation for rural areas. The presented results, data and information are based on the reports, provided by the participating schools. The selection of the target area was based on that of the ongoing WECF project "Safe Water, Sanitation, Health and Dignity." The villages were selected based on there being a school with teachers who were interested in participating in the project.

Actions taken

A two years project entitled "Safe Sanitation, Health and Dignity" (SSHD) was initiated by WECF (international NGO) and its partners in villages in four counties (provinces) of Romania; Giurgiu, Ialomita, Mehedinti and Teleorman county. The project was financed with the support of foundation Essemble, France and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed in raising awareness on water source protection, safe sanitation, organic waste management, hygiene and health.

To address this, WECF introduced an educational package (WSP toolkit) for schools as a means to promote community based Water Safe Plans (WSP) for local small scale water supply systems like dug wells, public taps etc. The project's implementation embodied WSP activities for the small scale water supply system that included 8 schools. The WSP manual for teachers and other stakeholders were distributed in order to provide background information of WSP, the properties of drinking water, and sources of pollution and related health risks.

The toolkit included questionnaires, which were intended to obtain information from the population, local health authorities and authorities responsible for water sources. In addition to the questionnaires, WECF conducted water tests, and trained teachers. Pupils and staff of eight rural Romanian schools investigated the risks and the quality of their local drinking water, identified the sources of pollution and formulated plans of actions in order to improve the water quality and to minimize the health risks caused by contaminated drinking water.

Most schools identified together with the pupils the tasks and activities, which wells should be monitored on seasonal fluctuation of the nitrate concentrations and which wells should be tested only once. The children were asked to take the samples and the water tests were carried out in the classes. Often the teachers felt that it was more appropriate for them to interview the local health and other authorities, whilst pupils interviewed local people. In summary, all the involved schools and stakeholders appreciated the practical activities and the flexibility of the programme. Approximately 500 water samples were tested for nitrate. Results and experiences other simple tests like pH, observing the turbidity or colour of the samples, were also carried out.

Outcomes

The project found that there is low awareness existing amongst the rural population on the causes of water pollution. The pupils of participatory schools were very motivated and enthusiastic about the activities, because they experienced it practically, and also because it was relevant to their local environment. The result of WSP activities depended substantially on the background motivation and availability of teachers, and the local NGO. WSP approach with the involvement of schools contributed in raising awareness, capacity building and mobilizing of the community. The main findings of the WSPs developed in the target villages are that most water sources exceeded the EU nitrate limit of 50 mg/l (locally the nitrate concentration in water exceeded up to 9 times the EU limit). Even drinking waters in deeper aquifers are endangered by nitrate pollution at local level due to unsealed pit latrines, keeping livestock without a safe management of excreta, lack of safe waste disposals and uncovered wells. Finally, the communities do not have a budget for maintenance of public taps- the users of public taps pay approximately 0.40 Euro (2 RON) per cubic meter water, despite it being unsafe. The approach to develop WSP involving schools promises to be a good tool for Mobilization of youth and community for taking action at local and regional level, capacity building of civil society, cooperation of civil society with local authorities and raising awareness.

Lessons Learned

In most of the target villages the findings of the WSP-teams showed nitrate contamination. A first step in solving the causes should be awareness raising on all levels, and with public

participation and support, followed by concrete water protection measures.

Safe drinking water supply with community involvement should be ensured in all rural areas of Romania, a section of the society which had until now been neglected.

The project showed that WSP programmes could connect the local communities, regional and national authorities, and contribute to the realization of the allocated targets of the protocol of water and health, and set objectives for rural areas.

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