



CASE STUDY

Zambia: Water Watch Groups

Following the reorganisation of the water sector in Zambia, an action that decentralised service provision, it became crucial to monitor the service providers and the consumer experience. Action was taken to set up Water Watch Groups that have as their responsibility to raise public awareness about rights and obligations. This case study, concludes that consumer involvement is the key to the success of water sector reforms.

Background

Consumer representation and protection in a commercialised monopolistic environment becomes a critical requirement particularly in a situation where the services involved are basic human needs of water and sanitation.

Following the reorganisation of the Water Supply and Sanitation Sector in Zambia, where service provision has been decentralised to the local level and commercialised, it became imperative to keep a watchful eye on the service providers. The National Water Supply and Sanitation Council (NWASCO), the regulator, has been established with mandate under the Water Supply and Sanitation Act of 1997, to ensure improved service delivery and sustainability, and safeguarding consumers from exploitation.

NWASCO has a very lean structure with offices in Lusaka only. However, in wanting to ensure that NWASCO is present on the ground for first hand information and addressing consumer complaints, Water Watch Groups (WWGs) have been established, comprising customers from the service areas. WWGs were established in order to give the water consumers a voice, protect their interests, follow up their complaints, and improve communication between consumers and providers. The WWGs have delegated power and duties from NWASCO. Membership to the WWG is voluntary and does not attract any remuneration for the services provided. NWASCO, however, endeavours to provide WWGs with stationery, transport, and other necessary logistics to enhance their smooth operations.

Actions taken

The WWGs perform the following functions:

1. To represent the interests of consumers in the WSS Sector
2. Follow up unresolved consumer complaints
3. Improve communication between consumers and providers
4. Arbitrate in conflicts between consumers and service providers
5. Sensitise consumers (i.e. the poor) on their rights and obligations
6. Educate consumers on the role and functions of NWASCO
7. Collect information on performance of providers

8. Inform NWASCO on effectiveness of the regulations and propose possible adjustments
9. Create public awareness of WWGs existence – through public meetings, seminars, workshops, exhibitions

The WWG in carrying out consumer sensitisation, mainly use the media, popular theatre in Peri-urban areas, participate in workshops and debates, and open air meetings. Consumers are sensitised on their rights and obligations; on the proper use of water and timely payment of bills as well as guarding against vandalism through the holding of public meetings. The media is used as a forum for exchange of information with WSS customers. Promotional materials are also distributed and used as a source of information.

Activities of WWGs include:

- Holding public meetings with consumers
- Holding meetings to review/validate complaints
- Engaging in outreach and publicity programs via sensitization meetings, TV and Radio broadcasts, media fora
- Submitting periodic reports to NWASCO including feedback from consumers
- Participation at workshops, conferences etc.
- Recruitment, training & orientation of new WWGs The Lusaka WWG was the first to be set up as a pilot project in 2002.

The demand for WWGs has increased with more people getting to appreciate the value addition and impact on the ground. Consequently, in towns where there are no WWGs, people are requesting to be recognised as WWGs. However, due to the demand of monitoring as well as the cost involved, NWASCO has been cautious with the rate of establishing WWGs. Establishment of WWGs has therefore been phased. So far 8 WWGs have been established across the country. WWGs are now present in Kitwe, Chingola, Ndola, Luanshya, Mufulira, Kasama Lusaka and Mpika. It is NWASCO's plan to eventually have a WWG in each major town and four additional WWGs are going to be established every year.

Due to the very high impact on consumer participation and utility response to complaints the energy and telecommunication regulators have come forward to join hands with NWASCO and eight of the WWG have been transformed into consumer watch groups to address energy and telecommunication issues as well.

Outcomes

The basis for measuring the performance of providers is the service level guarantee document, which the providers sign with NWASCO and issue out to customers as the minimum quality of service to be provided. The WWGs look out for the following:

- Drinking Water Quality: The aesthetics of the water provided such as appearance and smell
- Hours of supply: The time of continuous water supply at connections (household, communal points)
- Billing for Services: The period of the bill and time for payment
- Client Contacts: The response time to customer complaints, requests for meters, new connections, and access to offices of the provider
- Interruption of Water Supply and Blockage of Sewer: Notification of consumers of both

planned and abrupt water supply interruptions and measures to correct the situation.
Quick amelioration of sewer blockage

- Pressure in the Network for Water Supply: Sufficient pressure in order to meet the customer demands
- Unjustified Disconnections: Entitlement to compensation for unjustified disconnections by the provider
- Sewer Flooding: Ensure that there are as few households as possible flooded with sewer during a year

WWGs' Achievements:

- WWGs received and handled more than 50,000 complaints between 2004/2005 as a result of increased public awareness.
- Providers have started resolving customer complaints expeditiously.
- There is a clear change of attitude by the CUs towards customer.
- Consumer knowledge on WSS issues has improved - empowerment on rights and obligations.
- Improved behavioural change by consumers – (e.g. willingness to pay, reduction of vandalism).
- The Lusaka WWG facilitated the setting up of a Lusaka Water and Sewerage Company Office in Chunga after cases of vandalism and non-payment of bills in the area. This was attributed to the lack of presence of the provider in the area.
- The Kasama WWG quelled down planned protests in Kasama over lack of public consultations before implementing a new tariff.
- WWGs are increasingly being recognised both locally and internationally, hence their participation in local and international fora. The Lusaka WWG participated in the Tokyo Water Action Contest after being selected from over 870 entrants.

Lessons Learned

Consumer involvement is key to the success of water sector reforms. WWG members must be committed and operate under clear objectives. It was important to keep out politicians to avoid the WWG to be used as political instrument.

WWG activities have to be adequately funded with strict fiscal controls.

The volunteer concept has proven to be an excellent tool for reinforcing consumer protection. However, a major challenge has been to correct the impression that the WWGs are not employment but voluntary work for the good of all water users.

It is very important to integrate health messages into WSS programs in order to have a holistic approach.

It is essential to pay specific attention to low-income urban areas where the quality of service provision usually lags behind.

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Local Authorities

Community-based water supply and management organisations

Communities of Practice

Supply Efficiency

Facilitation and Mediation

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