

INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY IN REGULATING WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION SERVICES IN LOW-INCOME AREAS

BACKGROUND

Zambia's water sector underwent reforms from 1993 to 2000, during which time government adopted a water policy, and set up the necessary legal and institutional framework for providing water supply and sanitation efficiently and on sustainable basis. The management of water supply and sanitation services in urban areas was consequently commercialised under the reforms with the view of improving service delivery. The principles in the Water Policy included the separation of the management of water supply and sanitation provision, water resource management and regulatory functions.

The government in passing the Water Supply and Sanitation Act number 28 of 1997, established a regulator - National Water Supply and Sanitation Council (NWASCO) to monitor the performance of the water utilities to ensure efficiency and sustainability of services, thereby protecting the consumers. NWASCO which started operations in 2000, is mandated to safeguard interests of the consumers and is required to set guidelines for water service providers on handling customers.

In the past, water consumers had little or no recourse when they received poor services from water supply service providers. This was mainly as a result of the monopolistic nature of water service provision in Zambia. The water service providers at the time took advantage of the absence of a regulator and exploited consumers without giving much thought to the quality of service they were providing.

During this period, water supply and sanitation services were being provided by Local Authorities, the Department of Water Affairs and two commercialised utilities. Problems such as delivery of wrong water bills, erratic water supply, poor water quality and unjustifiable water supply disconnections were the normal trend. Sometimes water supply would be cut for as long as ten days or longer without any notice or apology.

The most affected communities were the urban poor i.e those residing in high density townships, peri-urban areas and unplanned settlements. Since its establishment, NWASCO has been making efforts to protect consumers by addressing some of these issues.

ESTABLISHMENT OF CONSUMER WATER WATCH GROUPS

As a way of extending its regulatory role to the direct benefit of the consumer in low-income areas, NWASCO has had to establish voluntary groups known as consumer Water Watch Groups (WWGs) which are set-up in areas serviced by water utilities. These groups comprise male and female members of the community from different consumers group who have volunteered their services to ensure water consumer rights are protected and consumer obligations explained.

The WWGs' main objective is to represent consumer interests in the serviced areas and provide information to consumers on service delivery. They have delegated powers from NWASCO to monitor the performance of the water utilities and follow-up outstanding complaints from consumers regarding the quality of service being provided and on any other related issues. When the Water Watch Group's intervention fails, they call upon NWASCO to take up the complaint with the utility. At this stage, the utility risks being penalised and the matter being publicised by the regulator.

So far, three Water Watch Groups have been set up in Zambia. The first one to be established was the **Lusaka Water Watch Group (LWWG)** two years ago, followed by the **Kitwe Water Watch Group (KWWG)** and **Chingola Water Watch Group (CWWG)** respectively - these are only a few months old.

ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE WATER WATCH GROUPS (WWGS)

The functions of the WWGs include collecting information on performance of provider, particularly on service level and submitting it to NWASCO management as may be specified, informing NWASCO on the effectiveness of the regulations and guidelines that have been issued and advising on adjustments to the same.

Other functions include receiving and validating acceptable outstanding complaints from consumers before presenting them to water utilities for resolution, sensitising consumers through provision of information on water conservation, their obligation towards timely payment of bills and guarding against vandalism as well as educating them on the role and functions of NWASCO.

WWG activities include sensitisation meetings with the community in various areas such as Matero, Chunga, Garden and Chilenje townships. Depending on the demand, they occasionally hold public hearings at which consumers submit their complaints individually or through their community leaders.

Sometimes the WWG members are accompanied by a representative from the water utility company who explains issues to the consumers on behalf of the company. Theatre drama groups are also used to disseminate messages to the community in nyanja and bemba - the most widely spoken local languages. The WWGs also advise on adjustments to regulations and guidelines and educate consumers on the role and functions of NWASCO.

These voluntary groups particularly the Lusaka Water Watch Group (LWWG) which has been in existence since 2002, have had newspaper, radio and television interviews to disseminate information to the public. They have also participated at workshops and discussion fora. For example Lusaka Water and Sewerage Company the utility servicing the LWWG's area of operation has invited them on occasion to participate in workshops affecting the utility such as the possibility of Private Sector Participation in water provision for Lusaka. NWASCO has also invited them workshops concerning water service provision and the community. The regulator will soon be running a series of

public awareness television and radio series in which members of the water watch groups will be invited to participate as has been the case in the past.

The WWG members also participate in conferences and exhibitions with the view of creating public awareness on the existence of the Water Watch Groups. Since the WWGs are a lean group, they usually work in conjunction with Resident Development Committees and other local grassroots leaders in the various peri-urban and low income areas who normally pass on the community's water and sanitation complaints, particularly during public meetings.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF WWGS

Each WWG runs independently and appoints a coordinator who is the main contact person with the regulator.

The WWGs are expected to meet at least twice a month to plan their work and handle complaints. However, they do not strictly stick to this schedule and meet more whenever necessary to tackle urgent complaints that come up. Individual members are usually assigned responsibilities such as complaints to follow up between the meetings. The WWGs submit a workplan every quarter, a monthly report and a quarterly report to the NWASCO. During their meetings, members take turns in writing the minutes.

NWASCO's Public Relations Officer oversees the activities of the WWGs and occasionally meets with the members to follow up on any issues that may arise.

RECRUITMENT PROCEDURE

The procedure for recruiting Water Watch Group members is as indicated below;

- NWASCO advertises in the public print media calling for volunteers who are able perform the role
- Candidates are short listed and invited for interviews which are conducted by not less than two officials from NWASCO. The applicants are screened to ensure they are customers of the water utility in the particular service area, willing to do voluntary work and that they have a clean police record
- Seven or eight candidates are selected and appointment letters sent to the successful candidates. Identity cards are then issued to the members
- Training is held for the new members giving an overview of the water sector, the role of the regulator, the service standards expected of the utilities and the role of WWG members
- Each member is made to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the regulator binding him/her to follow stipulated guidelines. This contract is valid for one year and is renewal, depending on the performance of the individual member

- The members are introduced to management and staff of the Water utility in whose service area they will be operating in and a liason person (from the utility) is introduced to them
- Interviews are arranged with the media to introduce the new members to the public
- WWG are then eligible to hold meetings

LUSAKA WATER WATCH GROUP

This Group which was a pilot scheme has had numerous sensitization meetings in different residential areas of Lusaka at which they have received complaints and shared information with the residents regarding the role of NWASCO as well as the rights and obligations of consumers.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Initial results on the performance of LWWG have been very positive and good feedback from the public has been received. Some of the results include the following;

- Caused Lusaka Water and Sewerage Company (LWSC) offices to attend to complaints forwarded by LWWG
- Complaints brought to the company are now receiving attention within the stipulated time
- Increased awareness in all the departments of the water company on the need to improve quality of service to the satisfaction of the customer and; increased consumer awareness. NWASCO is now able to get feedback from the consumers on the sector strategies and policies being implemented and how they affect the consumers.
- The regulator has decided to include Water Watch Groups in the Tariff Adjustment Process as a result of the feedback it has received from consumers through the WWGs
- Knowledge about water issues on the part of consumers has increased and water companies have been forced to sit up and improve the quality of service
- The LWWG has attended to over 40 individual complaints and issues and several other group complaints regarding service provision. NWASCO has only been requested to intervene on three occasions
- The LWWG also won itself a position and participated in the Tokyo World Water Forum held in March 2003. This was after succeeding in the first round of the Water Action Contest, which was contested by eight hundred seventy (870) organisations around the world. LWWG was among the 150 finalists selected for sponsorship to the Forum. As a result of their participation, LWWG which had

taken part in an exhibition has been able to start networking and share experiences with similar organizations in other parts of the world.

ESTABLISHMENT OF MORE WATER WATCH GROUPS

In the second quarter of 2004, two WWGs were established on the Copperbelt and they are set-up as follows; **Kitwe Water Watch Group (KWWG)** covers areas serviced by Nkana Water and Sewerage Company and AHC-MMS while **Chingola Water Watch Group (CWWG)** covers those serviced by Mulonga Water and Sewerage Company and AHC-MMS. They each have an average of seven members and both groups are already operational. The impact of the introduction of KWWG and CWWG in these service areas is already being felt by the consumers as more attention is being paid to consumer complaints by the utilities and public awareness had been created.

As a result of the achievements of the Lusaka Water Watch Group and the recent establishment of these two WWGs on the Copperbelt, there have been numerous calls from members of the public in other parts of the country for NWASCO to introduce this concept in their respective areas.

In response to this growing demand for more WWGs, NWASCO has had to put on schedule the establishment of four more such groups. New WWGs are expected to be established in the following provinces by the end of the year;

- Southern - Livingstone town (01)
- Copperbelt – Ndola (01) and Luanshya (01)
- Northern – Kasama (01).

FUNDING

So far, NWASCO has managed to secure funding from the Development Cooperation Ireland (DCI) for the establishment of the Kasama Water Group (KAWWG) following a proposal it made to the donor agency. The proposal for funding was also circulated to a number of other donor agencies and the regulator is awaiting feedback in the hope that this noble concept of encouraging community participation in water governance issues will be extended to the rest of the country.

During the operations of the WWGs, NWASCO's support is provided in form of limited stationery, publicity material such as brochures, T-shirts and banners, participation at workshops as well as facilitating their meetings and outreach programmes, all of which comes to about USD2,000 per quarter. The regulator also gives the members some money for their transport to and from meetings as an incentive.

CHALLENGES

The quality of service by water companies and knowledge about water issues on the part of consumers is obviously being enhanced and cases of vandalism of infrastructure has dwindled as members of the public are coming forth to report offenders.

However, the level of understanding still has to be raised so that only bankable complaints are brought to the water companies' attention. There is also need to create more awareness among water utilities' staff so that the consumer's voice can be heard even more.

Unfortunately, financial constraints have made it difficult for the regulator to introduce similar groups to other needy parts of the country.

Our challenge is therefore, is to sources funds and ensure we build capacity in these community groups, continue to bridge the gaps between the consumer, the service provider and the regulator for the best interests of all.

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