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# TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Transforming the way community water management is viewed and conducted in northern Kenya

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**For several years, Oxfam has been working with communities in Turkana and Wajir, Kenya, building the capacity of local water committees to better manage their water supplies and hold higher authorities to account. Instead of short incentive-based workshops with little follow-up, Oxfam has taken a longer-term approach by developing a toolkit to provide regular training and support. Having demonstrated considerable success from this approach, Oxfam has advocated for other organizations to adopt a shared method of water committee training.**

## **1. What change(s) was this programme intending to influence through its leverage strategy?**

Across Turkana and Wajir, Kenya, Oxfam has been working with water committees at a community level to help them better manage their water supplies and develop systems that demand a high level of accountability and transparency within communities. Oxfam led The Drought Management Initiative which was a 3 year EC funded consortium project in Turkana focused on improving drought preparedness and mitigating against drought through improving water access.

The DMI takes a longer-term approach to capacity building by developing a toolkit to be used with staff to provide regular training and support. This is very different to the traditional capacity building model that focuses on running short incentive-based workshops with little follow-up support.

Given that there has been no standardization of approaches to the issue of working with water committees in northern Kenya, the team has advocated for others to adopt a shared methodology based on Oxfam's experience. In so doing, the programme aims to improve the consistency, co-ordination and quality of approaches to rural water supplies across all agencies intervening in this area. The focus is very much on longer-term sustainability – developing more effective ways of working with communities to build their capacity to manage their own water supplies, and to hold others accountable for ensuring supplies are well managed.

Our ultimate aim is for agencies to help committees build their capacity to hold higher authorities to account in their water provision. This, however, is something that will take time given the very basic levels of development in Turkana and Wajir.

## **2. What, if anything, was new, innovative or different about the way this programme attempted to bring about change?**

While the idea of taking a much longer-term approach to capacity building was based on common sense, it was also a completely new one to those engaging with water management structures. *Not* paying for training, or holding big workshops, went against the norm, so was quite an innovative approach when it came to working with committees to help them better manage their water sources.

Prior to Oxfam's initiative, there was also no single agreed method for building the capacity of committees that had buy-in from all the major actors involved in the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector. Seeking to harmonize approaches and develop ways of working with communities, the project has worked to improve the quality of work across the board. This is a very new approach to water committee management and training.

## **3. Recognizing that leverage can be achieved in different ways, how did the programme leverage change?**

Aiming to create a shared approach to water committee training, Oxfam developed a capacity building model that was refined over a period of

several years in Turkana and Wajir. After learning from this, and having demonstrated considerable success, the team decided to begin advocating for others to start adopting this model. This was done in a number of ways.

At the local level, we took our consortium partners to the field to visit the programme to demonstrate the benefits of this way of working. At a national level, however, the focus was more on explaining the logic behind why an incremental approach tailored to individual villages, with follow-up and reflection built in before moving on to the next step, made more sense than intensive workshops away from the village. For everyone involved, it was very clear that the workshop model was not working so persuading people that a more considered, longer-term approach was more appropriate was a fairly easy sell.

Working through the Drought Management Initiative, Oxfam first proposed the idea of creating a shared manual that all actors could use with common guidance on water committee training. While the manual would not have been conceived without Oxfam, the key was convincing the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and UNICEF to get involved. Because they had access to funds, and also good connections with the government and other agencies, they were able to drive the project forward in a way we would not have been able to on our own. A good working relationship between the Oxfam lead and technical staff at FAO helped facilitate this.

#### **4. What worked well and not so well with efforts to leverage change through this approach?**

What was really important for Oxfam in pushing for the creation of a common set of approaches for community water supply management was getting the right partners on board. In this case, having FAO's support and buy-in allowed us to ensure the initiative took off by leveraging their influence with the government and other organizations. Their funding also made production of the manual financially viable. Once the project was underway, Oxfam was a key part of the steering committee with UNICEF and FAO representatives, but was able to take more of a back seat role as FAO drove the work forward, with Oxfam helping influence the direction without having to dictate the pace. This slowed down the whole process and, in the short term, even affected our ability to report this as a project output under our EC Drought Management Programme, but in the longer term it was both time and cost effective and more strategically important in terms of buy-in.

At a programme level, developing a clear set of methodologies that could be used and adapted with communities also worked well. We found that facilitating meetings between committees and District Water Officers has been very successful in opening up dialogue. Having the right staff on board, who believe in the concept of training without financial incentives has also been crucial to win over sceptical community members.

Conversely there have also been challenges internally to win over those for whom this new approach was not so attractive. For example, it can be

much easier to do a job when you are distributing goods a community wants, or inviting people to an all-expenses paid workshop, than simply investing time training. Some projects involved reimbursing people for their participation, creating tension at times with our WASH projects that were operating in a different manner, as staff were also being challenged by community expectations. At the community level, not everyone wants to see change if they profit from the status quo; so it can be a challenge if there are individuals set on preventing the model from working. For example, poor management of resources or the regular breakdown of facilities can result in more money for Water Officers being called to fix things.

Attaining our goal of reaching consensus and having a formal manual in place for all actors to use in their work on water committees is clearly a great achievement. However, there are still some challenges in that the approach is not mandatory across the sector, and in many instances it is easier for others *not* to use it as it is both time and labour intensive. There is also the wider issue that donors do not require the same kind of detailed reporting on capacity building that they might in other programmatic areas. That means that it is easier for agencies to skip this element of their work as there is less accountability required. This does point to the need to think much more broadly when hoping to bring about real large-scale change.

#### **5. What capabilities, knowledge or skills were helpful when implementing this approach?**

We have found that it is really important to have practical experience at a field level so we can be confident in what we are doing – technical facilitation skills to enable us to work with communities effectively are a big part of this. Persuasion and tenacity have also been key to making the project work and winning over those less engaged with the concept. Overall, success has all been down to good staff who believe in what the project is trying to achieve.

#### **6. What has changed as a result of the programme and how have you measured this? (Where possible, quantify the scale of programme success in terms of outcomes and reach, and relate this to inputs and cost.)**

An external review of the Drought Management Initiative showed that Oxfam committees were better organized than those that received paid training, which was a great endorsement of the project. We have also been able to see the difference this way of working has made in Turkana, where Oxfam's projects in the north compare very favourably with projects run in the central and southern regions.

By devising a scorecard system to quantify results, we have been able to measure significant progress made by committees over the lifespan of our interventions. While no committee has reached a point where they are able to be totally self-reliant, they are clearly in a far better position than those that have not received training based on the Oxfam model.

The successful development of this way of working on community water

management, and the fact that our relationships with other agencies has resulted in a formal manual endorsed by the government and other major NGOs is a great achievement. This manual has been widely distributed by FAO and provides the starting point for harmonizing approaches across the sector; sharing good practice and ultimately ensuring communities are better able to manage their water services. However, there has been little by way of formal evaluation of the manual's impact, so it is difficult to measure exactly how it has been used, or what others think of it.

### **7. Can you describe (or measure) Oxfam's contribution to that success?**

Oxfam provided the 'spark' for the whole initiative – without us there would be no shared guidance on community water management. We developed a model for capacity building and then initiated the whole process of challenging others on what they were doing with a view to sharing learning, developing good practice and harmonising approaches across the sector. We highlighted the common ground between different stakeholders and suggested that we should share a common approach to reach the same objective of creating sustainable, well managed water sources.

Working with and through other influential organizations with access to funding, we have since been actively involved in shaping the development of a formal manual that we hope will play an important reference role for all agencies working on water management.

### **8. Are there any other lessons you have learnt about how to effectively leverage change?**

Perseverance is important. The whole process from conception to the finalization of an agreed common approach towards capacity building of water management committees has taken five years. The manual itself took a good 18 months to develop once agreement had been reached that it should be compiled. It has been very important for Oxfam to have continuity of programmes and staff over this period. For example, had Oxfam's Kenya Humanitarian Programme Co-ordinator, whose idea this was, left and been replaced by someone else, the direction of work could easily have changed.

We also found working with FAO and UNICEF very important to help influence others – they helped to drive the project forward in a way that Oxfam could not have managed on its own. You could argue that one of our most successful leverage techniques was to identify those with even greater leverage than us, and developing the relationship in such a way that we could extend our influence through them.

One important lesson has been the need to document change more formally. Despite many anecdotal reports of change related to this form of capacity building, we have very little written down. Now that there is a shared manual for all agencies to utilize, we must make sure that we follow up with evaluations of how far these practices are adopted, and what impact they have.

We also need to be realistic about what can be achieved. The assumption that committees should quickly get to the point where they can manage their own water supply is flawed given the sheer lack of development in the areas we work. It is important that there is a structure in place above the committee level to provide support so that they are not operating in a vacuum – at the moment, this is Oxfam; ideally this would be the government or private sector. Oxfam is working with the county level water boards and private companies on this issue, but there is an argument we could and should be doing more to work with people at the regional and national level to support this.

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