



Dandora, Kenya

‘This programme is having a ripple effect’: SWIFT promotes safe, legal connections to the improved water network in Dandora

What has changed?

People living in the informal settlement of Dandora in Nairobi often have to walk long distances from their homes to collect water, and queue for lengthy periods. They pay high prices to vendors, and experience low flows due to inadequate supply. In some areas, more than 90% of water produced by the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company (NCWSC) is either lost through leakage before it reaches the customer, or is diverted by illegal connections.

‘There are cartels operating within this area, and they’ve been charging people a lot of money for water,’ says Sylvia Muthoni Ndirangu, a project officer with Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP).

Recently, however, the community began to enjoy a reliable supply of safe drinking water at as little as a fifth of the cost they had previously been paying. Water is still rationed, as improvement works are ongoing, but residents are no longer forced to queue for hours at a time to collect it.

How has the change been achieved?

Under the SWIFT programme, WSUP is working in partnership with NCWSC to upgrade the water supply to Dandora and improve the access of low-income consumers. They are reducing the amount of water that

is ‘lost’ before it reaches the customer; boosting the network with higher water pressures; and increasing the amount of time water is available. They have also laid nearly 23km of new pipeline in the settlement.

At the same time, an NCWSC site office has been opened that serves as a customer care and complaints centre on water issues for residents, and a project task team has been established, with members representing all sections of the community.

The team has embarked on a mass promotion to ensure that connections to the network are both legal and metered, carrying out the plot-to-plot distribution of application forms for water connections to landlords.

Why does it matter?

‘This programme is having a ripple effect on the socio-economic status of the residents. The cost of water is being reduced, so people are able to invest their money elsewhere; for example on better food,’ says John Chege.

John is a sociologist with NCWSC, one of a number working closely with the task team, landlords and residents to understand potential customer groups, their practices, perceptions and preferences, and their willingness to pay for an improved service.

John says the reduced queuing time to collect water has had a positive impact on women and children;

women have more time to spend with their families and on their livelihoods, and children have more time for their education and homework. Sylvia has noticed that plots which were previously unused in Dandora are now being developed.

‘It’s too early to say, but from my observations I think people’s health is improving and they are spending less money on medicines and treatment for sicknesses,’ John adds.

What are the challenges?

‘At the start of the programme, people had a hard time buying into it. The cartels and people who were selling water felt we were interfering with their business, and they were threatening people,’ says Sylvia.



John Chege and Sylvia Muthoni Ndirangu

She describes a previous project under which residents paid for water meters that they never received, due to corruption. When logistical issues delayed the arrival of materials needed for network improvements under the SWIFT programme, the community began to fear a repeat of that experience. ‘People thought this was just like the previous project, and so were reluctant to get involved,’ Sylvia says.

John says another challenge the programme has faced is political interference. ‘People want to take the credit for any development in the community,’ he explains.

How will the challenges be met and what makes this change sustainable?

To meet the challenges, WSUP and NCWSC have focused on being inclusive and encouraging a sense of ownership; engaging politicians one by one and inviting them to community meetings so they can become part of the process, and establishing the project task team, which both John and Sylvia agree has played a crucial role. ‘It’s meant we can really interact with the

community, listen to them and be in touch with them,’ says Sylvia.

The team is made up of 16 people who act as advocates for their community, including representatives of the elders, youth, women, religious leaders, people with disabilities, and leaders from each ‘village’.

‘They can go back and explain what is happening, as well as ask questions on peoples’ behalf,’ Sylvia says. ‘This has gone a long way in overcoming the initial challenges we faced.’

Dandora residents have also been won over by seeing the promised improvements to the water network come to fruition. ‘If you make the services available and affordable, the community will buy in,’ says John.

Information sharing plays an important role in ensuring lasting change, and Sylvia has been developing communications materials to ensure residents are aware of the services being offered by NCWSC; for example, the ability to read their own meters and send the information to NCWSC via their mobile phones, and to use their phones to check their bills.

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‘There is also a mobile service called ‘Tambua’, she says. ‘It’s a way of checking the identity of Nairobi Water staff. People don’t know about this, and have been conned in the past by people saying they are from Nairobi Water when they were not.’

To ensure the changes are sustainable, NCWSC is developing the skills and knowledge of its staff on the ground, to enable them to deal with the issues that arise on a day-to-day basis in the Dandora office it has established. ‘Before, we didn’t have a continuous presence on the ground; we were absent, and being on the ground will make a big difference,’ John says.



NCWSC’s site office in Dandora

Stories and photos collected by Jane Beesley, freelance humanitarian communications specialist, and edited by Emma Feeny (Oxfam).

The SWIFT Consortium works to provide access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene to people in Kenya and DRC, and builds capacity to ensure services are sustainable. It is funded with UK aid from the British people.

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