



CAB members, head of service provider, members of government agencies, NGOs and women's committee with a banner which reads 'Transparency, accountability and citizen participation are the main principles for the drinking water supply sector'. Photo credit: Mumin Sidiqshoev, Oxfam GB Tajikistan.

# SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN TAJIKISTAN

Enhancing trust between communities and water service providers

Tajikistan was one of the first countries that signed up for the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA). Oxfam's strategy on social accountability in the country focuses in three aspects: constructive engagement, enhancing trust through the Community Advisory Boards (CABs), and promoting women's engagement. The programme has generated strong commitment from the government, communities and water services providers.

# 1 COUNTRY CONTEXT

Nearly 50 percent of the population of rural Tajikistan do not have access to a piped water supply, and that has far-reaching consequences for public health and for the viability of many livelihood options. As household water supply is culturally the sphere of women, the additional burden of collecting water from a distance falls disproportionately on women and children.

The issue of rural water supply is a shared concern of government, donors and NGOs. There has been considerable investment and efforts made by many actors in Tajikistan to increase coverage; however the lack of policy and institutional coherence has led to a low sustainability of these efforts.

At present, investment in the rural drinking water and sanitation sub-sector is characterized by a focus on the delivery of physical infrastructure and increasing access in the short term. Incomplete ownership rights over newly constructed water systems, poor management oversight and low collection of water tariffs hinder adequate maintenance. Moreover, lack of technological and managerial know-how, out-dated infrastructure, inadequate planning, as well as contamination of water are all factors that exacerbate the situation. These issues threaten the sustainability of the sub-sector. There is a consensus that new investment in the sub-sector can only be justified when these issues are addressed with pragmatic solutions for accountability and sustainability.

Traditional gender roles continue to burden women with the supply and management of household drinking water and sanitation. There is also a high level of migration of men overseas to seek employment, and remittances are not always paid regularly. Although communities in some areas consist of more women than men, women's representation is not proportional. The situation for women varies from community to community. Overall, women in some communities are able to raise issues and complaints, but struggle when it comes to persuading service providers and leaders to heed their requests and take action. In other conservative rural communities, women are not even able to voice complaints to service providers or leaders directly.

The political context in Tajikistan is also quite challenging. Water supply and sanitation systems were left abandoned during the Civil War (1991–1996), and incomplete reforms of the water sector have resulted in contradictory legislation and a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities. The concept of social accountability is new to Tajikistan. Therefore, it requires time to build trust among stakeholders to increase genuine interest and benefit from citizen-based monitoring. However, Tajikistan was among the first countries to sign up for the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA).<sup>1</sup> Social improvement is a top priority for the government, and Oxfam has been involved in the water and sanitation sector for many years in Tajikistan, which has enabled the creation of a strong long-standing relationship with the government.

Despite the service delivery gaps, the government is very cooperative and there is a strong recognition that water governance is key to enable fair and sustainable management of drinking water and sanitation for all people in Tajikistan.

## 2 OXFAM'S STRATEGY

Oxfam is currently implementing several projects targeting water and sanitation in Tajikistan. These projects tackle policy and networking, processes, products and participation. The Tajikistan Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Improving Social Accountability (TWISA) is a four-year project coordinated by Oxfam with the assistance of the Consumers' Union of Tajikistan as implementing partner. Based on a human rights approach to development, the TWISA project is contributing to solving water-related issues at local and national levels through service performance indicators (SPIs) and supporting citizen-led monitoring mechanisms for constructive engagement.

TWISA focuses in three key approaches: 1. constructive engagement, 2. enhancing trust through the Community Advisory Boards (CABs), and 3. promoting women's engagement.

Constructive engagement is managed by working with service providers, Water Users' Associations (WUAs) and communities to raise awareness on consumer rights and responsibilities. The strategy includes efforts to build service providers' capacity and responsiveness. Oxfam's experience has proven that social accountability is of interest to citizens for upholding their rights to water and for duty-bearers to increase customers' willingness to pay and to enhance their reputation.

Community Advisory Boards (CABs) comprise water authority members and representatives of the community. They are an excellent model for introducing the social accountability approach, suited to the political and cultural context in Tajikistan. Oxfam community mobilizers and Consumer Union representatives provide guidance on how to conduct meetings and update CABs and service providers on legal issues related to the performance water service provision. Many CABs are now very active and have started to implement social accountability mechanisms on their own initiative, allowing a good ownership of the approach.

The projects have put a lot of effort into promoting women's participation in decision making around water. Many women were trained and participated in events, in CABs and at high-level meetings. Seminars on women and water and gender training were also organized. Despite the good level of attendance for these activities, equal participation is challenging.

Oxfam's role focuses on facilitating the process and providing guidance and support. However, social accountability activities are designed so that local partners are responsible for direct support, and communities and authorities lead the process.

## 3 OXFAM'S IMPACT

CAB members report that an effective dialogue is taking place between community representatives and water providers to address complaints and requests formulated by citizens as well as structural challenges. Many social accountability mechanisms are being implemented, such as transparency, citizen feedback, participatory processes and responsiveness.

In terms of **transparency**, water service providers confirm that they report monthly to the CAB about operational activities and on the management of issues and complaints. All CABs are in favour of disseminating water meters, which are seen as a powerful tool for transparency as they inform customers of the amount of water they are paying for, which increases willingness to pay.

Some providers are already sharing their financial reports with the community. As a result, they have noted a significant increase in the trust of consumers, who are now aware that they are not only paying for 'water' but also for related services. However, there is still some reticence on providing financial reports. Changing people's minds and advocating for transparency is a sensitive topic that requires time.

Oxfam's work also contributed to the improvement of **citizen feedback mechanisms**. The establishment of the CABs contributed greatly because community representatives have strong links with citizens. Oxfam supported the creation or strengthening of customer service centres, and the training of service providers in customer care and acknowledging of community voices.

According to the CABs, consumers' awareness about the existence of the service provider has clearly been raised. They are now able to identify the service provider, they understand what they are paying for, and utility staff note that people now read their contracts carefully and even ask for clarification.

Many examples illustrate **collaboration** between consumers and service providers: for example when consumers undertake repairs themselves.

For the last two years, the proportion of families paying on a regular basis has increased to 70 percent, with some families paying one year in advance by bank payment. The release of the billing blockage created a virtuous circle on service provision, because water service providers are now able to pay salaries, to chlorinate, and to maintain infrastructure on time.

The partnership forged between CABs, local authorities and service providers led to the organization of two **awareness** seminars on their respective roles and functions in December 2015 and April 2016. An awareness campaign was also suggested by CAB and fully supported by local authorities.

Consumers overall are better educated about their rights and responsibilities and engage with CABs. This coincides with the government publicly committing to water for the next ten years, facilitating the enabling environment of the programme. Clearly, the main benefit of the CABs model is that the relationship between communities and service providers has shifted from conflict to cooperation and dialogue.

As a consequence of the gender training and awareness-raising seminars, the topic of women and water is familiar to the members of the CABs. However, this awareness does not translate yet into action, proactive commitment or practical plans.

At the **national level**, there is a clear buy-in and engagement of all organizations in favour of the concept of social accountability, and a very positive opinion of the work undertaken by Oxfam and by the Consumer Union.

*'Financial reporting to the CAB each month participates in building mutual trust. Before, nobody knew how money was spent.'*

Chief Accountant –  
Muminabad

The promotion of social accountability in the water and sanitation sector in Tajikistan has been a learning process. Indeed, there are still areas that need to be worked on and improved and that are therefore set as priorities for future development. Some of these areas are: engaging citizens who are not customers yet, promoting learning exchange, establishing a quantitative monitoring system to increase visibility, and positioning gender at the centre of the project's strategy.

### Stories of success

#### **Supporting the most vulnerable**

Jamila is a single mother of a daughter suffering from autism. As a child with disabilities, her daughter requires more water for laundry and caregiving. Therefore, Jamila spends a lot of time fetching water.

Jamila would like to leave her parents' house, but there is no water in her new house. She submitted a request to the Head of Mahalla (district centre) recently. As a result, CAB members decided to support her to get water in her new house and the issue was resolved very quickly, without problems and without queuing in various offices. '*CAB really works effectively here*', Jamila's opinion is also that of many people in the area.

## 4 KEY LEARNINGS

- **Supporting consumer groups** to advocate their rights for improved service delivery and at the same time raising their sense of responsibility has proven to be effective against 'reluctant' duty-bearers. Using participatory techniques and forming task groups has allowed Oxfam to bring the voices of poor people to the attention of decision makers.
- This first social accountability project in the region has shown that a **human rights-based approach and good governance** are a key prerequisite for sustainability of infrastructure management in the drinking water supply and sanitation sub-sector.
- **A good anchoring in the country dynamics** was achieved by building local capacities and designing a clear exit strategy.
- Increasing transparency enhanced customers' **willingness to pay**, which in turn has improved money flows within the utility and, hence, its capacity to provide better services.
- **Building alliances with influential stakeholders**, particularly with the government, was key for promoting participation and responsiveness of decision makers

## NOTES

1 <http://www.thegpsa.org/sa/>

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email  
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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-0-85598-939-2 in March 2017.

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