

Can new partnerships get urban water working?



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‘Donors should facilitate innovative partnerships to help water services reach all those living in cities, while continuing to support core water sector reforms’

The world is going urban. Sixty percent of the global population is expected to live in urban areas by 2030, according to the UN Population Fund. Delivering water services across swelling towns and cities is a huge challenge, and in sub-Saharan Africa – the focus of this Opinion – the proportion of urban people with household water connections has already fallen, from 43% in 1990 to 35% in 2008. I believe that new kinds of partnership can help meet the water needs of African cities, by building the core capacities of water providers and finding new ways to serve the hard-to-reach.

Coverage increases are hampered by a lack of investment in the expansion and rehabilitation of water network infrastructure, exacerbated by vicious cycles of poor maintenance, high water losses and low cost recovery. Available subsidies are widely mis-targeted and investment is concentrated on people who are better-off, reflecting politicised service delivery and neglect of the needs of poor populations.

Improving utility performance would generate significant savings, which could be used to finance expansion, but a huge financing gap of an estimated \$7.8 billion per year would still remain in Africa (Ghosh et al., 2010). One proposal to bridge this financing gap is to help service providers access market-based repayable financing (OECD, 2010). Attracting and managing such finance, however, will require substantial improvements in performance and management capacity. Meanwhile, equity must be prioritised, with new approaches mainstreamed to ensure access to affordable, safe water for all. This will mean looking beyond conventional piped services delivered by utilities.

Different types of partnership involving government, local private operators, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities could improve performance and enable service providers to deliver on their social obligations. Donors should learn from emerging experiences, focusing on how to facilitate effective partnerships and improve outcomes for poor people.

This Opinion offers lessons from a recent review of urban water partnerships (Tucker et al., 2010).

What can new partnerships offer?

The likely benefits of partnerships with **local private operators** include lower costs and greater trust than partnerships involving international companies. Local operators understand local conditions, and their involvement benefits the domestic economy. They have increased their share of the market substantially in recent years. Experience in Africa has largely been at small and medium scale, with some promising examples. In Mauritania, contracting the operation of services in 250 communities to local graduates extended the systems by an average of 150%. These operators have legitimacy in their communities and some act as micro-enterprises, investing in repairs and improvements (Vezina, 2002).

Working with **NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs)** can improve services for the poor, as long as they are trusted and familiar with the needs of poor populations. An innovative partnership in Malawi between the Lilongwe Water Board, the local Centre for Community Organisation and Development and the international NGO WaterAid helped poor water users by restoring service to dysfunctional water kiosks in Lilongwe (WaterAid, n.d.). Standposts and kiosks are often neglected by utilities as they are not very profitable, yet they can provide a vital service for poor users. New partnerships may help bring them back to life.

Utilities often struggle in poor communities as their standard service approaches (including tariffs, billing mechanisms and communication with customers) are inappropriate. **Supplying bulk water** at the boundary of a designated area to a local organisation, which then distributes the water and collects fees, is now seen as an appropriate model in countries where the utility lacks the political mandate or finance to expand into poor settlements.

In the rural town of Savelugu, Ghana, such an arrangement with a community organisation increased access to safe water from 9%

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to over 70% in its first three years (Adam, 2005). Water supply remains vulnerable to fluctuations in supply by the utility and the community depends on outside assistance for infrastructure expansion and management support, but the achievements are considerable.

Finally, **capacity-building partnerships between public service providers** are receiving increasing attention. Water providers form partnerships to offer training, technical support and solidarity. Building on ‘twinning’ approaches developed in the 1980s, and with various names including ‘public-public partnerships’ and ‘municipal development partnerships’, these have international support from the EU Water Facility and the Global Water Operators’ Partnership Alliance (GWOPA).

Such arrangements can transform performance and create virtuous cycles of capacity-building. The Moroccan utility ONEP (Office National de l’Eau Potable) benefited from partnerships with European countries and now supports its counterpart in Mauritania. A review of municipal development partnerships by European countries revealed their lasting impacts, as they ‘helped municipalities to help themselves’, in contrast with the use of consultants (Emminghaus, 2003).

Elements of a successful partnership: what can external actors do?

There is no one-size-fits-all model. The key is to select partners with the right experience and skills, based on an assessment of existing capacity and needs. This means that water providers need information about different partnership options, their benefits, costs and risks.

Experience shows that partnerships depend on the performance of all partners, and governments cannot use partnerships to wash their hands of responsibility. Even if services are contracted out, good contract design, regulation and monitoring are critical.

External actors play important roles in supporting partnerships: matching partners; supporting the development of partnership agreements and monitoring procedures; financing staff costs for capacity-building; and resolving conflicts. Involving communities as active partners can be very effective, but community organisations often require ongoing external support, while strong governance arrangements and monitoring are needed to prevent capture by local elites.

It is important to document lessons from initiatives such as the GWOPA. Opportunities to extend partnerships in water supply and into related sectors, such as sanitation (where access rates are far lower), solid waste and water resource management should be explored.

Finally, partnerships are not a panacea. Donors should continue to support vital core improvements in water sector governance and capacity, while working to facilitate new partnerships that could help service providers overcome the immense challenges they face. This may mean taking risks.

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