



WHO CARES FOR WATER?
WATER RIGHTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract

This paper will discuss how RBA can be of positive impact to sustainable management of water resources at the local community level. It will give specific emphasis to rights to water and accountability for such management of people living in local communities. This level of accountability has to be considered as a long-term goal and not as a prerequisite for funding of development programmes or as a condition to get rights fulfilled. As mentioned, NGOs and Government Agencies have an important role to create an environment in which people can assume accountability and have a greater chance to get their rights to water fulfilled. A framework of research questions is proposed to increase insight why – in many cases – such rights and accountability cannot be expected as long as the necessary preconditions are not fulfilled in the socio-economic, institutional and policy environment. It is argued that it is important to get answers to such questions in order to better plan activities for water resource interventions that are not only sustainable from a national or even community point of view, but also ensure that rights of especially the under-privileged groups in local communities are fulfilled and that they can assume their own share of accountability for the good use of available water resources. Some insights are given how a programme as EMPOWERS can contribute to such goals.

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF RBA IN THE MIDDLE EAST WATER SECTOR (2 pages)

This paper will discuss the potential of Right Based Approaches (RBA) in making local water management more effective in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. In short RBA has the potential to impact and sustain integrated water resource management via good governance, through empowerment, equitable access, local level accountability and end user involvement in shared management. RBA however, is not an entirely new approach to development. With a greater emphasis on rights of local people it is the latest successor to other development approaches that have tried to capture what is really important to make development efforts meaningful for people in local communities. Where each school of thought gave different focus to different aspects, all belong to a family of participatory approaches where the interests of local people is put on the forefront. This ranges from “Farmers first” (Chambers et al, 1989) and the first ideas on PRA, such as developed in Khon Kaen in Thailand (reference??), in which much of the thinking of Robert Chambers and others were translated in practical tools, through innovative thinking on Low-External-Input and Sustainable Agriculture or LEISA (Reijntjes et al, 1992), Farmer Participatory Research and Participatory Technology Development (PTD) (ILEIA, 1989, Veldhuizen et al, 1997), to the concepts of “sustainable development” (Gips, 1986; Bruntland, 1989) and sustainable livelihood systems (DFID). Where RBA is thought by some to be new jargon or “old wine in new bags” it adds another dimension that has had until now too little attention. Development of the interests and priorities of local people can often not be taken forward if no explicit attention is given to the rights they have to pursue those interests and priorities, be it in

land, in a natural resource or more fundamentally in education, health and the future of children. This also applies to water as a key resource for the livelihood of every household. Hence water as a human right¹.

Where RBA gives this focus to rights it also encompasses and builds on the mentioned earlier schools of thought that all hope to contribute to sustainable development. Advocates of RBA will typically tie their proposals to a deeper analysis of underlying causes of poverty. RBA is another lens of looking to development. It considers rights and responsibilities of local people, for instance users of water at the community level, as well as the responsibilities of water service providers (be it government or private) as a key dimension to ensure sustainability of activities and projects in the water sector. It gives hereby explicit attention to gender and different rights and priorities of men and women. For instance CARE International in its efforts to underpin its development strategies “*believes that all marginalized people should be able to claim their rights and exercise their responsibilities. This is why CARE takes for instance the issue of gender inequality very serious. As a right based organization, CARE deliberately and explicitly focuses on enabling people to achieve the minimum conditions for living in dignity – in other words, achieving their human rights (CARE-UK, 2005)*”. As older schools of thought RBA is about empowerment, partnerships, accountability and responsibilities, social exclusion and sustainability.

There are very few if any case studies available in the MENA Region of programmes that apply RBA. There are some more but still few examples of projects in this region where genuine participatory and sustainable community approaches are put in practice. To be true, even if PRA is practiced in other parts of the world since the eighties, it was introduced in Egypt and other countries in the region only in the mid-nineties and even today NGOs in most countries here use PRA kinds of needs assessments in a primarily extractive way. For an important part this can be explained by an institutional and development context that is heavily influenced by still weak decentralization, a critical lack of involvement of civil society in planning and decision-making and fragmented responsibilities among many government agencies and other players. Centralized and top down management persists so that intermediate level government staff and end-users are usually confronted with top-down implementation of instructions, little autonomy, almost inexistent planning, intermittent communication, limited capacity for interaction, and an overemphasis on trouble-shooting and complaint management. Moreover, the specific needs for quality drinking and irrigation water, and water rights of poor communities and women are largely ignored (Laban et al, 2005).

When we speak about RBA in the water sector we also speak about local water governance. We understand such governance here as “involving all actors at different levels in the entire process of management, planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation around integrated water resource management and water service delivery (EMPOWERS, 2006a)”. Local water governance is crucial to sustainable

¹ The UN Declaration of Human Rights (2002) states in General Comment 15 (Article 1) that “the human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity and is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights”.

and equitable development and management of the MENA regions scarce water resources. Such local water governance can only be achieved by:

- Decentralization and empowering end-users in local communities;
- doing this in partnership through a wide array of stakeholders from government agencies to local Community Based Organizations (CBOs);
- ensuring accountability and promoting responsibilities at all relevant levels;
- giving high emphasis to the institutional and other modalities that will ensure sustainability

There is growing recognition in the MENA region – also at government policy levels – that the above points are key to arrive at more sustainable use and management of the region's extremely scarce water resources. If such local governance should also include the interests of women and under-privileged groups in local communities, it follows that using a right-based approach becomes a necessity. Making sure that women and other under-privileged groups are involved in the planning and decision making process may limit risks of discrimination and social exclusion. If this is a vision for the water sector in the MENA Region, then RBA certainly may become a relevant, appropriate and effective approach to increase development impact in this sector.

This paper is in part inspired by the EMPOWERS project that is implemented since two years by a partnership of 11 NGOs and Government Institutes led by CARE International . As indicated at the end of this paper EMPOWERS - in the view of many - applies a RBA approach in a very practical way, without really saying so, in three countries of the Middle East: Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. For another part this paper builds on 30 years experience of the author with projects that deal with natural resource management, from community forestry and sustainable land use to local water management (Chandy et al, 1993; Gueye and Laban, 1994; Laban et al, 2003).

LOCAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN LOCAL WATER GOVERNANCE (2½ pages)

RBA is not only about rights; it also deals with responsibilities and accountability. Within the broader frameworks of sustainable community development and RBA this paper will focus on the contextual inadequacies that often hamper local people to claim their rights, assume responsibilities and thus assume greater ownership in the management of scarce water resources. This will be done through the lens of local level accountability for water resource management.

At the level of development organizations (NGOs and local government)

Right-based approaches stress the need for accountability and responsibilities (references: **SAVE the Children, CARE, 2005; DFID**). Accountability of civil society organizations (e.g. CBOs, NGOs and international NGOs) towards their target groups is considered important. For instance, it is one of CARE's principles underpinning its development programmes: *"We seek ways to be held accountable to poor and marginalized people whose rights are denied. We identify those with an obligation*

towards poor and marginalized people, and support and encourage their efforts to fulfill their responsibilities). In short, a rights orientation compels CARE to be more accountable to the people it serves. It contrasts with a 'results-orientated' approach to development which can overemphasize accountability to the donor (CARE-UK, 2005). It has indeed to be questioned if project results expected by donors are always, albeit unintentionally, in the best interest of poor and marginalized people. RBA also stresses the responsibilities of government agencies and other duty-bearers to make sure that local people can exercise the rights they have. As CARE states in their same principle "*it is CARE's obligation to identify, encourage and support those persons and institutions who are duty-bearers, to meet their responsibilities vis-à-vis right-holders*".

These are certainly critical issues that need all attention in designing and implementing development programmes for rural or urban poor. NGOs intervening in community life should indeed be aware of social, cultural and/or economic differentiation within a given community, for instance with regard to access and rights in water use and management. Being aware of this and feeling accountable to the poorest, they have a responsibility to make sure that the interests, priorities and rights of women and the less privileged groups are taken into account in their development programmes. At the same time NGOs and civil society at large have a responsibility to make sure (advocate) that policy makers, politicians and other decision-makers ("duty-bearers") give hand and feet to their responsibilities in enhancing good governance and sustainable development. These responsibilities include the creation of a conducive environment for IWRM in which local people can exercise their rights and assume accountability for water resource management within their own local settings.

At the level of local users and their community organizations

This paper will argue that accountability and responsibilities as identified above for NGOs and duty-bearers are important but not enough. This is especially so in water use and management or for that matter natural resource management in general. Management of these resources is a long-term complex multi-stakeholder affair in which many players at many different levels have to assume responsibilities and account for this to others. Natural resource (water) management can be seen as a system composed of two interfering decision making subsystems: a 'horizontal' land/water use system and a 'vertical' human activity system. The horizontal system may be described as the complex interaction between land/water/trees and their users within a given geographical space and time frame. The vertical system may be described as a complex network composed of different levels of actors, from local households to governments. All these actors have each their own role, responsibilities and – not rarely conflicting – interests in water resource management. The whole of these two interacting systems could be described as a Decision-Making-in-Conflict System (Laban, 1994) that needs to be taken into account when promoting local water governance. Such a system could also be defined as a knowledge, information and decision-making system built by persons, networks, institutions and their interfaces at different levels. Each level (element of the system) will interfere with other levels. Through their activities they influence and interfere with the very conditions they are taking into account when making their decisions (Röling & Engel, 1991). The outcome of such interaction can be either positive or negative, depending on its

impact on the sustainability of water resource management. Systems oriented research on the dynamics between actors and the conditions determining their decisions can contribute to the enhancement of a human activity or decision-making system that makes sustainable management of water resources a feasible option (Laban, 1994). This paper will not further elaborate on all the intricacies of such complex decision-making systems important for good water governance. It will merely highlight what this could mean in terms of rights and accountability at the grass root levels of the system: local communities, local households and their organizations. The paper will also indicate how development practitioners can get better informed on these issues.

“Accountability” is used here in the wider sense of *taking responsibility for one's own behaviour and actions, at the same time being able to account for the effects of such behaviour and actions to others* (Laban, 1994, Laban, 2005). Where such accountability has to be defined at all levels, in this article the emphasis is given to accountability of local people for sustainable water use and management, towards themselves and their community. Of equal interest, but not discussed in more detail in this paper, is the accountability of intermediate level organizations and their staff (NGO and Local Government) to local populations through development programmes and approaches that enable local people to take ownership, claim their rights and assume accountability for the management of their water resource base (Laban, 2005).

The importance to consider such local accountabilities stems from the failure of an unfortunate large number of development projects over the last 30 to 40 years. Although such projects may have been efficient in achieving expected physical results in the short-term, in many cases impact and sustainability or even effectiveness was low. Long-term and sustainable impact of programme interventions in the water sector depends for an important part on the sense of ownership and the degree of accountability that local people take for the way water resources are managed in their community and for the activities that are needed to use and maintain that resource (Laban et al , 2003). In many cases people will not assume such accountability as they do not feel the activity and/or their results as really theirs (ownership), being something provided temporarily by an outside institution (an NGO or government agency) that does not meet their real priorities or longer-term interests. Many water infrastructure and service delivery projects are an example of this. Ownership – and thus sustainable impact - is intricately related to the degree that local people can assume accountability for the actions undertaken for such management and to the possibility to claim the rights they have to water in terms of quality, access and control.

Giving emphasis to local level accountability of individuals and community groups may well be important also for another reason. The actual discourse on rights may have unexpected negative effects, especially when informal or customary rights are involved. As in forest and tree management (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991) many different user rights may exist that are not recognized by formal laws. RBA is also a result of current liberalization policies, placing the individual at the centre of development processes (Hellum, 2001). Securing for instance formal individual rights to water - even within households - as a further extension of pricing and liberalization in the water sector may have unexpected and undesired effects that will rather increase marginalization of women and other under-privileged groups. Where RBA intends to provide a possible framework for social justice,

this may also work against it when complex socio-cultural complexes are not carefully taken into consideration (Ahlers, 2005). RBA may then end up dismantling community protection and solidarity and their organization and control over the management of water resources. Enhancing internal accountability of local community groups for water resource management may become crucial to balance formalization of individual rights and strengthen internal solidarity and external influence.

Raising the issue of local level accountability is certainly not a call for shifting responsibilities away from the so-called duty-bearers. On the contrary, it is the experience of many development projects, now and in the past that in too many cases people are not able (or enabled) to assume responsibilities for the results and activities undertaken by these projects. For a majority of cases this is due to the fact that the necessary conducive environment is not created by duty-bearers and NGOs so that important preconditions under which local people can assume accountability for their water resource use and management are not fulfilled. Both these duty-bearers and NGOs have a large responsibility here. As will be mentioned below such preconditions have in essence to do with benefits, knowledge, rights and claim-making power. Local level accountability has to be seen as a long-term goal rather than a pre-requirement for a development programme or an investment in the water sector.

This paper will discuss what questions need to be raised in the socio-economic and institutional domain to enhance ownership, rights and accountability of local people for the sustainable management of their water resource base and thus to contribute to local water governance. To avoid any confusion, such ownership is not necessarily the same as ownership over the water resource itself.

ROLES OF NGOS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT (1½ page)

What roles and responsibilities NGOs and Local Government Agencies (LGA) have to assume (a) to make sure that water is indeed considered a human right and not in the least for those who have little or no access to power and influence: women and other under-privileged groups in local societies; and (b) to ensure that local water users and their organizations can assume their responsibilities for sustainable water resource management?. To be able to give answers to this question, perhaps the following three main processes - complementary in nature – are useful to distinguish:

- (i) processes that sensitize staff in NGOs and government institutions on RBA and encourage them to assume accountability for programmes that enhance rights and accountability of local people in water resource management;
- (ii) stakeholder processes that aim empowerment of under-privileged people; and
- (iii) focused analysis of the reasons why such under-privileged groups have insufficient rights and access to water (human rights not being achieved) and cannot assume their own share of accountability for water resource management.

RBA sensibilization processes are undertaken since some time in many of the bigger NGOs and international development agencies (DFID, WHO), who at the same time are

undertaking efforts to raise awareness on the need for RBA among government institutions. While this is important, this paper will not further elaborate on the tools and pedagogies for this. Organizations as CARE and Save the Children are in the forefront of developing such tools, although with a bias to rights on the expense of end-users responsibilities.

There is also a wealth of knowledge and experience on empowerment and participatory stakeholder processes, although they are undertaken only recently in the MENA Region. Many of the development approaches mentioned in the beginning of this paper are pursuing such processes. They are key to reach especially the under-privileged and directly call on NGOs and LGAs to be applied. Special mention may be made here of Participatory Technology Development (PTD) and Rapid Analysis of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS). Both build on wide experience in agricultural and rural extension and aim to empower farmers to take the driver seat in the mini-bus towards their own development (among many others: Veldhuizen et al, 1996; Engel, 1997 and Engel & Salomon, 1997). RAAKS as an elaborated approach for participatory analysis of networks and actors has proven in many cases to be able to cut through sectoral boundaries and enhance stakeholder dialogue and concerted action (SDCA) as is used in the EMPOWERS programme in the Middle East (see below). Again, although critical for RBA, such empowerment and actor processes are not the focus of this paper.

The paragraph below will further discuss questions that are important for the third process: the analysis of the reasons why people can not achieve their right to water and assume accountability for its management.

For all three main processes mentioned here, NGOs and Local Government Agencies (LGA) have key roles to play, although probably different in emphasis:

- raising awareness on the need for and providing the tools to apply RBA (NGOs);
- creating the institutional environment in which local people and especially women and other under-privileged groups can be empowered, claim their rights and assume their share of accountability (LGAs);
- facilitate stakeholder and empowerment processes between LGAs, CBOs and local water users (NGOs);
- participate in empowerment processes through stakeholder dialogue and concerted action (SDCA), such as in the participatory water planning cycle (PWPC) process developed by EMPOWERS (NGOs, LGAs and CBOs)
- **initiate (NGOs) and undertake (NGOs and LGAs) more in-depth analysis on causes for non-achievement of formal and informal rights in water and accountability for water resource management** (see paragraph below);
- undertake advocacy activities to influence national policies that build on the results of the above (NGOs and LGAs).

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY (2½ pages)

As mentioned above this paper focuses on the following research question:

What are the reasons why people can or cannot achieve their rights to water and assume accountability for the management of water resource management systems?

The questions proposed here follow a simple analytical framework as proposed by the author in other articles (Laban, 1994; Laban, 2005). For a first approximation of why people can not exercise their rights to water and assume accountability for water resource management interventions, this framework of questions tries to uncover the immediate reasons that restrict people in this. As illustrated in the figure below, it gives importance here to:

- *Existing economic and other (non-material) benefits*
- *Appropriate awareness, knowledge, skills and capacities*
- *Guaranteed rights to water (quality, access & control)*
- *Claim making power and leadership*

Based on experience with many other development projects focusing on natural resource management (Chandy et al, 1993; Gueye and Laban, 1994; Laban et al, 2003) it implies that ownership and as a consequence accountability will only be assumed by individuals or local community groups when they perceive the benefits, have access and control over resources, have the knowledge and capacities to implement them, have the organizational strength to realize these activities as well as the claim-making-power to make sure that such pre-conditions can be fulfilled/maintained. The questions below will help to assess - through participatory approaches - to what extent these pre-conditions are in place or not, and how they can be fulfilled to enable local people to assume accountability, claim their rights and thus take ownership for sustainable water resource management.

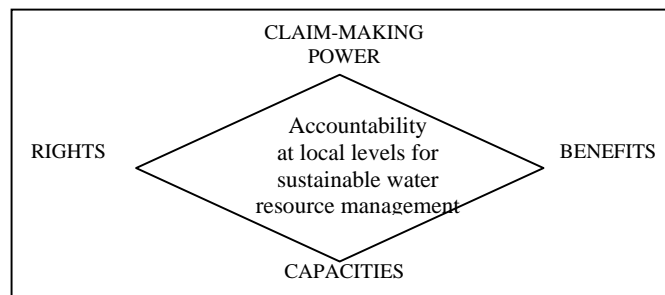


Figure 1. Pre-conditions which are necessary for local people to assume accountability for sustainable water resource management activities (Laban, 2005).

The following could be considered as key questions that need to be further detailed in action research programmes. These questions have to be used with a strong emphasis on recognition of possible **differences and inequalities among gender** in interest, priorities, rights, access/security to water and the degree that men and women can assume accountability for water resource management. Such emphasis is necessary as experience over the last ten years has shown that gender participation not necessary leads to gender equality. Moreover, granting formal rights will not necessarily provide a more gender balanced water security. Extensive studies on water rights have shown that these are

complex, contextually diverse and historically dynamic. Reducing access and control over water to an individual and universal defined entitlement endangers security over water rather than safeguard it. Furthermore, it may seriously undermine sustainable water use (Ahlers, 2005).

Questions for Action-Research on Accountability and Rights in local water resource management

Basic information for planning

- a) what are the different **water use groups** in a community with regard to direct physical availability of and access to water, (in)formal rights, water quality and cultural acceptability of technology;
- b) uncover which of these water use groups can be considered as **under-privileged** in terms of their access and rights to quality water and sanitation; such uncovering will probably also gives clues to other dimensions of social, cultural, or economic differentiation within the studied community;
- c) question each water use group what are the actual local mechanisms in place in their community to enhance or restrict access to (quality) water to under-privileged water use groups;
- d) question different water use groups who is currently considered to have rights to water and why? And who holds this opinion?
- e) question (using participatory approaches) each (or at least the under-privileged) water use groups what are their direct **priorities** and what local/immediate solutions they see to achieve such priorities (possibly as part of a longer-term strategy/vision);

Light Action-Research

- f) question these water use group what **benefits** (material/immaterial) they perceive from actual and proposed water resource management interventions (irrigation, drinking water, sanitation);
- g) question these water use group what **knowledge** and capacities they have or do not have to implement and manage actual and proposed water resource management interventions;
- h) question these water use group what effective formal and/or informal **rights** they have to access water resources in the community or to benefit from actual and proposed water resource management interventions;
- i) question these water use group how they can or cannot exercise influence (**claim-making power**) on community leaders and other influential persons/"institutions" in or outside their community to acquire the necessary knowledge and capacities to manage; to get a greater share of benefits; and to achieve their rights and access with regard to actual and proposed water resource management interventions; or in other words what are the power relations in their community that affect positively or negatively their share of quality water;
- j) analyze on the basis of answers to above questions what limits these water use group most to feel **accountable** and take **ownership** of a specific water intervention that is in their interest;
- k) explore with different water use groups what can be done to overcome found restrictions for ownership and accountability (technological, socio-economic, institutional, legal political);
- k) explore at institutional levels outside the community what can be done to overcome found restrictions for ownership and accountability (cultural, socio-economic, institutional, political) of the water use groups targeted;

In -depth Action-Research

- l) explore by more in-depth research what are the underlying causes that lead to

- situations as found by the answers to questions as formulated under e) to k);
- m) explore through more in-depth gender analysis what differences/inequalities may exist among gender in terms of benefits, rights, knowledge and claim-making power;
 - n) explore what negative effects formalization of individual rights may have on access and security to water for women and other under-privileged groups.

It has to be noted that in the above a conscious choice is made to approach social/economic differentiation through the identification of different water use groups. In the practice of PRAs it appears often difficult to tackle such differentiation directly through poverty/wealth categories as is for instance done in the PRA tool for wealth ranking. People in local communities will find it often difficult to classify others and themselves in such categories as this is often embarrassing and/or difficult to do. Poverty or wealth depends on many subtle factors that cannot easily be captured in straight forward categories.

Different levels of study and analysis can and perhaps have to be applied. For practical reasons we will make a distinction here between a “light” and more in-depth action-research/ participatory analysis. In many situations time and resources will not be available to get at deeper length with regard to the questions above, and especially when desiring to ‘un-pack” deeper and underlying causes for specific under-privileged “water use groups” being marginalized if not socially excluded or discriminated. However, for basic planning of water resource management interventions at the community level a minimum of information is required. Answers to questions a) to d) belong to such minimum requirements. With somewhat more time and staff resources and where an emphasis is given to effective participatory planning and RBA, answers to the questions as under e) to k) are crucial. The further in-depth exploration of underlying causes to poverty of women and under-privileged groups becomes the domain of question l).

As for the tools that can be used for such participatory action-research, most of the questions for a) to d) and also for e) to k) will make use of simple PRA inspired tools. For question d) a problem tree and ranking of problems and priorities has proven in many cases to be effective (Zakaria and Laban, 1997; Diop and Laban, 1998) while this has been further elaborated by EMPOWERS with tools for visioning and scenario building as part of a participatory water planning cycle (Moriarty et al, 2005).

Tools for getting hold on the issues raised under questions e) to k) have been explored in other work (Laban et al, 2003; Laban, 2005) and will be further elaborated by EMPOWERS (2006b). Most of this elaboration will be done by identifying for each local context what are the issues that influence/factor the degree people perceive benefits, knowledge, rights and claim-making power. These issues will then be translated in semi-structured checklist of questions to be used for triangulation in PRA style interviews with individuals and focus groups. For further more in-depth action-research for question l) some more elaborative RBA tools have been developed by CARE, such as the “Benefit - Harm Tool” (CARE, 200....??) and Causal-Responsibility-Analysis (CRA) Tool (CARE UK, 2005) and frameworks for further analysis of underlying causes of poverty (CARE,

200...???. For questions m) and n) use can be made of available tools for gender analysis.

WHAT CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE ? (2 pages)

The paper above describes a development context in which RBA can play an important role. It emphasizes the need to look at both rights and accountability of local water users within their local community environment. Research questions are proposed to get the necessary participatory information to better understand the complexities around these two issues. RBA is an important lens but not the only one to address sustainable development of water resources at the community level. Sustainability in terms of socially just, economically viable and ecologically sound (Gips, 1986, Bruntlandt, 1989) is another probably wider lens through which RBA will be found as part of the overall picture. A genuine participatory approach to involve especially local water users in planning and decision-making is critical to make RBA effective, while emphasis on rights and responsibilities will provide higher credibility to such participatory approaches. Especially in the water sector with its long-term and geographically wide implications it is equally critical to address local water resource management (community level) in its interaction with its broader physical and institutional environment (governorate/national, watershed, river basin, etc). Rights of local people cannot be disconnected of their responsibilities for water management “up-and down-stream” or the management of deep aquifers that even have to be shared by different countries. In countries of the Middle East, many of the above issues are not addressed in actual NGO or Government development programmes in the water sector. Emphasis until now in most projects, with very few exceptions, is on delivery of water infrastructure, preceded by needs assessments that claim to be participatory, but in most cases do not go beyond extracting information and perceived needs necessary for submission of project proposals to donors. A closer look to concerns, priorities and rights of the less privileged groups (often including women) is in most cases lacking.

What can make the difference when having – by necessity – to address all these issues with a complex network of different actors at very different levels, from international and national to districts and local households in local communities? Some clues to this may be given by the EMPOWERS programme that is actually implemented in one governorate in each of three countries in the Middle East: Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. In each governorate CBOs of six communities are involved - together with government staff - in the development of effective participatory planning approaches for the whole water sector (agriculture, drinking water, sanitation and where applicable industrial use). It is doing this by facilitating an approach of Stakeholder Dialogue and Concerted Action (SDCA) around a Participatory Water Planning Cycle (PWPC) that will together contribute to better IWRM and local water governance (Moriarty et al, 2005; Laban et al, 2005; www.empowers.info). In our view there are a number of critical elements that seem to be important in working in this complex domain. A number of them are highlighted in the box below.

The EMPOWERS Experience

Many people ask us: what is it that makes a project like EMPOWERS different. Words are often insufficient to capture all the energy that is mobilized by a genuine and transparent participatory approach as we are trying to develop and test. Many people around us in the local communities and in local government are enthusiastic because they see and feel that this is different and closer to what they aspire when discussing and working together on practical solutions for problems in water use and management. What is it that makes it different? Maybe the following can help in understanding this:

- a) a genuine participatory approach: a level of interactive participation that leads to self-mobilization in stead of being limited to extractive collection of information or just consulting with people (needs assessments);
- b) not directly aiming to ensure rights in an activist way, but – more practically - taking rights as one of other important factors to achieve sustainable water resource management
- c) a more in-depth analysis of why local people are not able to claim their rights to water and assume responsibilities for relevant water management activities;
- d) combining short-term benefits in the form of small community water activities (pilot projects) with the broader picture of developing long-term water development strategies (problem analysis, visioning, water resource assessment, scenario building and strategizing for the water sector);
- e) vertical institutional up-scaling of communication and coordination through stakeholder dialogue and concerted action (SDCA);
- f) a structured and interactive planning process based on visioning and scenario building that results in developing long term water strategies (at both community and governorate levels);
- g) building bridges and the quality of dialogue between groups in local communities and officials in government institutions (thanks to e and f above);
- h) a strong emphasis on good process facilitation to make a), b), c) and d) as well as e), f) and g) possible (the facilitation skills that make working with the SDCA and PWPC tools effective);
- i) a strong emphasis on in-depth documenting of what happens throughout the learning process of EMPOWERS;
- j) a strong emphasis on institutionalizing above planning and facilitation processes in the appropriate already existing institutions (respectively Government and NGO).

Some of the above mentioned elements merit some more explanation.

The term participatory suffers from becoming meaningless as it is used to cover many processes that are not always that participatory. EMPOWERS refers here to a level of participation of target groups that comes close to a situation where they take their development in their own hands and call on others to participate in their development. This level of participation ranks as step 6 or 7 on the participation ladder developed by Jules Pretty when working with IIED (in: Veldhuizen et al, 1997). Such a level of participation contrasts with lower steps on the ladder, i.e, collecting information by outsiders (step 2) or just consulting with people (step 3) often in a rather extractive way. Many development projects in this region do not make the necessary steps to reach higher on this participation ladder.

The stakeholder process is intricately combined with a planning process; one cannot work effectively without the other. The tools for both processes cannot be used without

possessing the necessary skills for process facilitation, in analogy with a good carpenter who has not only the right tools but also possesses the skills to use them properly (Laban et al, 2005b). Key here is the quality of the dialogue and interaction between different stakeholders. The planning process does not focus only on short-term physical results (water infrastructure pilot projects) but also on a longer-term vision (10 to 15 years) and the strategies to achieve that vision. By the way, narrative scenario building tools used in EMPOWERS provide a very useful and necessary bridge between a generally weak transition from problem and objective analysis (Metaplan) to operational planning (Log frame) in Objective Oriented Project Planning.

SKETCHING AVENUES FOR RBA IN THE MIDDLE EAST'S WATER SECTOR (1 PAGE)

Combining the RBA focus on local rights and accountability, as described in this paper, with empowerment, stakeholder and participatory planning processes as experimented by EMPOWERS seems to be important to advocate if one adheres to a vision where also under-privileged groups in society have a “seat at the water table”. This paper has outlined a pragmatic way to identify and substantiate the issues that seem to be important if one aims to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of fulfilling the rights of such under-privileged groups as well as to facilitate situations where end-users in local communities can assume their accountability to good water resource management. It is important to find and give the financial support to make such action-research happen. The development of a large number of case studies to substantiate the relevance and impact of such approaches are urgently needed in order to be better positioned to advocate these approaches to decision makers in government and funding agencies.

Accountability and rights analysis as proposed here can serve different purposes:

- a) understanding the issues that may hamper people in claiming their water rights and in assuming accountability for local water resource management;
- b) identifying priority actions for NGOa and Local Government Agencies in their development programmes (where is action most urgent: benefits, knowledge, rights, claim-making power);
- c) determining the most effective focus for advocacy programmes;

and through a), b) and c)

- d) increasing impact and sustainability of planning and development activities in the water sector.

EMPOWERS has been working in the past two years on developing and testing empowerment, stakeholder and participatory planning processes. It intends to start this year a comparative study in each of the three countries, in which the above mentioned action-research questions will be further developed and used to provide better insights in what hampers local people to claim their water rights and assume accountability for local water resource management. It would be great if these efforts can be supported also elsewhere. EMPOWERS will come to an end in the course of next year and further

action-research in these issues is critically needed after that moment in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Such further study will largely depend on the interest of relevant government institutions as well as on the donor agencies active in the water sector here. Such interest has to be developed through sensibilization efforts on RBA as well as by the above mentioned case studies that present RBA as a pragmatic approach to sustainable development of the region's scarce water resources.

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