

Making women's voices heard

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Summary

This paper reflects on gender accountability in water and sanitation services. The three players in the triangle of accountability – the state, service providers and clients – have a specific role to play in making services work. Having no drinking water and sanitation facilities has far-reaching consequences for families, but hits poor women in rural areas the hardest. Effective gender policies can work towards greater gender justice and equality. National and local governments play a crucial role in promoting equal rights, participation, opportunities, access to resources and control over them. Donors can contribute to gender accountability by supporting women's organisations and gender auditing systems.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals recognise that equality between women and men is central to human development. They also acknowledge that water supply is a basic necessity, especially in poor neighbourhoods and rural areas. The United Nations report that more than 1.1 billion people (one in six of the world's population) lack access to safe drinking water and about 2.4 billion people lack adequate sanitation.² There are serious concerns that the MDG for water – to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water – will not be met in 2015.

This crisis has a gender face. The lack of access to water and sanitation has huge implications for women and for MDG₃ for gender equality. The world is lagging behind in achieving MDG₃, and the crisis in water and sanitation contributes to this underperformance. This paper will use practical examples from the water and sanitation sector to examine why women's rights are lagging behind, who can be held accountable for this poor performance, and how it can be improved.

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² World Water Assessment Programme (2003), p. 11

The pertinent questions go beyond the issue of ‘a lack of services’ or the inability to improve basic human rights to women, who are still often considered second-class citizens. A central issue is that of responsibility. How can politicians be forced to keep the promises they make to women during election campaigns to improve basic services? How can the gap between policies and their implementation be closed?

Three strands of thinking seem essential in addressing these questions. One is about the position of women and the difficulties of empowerment and changing attitudes. The second is gender accountability, which is related to democratic processes and how they help make services work for women. The third question refers to creating synergy, collaboration and gender awareness to make development effective.

Women’s empowerment

Africa is facing an ongoing, endemic water and sanitation crisis that debilitates and affects the health of families. Only 62% of Africans have access to safe drinking water and 60% to adequate sanitation. These figures vary significantly between countries. For instance, in Zambia, sanitation coverage is only 27%.

The lack of access to drinking water has far-reaching consequences, hitting poor women in rural or peri-urban areas hardest. It limits economic growth, educational access and life opportunities. Fetching water for domestic use is time consuming. A 2002 UNICEF study of rural households in 23 sub-Saharan countries found that 25% of the women spend 30 minutes to an hour each day, collecting and carrying water, and 19% spends an hour or more.³

Women living in rural areas in Zambia say that fetching water can take up to six hours every day during the dry season. They and their children have to walk an average of 16 kilometres. Besides the physical burden of long walking hours, this also exposes women and girls to the threat of violence and rape.

In Ouagadougou, in periods of scarcity, water is cut off in the shanty towns and, less so, in the richer neighbourhoods. Women wait at night to obtain a bucket of water and have to pay double the price. (Reijnders in E-conference ‘Gender, Water and Integrity’)

In Morocco, the World Bank’s Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project aims to reduce the burden of girls who are traditionally involved in fetching water to improve their school attendance. In the six provinces where the project is based, girls’ school attendance increased by 20% in four years. This was attributed in part to the fact that the girls spent less time fetching water. It was also found that convenient access to safe water reduced the time spent fetching water by women and young girls by 50 to 90%. (World Bank 2003a)

Having access to safe drinking water has a positive impact on the health of the family; drinking unsafe water causes a high incidence of diarrhoea among small children. This also impacts negatively on women who have the role of care-givers.

³ Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) (2005), p. 19

In urban and peri-urban areas, the high costs of water have severe economic implications for poor families. It is primarily women who manage water in the domestic situation. They are on the front line when it comes to exposing the problems associated with water privatisation and mismanagement:

“We normally have to ensure that we reach the place before the water vendors come, as they push us backwards when they collect the water. We are not strong enough to resist which means we have to wait longer and sometimes, we don’t even get to reach the water. We are forced to buy water from a vendor taken from the same source for as much as 100 Shillings or more per jerry can”. (WaterAid 2003, p. 26)

In Kenya in the early 1990s, water was supplied by the local authorities. Poor women and men had access to water. In a certain slum area, there used to be five water kiosks where women and men could buy water at a very low price. After water supply was privatised, most of the kiosks were closed and only one remained operational. The price has increased six fold, whereas the tariffs for water in other parts of the town have not increased. This has led to the emergence of private vendors, especially landlords. (Toroitich in E-conference ‘Gender, Water and Integrity’)

Women play multiple roles in providing water, sanitation, agricultural production and health care, and this role is highly recognised and valued. There is, however, limited attention to women’s rights to water. The differences in power between women and men, between the poor and the non-poor, and between rural and urban areas affect opportunities and outcomes. Gender differences play a role between user and provider. And because of differences in power, status and cultural factors the relationship is generally not based on mutual respect.

The voices that count most are those of males, the powerful and wealthy. Being a poor woman farmer from a small community not only affects how you are served but also your capacity to hold policy-makers and service providers accountable. Generally poor people lack voice and power in public spaces. Women feel that they are unable to take a stand against those that misuse their positions.

In India, women’s groups in Kerala were rebuffed by local politicians and government officials when they tried to discover how earmarked funds for women’s development had been spent. Local power relations obstruct the effective use of democratic procedures, even in Kerala, where the poor and women enjoy comparatively high degrees of literacy and social welfare. When poor people challenge local decision-making and spending patterns, the interests of local elites and officials are profoundly threatened. (Goetz and Jenkins 2001)

Gender inequalities, as shown in the examples above, are a daily reality generated and reinforced by social institutions such as informal family laws, cultural traditions and social norms with deep-rooted beliefs that women are second-class citizens. Inequalities are still huge in most developing countries in all sectors and directly affect the lives and livelihoods of women and households. Women are not included in the design of the infrastructure of services, nor in reporting and evaluating their functioning. This is not in line with day-to-day practice. Women, as the main users of water services, are the best persons to consult with local authorities on the location of water taps, the most appropriate technology to meet the needs of households, and their role in maintaining the equipment.

Effective policies are needed which can work towards greater gender justice and equality between women and men. Gender equality refers to rights, participation, opportunities, access and control over resources.

How can women and men have equal access to and control over the resources and services in their environment? How can we ensure that women's needs are recognised and taken into account when water and sanitation infrastructure is built? How can women claim these specific services and how can politicians and providers be made aware of their needs? Gender accountability addresses these questions.

Accountability and gender accountability

In recent years, the term accountability has become a buzzword. It is used in different contexts and situations, and its exact meaning is not always clear. Things get even more complicated when gender comes into play.

Accountability is defined as follows: 'Accountability, simply put, is a two-way relationship of power. It denotes the duty to be accountable in return for the delegation of a task, a power or a resource.'⁴

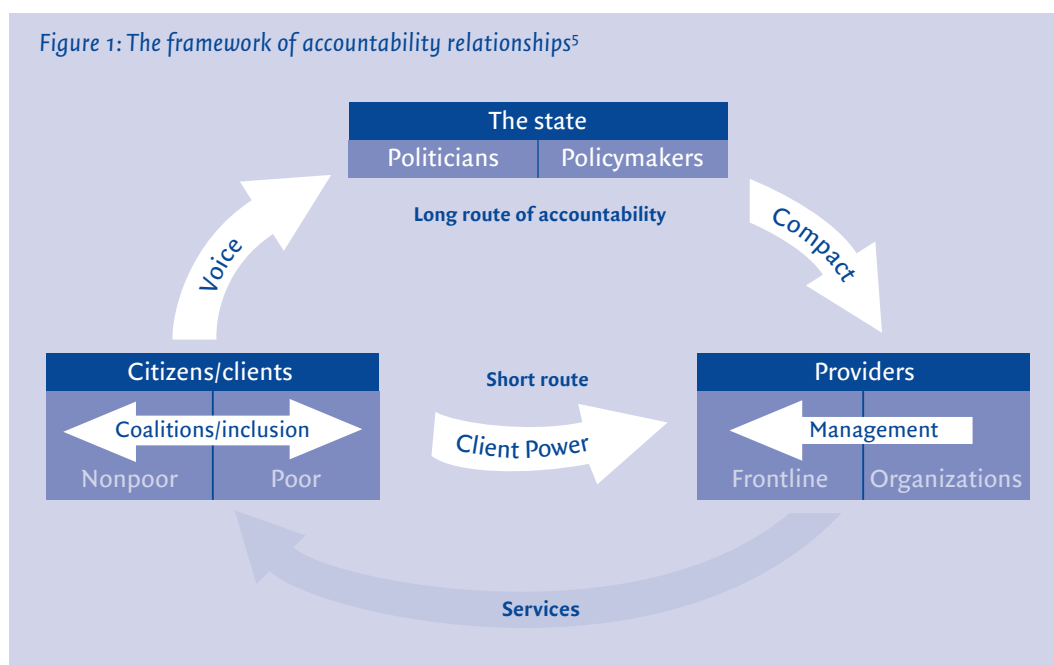
Accountability is not limited to finances. It is directly linked to performance and results. It is about value for money, holding providers accountable for their actions, the services promised and offered. And it is about trust and control. Accountability requires actors to take responsibility. Service providers (organisations, institutions, governments, donors and individuals) should be able to demonstrate whether they are complying with their promises or not. They are accountable for their actions, spending, use of resources, performance, outcomes, and so on. Accountability also forces policy-makers to focus on results. Citizens have the right to know what services are to be delivered and the results that are being achieved. They should be equipped with instruments to claim their rights and services. That means defining who is responsible for what, and the expectations of the various parties involved. Reports must be submitted and performances evaluated. Effectiveness will increasingly be measured in outcomes. What are the overall benefits for the population and specifically for women?

The World Development Report 2004 elaborated accountability in a triangle of relationships with three main actors: citizens/clients (water users), politicians/policy-makers (parliamentarians, ministers), and providers (water and sanitation departments, water suppliers).

The links between state, providers and clients/citizen form a complex relationship of power, with multiple actors and different interests. The state is represented by politicians/policy-makers at national, provincial and municipal level. Providers are also present at all levels of society and include frontline professionals like engineers involved in building infrastructure.

4 *Lawson and Rakner (2005), p. 9*

Figure 1: The framework of accountability relationships⁵



In the ideal situation actors are linked in a short route of accountability (see figure 1): clients exercise *client power* through interactions with frontline providers and hold them accountable. This implies that the clients have power and can claim their rights. When this is not the case and the power of the clients is weak, they use their voice to hold their elected representatives (politicians and policy-makers) accountable, and these representatives in turn hold providers accountable. This is called the long route of accountability.

Clients fall into different categories with different interests and power relations. These include poor and non-poor, women and men. Poor women mostly do not have the power to openly express their interests or be listened to. Other organisations play an important role in a democratic society, including non-governmental organisations, churches, women’s groups, parents associations, etc. They are recognised for their contributions to the effective functioning of systems like health care, education, water and sanitation. In addition, donors and international aid agencies, financial institutions and the private sector play a role in terms of transparency, service delivery and accountability.

The World Development Report 2004 states that, to make services work for the poor, accountability has to be strengthened in the three relationships in the delivery chain: between policy-makers and poor people, between policy-makers and providers, and between providers and their clients. All actors involved in the provision of services at every level play a role and must be able to be held accountable for their actions.

Gender accountability gives an extra dimension to the concept of accountability because it refers to unequal gender relations and power differences at social, economic and political levels. Women’s voices have to be heard and responded to, thus bringing in a new measure of accountability. Those seeking accountability – in this case poor women – act as citizens and agents and not as passive beneficiaries of development. They act as agents who can inform priority-setting and decision-making, demand answers from policy-makers, and enforce punishment for poor decisions. A more political approach is needed, making women more aware of their rights

5 World Development Report (2004), p. 49

and developing their capabilities, including understanding how institutions function and how to negotiate to promote change.⁶

This also implies that there is a lack of knowledge among politicians and providers of the basics of gender equality, the specific situation, position and demands of women. At the same time, ignoring the needs and voice of women will limit their full political participation and development in general.

How can we ensure that gender equality will be taken into account at these different levels? How can we ensure that all actors have an understanding about gender equality and the importance of a gender approach that includes both men and women as beneficiaries of their services?

Strengthening gender accountability mechanisms in water and sanitation

MDG3 on gender equality and women's empowerment, is not moving forward fast enough. Gender accountability is therefore called for. Women must have voice or political power to successfully engage in development processes and to engender public services.

Engendered public water and sanitation services imply that women are involved from design to evaluation. It also implies that this involvement will empower them with new knowledge and capacities. Participation in the monitoring and evaluation process and taking part in maintenance activities make a service more accountable and responsive to citizens. Performance will then be more effective and predictable. In the triangle of accountability relationships women, as users, should have a direct relationship through the short route with the providers and the frontline professional (engineers).

Drinking water and sanitation facilities require investment in construction, maintenance, rehabilitation, repair and replacement. Poor people, and especially women, have a stake in the effectiveness of the performance of local authorities and service providers. Accountability improves when users have face-to-face contact with the service provider and the technical engineer. The flow of information about water availability, treatment, maintenance and technical aspects of the water system will be more fluent. When there are mechanisms for feedback, there is more chance that the delivery of water service will improve.

In Malawi, the United Nations Community Development Fund (UNCDF) constructed 600 water points to serve 4,000 households in 50 urban centres. In the first stage women were sidelined. As a result the pumps fell into disrepair, as the men had no real interest in ensuring they were properly maintained. Fifteen years into the project the situation has changed. Women now make up the majority of the committee members and take an active role in planning and management processes. (WSSCC and WEDC 2005, p. 5)

In Zambia voluntary water-watch groups comprising both males and females have been set up to increase citizens' participation in the effective monitoring of water supply. They also aim to increase consumer knowledge on their role in ensuring consistent and good quality provision of water and sewerage services. A lot of people are ignorant of their rights and therefore fail to claim a quality service. (Nankonde-Muleba 2005)

6 Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004), p. 108

Participation: women as agents of change

Participation is different from accountability. Participation means giving citizens a role in government decisions, while accountability means that people will be able to hold governments responsible for how these decisions are affecting them.⁷

Supplying good quality services is an element of good governance and often a subject for accountability. Poor, rural areas are frequently a blind spot for politicians, except when they are campaigning during elections. Most of the time, rural areas lack basic services like health care, education and water infrastructure. Women can play a crucial role in making services work for themselves, too.

At a rally in Cameroon, a political candidate asked what the people needed. A woman stood up saying that she would vote for him, but that they were ashamed to go to vote because they were dirty because there was no water to wash once they came back from the farms. Women were not only the principal users of water, but they were also, in some ways, the makers of modern water supplies. (Page 2005)

The term 'governance' reveals a set of linkages between the state and the civil society. Governance of urban services like water supply depends on a number of actors, including municipalities, civil servants, the private sector and other partners. Effective governance has been associated with good quality infrastructure and service provision. It is the role of consumers and civil society in general to hold service providers accountable. Direct participation of women in the delivery of water services is expected to lead to improvement in their control of these services, and improved accountability to a better outcome. This means that there is a relationship between the voice of women, accountability and water services (output).⁸

Improvements in the quality of services can best be achieved if individuals pursue their own interests. Women are very interested in obtaining easy access to safe drinking water, which will improve their family's health situation and remove the burden of fetching water. Examples from Latin America show that women are very much able to manage and organise water and sanitation activities.

The Drinking Water, Sanitation and Community Organisation Programme in the rural area of Pasoc, Nicaragua, has worked on health and violence issues from a gender perspective. This has included increasing the proportion of women participating in Water Committees to around 45% and the proportion of women committee coordinators to around 50%. All educational materials used have been adapted to include a focus on gender for use in health education programmes in schools. (Woodfield and Smout 2002)

The contribution of women's organisations

Civil society organisations can play an important role in raising awareness and contributing to the process of monitoring. Women's organisations that focus on women's rights, and on the importance of developing accountability and democratic practices at local level, can help foster fairer, more honest, transparent, democratic and accountable governance. They are able to hold powerful actors accountable for providing services for poor women. They can also support the poor, women in particular, in demanding services and claiming their rights.

Women's organisations play a critical role between users, the government and providers. They are

7 Blair (2002)

8 Goetz and Jenkins (2001)

able to analyse government plans and budgets, critically review the proposed infrastructure, and motivate users to participate in designing the plans.

Gender accountability and the public and private sectors

Government policies can help poor people acquire better services by expanding the choice of providers. Governments can also expand consumer power by giving them the ability to monitor and discipline providers and by establishing procedures to make sure complaints are acted on.

Raising questions about accountability means having a stake in how the national budget is spent. Public spending on water and sanitation infrastructure mainly benefits the non-poor. A gender analysis of government budgets can increase their transparency, revealing what resources and services are allocated to what sectors, and who benefits. Many countries, especially in Africa, have developed methods that allow citizens to analyse budgets or participate in the decision-making process.

The lesson learned from gender budget experiences is the importance of involving women's organisations, which are rooted in local communities and are accountable to their constituencies, to ensure that the voice of the poorest women is taken into account. Macro-economic knowledge, often lacking among gender experts and women's organisations, is required to understand and speak the language of planning departments.

It is also important to involve parliamentarians by having them scrutinise government spending at local level on water and sanitation infrastructure.

In a number of countries the private sector is heavily involved in the construction of water and sanitation infrastructure. With many government programmes far from meeting their objectives, private companies are being called in to help. Millions of poor people have no access to water. This is because of poorly conceived government plans and programmes. Governments need to commit to providing poor people with basic access to a safe water supply. Public Private Partnerships (PPP) would be successful where demand is high and in areas where communities have the resources to pay for better services.⁹

Creating synergy, collaboration and gender awareness

Each of the three players in the triangle of accountability relationships – the state, providers and citizens/clients – has a specific role to play regarding gender accountability. Development outcomes on gender equality cannot be effectively delivered by only one player or by each player separately. Development effectiveness requires knowledge on the position of women.

The state

The state, as the executive, legislative and judiciary power, provides the regulatory environment for accountable development. It plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality, good governance and the capacity for democratic scrutiny. Most governments in partner countries have developed a gender policy and have attempted to include gender equality in their sector policies. Gender policies are in place on paper but are not being put into practice. This does not mean that

⁹ Contribution by Prakash Kumar to the E-conference 'Gender, Water and Integrity', moderated by the Gender and Water Alliance, 2007.

there are no good intentions, but that the delivery of 'gender equality' is failing. Governments have also signed international agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Their task is to put their policies into practice and act in accordance with international agreements.

As far as infrastructural works on water and sanitation are concerned, governments become more transparent by sharing contract documents and procedures with the clients and making clear who the beneficiaries are, in particular, how women are benefiting from the facilities. Government also has a responsibility towards providers to make a gender-sensitive framework available.

Accountability is one of government's key responsibilities, and it needs to:

- Take account of the interests of key stakeholders, prioritising the needs of women (and therefore of families).
- Build its capacity to develop gender-sensitive skills and adequate mechanisms to align with civil society organisations.

The Zambian Government aims 'to reduce gender imbalances and attain gender equality'. In 2000, it adopted a national gender policy and established a gender consultative forum to advise the government on emerging issues and ensure that policies and programmes are gender responsive. (Republic of Zambia 2006, p. 314)

Uganda introduced a Water Sector Gender Strategy in 2003, which includes an affirmative action component. This mandates that all administrative levels from cabinet down to village should include at least 30% women. As a result, women's voice has been enhanced and they have been trained to locate water sources in the village, to decide on the location of facilities, and to repair pumps. (Goetz and Jenkins 2001)

The providers

There are a range of different types of service providers, including public organisations, NGOs and private sector organisations, all with different tasks. The providers of basic water and sanitation services are presented as neutral arbiters of competing user interests. To ensure effective use of the infrastructure they have to ensure that water users (women) have been taken into account. Providers are not regulated or bound by global commitments to gender equality and providing water for all. More data is needed on how services are provided and used. Communities can use scorecards on which local people, but specifically women, rank or score the range of water services supplied by the providers. With the data, people can compare the services they receive and start negotiating on improved services.

In Ghana, a project initiated a community scorecard assessment of a range of services being provided to rural areas of the Wa region. 'Before the community scorecard assessment, we had no latrines in the community, although we had been promised some. During the assessment, we made a lot of noise about latrines and now 30 households have latrines. The wells have been disinfected and the water is safe to drink, which has relieved the community of sickness.' (Ryan 2006, p. 23)

Providers should be supported in:

- Involving water users in implementation so that they have a strong influence on the availability and the quality of the services. They should inform their clients about how the water will be provided and what role the beneficiaries will play.
- Supplying more sex-disaggregated data and data on how the providers supply their services.

- Developing common criteria for government and clients, with priority to downward accountability to women consumers.
- Investing in knowledge networks and developing a rating system.

Clients and civil society

When services are failing the poor, clients can play two roles in strengthening service delivery. They can help tailor the service to their needs, and they are in a better position to see what is implemented on the ground than most supervisors in government bodies. Clients can be more effective monitors of providers, since they are at the point of service delivery.

Women, as active clients and agents of change, are able to influence public service providers, and can use their voice to influence politics. Accountability will improve when users have a personal relationship with the service providers and when women actively participate in the development process. Often this is only possible when women organise themselves to claim their rights.

Women's organisations are crucial for advocacy. They have the knowledge and capacity to demand greater transparency and accountability from government and donor institutions. They can influence policy, strategies and expenditure priorities at different levels, according to their aspirations and preferences. They can exercise power over service providers and hold them accountable for the level of access to services and their quantity and quality. Strengthening beneficiaries' voice and client power encourages policy-makers to be responsible to the needs of communities and stimulates demand for better public services from service providers through regulation, contracts, monitoring and evaluation systems. They are also in the position to demand more democratic processes of decision-making.

Civil society women's organisations face a vital task in developing gender accountability by enhancing their capacities in advocacy, analysis and action:

- They have a watchdog function. This includes influencing policies and assessing how governments, providers and agencies support or inhibit gender accountability.
- They fulfil an important role in channelling and supporting women's voice in relation to providers and the government.
- They play a role in advocating for accountability and transparency. This includes sharing best practices where governments or providers do take gender issues into account.

Conclusions

Attention to accountability forces providers to focus on results, politicians to monitor these results, and clients to claim their rights. Attention to *gender* accountability addresses how women and men benefit from public services. It reveals whether gender inequality exists and encourages all the participants to improve the situation and involve female clients in development processes. A gender approach can often get stuck in good intentions and theoretical concepts, without concrete results that improve the lives of the poor, especially poor women. Gender accountability – with its emphasis on results – is a very practical way to work towards gender equality, involving different actors at different levels. In doing so, it improves the effectiveness and quality of development cooperation.