

## From our water correspondent

*In this edition, Lovy Rasolofo-manana writes from Madagascar about his efforts find out why the water isn't running in the commune of Vavatenina.*

Field visits with WaterAid often bring us into contact with our fellow citizens and the realities of their daily lives. Access to water and sanitation is a harsh reality for many in Madagascar. During the month of March 2009 I made a visit to Vavatenina. I reached this rural commune, 570 km east of Antananarivo, after a day and a half journeying. The small settlement has two small hotels that offer temporary shelter for passers-by like us.

Since it was hot and sweaty, I began the day hoping for a shower but I soon learnt that, despite its status as a 'first category' rural settlement, drinking water, or just water, was lacking. It's true that WaterAid has supported its locally based partner, Frères Saint Gabriel, to install water points in this community; however, they are on the periphery of 'town'. The supply and distribution system serving the small town centre is the prerogative of the town hall which subcontracts the management of their water service in accordance with the established formula. For 'prerogative', read 'monopoly'.

While the system built in the 1980s was refurbished just two years previously, the guest house owner confirms that it only manages to provide water to a small proportion of the population. Some of the people we interviewed during our stay in Vavatenina, to study the question of local taxation, reported a 10 per cent functionality rate for private connections and public tapstands combined. There is cause for alarm when the guest house, which figures among the more privileged segment of the local community, has to fall back on well water of dubious quality, fetched by the bucket load for their clients.

Before our meeting with the second deputy mayor, Vavatenina's senior collector, my two colleagues and I were driven by curiosity to walk about the town centre and see for ourselves what the situation was. Indeed, several tapstands were abandoned and dusty.

Some few moments later, our conversation with the deputy mayor under way, it was evident that he felt more optimistic, suggesting that half the public tapstands were operational. He added that Vavatenina's water supply service had been managed in-house for over 30 years before being handed over to a non-profit association

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acting as a private service provider. The association asks for 500 ariary (approximately 25 cents; US\$1 = 1960 Madagascar ariary, November 2009) per household for access to a public tapstand and 4,000 ariary (\$2) for a private household connection. It is questionable whether this income amounts to sufficient revenue to cover the operating costs of a network comprising five private connections and 102 public tapstands serving close to the 51,000 residents registered in 2009.

Whatever the case the commune, through its delegated service provider, only managed to collect 88,000 ariary (\$22) as cost recovery against the initial budgeted income of 7,400,000 ariary (\$3,700). The deputy mayor recognizes this poor performance as being due to a contractual problem with the service provider who was dismissed in 2008 and the deterioration of the pipework resulting in a dysfunctional system.

Our mission in Vavatenina was mainly to understand the causal linkages between water service cost recovery and the performance of local taxation and improvements in access to those services. Our discussions with the senior tax collector completed our case study. In fact, he informed us that the commune has significant potential for generating local revenue as people are generally aware of the ins and outs of taxation and revenue generation. As an illustration he mentioned that

the local tax income rose from 1.07 per cent in 2005 to 11 per cent in 2007 as a portion of the Communal revenue. As 60 per cent of local taxes are returned to the commune this represents a windfall to refill the commune's coffers.

Our meetings the following day with taxpayers shone a different light on the situation. They clearly stated that they are obliged to pay taxes to remain within the law but also for the economic development of the commune. Sadly, they do not see any concrete developments by the commune for the payments they make. A clear case in point is the poor rate of access to drinking water. In this regard the taxpayers demand transparency and accountability from the local authorities in terms of service provision, even if only the most basic ones. They proposed methods such as 'public hearings' to achieve this, and in the same vein, annual exchanges are required to ensure greater visibility and better communications about the use of taxes.

Upon leaving the Commune of Vavatenina after our three-day visit we felt that by improving the delegated management of services and redressing the local taxation system the commune would be in a position to meet the drinking water needs of local people.

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