

From our water correspondent

Our water correspondent is Laura Hucks from WaterAid in Tanzania. She writes about the need for a dialogues mechanism in the water sector that works.

The mid-term review of the Water Sector Development Programme (WSDP) has just taken place here in Tanzania. The review marked the mid-point in the implementation of the first 5-year phase of the programme, worth US\$951 m, which seeks to strengthen sector institutions for integrated water resources management and improve access to water supply and sanitation services. According to the latest WHO/UNICEF figure, access to an improved water source in Tanzania stands at 54 per cent and to improved sanitation at a shocking 24 per cent. The mid-term review produced a flurry of activity, the arrival of experts from different corners of the globe and a gruelling schedule of meetings and supervision missions to test the endurance of Ministry officials and development partners alike.

The Ministry of Water and Irrigation produced its own input to the process in the form of a progress report. One issue which the Ministry highlighted

as needing attention, but which got side-lined as other more pressing issues emerged, was the functioning of the sector dialogue mechanism.

The sector dialogue mechanism was developed back in 2006 at the same time as the programme itself was under design. It was intended to be the main tool for monitoring progress of the WSDP, and, because it made space for all kinds of actor, including civil society organizations, to question Government of Tanzania (GoT) decisions, it was hoped that transparency and accountability would increase.

The dialogue was to take the shape of an Annual Joint Sector Review, where policy choices would be discussed as well as the effectiveness of spending, performance and strategic direction. Then there was the Water Sector Working Group, meant to meet more frequently and co-chaired by the Permanent Secretary (PS) for Water and the PS for Local Government, it was designed to bring together technical representatives of development partners and non-state actors on a bimonthly basis. Finally, there were the technical working groups supporting the

Access to improved sanitation stands at a shocking 24 per cent

The Ministry highlighted the need for a functioning sector dialogue mechanism

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In practice the dialogue mechanism is facing many problems

development and implementation of action plans coming from the Annual Joint Sector Reviews and inform on priorities for forthcoming reviews.

All good on paper, but in practice the dialogue mechanism is facing many problems. The biggest threat to the dialogue mechanism is the multiple conversations that go on outside the formal dialogue mechanism. On the Ministry side, the dialogue mechanism seems to be disconnected from departmental management structure and directives, and also from national accountability mechanisms: for instance the scrutiny of parliamentary committees. As such, the dialogue represents an additional burden in parallel with their already huge workload; an additional activity which is necessary to keep the donors happy.

It is also just one of a multiplicity of different monitoring tools, which are not necessarily aligned with each other. The development partners are also frying other fish elsewhere – much activity and problem solving takes place in the development partners group (which does not have GoT representation or a strong feedback mechanism to the latter) or in bilateral conversations relating to individual donor inputs with senior Ministry staff. At the end of the day, it's difficult to know

what decisions are made, where and how, and who is responsible for taking them forward. This damages transparency and accountability since it prevents other stakeholders – especially local civil society – from accessing information or contributing to the monitoring process.

Lastly, the dialogue does not take account of the people that matter most – the implementing agencies. Local government authorities are the ones who have to deliver the WSDP but the dialogue is limited to those based in Dar es Salaam and pays little attention to district performance. At the central level, even the PMO-RALG (Ministry of Local Government) is also struggling to keep up. We need to somehow address this contradiction without further overloading the dialogue mechanism. Answers on the back of a postcard, please.

Of course, not all decisions need to be made within the dialogue mechanism. Arguably, the Ministry of Water needs to have more discretion and autonomy to manage the Water Sector Development Programme. What is needed, however, is a clarification of the purpose of the dialogue mechanism and a review of the way it is functioning in line with this. Otherwise we will continue to talk at cross-purposes.

We need clarification of the dialogue's purpose and a review of the way it functions
