

From our water correspondent

NGOs can improve their feedback to donors by incorporating the voices of partners and consumers, for the benefit of all, writes Kate Fogelberg.

WE NEED MORE MONEY. AS I watch the mayor of a small rural municipality stand up to deliver the conclusions of our partners' feedback on Water For People support in Honduras I am braced for this mantra of the sector. Everybody wants more money, right? From the global advocacy movement to the implementing agencies on the ground, if we only had more money, we could solve the water and sanitation crisis.

What the mayor actually says leaves me momentarily speechless – and thrilled. 'We have identified the priority areas that we think the organization can improve', he says. 'First, it would be very beneficial if they could promote the coordination with other actors in the municipalities to all follow the same methodology. Also, Honduras is unique in that we have the legal framework to support the Association of Water Committees in each municipality. We think they have been an underutilized partner to date and working more closely with them will help us all reach the goal of sustainable water services.'

Not more money, but money invested in different ways!

A few weeks ago, I was working on two different reports for two different donors both financing pieces of the same programme – a typical situation, since most donors have their own unique formats, and most NGOs spend a lot of time reporting back on what was done with that money. What ends up happening is that reports are written with little true reflection on what is working and what is not. And what rarely happens is that those challenges are published for the world – not just one donor – to see. Even rarer is to hear feedback from partners and recipients of charitable donations on what the NGOs are and are not doing well.

This is what the meeting in Honduras is designed to change.

Within the framework of what we are calling 'Reimagining Reporting', several years of programmatic data and financial data broken down by region and/or investment type are reviewed. Our teams wrestle with what the data show – what have they done well over the past several years and what are the areas for improvement – as well as what data are missing, to be able to measure progress towards their ambitious goal.

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Kate Fogelberg (kfogelberg@waterforpeople.org) is with Water for People, Peru.

© Practical Action Publishing, 2012, www.practicalactionpublishing.org
doi: 10.3362/1756-3488.2012.036, ISSN: 0262-8104 (print) 1756-3488 (online)

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Although many improvements have happened over the past five years, we spend most of the time brainstorming on what still needs to be done. Most worrying to our team is developing a strategy to ensure all potential users can access improved systems and that service levels can be maintained over time. A common challenge in the mountainous coffee-growing areas where Water For People and its partners work is that new households often build homes above water tanks, thus throwing technical complications into connecting to the system. Or that committees have valued their in-kind contributions during the construction process so much that they have put in place inaccessible connection fees for subsequent users, with no alternative payment processes.

In close second place is the need to ensure water committees can transfer their knowledge to the next committee when term limits are up. Last, though of utmost importance, is the need to improve watershed management, because what good is a well-managed water system if there is no water to manage?

Even more illuminating than staff reflecting on their challenges was a similar exercise with partners: local government representatives, national regulator, other NGOs, and members of the Association of Water Committees. We gave them the list of challenges

our staff identified, but in no particular order, and asked them to prioritize the biggest challenges in ensuring universal access to permanent service. This diverse group, after a vibrant discussion, prioritized the same top three challenges that our staff did, demonstrating a deep understanding between staff and partners of what still needs to be improved to end water poverty in Honduras.

As I write this, web designers are taking all this information, on coverage, levels of service, sustainability, money invested, partner feedback, and more, and turning it into a palatable, visual, compelling story of what has worked, what has not, and what is being done to improve things. Next will be building the user – in this case, rural Hondurans who are drinking (or not) from improved water sources – into this feedback loop.

As I finished up the two reports, I couldn't help but think how this system has the potential to improve so many pieces of the philanthropic puzzle. We won't analyse grant-by-grant what is working and keep those thoughts to just ourselves and the single donor, but will systemically reflect on strengths, weaknesses, and concrete strategies to improve. We will contribute to the ongoing debate on aid transparency by bringing in voices seldom heard and reporting back on not only our successes, but also our failures.

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