

# Editorial: Can communities manage their water services?

*Richard C. Carter*

From the early years of the first UN water decade (1981–1990) and for the following two or three decades, community management of rural water services has been the norm. This management model – synonymous with what many countries refer to as community-based maintenance (CBM) – seemed to be the only and best option for ‘keeping the water flowing’ in rural water services, in particular those provided via water points such as handpumps.

Over the last 10–15 years, community management (or the CBM model) has been increasingly blamed, even vilified, for the frequent breakdowns and long downtimes which are often observed in rural water services. Although alternatives to CBM (such as professional operator models and rural utilities) have been emerging and slowly growing in recent decades, the emphasis here is on gradual emergence, not (yet) on management models that can be scaled up to serve entire or near-entire rural populations. These alternatives may take a long time to reach a substantial number of communities in many low- and even middle-income countries.

I am well aware of the challenges associated with CBM, the dire statistics on rural water point functionality, and the corresponding reasons why many water sector professionals portray it as an outdated approach which is in terminal decline. And yet I believe there is good reason for persisting with the model in this third decade of the 21st century. Here I set out three reasons why I hold this belief, and I outline the main components of the support package that must accompany CBM in order for it to work effectively.

## Why persist with CBM?

First, there remain many communities and entire districts where there is either an insufficient density of water points to enable an operator to achieve economies of scale; where there is an inability or unwillingness by communities to pay for higher reliability; or where there is a sheer absence of potential private providers or rural utilities. In such cases CBM will remain the only realistic option for the foreseeable future.

Second, it is worth remembering that a CBM approach which in reality can be summarized as *‘build, provide nominal training, hand over, abandon to the community’* was never what the early proponents of CBM envisaged. The way in which infrastructure has been ‘handed over’ has often amounted to a dereliction of duties by those organizations which have put that infrastructure in place. Community management arrangements absolutely need and require external support, just as physical infrastructure needs regular maintenance and repair. And there is no time limit to the need for that support.

Third, there is ample evidence that well-supported CBM works. A review (Miller et al., 2019) of 218 programmes identified positive associations between what the authors called external support programmes (and defined as ‘the set of activities provided by NGOs, government, private and community-based entities to community-member managers to ensure continued safe operation of a drinking water system’) and functionality, household satisfaction, household participation, and financial stability in those same water supply systems.

### What does supported CBM look like?

Communities can and do undertake much of the day-to-day work involved in keeping rural water points working. However, there are limits to community capability. The external support that communities need may fall into the following 10 categories, each of which may take on greater or lesser importance in specific cases:

- training – and periodic refresher training – of water user committees in basic maintenance, repairs, revenue collection and management, and broader management of the water point; and of handpump mechanics in more advanced diagnosis and repairs;
- technical assistance in the diagnosis of malfunctions, advice on repair options, and carrying out complex repairs;
- assistance with resolution of conflicts, breakdown of trust, and disagreements within the community;
- assistance to water user committees at times of transition of responsibility;
- financial or in-kind support in the case of high-cost repairs;
- support to communities at times of crisis such as floods, droughts, influxes of people, and other events;
- quality assurance of spare parts and maintenance of spare parts supply chains;
- advocacy to minimize and forestall external political interference, particularly over payment of agreed water charges;
- monitoring and information management in regard to water point functioning and water resource quantity and quality;
- sharing and coordination of agreed practices and approaches towards CBM among all stakeholders involved in CBM.

I suggest this as a checklist of the content of external support to CBM – the ‘plus’ in community management plus, a term first introduced by Erich Baumann (2006) but anticipated as integral to CBM since the 1980s (Briscoe and de Ferranti, 1988).

### Endnote

In order for rural water services to continue working, two key conditions must be fulfilled. First, the minor operation and maintenance costs (opex) and the larger, less frequent, capital maintenance (capmanex) costs must be covered. Rural communities in low-income countries may be able to cover the first, but often they cannot afford the second. Unless local government or some other external entity covers

that financing gap, physical infrastructure will gradually deteriorate to the point of eventual failure.

Second, the costs of support to CBM must be covered, and these costs will not come from user fees or tariffs but rather from some combination of government, donors, NGOs and faith-based organizations. These support costs are similar in magnitude to those for the maintenance and repairs of the physical works. Physical systems need maintenance and repair work for as long as they are expected to supply water; management arrangements likewise need continuing support with no time limit.

CBM will be needed for the foreseeable future, but it must be properly supported and funded. Trials of alternative management and financing arrangements must continue, too, but in the low- and middle-income countries where sustainable services are so challenging, it seems unlikely that they will be able to serve entire rural populations very soon.

## Welcome

We have great pleasure in welcoming to the *Waterlines* Editorial Team the following new members: Dotun Adekile (consultant, Nigeria), Jeanette Cooke (consultant, Rome), Cara Flowers (freelance, UK), and Leslie Morris-Iveson (consultant, UK). The expanded team will work with our counterparts at Practical Action Publishing to ensure the journal's content becomes ever more useful and that it can reach and be used by an ever wider readership.

## References

- Baumann, E. (2006) 'Do operation and maintenance pay?' *Waterlines* 25: 10–12 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/0262-8104.2006.033>> <<https://www.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/Baumann-2006-Do.pdf>>.
- Briscoe, J. and de Ferranti, D. (1988) 'Water for rural communities: helping people help themselves', The World Bank, Washington DC <<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/345181468766765197/pdf/multi-page.pdf>>.
- Miller, M., Cronk, R., Klug, T., Kelly, E.R., Behnke, N. and Bartram J. (2019) 'External support programs to improve rural drinking water service sustainability: a systematic review', *Science of the Total Environment* 670: 717–31 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.03.069>>.