



# Poverty Reduction Strategies: opportunities and threats for sustainable rural water services in sub-Saharan Africa

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**Abstract:** The links between access to safe water and poverty alleviation are multifaceted, but can be realized only if water supplies are sustained. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) have been developed by many low-income countries in conjunction with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and describe each country's macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes to promote growth and reduce poverty. An analysis of PRSPs in sub-Saharan Africa revealed insufficient attention to water and rural development and identified three common themes in the pursuit of reduced poverty: trade liberalization, decentralization and privatization; each of which poses opportunities, but also considerable threats, to the development of sustainable rural water services. An additional theme is that of community management of water services, which is prescribed by many PRSPs and related national sectoral strategies, yet has failed to deliver satisfactory levels of sustainability. PRSPs are designed to promote growth and reduce poverty, yet many of their essential ingredients threaten to reduce the sustainability of rural water services and thus hinder rather than promote development and poverty alleviation in rural Africa.

**Key words:** Africa, PRSPs, poverty, rural, water, sustainability.

## I Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the policy debate around the relationship between water supply and poverty, and to evaluate the potential effects of national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and related policies on rural water service sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa.

When poor people are directly asked about poverty, in the majority of cases they identify the lack of access to water as one of the key causes of poverty and improving access to water as one of the top priorities in reducing poverty (Calaguas and O'Connell, 2003). The links between water and poverty are multifaceted, and sustainable access to safe water

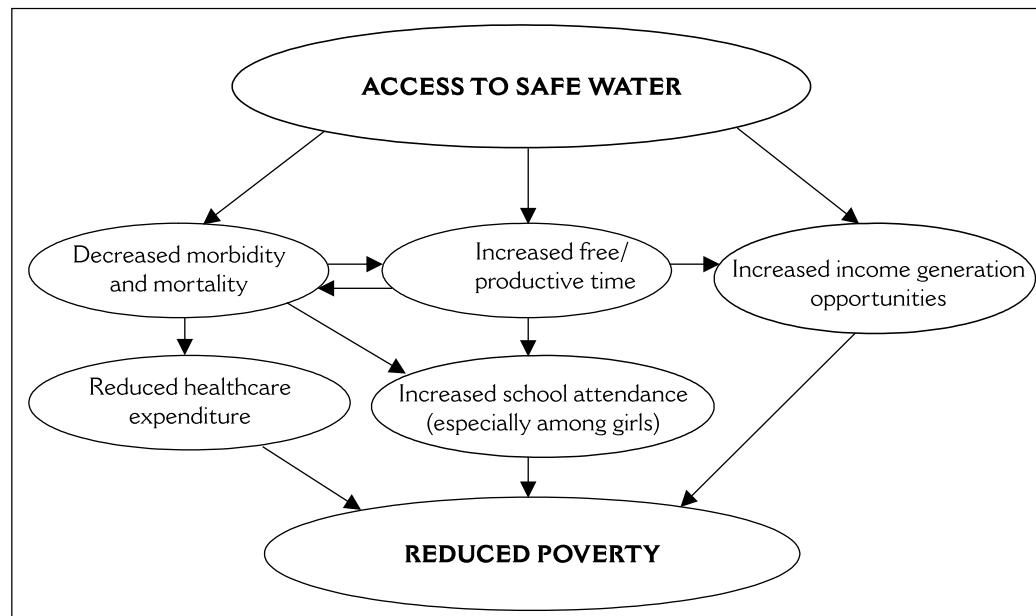
supplies can go a long way to ameliorate the effects of poverty. Figure 1 summarizes the key positive impacts of safe water provision on poverty. These are largely interdependent, and include:

- direct health benefits through decreased morbidity and mortality;
- higher productivity due to improved health;
- subsequent reduced spending on medicines and healthcare;
- more time available for water-fetchers for productive use;
- increased school attendance, especially among girls, as a result of reduced time used in fetching water; and
- increased potential for water use for income generating activities.

Traditionally, the water sector has disseminated the importance of improved water supply primarily in relation to public health (Esrey and Habicht, 1986; UNICEF/WHO, 2000),

but there is now increased awareness among sector professionals of the links between water and poverty. The extent and significance of water-related poverty was recognized at the International Freshwater Conference held in Bonn in 2001, which reiterated the importance of achieving safe, affordable and sustainable water access for poor populations, as a central global concern of poverty reduction (ODI, 2002). It is also now generally accepted that poverty transcends pure economic disadvantage, but impacts on general well-being and health, as well as social, educational and economic opportunity. Water is defined by the Humanitarian Charter as a basic human right; consequently, providing sustainable access to safe water through appropriate services has the potential to promote justice and dignity, and to empower the poor.

The fact that 53 percent of people in rural sub-Saharan Africa lacked access to safe water in 2000 as opposed to only 17 percent of their urban counterparts (UNICEF/WHO, 2000), illustrates the necessary emphasis that should



**Figure 1** Relationship between water and poverty

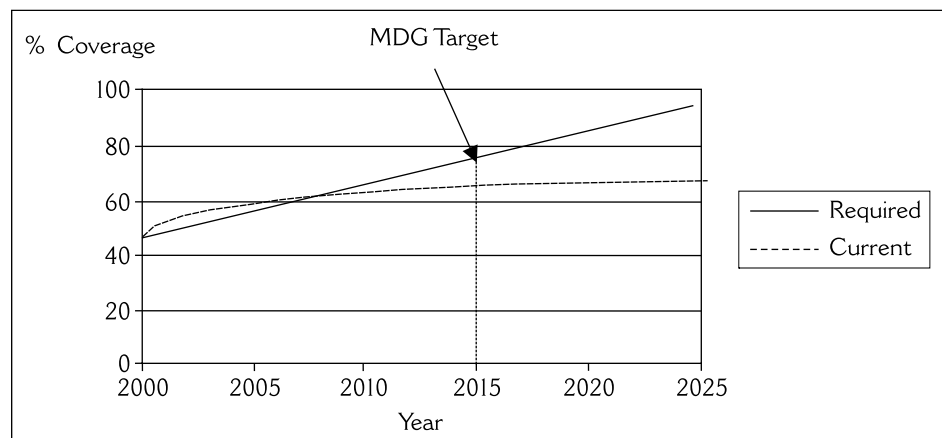
be given to the reduction of rural poverty, and consequently, the importance of sustainable service provision in rural areas.

### 1 Water service sustainability

The Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for environmental sustainability, agreed by the United Nations, includes the target to halve by the year 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water (Annan, 2000). If this target is to be achieved, it is estimated that approximately 184 million more people in rural Africa must gain access to safe drinking water before 2015 (UNDP, 2003). In addition to increasing access through implementation of improved water supplies, it is also necessary to ensure that both new and existing water systems are sustainable, so that access to safe water is sustained for all. It is estimated that 35–50 percent of rural water systems in sub-Saharan Africa are not functioning (Baumann, 2005; Harvey and Reed, 2004). Many of the reasons for these low levels of sustainability are related to water user communities, such as limited demand, lack of affordability or acceptability among communities, perceived lack of ownership, limited community education, and limited sustainability of community management structures (Carter *et al.*, 1999). However, there are also many

factors external to the community that influence sustainability; these include supply chains for equipment and spare parts, government support, and environmental issues. Figure 2 represents a prognosis model which demonstrates that unless current sustainability levels are increased, even with vastly increased investment for new infrastructure, the MDG target for water will not be realized.

In order to address the critical issue of water service sustainability it is necessary to take a holistic approach which incorporates financial, institutional and community issues, and technological and environmental considerations; all of which are influenced heavily by government policies. The institutional framework is generally defined by government policy which dictates stakeholder roles and responsibilities, be they governmental, private sector, community-based or civil society. Similarly, financing mechanisms for cost-recovery and ongoing operation and maintenance of systems are often defined by sectoral policies. Even the choice of water supply technology is affected by government standardization policies. This is particularly apparent with the handpump-equipped well or borehole which remains the predominant water technology in rural Africa (Narkevic, 2005). In addition, there are many generic policies which have



**Figure 2** MDG prognosis model illustrating the 'sustainability gap'

indirect but significant impacts on service sustainability, as will be outlined in this paper.

## 2 *Poverty reduction strategies*

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) launched the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) initiative in 1999. As part of this process low-income borrower countries are required to complete a PRS paper (PRSP) to access Bank and IMF concessional lending and Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief. PRSPs are prepared by the government of the member country in collaboration with the staff of the World Bank and IMF, as well as civil society and development partners. These documents describe the country's macro-economic, structural and social policies and programmes to promote growth and reduce poverty, as well as associated external financing needs and major sources of financing.

According to IDS (2000), the principles that guide PRSPs are:

- *Country-driven*: with governments leading the process and broad-based participation in the adoption and monitoring of the resulting strategy;
- *Results-oriented*: identifying desired outcomes and planning the way towards them;
- *Comprehensive*: taking account of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty;
- *Long-term in approach*: recognizing the depth and complexity of some of the changes needed;
- *Based on partnership*: between governments and other actors in civil society and the donor community.

Forty-one countries were included in the PRS initiative, 32 of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the African countries, 20 have completed full PRSPs at the time of writing and nine have produced interim PRSPs. The 20 countries with completed PRSPs were included in this study and are as follows:

1. Benin
2. Burkina Faso
3. Cameroon
4. Chad
5. Ethiopia
6. Gambia
7. Ghana
8. Guinea
9. Kenya
10. Madagascar
11. Malawi
12. Mali
13. Mauritania
14. Mozambique
15. Niger
16. Rwanda
17. Senegal
18. Tanzania
19. Uganda
20. Zambia

In sub-Saharan Africa in general, the water and sanitation sector has been poorly integrated into PRSP and budgetary processes, contrasting sharply with sectors such as education and health that are lent greater priority in PRSP documentation, and subsequently benefit from larger resource allocations (ODI, 2004). A recent review of the PRS process identified the need for greater focus on infrastructure and rural development in PRSPs (OED, 2004). Given these findings the aims and objectives of the study were designed to incorporate these issues in the PRSP assessment process.

*Aims and objectives*: This study aimed to analyze the contents of PRSPs from the 20 countries to determine the respective emphasis given to water and rural development, and to identify common themes that influence rural water service sustainability. These themes were then analyzed to determine potential opportunities for, and threats to, increased service sustainability. Given the direct relationship between access to water and poverty reduction, the findings were then applied

to evaluate the effectiveness of PRSPs for alleviation of rural poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.

## II Methodology

The first step in this process was to assess each of the 20 poverty reduction strategy papers in relation to the following factors:

- emphasis on water supply in relation to health and education sectors;
- emphasis on rural development; and
- sustainability factors for rural water services.

The relative emphasis on water supply was determined by assessing the paper content allocated to water supply in relation to the paper content allocated to the health and education sectors. The PRSP was deemed to have 'sufficient' water focus only where water supply was allocated at least 75 percent of the content amount (defined by numbers of lines of text) given to the least emphasized of the other two sectors (that is, health or education).

The relative emphasis for rural development was determined using a similar process, by assessing the paper content allocated to rural development in relation to the paper content allocated to urban development. The PRSP was deemed to have 'sufficient' rural focus only where rural development was allocated at least the same content amount (that is, the same number of lines of text) given to urban development.

In addition to the assessment of relative emphasis on water and rural, the PRSPs were analyzed with respect to generic factors affecting rural water service sustainability. These sustainability factors (derived from Harvey & Reed, 2004) were:

- institutional and financial issues;
- community and social issues;
- technology and the environment;
- supply chains and maintenance; and
- monitoring.

The entire content of each strategy paper was reviewed to identify generic themes which have potential influence on any of the above sustainability factors related to rural water services. Each of the themes identified and its relative potential impact on rural water service sustainability was then examined qualitatively with particular reference to research conducted in four African countries with completed PRSPs: Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia.

## III Results and analysis

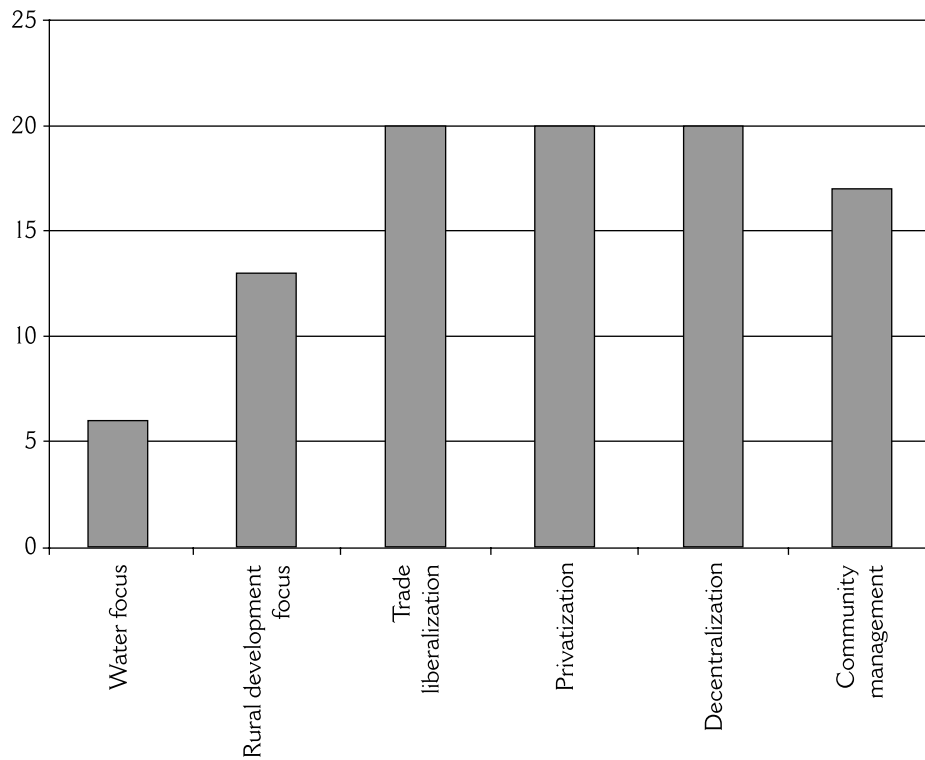
Figure 3 summarizes the results of the initial analysis of the 20 PRSPs. This indicated that only six out of 20 PRSPs (30 percent) had sufficient focus on water. Even more tellingly, of the 70 percent of PRSPs with insufficient focus the majority did not have even a single paragraph specifically on water. This supports the OED findings and demonstrates the limited attention given to the water sector in relation to other public service sectors in national strategies for poverty reduction.

The analysis also revealed that only 13 out of 20 PRSPs (65 percent) had sufficient focus on rural development. While this demonstrates a greater emphasis than that for water it again supports the OED findings by revealing that rural development is commonly assigned a lower priority than urban development in macroeconomic planning.

In seeking common generic themes related to sustainability factors it was identified that 20 out of 20 PRSPs (100 percent) emphasized each of the following three themes:

- Trade liberalization;
- Privatization; and
- Decentralization.

Each of these themes has potential direct effects on one or more sustainability factor. Trade liberalization has potential effects on technology, supply chains and maintenance; privatisation has potential effects on institutional and financial issues, technology, supply chains



**Figure 3** PRSP analysis summary

and maintenance; and decentralization has potential effects on institutional and financial issues, community and social issues, and monitoring.

Of the 30 percent of PRSPs which had sufficient focus on water, all emphasized the importance of community management of rural water supplies. Consequently, the policy analysis was expanded to assess the water sector policies of the remaining 14 countries to ascertain whether these also emphasized community management as a policy directorate. This expanded analysis indicated that 17 countries out of 20 (85 percent) had a clear policy focus on community management, making this a fourth generic theme, since this had a direct effect on community and social issues in relation to rural water services.

Each of the four core themes and how they impact on rural water service sustainability

is examined in detail below, with particular reference to the four research countries.

#### *1 Trade liberalization*

All of the 20 PRSPs, without exception, emphasize the importance of trade liberalization in reducing poverty. Phrases such as 'liberalising the economy' (Mali), 'open(ing) up trade' (Ghana), 'elimination of barriers to trade and fair competition' (Zambia) and 'continued liberalisation of foreign trade' (Mozambique) are commonplace across country papers. Zambia's PRSP presents the only check on trade liberalization by identifying that 'the introduction of external trade liberalisation with little consideration of the speed and degree to which the country's main regional trade partners are doing the same calls for further reflection'. Even here, however, there is no indication of a significant change in policy direction.

Trade liberalization has specific impacts on rural water service sustainability. Rather than stimulating competition among the private sector and ensuring quality water supply equipment, the policy threatens in-country manufacture and the provision of high quality equipment and spare parts, which are necessary to ensure that water supplies are sustained. Trade liberalization means that local African manufacturers must compete with international companies that benefit from reduced labour wages and increased domestic demand for products within the country of manufacture. Since the vast majority of sub-Saharan African countries have no, or negligible, quality control on imported products, this often means that imported equipment and components are often of lower quality than those manufactured in the country of use. This means there is an increased need for repairs and reduced sustainability.

Local manufacture of handpumps and associated spare parts has considerable potential to promote sustainability of rural water supplies. Indeed, in the 1980s this was thought by many to be a prerequisite for handpump-based water supplies (Arlosoroff *et al.*, 1987) and there was a big drive to promote in-country manufacture which assured quality and accountability. Current evidence suggests that where pumps are manufactured in-country there are significantly fewer problems in setting up sustainable supply chains for

equipment and spare parts (Harvey & Reed, 2006). Where pumps are imported, however, there is commonly a lack of quality control and little opportunity for the consumer to exert their rights on the supplier.

An example of this is the case of Uganda (Box 1) in which local manufacture is threatened by uncontrolled importation of often inferior pump components from India.

Procurement processes of governments and major donors exacerbate this problem since pump suppliers are selected on the basis of lowest price per pump and bulk orders for pumps (but not normally spare parts) are placed on this basis. This is in the short-term financial interests of the purchaser but does little to promote sustainability. International companies are keen to compete for contracts to supply large number of pumps, since the profit margins are attractive, but subsequently they have no incentive to supply spare parts which provide negligible profits, and so long as they continue to receive large orders for pumps, business remains viable. This practice means that an isolated supply chain must be set up for the ongoing supply of spare parts, which is an unsustainable private sector activity. Consequently, rural communities have limited access to spare parts and are often unable to repair and maintain their water systems.

The negative effects of trade liberalization are further compounded by import and taxation arrangements imposed by governments. Many international donors and aid agencies have

### **Box 1** Handpump imports and local manufacturing in Uganda

An indigenous private company manufactures Uganda's standardised handpumps in Kampala. The quality of these pumps is generally good as indicated by the fact that the company received a Quality Award in 2002 from the Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS). The annual sales of the company are about 2,000 handpumps per year although it is capable of manufacturing double this number. There are also several import companies in the country which import near identical pumps from India, which are available at lower prices than those manufactured in Kampala, and are of poorer quality. Due to the Government's policy of trade liberalisation there are no attempts to limit importation of such pumps, which threaten the long-term security and sustainability of local manufacturing, and consequently, the sustainability of rural water services.

(Harvey, 2003)

negotiated with national governments to ensure tax-free aid. This means that import duties and government taxes are commonly waived, supposedly in the interests of 'sustainable development'. In reality, such measures have the potential to completely undermine rural water supply sustainability, since the emphasis is on ensuring low procurement costs for the donor without consideration of the knock-on effects of such a policy. The relaxation of duty on such 'development-related' products means that an uneven commercial playing field is created which disadvantages the local manufacturer. In addition, it also adds to the pumps and spares dichotomy, since duty is commonly imposed on imported spare parts but not on pumps. A clear example of this is the case of Kenya (Box 2).

Despite the negative impacts outlined above, trade liberalization is likely to remain a central tenet of World Bank influenced development policies for many years to come. It is therefore important to recognize potential opportunities it may provide to improve rural water supply sustainability. International competition could improve value for money and cost-effectiveness, but only if national Governments develop effective regulatory frameworks for quality control to prevent the prevalence of inferior products. A community with a pump that constantly breaks down because of poor quality seals will soon decide to stop bothering to repair it and their water supply will not be sustained.

The most important requirement to ensure positive outcomes of trade liberalization, however, is appropriate donor procurement. If agencies that buy pumps for water supply programmes purchase these in the country of use and demand that retailers stock quality pumps and spares, this may promote competition, reduce costs (to agencies and communities) and improve the quality of products. This requires a fundamental change in procurement approach, especially within large international organizations, that decentralizes decision-making powers to national programmes.

Trade liberalization is intrinsically linked with privatization, another central tenet of IMF and World Bank policy, since it encourages free market competition between private enterprises. However, privatization differs in that it has both international and local applications.

## 2 Privatization

All 20 PRSPs place considerable emphasis on the importance of privatization of national assets and promoting private sector participation in achieving poverty reduction. This has potential for contributing to water service sustainability, but evidence suggests that the current approach to promoting private sector involvement may actually reduce sustainability.

### **Box 2** Handpump imports and local manufacturing in Kenya

Most NGOs and bilateral agencies in Kenya are exempted from 5 percent import duty and 18 percent Value-Added Tax (VAT) by agreement with central Government. In addition to this, all handpumps imported into the country are exempt from VAT, and importers need only pay the 5 percent import duty. Spare parts and raw materials, however, attract the full levels of VAT and duty. As a result, at least in part, importing large consignments of Afridev handpumps from India proves much cheaper than manufacturing the same pumps in country even though there is capacity to do this. It also means that there is even less incentive to import spare parts, and yet there is insufficient profit to attract local manufacturers to produce these as an isolated activity. There is no Government policy to encourage or protect the local manufacture of handpumps, nor to ensure sustainable spare parts provision.

(Harvey *et al.*, 2003)



The role of the private sector in rural water services in sub-Saharan Africa is largely limited to construction and installation of water systems and the supply of spare parts. Uganda is one country in which the private sector plays a lead role in implementation, since most major donors now provide aid through central budget support and the Government uses private contractors to implement its rural water supply programme (DWD, 2002). This means that increasingly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the traditional role of which was to implement donor water supply projects, are becoming largely redundant since donors no longer provide them with funds for direct implementation. This threatens water service sustainability since the main incentive of the private sector is to maximize profits, while that of NGOs is to reduce poverty and ensure sustainable development. Privatization of water and associated services in Uganda is therefore leading once again to a supply-driven approach, in which services are imposed on communities by Governments (in partnership with the private sector) with minimal consideration of their needs and priorities (Harvey, 2003). The Government role is largely limited to contracting out construction works, while most private contractors do not have expertise in community consultation and participation and there are ineffective structures in place to ensure that this happens. Evidence strongly suggests that service sustainability is significantly increased where user communities participate in the decision-making process and implementation responds to their demands (Batchelor *et al.*, 2000).

The privatized approach therefore threatens to negate the gains made by demand-responsive initiatives and to reduce sustainability levels even further, unless there is strong regulation to ensure that poor rural communities are able to articulate their demands and that the private sector responds to these appropriately. Regulation is also essential to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable

people are served adequately and that subsidies are provided for them where needed.

Another major constraint in the push to privatization is the limited capacity of the indigenous private sector in the vast majority of countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Even in Uganda, which is ahead of most other African countries in the privatization process, private sector capacity is generally weak and requires strengthening (NAO, 2003). The slow rate of implementation and lack of competition for drilling contracts for handpump-based water supplies means that the average cost of a borehole in the four detailed study countries is approximately US\$ 5,000. This cost is more than five times that of an identical borehole drilled in near identical geological conditions in India (Carter, 2005). The lack of capacity and competition therefore often means lower quality work, resulting in less sustainable boreholes, as well as low cost-effectiveness.

Post-construction private sector participation is generally limited to the provision of spare parts. As discussed earlier, in the vast majority of cases this activity is separated from the provision of pumps which makes it unviable as a stand-alone private sector activity. Selling spare parts is not generally a profitable business and therefore the willingness of the private sector to take on this commercially uninteresting activity is minimal (Baumann, 2000). Evidence from Ghana, Malawi, and Zambia indicates that even when the private sector is persuaded to become involved as a result of incentive provision by donors, supply chains remain unsustainable (Harvey & Reed, 2004). The insistence of donors to continue to attempt to instigate sustainable private sector supply chains for spare parts is irresponsible given the widespread evidence of this lack of viability. A clear example of this is the case of Ghana (Box 3).

The fact that community management of rural water supplies is promoted across Africa, as shall be discussed later in this paper, means that the participation of the private sector

**Box 3** Private sector spares supply in Ghana

A joint government/donor initiative in Ghana in 2001 involved a US\$125,000 grant to hire a private contractor, rent appropriate warehouses and provide necessary marketing and promotion for a nationwide handpump spare parts supply network. In addition to this, DM 400,000 (US\$200,000) was provided to purchase and import the initial batch of spare parts (for all four standardised handpumps found in Ghana) and establish quality control procedures. The intention behind this was for the initial batch of spares to act as a seed fund to generate profits for the private contractor, some of which would be used in a revolving fund to purchase more spares, leading to a fully privatised sustainable supply chain for spare parts.

Despite this considerable investment the private contractor has established only five distribution outlets for spares across the country and does not intend to open any additional outlets due to limited profitability. The location of these existing outlets means that travel from some communities to the nearest retail point takes one or two days and involves considerable cost. The commercial viability, and hence sustainability, of spare parts provision in the country remains seriously doubtful, to say the least, since the use of imported pumps and parts is promoted and yet the demand for and turnover of spares remains very low due to the low density of rural water systems. Private sector stakeholders themselves question the viability of private sector participation and most are reluctant to get involved (Venkatesh, 2002).

(Harvey *et al.*, 2002)

is largely limited to initial construction and provision of spares. Construction contracts are irregular and there is no guarantee of a stable income stream, and provision of spares is commercially unviable. This means that there is currently a serious lack of incentives for private sector participation in rural water services. If privatization is to have a positive impact on service sustainability then public-private options for operation and maintenance (O&M) of water supplies need to be explored. There are several approaches that have been introduced, such as the Total Warranty Scheme in Mauritania (Bernage, 2000) and the Handpump Lease Concept in Angola (van Beers, 2001). These have been successful in providing a regular income to indigenous private sector operators, since rural communities pay them to provide a reliable water service, but have been implemented only on a small scale to date. A recent study in Uganda indicated a strong desire among local spare parts dealers to diversify activities in this way to increase profits (Baumann *et al.*, 2002).

Privatization does provide some opportunities for increased sustainability of rural water services but only if private companies are effectively regulated and if they develop

sufficient capacity and skills, especially in community-based development approaches. Indeed, privatized rural water services may provide a more sustainable option than community-managed services, since they are based on sustainable incentives; but interestingly, recent research in Uganda showed that while many staff of Government departments and donor agencies expound the merits of privatized construction of water systems, most are resistant to the idea of privately-run rural water services (Uno, 2005). Whatever level of privatization is adopted, Government regulation is essential. For rural areas this means that Government powers must be decentralized so that regional and district water authorities have sufficient capacity and autonomy to provide effective regulation.

### 3 Decentralization

The emphasis placed on decentralization varies considerably between the PRSPs of the different countries, yet the move to decentralized service delivery and devolution of power from national level to regional and district levels is inherent in all the papers analyzed. Decentralization provides opportunities for improved local management of water services since greater local government autonomy

provides potential for closer links to user communities. This is especially important to provide appropriate support to communities to manage their own water supplies, since in almost all cases community management systems are sustainable only where there is continued local institutional support (Harvey & Reed, 2004). In most African countries the district level is also the optimum level for monitoring and regulation, which is essential to determine whether or not water systems remain operational, and if not, why not, and to ensure that private contractors are operating effectively.

Despite these apparent advantages, decentralization also has a number of potential negative impacts that must be mitigated against if this policy issue is not to result in decreased service sustainability levels. Increased bureaucracy, potential for multiple level corruption and limited capacity have led to increased inefficiencies and decreased sustainability. Uganda and Ghana are ahead of many other African countries in the decentralization process, but in both countries it can be argued that the push to decentralized implementation utilizing the private sector has been too rapid. Local government institutions require time to build up the necessary physical and human resources and develop appropriate institutional mechanisms. This means that efficiencies may be reduced significantly in the transitional phase (Box 4). It remains to be seen, however, whether these inefficiencies will continue or reduce over time. It is clear that local government accountability is essential

to ensure that services are provided in an efficient, effective, equitable and sustainable manner.

One contributing factor to the inefficiency observed in Uganda was insufficient capacity of lower levels of Government (at District level and below), especially concerning the ability to mobilize communities to address O&M issues (NAO, 2003). Similar limitations have been identified in Ghana (Harvey *et al.*, 2002) and Kenya (Harvey *et al.*, 2003). Local governments are pivotal to reshaping and strengthening local communities, and intensifying service delivery, especially to the poor, but require capacity building and reflective institutionalization of service delivery instruments (Mogale, 2005).

Of the three themes analyzed so far, decentralization offers the most positive opportunities for enhanced service sustainability levels. Decentralized government authorities are best placed to monitor, regulate and support rural water services. In order to be effective, however, adequate resources must be provided and sufficient capacity developed. This process is likely to take considerable time, but decentralization undoubtedly has the potential to effectively support private service delivery or community managed water services.

#### 4 Community management

Community management is a cornerstone of government policy for rural water services in the vast majority of African countries with PRSPs, and has been consistently promoted by donors and implementing agencies over the

### Box 4 Decentralization and privatization in Uganda

In Uganda in 2003, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) undertook an audit of the water supply sector 'Is the Water Sector Performing' in which they asserted that the cost of a single water point had increased by three to four times since the introduction of budget support and decentralised, privatised water service delivery in 2000/01. The Directorate of Water Development of Uganda fiercely rejected the findings of this report, claiming that the data were not reliable, and that there was no urban/rural breakdown considered in the analysis. However, evidence from some NGOs would seem to support the findings of the MoF audit in relation to rural water supplies (Busoga Trust, 2004).

(Harvey, 2003)

past two decades. Despite this uniformity, the policy has undoubtedly had limited success to date, and a number of checks and balances must be instigated if it is to have a beneficial impact on service sustainability.

Community management is based on the well-intentioned principle of empowering communities to take ownership of, and responsibility for, their own water supplies. This is a worthy ideal but the way in which it has been adopted in most countries abrogates responsibility for sustainable service delivery away from Governments and implementing agencies. Since access to safe water is a universal right it is unacceptable and unethical that communities should be left alone to manage and sustain their water supplies, since they may be unwilling or unable to do this. Community management has been adopted by many as a convenient mechanism to 'pass the buck' when it comes to the complex issue of ensuring sustainability. Governments can claim that they are not responsible for rural water services since these are 'community managed'. Implementing NGOs and donors can leave a project area claiming that they have ensured sustainability by 'mobilizing and training' communities to manage supplies themselves. The reality is that many communities do not manage water systems appropriately and that these soon fall into a state of disrepair (Box 5). As already stated, there is a strong need for localized (de-centralized) institutional support if community management is to be effective, and yet this is often overlooked. Unchecked, community management may also neglect the poorest

and most vulnerable in societies since in most cases there is no systematic way of providing cross subsidy.

It may seem surprising that the major macroeconomic policy of a country (its PRSP) can define the way in which individual rural water supplies are managed, and yet this is the case for some countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Phrases found in PRSPs include: 'emphasis will be given to communities and the users to take responsibility for (water) maintenance works and organisation of management' (Mali); 'communities...to establish lower-level WASHE (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Education) committees to ensure effective community planning and management of (water) facilities.' (Zambia); 'raising people's accountability for its (water's) management' (Chad); and 'communities... being responsible for the maintenance of facilities' (Uganda). This is a case of policy defining process at a level of detail that seems inappropriate for such a policy paper. It can also be argued that this actually disempowers communities since they are given no choice as to how their water services are to be managed and sustained.

Community management is relevant to the other PRSP themes of trade liberalization and privatization, since if communities are to be primarily responsible for ongoing service provision they are responsible for purchasing spares parts and engaging the private sector. Decentralization is also related as the role of local Government is dependent on how water services are managed. Community management provides significant opportunities for

### **Box 5** Community management in Zambia

A study of 57 rural communities across 9 districts in Zambia indicated that all communities required a supporting institutional framework at district level to enable them to manage operation and maintenance effectively. Community WASHE (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Education) committees were most effective where the supporting district WASHE committees were typified by dynamic management and leadership, and included all relevant governmental and NGO stakeholders. In districts where WASHE committees were non-existent, or inactive, the number of dysfunctional community committees, and the proportion of water systems which were not functioning, were 2-3 times higher.

(Harvey and Skinner, 2002)

sustainable water services but whether it is adopted should be decided at local level rather than at national level, based on the wishes of communities themselves. It is also essential that there is clear understanding of what the term 'community management' means; it should not mean that communities can be isolated or that the obligations of Governments can be ignored.

#### IV Conclusions

This analysis of PRSPs in Africa reveals a high degree of content uniformity despite a significant range in detail and scope. The limited attention to water and rural development in relation to other sectors and urban development indicates that access to water in rural areas is given low priority in reducing poverty. The links between water and poverty are multidimensional and enhanced rural water and poverty focus is required in the PRSP development processes of all countries.

Rural water service sustainability is a dynamic concept which is affected by many interrelated factors. These include trade liberalization, privatization, decentralization and community management, all of which are embodied within the majority of PRSPs. There are strong links between trade and privatization, but for these to have a positive impact on water service sustainability, there must be an even playing field for manufacturers and realistic indigenous private sector opportunities must be developed. If private sector participation is to be limited to construction and spare parts provision, the low levels of rural water sustainability prevalent across the sub-continent are unlikely to improve. Privatization has the potential to increase sustainability but only if the capacity of indigenous private companies is developed and if increased opportunities, such as the opportunity to manage rural water services, are provided for them.

Liberalized trade coupled with donor-friendly import policies and current donor procurement practice does little to enhance sustainability. Trade liberalization can only

contribute to service sustainability if the procurement practices of major donors change and if there is effective quality assurance. Donors should buy pumps (whether manufactured locally or imported) in country and should work with private enterprises to ensure sustainable supply chains for pumps and spare parts.

There are also strong links between decentralization, privatization and community management. Decentralization processes must be adequately supported and given sufficient implementation time to ensure development of appropriate resources and mechanisms. If private sector participation is to increase, local government institutions must be equipped to regulate this. Likewise, if communities are to be responsible for management of water supplies they must not be isolated but provided with adequate support from local government. Policy should not dictate management arrangements for water supplies but should be sufficiently flexible to ensure that poor rural communities are provided with real choice and fully empowered.

While there are aspects of PRSPs which have potential to contribute to sustainable water service provision, these must be viewed holistically if these benefits are to be realized. Policy-makers and sector professionals must be made aware of the interrelationships between the PRSP themes identified. Simply promoting 'privatization', 'decentralization' or 'community management' means little and may do more damage than good unless the interdependencies between them are understood and practical strategies are developed to maximize their positive impacts.

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