

The participation of the socio-political environment in water and sanitation

By Stephanie Heiland¹

Water and sanitation is still perceived as a predominantly technical sector, as an evaluation of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) shows, which has to open up far more to questions of poverty reduction, gender equality, conflict prevention and the participation of all social groups. So far, socio-political and socioeconomic factors are not sufficiently considered and current projects in water and sanitation do not correspond to the fact that the sector politics have become more important.

Governance

Water and sanitation is a social and political affair which goes far beyond the influence of the operator, no matter if it is a small water committee, a cooperative, a public or private enterprises, etc. Often, the initial situation of a water and sanitation project, includes problems like the lack of willingness or capacity to pay for the service, an un-ecological use of the water resources, a high level of water induced illnesses, a high conflict potential for example because of an increase in charges or deficient water quality and quantity, political influence in the operator, etc. – problems related to actors outside of the operator itself.

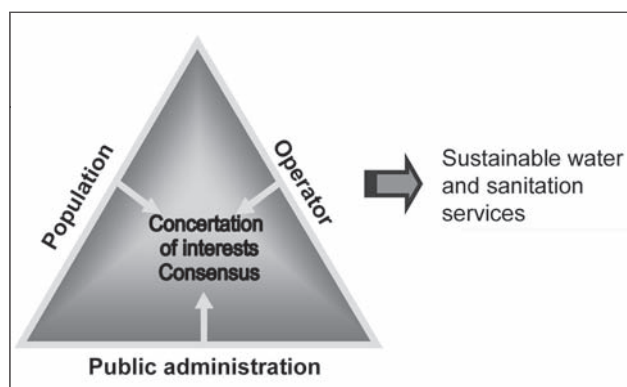
The context in which an operator acts is characterized by interactive processes, rules and mechanisms that coordinate and direct the behaviour of human beings – so called “governance” processes which are important to consider when implementing a water and sanitation

project. The operator of the water and sanitation services finds itself in a social and political environment which consists of many different actors: Apart from the **operator**, there are two more main groups of actors: the **population** in her function as users of the services and the entity of the **public administration** politically responsible for the water and sanitation services. The different actors have different interests and strive for different benefits with regard to water and sanitation, understanding benefits not only as material goods, but also as values like image, acknowledgement, recognition, power, influence, comfort, etc. For example, the population usually shares the common interest of paying an affordable water fee. The interest of the operator is to get enough receipts to be self-sufficient and the public administration might follow the interest to maintain a positive image in the population to be re-elected in the next ballot. If these interests and benefits are very divergent, normally the water and sanitation services do not work efficiently and sustainable. In many cases it even leads to conflicts.

Therefore, the concentration of interests and benefits or consensus between the three main groups of actors is considered to be an essential condition for economically, ecologically and socio-politically sustainable water and sanitation services.

Incentives – positive or negative – can stimulate and reinforce or keep from certain modes of behaviour, and therefore play an important role in governance processes. Usually, groups direct the individual strive for benefits to socially acceptable paths. The individual behaves in first place according to the influence of the group and the strength of the incentives. For example, formal or informal rules and norms can work as an incentive for an individual to behave in a certain way.

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Concertation of interests between main groups of actors in water and sanitation as a condition for sustainable services

The processes, through which the operator, together with the public administration and the population, develop the water and sanitation situation on the local level, are not only in the field of improving the infrastructural, managerial, technical, commercial and administrative areas of an operator. To reach the goal that all the actors involved go towards a common goal independent of their individual or collective strive for benefits and their interests, additional strategies are required.

Empowerment of the socio-political environment of the operator

The term “empowerment” got popular in development cooperation in the context of the Gender and Development - approaches. Nowadays, it is also widely used in the fields of adult education and community development.

Empowerment refers to the strengthening of the capacity to reach a qualified participation in society. It has to do with “power”, but not in the sense of having power over- or dominate others, but with self-esteem and internal power and independence.

The empowerment of the socio-political environment of the operator is based on the idea that water supply and waste water disposal is not only the responsibility of the operator, but a common matter in which everybody has a role. Empowering women and men, young

people, children, local authorities, representatives of indigenous populations, etc. to participate in a qualified way in water and sanitation, creates understanding, a sense of co-responsibility for water-related problems and social control for the execution of the operator.

In the regions of Chaco and Bustillo in Bolivia, for example, the population participates in the board of the operator. The representatives of the population are elected in democratic elections. During their 3-years-mandate, they receive permanent training and coaching, empowering their capacities to carry out their role.



Voting paper for the elections of population representatives for the board of the operator Manchaco SAM, Bolivia

Environmental and sanitary education

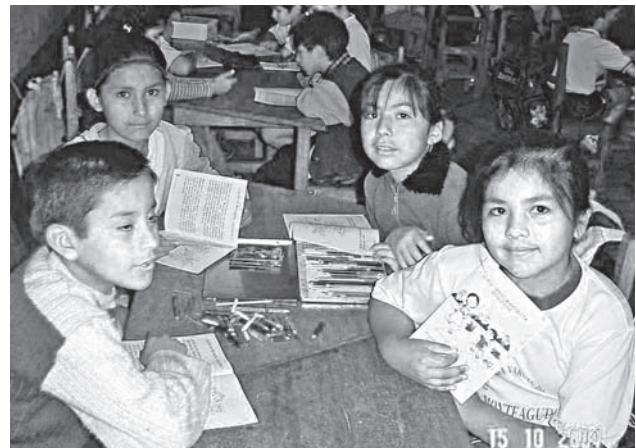
Water and sanitation is related to health and environment. Contaminated water, inadequate customs and habits in the use of drinking water and the disposal of waste water cause damages to the environment and increase the incident of water-induced illnesses.

Environmental and sanitary culture has to do with different levels of human culture and is expressed in customs, habits, behaviour, symbols, rituals, heroes and values. Psychologists believe that these are developed mainly during infancy and childhood. As education of children occurs in first place in the family and educational centres (kindergarten, school, university, etc.), parents, teachers, children and adolescents are the

principal target groups for environmental and sanitary education.

Environmental and sanitary education is a process promoting healthy and environment protecting habits, customs and behaviours parting from the specific necessities of the individual.

In Bolivia, an additional target group related to the above mentioned was identified: the decentralised offices of the ministry of education on district level. Lobbying work for the introduction of environmental and sanitary education into the school curricula led to a comprehensive educational programme in water and sanitation: ministry representatives and school directors declared the year 2005 as “the year of basic sanitation in education”. Hundreds of teachers got training and didactical materials in environmental and sanitary education and during all the year activities and events as drawing competitions and stage plays on water- and environment related subjects, water poetry and song competitions, etc. were executed.



Pupils of the Bolivian Chaco using environmental and sanitary education materials.

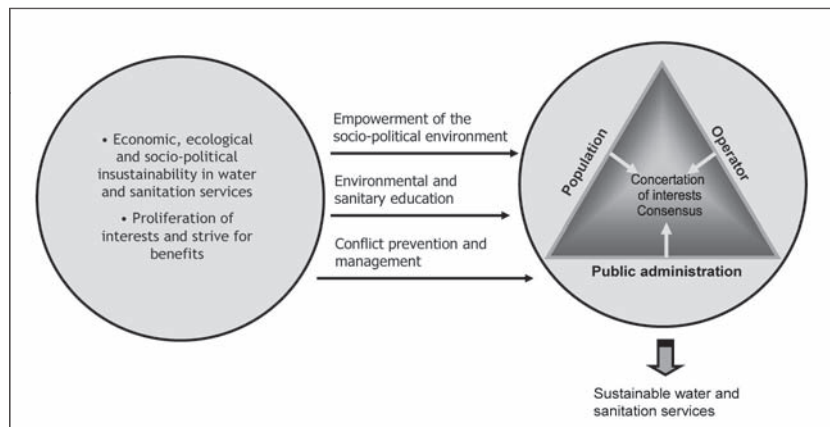
Conflict prevention and management

The demand for fresh water by human beings is permanently multiplying. It is estimated that in the following 30 years, it will triplicate. Today, about 70% is used for irrigation, 20% for industry and 10% by households. It is estimated that the number of countries not being able to guarantee the necessary water supply will increase considerably, and therefore also the conflicts about water.

Conflicts in water and sanitation can surge because of the above mentioned problem of national water supply, but also on a “lower level” as for example a fee increase, political influence in the operator, tensions between irrigators and operator, deficient quality of the water supply, etc. Therefore, conflict prevention and management has to be incorporated systematically into water and sanitation projects.

In reality, the borderlines between the different strategies are not as marked as they seem to be here, they rather pass into each other fluently. For example, an activity in environmental and sanitary education for a women’s group can contribute to the prevention of a conflict, empower the group of women. Nevertheless, the categorisation in different strategies helps not to keep in sight the direct and indirect impacts you want to reach.

Conflicts are part of social change and even result necessary for social development. They are the expression of tensions and lack of consensus between groups and individuals with regard to their requirements, interests and values. The problem is not the conflicts itself, but the way they manifest. There is always the possibility to transform conflicts constructively and convert them into opportunities.



Strategies for participation of the socio-political environment in water and sanitation