KTH VETENSKAP OCH KONST

KTH Land and Water Resources Engineering

Strategic Communication in Water Resources Management: Building Community Capacities for Greater Sustainability

Nandita Singh[1] and O.P. Singh[2]

[1]Department of Land and Water Resources Engineering, Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan,
SE-100 44 Stockholm, Sweden
[2] Visual Anthropologist, Sibeliusgången 42, 164 72 Kista, Sweden

Introduction

➢ Communication is being increasingly recognized as critical for achieving the goals of sustainable development. Assuming that development interventions universally entail adoption of 'change' – generally based in new technologies, new services or even new institutional frameworks – the significance of communication becomes paramount. For adoption of most of these changes, among other concerns, the need for change in the existing behaviors in the community is seen as important, and communication undoubtedly plays a vital role in this process.

➢However, in the water sector, where the overarching development goal is sustainable access to safe drinking water for all, primarily through installation of new low-cost technologies that users can build and manage themselves, it appears that the intricacies of the linkage between behavioral change and achievement of the goal are yet to be fully explored and adequately addressed.

➢ The presentation aims at delineating the factors that influence the fulfilment of water needs of local users in India from the perspective of communication. It is based upon the findings of an empirical study conducted in India in rural communities in 3 states, namely, Bihar, West Bengal (W.B.) and Madhya Pradesh (M.P.).

➢The study showed that technology alone is not the solution for fulfilment of water needs, but emerges as a problem in its own right because of problems of effective adoption, equitable access, and sustainable management of the technology at community level. The causes underlying this set of problems in turn lie embedded in the realm of behavior of the targeted technology beneficiaries and their larger communities, which need to be targeted for change through appropriate strategies.

Communication Approaches in Water Sector

➢Governments as well as agencies like the UNICEF have drawn communication strategies in water sector, and water-related IEC is designed and implemented in the field by different agencies, largely with the aim of sensitizing and educating people towards water problems and the water technologies available for their redressal.

➢However, the research shows that the ongoing efforts are not sufficient because these tend to take only a blanket-approach to communication, and conceiving the problem as that of one-way transmission of information from agencies to communities that is believed to automatically induce adoption of new technologies.

➢Also, these look at communication as an 'end-of-pipe' activity, isolated from rest of the project.

➢Consequently, these look for communication needs at the macro-level, overlooking the realities of the micro-groups within communities that may have differential communication needs due to certain socio-cultural & psychological factors embedded in the specific context in turn leading to behavioral constraints.

➢There is hence a need to strengthen the present communication approaches through adoption of a new **strategic perspective** for addressing the behavioral constraints among the targeted technology beneficiaries. Otherwise, the development goals in relation to water will remain difficult to achieve.

Problems with present communication approach in water sector
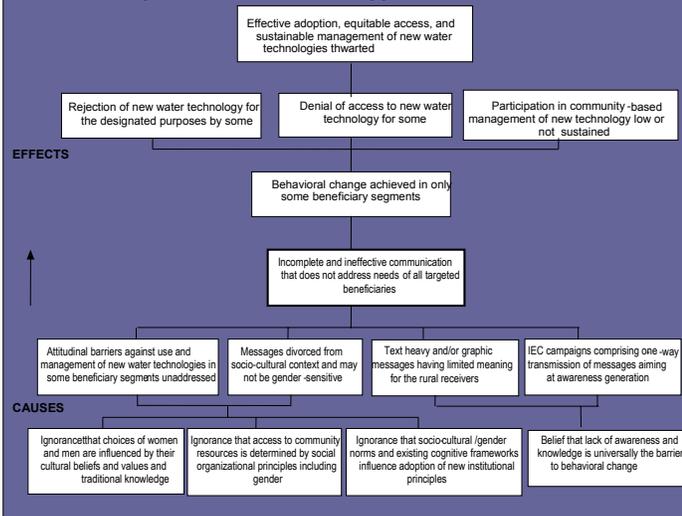
Examples from India

➢In a sample of 35 villages studied in W.B., the utilization pattern of 19 working arsenic removal plants installed by different agencies showed that women from only about 38% of the target/user households were actually using the water for drinking and cooking. Others rejected because it failed to meet the cultural perspective where good quality wateris required to be colorless, odorless, tasteless and freshly drawn.

➢Out of 44 public handpumps installed in the villages of M.P. and Bihar, only 9 were found to be actually located within the localities of various backward sections, in a context where only members belonging to the same or equivalent castes enjoy access rights to a common water point, thereby implying the plight of the intended beneficiaries from these sections who are therefore excluded from accessing an upper caste water point.

Targeted beneficiaries in 'behavioral change continuum'

Level 1	Unaware	*Need knowledge on the problem/solutions*
Level 2	Aware/knowledgeable but reluctant to change	*Need right motivation for change*
Level 3	Concerned and motivated to change	*Need support for sustained access to technology/requisite resources*
Level 4	Try the new behavior	*Need motivation for sustaining new behavior*
Level 5	Sustain a newly experimented behavior	*Reached the goal but may need continued support*

Communication needs of beneficiaries at different levels

➢ Each of these levels in the continuum has its own specific communication needs for undergoing necessary behavioral change and these may be different for women and men.

➢But the ongoing IEC campaigns tend to target the communication needs of only the beneficiaries at level 1 – aiming at awareness-generation and knowledge-building alone.

➢The needs of the remaining categories, which largely deal with attitudinal barriers of various kinds, do not appear to be sufficiently addressed.

➢Additionally, for some of those at level 3, behavioral change may need further support and this involves initiating a change in the attitudes of those in the dominant section of the larger community who oppose their access to the technology. In this case, then, the latter would require undergoing behavioral change in order to facilitate the access of the motivated targeted beneficiaries.

Conclusions

➢ Given this situation, where capacities of communities to use and manage their own water resources in an effective, equitable and sustainable manner is to be built, and the current communication strategies fall short of addressing the communication needs of all, there is need to define an innovative approach.

➢ On the basis of findings of this research, it is proposed that there is need to define a strategic communication framework in the sector. Otherwise, capacities of local communities will continue to be low, leading to difficulties in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in relation to water.

What is Strategic Communication Approach?

Strategic communication is more than mere information dissemination but ensures a "two-way" flow of communication, addressing human factors such as socio-cultural domain, psychology, behavior and politics. In this approach:

➢Agencies/managers analyze the wider context and plan desired outcomes strategically.

➢Interventions focus on goals, audiences and messages determine media.

➢Communication is fully integrated into a project from the start.

➢Target audience are involved in planning, interventions are based on their values, i.e., their "why" or "what".

Framework for Strategic Communication in water sector

It is proposed that a framework for strategic communication should have four progressive steps:

➢ Assessment of aspects such as the behaviors which need to be encouraged or discouraged, messages to convey, audiences to be reached, etc.

➢Planning for devising a clear course of action on the basis of above information.

➢Implementation of communication activities using multiple channels.

➢Monitoring and evaluation carried out simultaneously with implementation so that audience response is known and corrective measures applied on time.

➢Through these stages, the following strategic points would be significant:

(a) Defining and segmenting the audience to be reached, the audience must be segregated by gender.

(b) Tailoring strategies and messages to audiences – these should be easy, socio-culturally as well as gender sensitive.

(c) Ensuring adequate exposure for intended audience.

➢It must be recognized that good communication creates messages that solve problems that audiences recognize. Messages must fit into the mental and socio-cultural context of peoples' lives and the frameworks that audiences use to understand and define their actions concerning a problem.

Acknowledgements