

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Cliff Nyaga and Pauline Kiamba on Sustainable Rural Water Improvements in Kenya

Interview Transcript

Global Waters Radio: You are tuned in to Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the U.S. Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting-edge research from around the world.

This week on the podcast, we are taking you to Kenya and talking rural water service delivery with Cliff Nyaga and Pauline Kiamba. Cliff and Pauline have been working with the USAID-supported Sustainable WASH Systems Learning Partnership, better known as SWS. Today they are going to be talking about SWS' work in Kitui County, home to more than 1 million people; the importance of preventative maintenance for infrastructure; and how water, sanitation, and hygiene forums, or WASH forums, are helping improve governance accountability and strengthen WASH service delivery.

So Cliff, we'll kick things off with you. Can you introduce yourself to our listeners, give us a general sense of the water supply challenges facing rural Kenyans today, and talk a little bit about Kitui County, where SWS has been especially active.

Cliff Nyaga: My name is Cliff Nyaga. I'm working with the USAID-funded Sustainable WASH Systems initiative, and I am a research manager within the SWS program in Kenya. I will start by saying that Kenya has a rural population of 36 million people, and the available data indicates that half of this population, or roughly 18 million Kenyans, spend more than 30 minutes per day collecting water. Available data shows that a quarter of this population, or 9 million people, rely on surface water for drinking needs. And so, compared to urban Kenya, four times more people in rural Kenya rely on surface water for drinking.

One of the other challenges facing rural Kenyans is the fact that drinking water investments have largely focused on building new water supply infrastructure. The predominant model is that once a new water system is put up, then, after construction, rural communities are left to operate and maintain the new supply. Our work in Kitui [County] in fact shows that 82 percent of the rural water supply infrastructure is managed by communities. These are communities that are located in very rural remote villages, poor, and with a limited capacity in terms of skills, finance, and support to keep the water flowing.

GWR: So tell us about the FundiFix model, how it is helping improve water supply in Kitui County, and why this model places such an emphasis on preventative maintenance. How would you say this approach differs from water supply improvement efforts you have seen in other parts of Kenya?

CN: We are demonstrating the FundiFix model as an alternative response to Kitui County's rural water supply challenge. And the FundiFix model is about a performance-based approach to

maintaining rural water supply infrastructure, and is based on insurance logic that if you link maintenance of infrastructure to one service provider, then that reduces the financial risk. Essentially the cost of repairing each breakdown comes down.

The FundiFix has three in-built elements. The first one is that we are using smart handpumps to collect real time information on water abstraction at the source and breakdown incidents. Then the second element of FundiFix model is that we have included the private sector enterprise that provides maintenance services to communities managing infrastructure. The other element of the FundiFix model is a Kitui County water services maintenance trust fund, which was established in 2016, and the trust fund comes in to leverage external financing, especially from taxes. So this is public financing, then social investors then transfers to bridge the financing gap.

GWR: So what would you say your goals are for Kitui County's water service delivery during the next several years, and what makes this county a good place to apply a preventative maintenance approach for piped water systems?

CN: So I'll start by saying that the FundiFix model is unique in that first it prompts governments to interrogate and address the water system issues affecting its rural water supply. These are issues around monitoring, professionalizing financing, and coordination of local actors. And these factors affect sustainability of services. Moving forward over the next five years, our goal is to scale up coverage of the FundiFix model to all parts of Kitui County. And we hope that this will significantly improve sustainability of rural water services.

GWR: And in terms of that transition, why would you say it's important to move from pump-driven water supply schemes to piped systems?

CN: So the shift to piped systems has three main implications. First is increased coverage: So piped systems are more sophisticated systems, and hold higher capacity in terms of production, pumping, storage, distribution network. And so they have capacity to serve more people with drinking water service. Using an example of Kitui [County], where we are working, on average a piped system serves 2,000 people compared to a hand pump, which serves 200 people.

Then the next implication is on accessibility, or service level. So piped systems are now extensions of the network to water collection points that are nearer [to] the households or villages where people live. This brings services closer to people and in turn reduces the distance and the time taken to collect water. And the last implication relates to drinking water quality. If piped systems are professionally designed and built, then by nature of their construction, they do reduce risk from contamination and allow also additional centralized product treatment systems, which are more effective in terms of ensuring households have access to safe drinking water.

GWR: And what are some of the policy planning and governance changes needed to drive the transition to piped systems?

CN: So to facilitate the shift to piped systems, one of the key low hanging fruits is strengthening the coordination of the county-sector actors. By this I mean the government actors, the donor groups, non-government organizations, community-based organizations, private sector working in the county, and then putting in place policies that ensure that, number one, actors increase investment in rural water monitoring and maintenance, which is lacking, and also putting in place

policies that ensure that actors, strategies, and interventions align with the county government vision and sustainability objectives for the sector.

GWR: And would you say there are any aspects of SWS' work on water supply in Kenya that you think might be applicable to rural areas elsewhere in East Africa or the world? Any general findings or lessons learned?

CN: I'll start by saying that non-functionality of rural water supply infrastructure is a common challenge for many developing countries in Africa, and developing countries as well. And from our work in Kitui [County] demonstrating the preventive maintenance model, we have shown that it is possible to get to universal water access if county governments address a number of system-related issues.

And more generally, we've learned that first, the rural water sector has many actors and factors at play, and often their priorities are misaligned and dissimilar, and therefore important to understand the system as much as possible as you work on rural water services. That means going beyond to consider the influences such as local politics and individual interests, and how these influence actor decision-making practices and cultures, and trying to project the implications of that on water service delivery.

Second, the other big lesson we have learned is that generating and disseminating information and evidence to support understanding of the rural water system is key in any given context or country or region. And this forms a core first step in formulating a shared vision for the sector that is grounded on empirical evidence. For Kitui, SWS supported various analyses, such as the infrastructure water audit, system dynamic modeling, the organizational network analysis, and all these have been instrumental in providing us with information flows and new knowledge that we need to identify the issues affecting the sector and support the dialogue at the county level with the different actors.

The other lesson we have learned is that there is also opportunity to build partnerships with the private sector, but this will require development of policies and institutions that are strong enough to support private sector participation.

GWR: Well we're going to bring in Pauline Kiamba to help further contextualize SWS' work in Kitui County, this time as it applies to addressing governance and water supply challenges. So Pauline, thank you, and could you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Pauline Kiamba: My name is Pauline Kiamba, I'm working with the SWS implementing partners in Kenya, and my role includes supporting learning through various system analysis in the area where we are working that is Kitui County. I also support with reporting on monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and also play a role as a person of contact between FundiFix and the county government of Kitui.

GWR: So give us some context about governance challenges in Kitui County, and describe some of the obstacles standing in the way of delivering reliable and sustainable water service.

PK: The challenges faced in delivering reliable and sustainable rural water services in Kitui County are largely in regard to management and governance of rural water schemes, which

operate based on the community management model. This is whereby a project is set up by a development partner or an NGO, and even handed over to the local community to manage.

And so in terms of management, the communities running these schemes often have inadequate skills for repair and maintenance of the systems. And this in turn results in unreliability of service since repairs takes quite a long time to be done. And the management committees also lack adequate knowledge and skills for financial management of the proceeds that they receive from the sale of water at the water point.

GWR: So given these challenges, let's talk about WASH forums. I guess first and foremost, what are they, and what role can they play in tackling rural water challenges?

PK: WASH forums are initiatives of county government ministries in charge of water, together with the WASH partners, and here when I say WASH partners, I'm referring to organizations implementing WASH projects or programs within the counties. So in Kitui County specifically, we have been involved in the forums. The forum is supported by the UNICEF Kenya country office and to some extent the SWS project, and the forums are held every quarter.

And the forums usually provide a regular avenue to bring together sector actors to deliberate issues for improved sector coordination, communication and planning, with the overall vision of enhancing sustainability in the sector.

Then, in terms of helping to address the challenges to rural water sustainability, the forums provide an avenue for partners to present and discuss and share field experiences in regard to the challenges that they've been facing, and they also deliberate options that can be adopted to effect change in the sector. And in recent forums in Kitui County, the discussion on alternative management models for rural water schemes has been very dominant. And the county water policy and bill development process is underway. And they have also been discussions to properly contextualize certain alternative management models being proposed by the national water services regulator to the Kitui County context.

GWR: And can you talk about some of the ways SWS has helped make these WASH forums more action-oriented?

PK: The SWS Project is working very closely with the county ministry in charge of water. And as such, we have been allocated a position of representation in a particular task group that is involved in planning of the forum, and also on following up on forum improvement ideas. And so through our support, we have been able to introduce the idea of following up on action points from previous forums. And in this way, individuals from organizations tasked to follow up on certain items of discussions or activities, do the necessary follow-up, and report back to the forum. And we are also supporting the ministry to develop a standardized reporting template for water service levels in the county. This is aimed at easing tracking of progress in the sector, and also identifying sub-counties that require particular interventions from the county government and partners based on certain indicators, such as access or functionality, coverage, and the like.

GWR: And Pauline, bringing it all together, how would you say the WASH forums help reinforce the preventative maintenance work Cliff was describing earlier?

PK: We are using the WASH forum as a platform for demonstrating the FundiFix model of preventative maintenance and repair services, as an approach to enhance functionality and service reliability of rural water facilities. So, at the forum we usually update the partners and the county officials and everyone at the forum on the population benefiting from the maintenance services, the challenges faced, and recommendations, so as to inform policy and decision makers at the county government level, as well as WASH partners interested in learning from and adopting the model.

Over time, we have seen that the maintenance work has really piqued the interest of the county government and the WASH partners as well. And the model, that particular kind of approach that FundiFix is using, is being recommended, that is hand in hand with the required funding to support such an initiative, as an approach for inclusion in the county water policy and bill to deal with the management and governance challenges that have been plaguing the system over time.

GWR: Well Pauline and Cliff, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. For more information on the work of the SWS Partnership in Kenya and elsewhere, have a look at the links below. And as usual, be sure to follow the USAID Water Team on Twitter @USAIDWater.

This is Global Waters Radio.