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Information Needs: Learning in the Resource Centre Development (RCD) programme in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper is an output of a process undertaken in the context of the resource centre development (RCD) programme in Nepal. NEWAH has initiated the process with the support of IRC and in collaboration with the Integrated Development Society (IDS) - Nepal in January 2003. The paper focuses in particular on the so-called Information Needs Assessment (INA). It first puts the INA in a context and indicates the purpose of the assessments. It analyses the outcomes of the exercises and from there conclusions are drawn about what is to be done next that can help identify potential activities to improve information flows.

Introduction

In 2002, NEWAH with the support of IRC started a process that is meant to ultimately put effective information sharing activities in place. The IDS-Nepal also joined in this initiative at the end of the year. Effective here means that information reaches people who need it at the appropriate time and in the appropriate form. The most important element of this process is an assessment of information needs at the district and community level. A study on information systems and networks undertaken by Parker showed that most network partners did not have accurate information about their actual or potential users (Parker, 1993). The aim of this process is to find out what information is needed to improve performance of the water and sanitation services, in which forms and through what channels this should be provided to communities and intermediate level support organizations.

The Information Needs Assessment is an exercise in a series of exercises that are meant to provide insight in information related issues that should allow sector organization to become more effective in their performance. This insight is needed to give focus to the resource center development process. The other exercises include the Nepal Country Review, which describes the drinking water and sanitation sector, the Water Sector Assessment, which looks at the role of various sector stakeholders in the field of information, and stakeholder workshops to get a view on information exchange and use among sector agencies. From these exercises it became clear that an enormous amount of information is available and sent around. However, little of this is read and used, because the way in which it is presented is little attractive and user-friendly. It was also noted that most agencies share information about their own approaches, their own views, their own product and their own successes. Little is done to make comparative analyses that would add value to the individual pieces of information (Pokharel, 2002). And last but not least, various organizations produce information about the same issues, indicating that there is a potential gain from.

Background

It is generally felt that the water and sanitation sector is not fully effective, i.e. that water supply and sanitation services are often not sustainable, leaving people without improved access to those services as intended. Many organizations try to deal with this issue in an attempt to become more effective. During a sector stakeholder workshop in Kathmandu, where we mapped out information products produced by the various stakeholders as well as information flows, and actual use of the information sent around, participants concluded that that ineffective information sharing is one of the causes hampering progress in the water and sanitation sector. Among agencies this leads to insufficient learning about what works and

what does not work and community members do not know where to go for information they need to solve the problems they may have with their water supply and sanitation facilities. It also revealed that where information is shared, for various reasons the receivers do not use it. This confirms what is stated by Parker (1993; 64), who says that 'Managers in many sector institutions are aware of the need to organize information provision more effectively, but do not know how to go about it'.

NEWAH, IDS-Nepal and IRC envisage that analysing the picture emerging from the above mentioned exercises will help sector stakeholders who are committed to improving the effectiveness of information sharing to draw up a plan of action to make information flow more effectively. The findings from the INA and the other exercises were presented to a number of stakeholders that can play a role at the national, regional and district level. Building on what is already being done these stakeholders are now developing and implementing a plan to make information sharing more effective. An assessment of the stake holder's capacities and resources to implement this action plan would help to make it further operational. By pooling and, where needed, finding additional financial and human resources the plan can be implemented properly.

Objectives of the Information Needs Assessment (INA)

Generally we have the tendency to 'provide people with our information' without first asking ourselves whether it will come in the right form and at the right time for the receiving party, whether it addresses a need. Sharing information is often driven by our wish to share our experiences and our thinking, less by the information needs the other party may have. The October 2002-workshop in Kathmandu confirmed this. Participants confessed that sending documents were often a matter of just sending of what was produced and that documents they receive from others often end up in a drawer without being read. This is a missed chance to learn from one another.

This happens at the level of Kathmandu. What happens in the regions, district and communities is less known. Since the information we have may potentially be very useful, it is wise to get a more exact view on information needs and the best forms and channels for the various groups of people requiring information. This is the foundation on which to build information sharing activities. The Information Needs Assessment done in Nepalgunj in the mid-Western region and Biratnagar in the Eastern region, was meant to obtain a more exact view on this. The objectives of this Information Needs Assessment were to:

- Identify/get to know the problems of communities and intermediate levels related to water supply, health and sanitation;

- Identify information requirements to help solve those problems;

- Identify ways and means of effective information collection, management and dissemination to the target groups.

Nepalgunj and Biratnagar, where NEWAH has regional offices, have been selected because of the developmental differences in both regions, which we assumed to have an impact on the nature of the information needs people have.

The INA-workshop

From problems to information needs and beyond

'Information' is a complex concept and asking people to indicate their information needs is something they may not be able to do. Therefore the team decided to start with an 'identification of problems' and from there, deal with the questions 'what kind of information', could help solve the problems and 'in what form' and 'through what channel' should information be made available.

Different stakeholder groups

With regards to water and sanitation services and related problems, differences exist between the hilly/mountainous areas and the flat Terai areas in the South due to geographical conditions and technologies used. For example, problems and information needs for users and service providers of tube-wells and those of gravity flow systems are likely to differ. Therefore, we sought a representation from water and sanitation committees and from support organizations (the intermediate level) from the hills and the Terai. Support organizations include governmental institutions, such as the District Development Committee (DDC), the District Water Supply Offices (DWSO) and non-governmental organizations (in most cases representatives of branch offices of (I) NGOs having a head-office in the capital).

In both regions the number of participants was about 20 (including four women). For the workshop exercises they were divided into four groups.

1. community (water committee) members from the hills
2. community (water committee) members from the Terai
3. representatives from the intermediate level from the hill
4. representatives from the intermediate level from the Terai

The workshop process:

Process item	Description
<p>Introduction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · welcome; · ‘why is information important’ · the flow of the programme · personal introduction, including the question ‘why do you think you were invited to this workshop’ · logistics and financial issues 	<p>Given the fact that ‘information as a resource to become more effective’ was a new concept, we began first having an introduction and only then the ‘getting to know each other’. The introduction included an example on how information could have helped to be more effective (see box 1). This helped the participants in understanding the nature of the workshop and to relate it to their real situation.</p>
<p>Problem identification:</p> <p>presentation of possible problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · group work to validate the list, add, delete and indicate the five most important ones · presentation of group work 	<p>This session was started with a presentation using a list of potential problems with water and sanitation at the level of the community and at the intermediate level. Groups were asked to validate and complete this list.</p> <p>The intermediate level participants have the tendency to formulate community level problems, rather than problems they face themselves. This requires a clear explanation by the facilitator with good examples.</p>
<p>Linking problems to information/knowledge needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · working out two examples in the plenary by further specifying the problem if needed and by subsequently asking how information/knowledge could help to solve the problem · work in small groups to do the same for their other problems · presentation of group work 	<p>This was a complicated link to make! Information/knowledge is not easily seen as a resource (like money and manpower).</p> <p>Again, the assignment needs to be introduced and illustrated through examples. In the small groups careful facilitation is needed.</p> <p>Probing on the problem, to get it more clear, may be needed before identification of information/knowledge needs can start.</p>

<p>Linking information/knowledge needs to forms and channels of information dissemination:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · explanation of questions that help give direction to this assignment · work in small groups to work on these questions with relation to their info/knowledge needs · presentation of group work 	<p>Participants were first asked to select the five most important information/knowledge needs. The questions used to get insight in preferred forms and channels were: What is the best way for you to get this information? Do you think there is any organization that has this information? If so, could you please name them? What are the difficulties you face to get the information from this org?</p>
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Experience with the first workshop in Nepalgunj did not lead to drastic changes in the programme and in the flow of the exercises, but did make us rethink the questions that were formulated for the work in the small group. In the second workshop we asked participants at several instances to focus by selecting priority problems, priority information/knowledge needs, preferred forms and channels.

Box 1: How information could have helped to be more efficient

Two years after a project had finished a villager had to spend 200 rupees to travel to the district water supply office (DWSO) to look for new brass taps. However, the DWSO was not the place where he could buy spare parts. The district engineer said to the villager to go to the market and get them there. In this case, if the villager would have had information on the right place to go, he would not have traveled all the way to the DWSO. He would have gone to the market straight away. He could even have purchased a couple of additional taps with the money thus saved. This example helped the participants in understanding what the workshop was all about and to relate to it

Box 2: potential problems for validation For the community level we listed the following potential problem: trained system caretaker goes to India, local health motivator gets marriage and leaves the village, taps damaged and spare parts are not available in local market etc. For the intermediate level these problems focused on the difficulty for the intermediate government level to provide follow-up support.

The workshop outcomes

The main problems

The participants identified the problems related to their water and sanitation situation. They discussed these in their groups, analyzed them and selected the most important ones. The group exercise helped them to explore problems, share ideas, get a better understanding and reflect their own role in it. The main problems are given below.

The community level problems are very much related to the sustainable management of their water supply system, in particular:

- The upkeep and management of the maintenance fund;
- Intentional damaging of pipelines/meters;
- Ineffective management by user committees, including ineffective management of conflicts and the inability to arrange for a new caretaker once the trained one has left;
- Non-availability of good quality spare parts;
- People use unsafe water because they do not know about the dangers;
- Insufficient support from intermediate organizations, for example for technical assistance.

For the intermediate level (GO and NGO) problems focus around:

- Implementing agencies applying different approaches, causing ineffectiveness in follow-up (specially mentioned by GO's);
- Government organizations insufficiently informed about activities of implementing agencies, causing ineffectiveness in follow-up (specially mentioned by GO's);
- Insufficient data and knowledge about alternative technologies;
- Insufficient arrangements for long term monitoring (specially mentioned by GO's);
- Insufficient capacity for water quality testing;

In the case of the community level problems our assumption that differences would exist between Terai and hill communities was confirmed. The upkeep and management of the maintenance fund is more difficult in the Terai than the hills. The reason behind this is due to individual water points in terai (tube well) whereas most of the gravity flow systems have a common source that helps to unite people in the hills. Intentional damaging of pipelines/meters is basically in urban (and therefore Terai) water supply systems and indicated in Nepalganj. Ineffective management by user committees, including ineffective management of conflicts occurs mainly in hills and is strongly related to the use of water sources and to transparency in use of funds. Non-availability of good quality spare parts at 4 5 local market is the major problem of Terai tube wells for both Nepalganj and Biratanagar area. Use of unsafe water is the situation of hills and Terai in both regions. Insufficient support from intermediate organizations was indicated by the Terai community group in Biratnagar. However it is a common problem to most of the cases.

The problems of the intermediate level group were similar in Nepalganj and Biratnagar. In the beginning of the exercise, they found difficult to identify the real underlying problems for them in terms of supporting to the community's problem.

Information needs It was realized that information can help solve problems. In the beginning of this exercise it was difficult to get answers from the participants to the question "what kind of information do you need to help solve the problems". People are used to think in terms of funds and training to solve problems and when funds and training are not given the problems remain unsolved. They may not realize straight away that information on how and where to apply for funds or training can help. For example, many water committees are facing difficulties about how to manage their maintenance fund. Here the information needed is about the training for water committees to enhance their knowledge and skill to motivate people. It requires the information/knowledge on how to keep update records, mobilize resources and built up trust between the users and committee members. The committee needs the information and knowledge about how to motivate community members to pay for water and to be careful with the system. Important is also information about how to create ownership feelings and ensure transparency. The community members as well as participants from the intermediate levels identified information needs for their most pressing problems that are summarized as in the following tables.

Water committee members indicated they need information about:

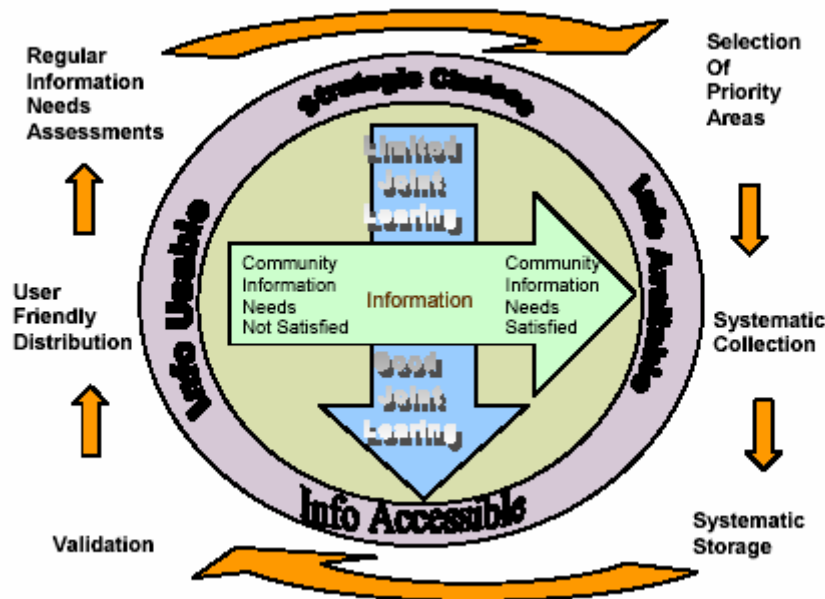
- ↳ How to motivate community members to pay for water and to be careful with the system;
- ↳ Management skills such as book keeping and conflict management;
- ↳ Availability and quality of spare parts and spare parts management;
- ↳ Transmission routes of diseases and how to prevent diseases;
- ↳ How to improve drainage and where to go for water quality testing;

Intermediate levels indicated they need information about:

- ↳ Who is doing what and how (approaches used) in the district;
- ↳ Training opportunities so they can inform communities;
- ↳ The usefulness of alternative technologies and implementation approaches;
- ↳ How to effectively monitor;
- ↳ Opportunities and methods for water quality testing; and
- ↳ How to motivate community members on hygiene issues, on proper use of facilities and on management of the maintenance fund

Information flow management model

Through a workshop the information obtained through the information needs assessment in Nepalganj and Biratnagar was fed back to the stakeholders in Kathmandu. After all they are the ones to set the process in motion that is to improve information flows. The workshop facilitators prepared a model to illustrate proper information flows and where the information from the INA comes in. This model, which is shown below, helps to understand the concept and process for information flow management. It has the following elements: selection of priority areas from the information needs assessment and the design of a systematic collection and storage system. In addition, validation, packaging and distribution of the information in a user friendly way are functions to be developed.



In the above model, the horizontal arrow represents the aim for the shift of unsatisfied information needs at community level towards satisfied information needs. To satisfy the information needs of the community, the community needs to be provided with information from the sector stakeholders, which will allow the community to have a choice. This information provision can be the most effective if the sector stakeholders will shift from limited learning (the information-push) towards good joint learning among the sector stakeholders (the vertical arrow). Effective here means that information reaches people who need it at the appropriate time and in the appropriate form. To realise effective information, the information needs to be available, accessible and usable. Therefore, one needs to make strategic choices (the inner circle). The elements indicated by arrows (outer circle) need to be in place that enables to make strategic choices that make information available, accessible and usable.

What next

We feel that the information needs assessment was an interesting and important exercise. To a large extent it was a validation our own thoughts on what people in the field need in terms of information. However, what was even more exiting was that it help all people involved to realize the importance of information and how information can potentially help to solve problem. Because the workshops provided a platform for exchange between community people and district level staff, they contributed to the development of mutual understanding.

Community members are very outspoken on their problems and the information needs they have and there are quite a number of issues they require information on. If sector organizations want to be of service to them there is a need to provide community members with information that outlines various alternatives that people can choose from. The information should be made accessible. If we want to work on improving information provision based on information needs we may have to select a couple of areas to start with. Once experience is gained on how to improve information flows, the number of issues can be expanded.

Representatives of the intermediate levels would gain a lot by improved coordination and sharing of information on the work that is undertaken and the approaches applied in their districts. From the national level they expect better information on policies and on rules and regulations with respect to ownership issues.

The information needs assessment is just a picture of the situation at a certain moment in time and based on discussions in a limited geographical area. When information products are going to be designed, careful thought has to be given to the form and channels to be used. Pre-testing of materials before large- scale production can prevent mistakes. Assessments need to be done at regular intervals in order to keep abreast of the (changing) information needs in the field. However, before starting the development of information products it is extremely important that the sector stakeholders involved in the information initiative define the objectives, strategies and functions of an information network. An important step is also to define the organizational and institutional requirements to make it all work, whereby an assessment of the capacities is crucial. Last but not least, the attitude of network members towards cooperation, and their ability to cooperate, has a vital influence in determining the success or failure of an information network. While members of a network usually have a positive attitude towards cooperation, they are not always clear as to what exactly this should involve and they are often unaware that, to obtain the benefits of participating in the network, they must also contribute to its activities. This will require a great deal of effort from NEWAH as the nodal organization for the information initiative in Nepal.

References:

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