

Problem Statement: The well-functioning of Area Mechanics in Mulanje district

Introduction:

Since the responsibility of the operation and maintenance of waterpoints in rural areas has been delegated to District Councils, a decentralized structure, there has been much effort into finding sustainable delivery of such services. One such effort that is becoming increasingly attractive and common in Malawi is the establishment of an Area Mechanic Network. An Area Mechanic Network is a highly regulated private sector borehole repair service offered to communities. The district of Mulanje has attempted two Area Mechanic Networks. The first Area Mechanic Network was setup by Oxfam in 2005, but ultimately failed to offer sustainable repair services to communities. The second was setup by TiMMS (Tikonze Mjigo Maintenance Systems) in November of 2011.

One thing that has become increasingly clear in the establishment of Area Mechanic Networks both throughout the country and within Malawi is that they cannot merely be left alone. To expect the invisible hand to assure the well-functioning of an Area Mechanic Network is idealistic fallacy. Challenges associated with community demand, vandalism, reporting structure, geography that can be traced to macroscopic trends are too weighty for the shoulders of the Area Mechanics alone.

Over the course of the last two months, my objective in Mulanje has been to contribute to the creation of an environment that enables the well-functioning of the TiMMS' Area Mechanic Network. While the success of this network is of great importance to EWB, there are lessons from the effort in this district that can be translated and scaled to the rest of the country and to other sectors all while keeping in mind the particulars of the district of Mulanje and the water sector.

The information needed to make such a contribution has been acquired through the reading of background documents on Area Mechanic Networks and past EWB work within and without the area of waterpoint Operation and Maintenance, interviews with 13 TiMMS' Area Mechanics (of 23), 4 TiMMS' Spare Part Retailers (of 7), 6 Water Point Committees as well as numerous conversations with Water Monitoring Assistants, the District Water Development Officer, WatSan volunteers (Sydney and Alyssa) and the TiMMS' maintenance officer.

In order to substantiate this objective and the difficulties surrounding it, this paper will first make a brief presentation of the position and view of the various stakeholders involved. Second, this paper will offer some recommendations from a holistic view of the system that best addresses the challenges faced in the operation and maintenance of waterpoints. For this section, it will be important to remember that the overarching goal is not the success of the Area Mechanic Network, but increased water point functionality rates and access to clean water. Finally, this paper will remark about how the specificity of the Mulanje Area Mechanic Network points to larger lessons to be learned not only in the Mulanje water sector, but across Malawi and across sectors.

Stakeholders:

TiMMS: TiMMS (Tikonze Mjigo Maintenance Systems) is a local NGO that is based in Zomba. It has experience working to set-up Area Mechanic Networks and Spare Part Retailer Networks in a few districts already including Mulanje. It started its work in Mulanje in 2002 with the setup of assisting some shops to start selling spare parts for boreholes. It set up the Area Mechanic Network for Mulanje in November 2011. More so than other districts TiMMS' has worked in, its work in Mulanje has been done with cooperation with both the district water development office as well as EWB volunteers. It's currently in charge with the supervision of the Spare Part Retailers, but has assisted myself in conducting field level research. While TiMMS doesn't seem to be leaving anytime soon, it remains an NGO and therefore not a permanent institution. Thus, it has access to a higher level of resources (fuel, money, motorcycle), but it's stay in Mulanje isn't as long as that of the District Water Development Office.

Spare Part Retailers: The TiMMS' Spare Part Retailers in Mulanje have been selling spare parts for boreholes to communities and are starting to be well known by communities. With the recent hike in prices though (almost double for some things), there has been a substantial drop in the ability to raise initial capital to buy parts as well as to sell parts to communities. There is also a need for advertisement of the new prices as many Water Point Committees are still unaware of these. Based on the relationship started in one area, there has been some interest in cooperating with the TiMMS' Area Mechanics to provide mutually beneficial services.

Area Mechanics: The TiMMS' Area Mechanic Network was setup in November 2011 and consists of 23 Area Mechanics each with a catchment area that covers about 50 boreholes. The TiMMS' Area Mechanic Network, as opposed to the previous Oxfam one, shows a lot of promise because of an improved selection process, provision of bicycles for transport and role clarification (as charging a fee for service). The Area Mechanics are community service oriented people, but still face challenges with community payment. This payment is not only for themselves for the repair services, but also with communities trying to buy spare parts. They have adopted methods to address this challenge through various types of meetings and strategies, but still need support. They have showed interest in the work of other Area Mechanics and the potential to work with SPRs in some way. They also point to the need of sensitizations ideally done by WMAs (although the level of resources needed for using the WMAs (fuel, allowances) is in all likelihood too high to sensitize every committee.

District Water Development Officer: The District Water Development Officer is in charge of overseeing all the processes that occur at the office. Ideally, there would be some reporting structure from the supervision of Area Mechanics that would be brought to his attention in some form of compiled results from the Water Monitoring Assistants, but due to lack of computer abilities and lack of attention this reporting structure has not been formally set up. Through meetings with TiMMS, he made sure that the ongoing management of the Area Mechanic Network be a responsibility of the DWDO and not of TiMMS. Since, the DWDO is a permanent structure, it is better suited in the long term for this responsibility. That being said,

the management of the AMN has been put on the back burner because of the massive African Development Bank (ADB) project that is taking priority in terms of activities.

Water Monitoring Assistants: There are 9 Water Monitoring Assistants (WMA) currently working with the DWDO. 3 of these have been working for extended periods of time with it (over 15 years) and the other 6 were employed as of 2010 by the ADB project. The Water Monitoring Assistants are field staff who are generally responsible for the supervision of water points. For the most part the WMAs have been incorporating the supervision of Area Mechanics into their work routine, but the reporting structure and meeting structure is still largely informal. The supervision and support has also been largely done on the technical side, and not on the community awareness/payment side.

Borehole Maintenance Overseers: They are the leftovers from the old system of waterpoint repair services. They can't be fired nor can they be hired by the DWDO, but are trained in the repair of boreholes and have extensive experience in the area. They are not trained in community mobilization and generally have lower levels of education than Water Monitoring Assistants. Under the new Area Mechanic Network, they are worried that they will be sitting idle with no work to be done. As they are paid salaries, they offer free repair services. There are three of them with the DWDO and their method of transport is by bicycle or bike taxi, so their reach isn't far.

Water Point Committees: Water Point Committees are the committees that are locally responsible for the operation and maintenance of their one borehole. This entails raising funds, raising community awareness, buying spare parts, holding meetings, and getting a repairman to service their borehole. Depending on if they have been trained in Community Based Management 1, they may also have increased knowledge about funds raising, and some basic repair services. That being said CBM trainings are often rather expensive and must be done by NGOs. They face challenges of overuse, vandalism as well as community payment. They have mostly setup a system of their own to look after their borehole which may or may not include the services of the local TiMMS' Area Mechanic, but in the case of major breakdowns they still rely on the services of the District Water Development Office for assistance which it is not in a position to help with given its low resources.

Case Study Questions:

1. Place yourself in the shoes of each stakeholder. What intervention or systemic change would be most useful for your particular purpose given your particular challenges?
2. You are now a market facilitator. Keeping in mind a low level of resources, what intervention or systemic change is most beneficial to the system as a whole? Is this the same as any of the interventions from part 1)?
3. You are now a JF whose stay in Malawi lasts only another 5 weeks. What is the best use of your time? Is the systemic change mentioned in part 2) achievable in 5 weeks? What steps should be taken with your team and the district government so that there's no loss of information or knowledge once you leave?