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Fixing the hole in the bucket

For a Sustainable Rural Water and Sanitation Program in Malawi.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is a long term and committed contributor to the Malawi Government's plan to improve water and sanitation for rural populations. To live up to the name of the new five-year "Sustainable Rural Water and Sanitation Infrastructure for Improved Health and Livelihoods" program, the AfDB RWSSI (Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Initiative) and Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) partnered to design a program which aims at sustainability through structural optimization and incentives at local level. *

Sustainable development, in any domain, is a way for people to use resources without the resources running out, or without them breaking down or being abandoned because of a lack of means to maintain them. Work to achieve sustainable development therefore implies considering impact over time, both past and present, in order for human and financial investments to be optimized for as long as possible. If the sustainability of gains cannot be optimized, the investment analogy is sadly that of the hole in the bucket taken to the well.

In Malawi, significant efforts and resources were deployed as part of a five-year program to supply water and sanitation facilities in four rural districts of Lilongwe, Machinga, Zomba and Mualnje. More than one million people have benefited from improved water and sanitation facilities and the ensuing improvements to health and daily life by the end of the program in December 2013.

EWB Field Staff, stationed in the regions, organized an *Impact Assessment* study to obtain data and collect anecdotal, nuanced input from beneficiaries and stakeholders about what could be improved in the new program. AfDB learned three key lessons from the study, which were consequently incorporated into the design of the new Malawi rural water and sanitation program.

Firstly, the importance of leveraging local knowledge. Building sustained and practical capacity in local government has been shown to improve service delivery over time and improve the implementation of future projects. In the new AfDB supported project, district government will have a greater role in planning, coordinating, and executing project activities. Impact Evaluation of the past project revealed that a centralized, demand-driven approach to resource allocation had not delivered optimal results. In some cases, false expectations had been set. Involving district staff, with better understanding of community interests and the geography of the area, could have avoided these issues. The new AfDB supported project will incorporate capacity building training for district government staff and will



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support the creation of Water Users Associations (WUAs). Impact Evaluation from the previous AfDB supported project highlighted the need to constitute WUA structures early on in the project timeline to allow for mentoring and to foster a sense of ownership.

Secondly, the need for an efficient and far-sighted implementation framework. AfDB supports the move towards a fully-fledged sector-wide approach (SWAp) where government will lead all donor-financed development in the sector. The AfDB program will be overseen by a permanent project coordination team within the Ministry of Water Development and Irrigation. By investing in national-level processes, the new AfDB program intends to improve and consolidate institutional capacity. Financial management of funds however, will be transferred to structures at district level. The previous system involved delivering cash personally, sometimes as far as 400 km away, from central government resources. It involved mobilizing central government staff for long trips to the field with a car and driver. The new system will reinforce the empowerment and sense of responsibility of local district government, increase operational efficiency and reduce turnaround time.

Thirdly, follow-up. In Malawi, developing sustained delivery of WASH services to reach Malawi's largely rural population remains a challenge. The Government of Malawi reports current water point functionality at 75%. What will that figure be in another five years' time if reliance on temporary unskilled staff is maintained? The new program will ensure that water and sanitation project staff are hired through the formal and permanent government channels. The aim is to retain skilled workers even after completion of the works, and that they continue to support service delivery beyond the project timeframe. At beneficiary level, Water User's Associations will be receive incentives similar to systems working in peri-urban areas of Malawi where incentives in the form of allowances are paid for managing water kiosks in each area, using funds collected through the sale of water on a per bucket basis. The government will also communicate on the fact that communities in rural areas must contribute to the costs of providing safe water. The overall aim is to enhance sustainability by changing the mindset of beneficiaries to one where they feel responsible for the services they receive.

On a final note, funds from the new program have been budgeted to conduct a further impact assessment study in five years' time, thereby acknowledging the commitment to sustainability.

Footnote.

[Funding of the Sustainable Rural Water and Sanitation Infrastructure for Improved Health and Livelihoods program.](#)



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*The 40 million USD program in Malawi is financed for a large part by the AfDB, through its African Development Fund (ADF 23 million USD), complemented by an additional 5 million USD donation from the AfDB Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Initiative Trust Fund (RWSSI Trust Fund) and 8 million USD from the AfDB Nigeria Trust Fund. The Government of Malawi has contributed 4 million USD.