

THE REVALUATION OF LOCAL AND 'TRADITIONAL' KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE WATER ACCESS AND WASTEWATER TREATMENTS IN SMALL SCALE COMMUNITIES

A GOOD PRACTICE OF DECENTRALISED COOPERATION WITH THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES IMPLEMENTED BY THE A.T.O. WATER AGENCY OF THE VENICE LAGOON, ITALY

Eriberto Eulisse, Centro Internazionale Civiltà dell'Acqua (Water Civilizations International Centre in Venice [waVE], via S. Benedetto 33, 30037 Scorzè-Venezia, Italy), direzione@civiltacqua.org

Abstract

The Venice Water Agency (ATO of Venice Lagoon) has recently launched an innovative programme of development cooperation ("Water as Commons" Solidarity Fund, here after WaCS), aimed to promote "traditional knowledge" and finance decentralised cooperation projects to better achieve the MDGs in Third World Countries (TWCs). Indeed the ex-post evaluation of many development cooperation projects in the water field, has definitely highlighted how an ethnocentric approach (i.e. simply based on western technologies and strategies) can generate quite often unexpected consequences that overcome the envisaged, positive outcomes (Reij *et al*, 1996; Langill, 1999; Laureano, 2003; Eulisse *et al*, 2010).

The waVE (Water Civilizations International Centre in Venice) was entrusted by the Venetian Water Agency with framing, in cooperation with UNESCO Venice Office, a specific Call focused in the promotion of traditional/local knowledge, borrowing from the European Commission, DG Research, a Marie Curie model to manage the full project cycle (evaluation, selection, negotiation and monitoring of funded projects). The presentation outlines this innovative experience that is at the forefront of Italian programmes of development cooperation implemented by regional Water Agencies. The waVE is a non-for-profit organisation created in 1996 to promote a new Water Culture.

Keywords

Development cooperation; Traditional/local knowledge and techniques; Empowerment of beneficiaries; Small-scale communities; Sustainable Development; Wastewater treatment and water access in TWCs

Introduction

According to UNDP Report (2006), 1.6 million people do not have access to safe drinking water globally, and 2.5 million people do not have adequate wastewater treatments. Today the problems related to wastewater treatment and access to safe drinking water are worsened in Third World Countries (TWCs) because of demographic growth, the failures of governmental water policies, the

consequences of climate change, as well as because of the prevision of an increasing demand for civil, industrial and agricultural water uses in the next decades.

Aim of this contribution is to outline the main features of the "Water as Commons" Solidarity Fund (WaCS) of the Venice Water Agency (ATO Laguna di Venezia), Italy, as well as the advantages related to the integration of traditional/indigenous/local knowledge with western technologies in development cooperation, to better achieve especially in small scale communities of Third World Countries (TWCs) the MDGs with regard to access to safe drinking water and wastewater treatments.

Methodology

In the field of development cooperation, a basic methodological distinction between small scale (rural) communities and larger, urban ones, is fundamental in order to adopt the best strategies to achieve the MDGs related to access to safe drinking water and wastewater treatment.

In small scale communities, the revaluation of local and traditional knowledge is fundamental to achieve the proposed project objectives while respecting the local water culture, norms as well as traditional perceptions and behaviours. Indeed the ex-post evaluation of many development cooperation projects in the water field, has definitely highlighted how an ethnocentric approach (i.e. simply based on western technologies and strategies) can generate quite often unexpected consequences that overcome the envisaged, positive outcomes. The necessity of rethinking new methods and more flexible strategies of decentralised (i.e. "regional") cooperation (as opposed to "international cooperation"), has led different scholars to reconsider the benefits that may come from an adequate revaluation of traditional knowledge and local practices/techniques, especially in rural areas of TWCs, to promote a sustainable development in the long run (Reij *et al*, 1996; Langill, 1999; Laureano, 2003; Eulisse *et al*, 2010).

The 2005 Report of UNCCD (United Nation Convention to Combat Desertification), has highlighted the considerable range of "traditional techniques" and good practices from the past that may prove to be important sources of inspiration to seek for "simple" and sustainable solutions to face droughts, water scarcity and extreme hydrological events in arid and semiarid environments (UNCCD, 2005).

Results and discussion

The worldwide compilation of traditional knowledge launched by the UNCCD, is the basic reference book to measure the sustainability of past solutions to face water scarcity as well as to compare the great variety of traditional techniques related to wastewater treatment (UNESCO, 2005). However, if a worldwide inventory of traditional techniques as well as theoretical approaches have been developed considerably during the last fifteen years, the translation of such methodical perspectives into practice and into a Funding Scheme seems to be far to be implemented.

The "Water as Commons" Solidarity Fund (WaCS) managed by the Venetian Water Agency (ATO of the Venice Lagoon) has launched in 2006 and 2008 a Call for proposal (with a budget of approx. 1,4 millions €) to finance development cooperation projects aimed to enhance access to safe drinking water and provide wastewater treatments to poor communities of the South of the World (Africa, Asia

and Latin America). The fund was made up by water tariffs increased of 1 € cent for each cubic meter of water supplied in the Venetian area of the ATO.

The first Call of the WaCS (2006) implied the allocation of the available budget to 8 projects (5 in Africa and 3 in Latin America); the 2008 Call allocated the same amount to 6 projects (3 in Africa and 3 in Latin America). However, compared to the structure of the 1st Call, the 2nd Call entailed a thorough methodic revision of the entire project cycle (evaluation, selection, negotiation and monitoring of funded projects), including the introduction of new selection criteria, and proportional weights to award projects dealing with consideration of local water cultures.

Following the conclusions and the recommendations of an international conference organized in 2007 by the waVE for this purpose, the Venetian non-for-profit association was formally entrusted by the Venetian ATO to reframe the 2nd WaCS Call and its project cycle, with a specific emphasis on traditional knowledge and techniques, in order to improve the achievement of the MDGs in the rural contexts of TWCs.

This methodic revision has entailed, first, an analyses of the current literature in terms of benefits deriving from the appropriate anthropological consideration of the local water culture, as well as of the traditional knowledge and techniques related to water. Then, the actual implementation of a Funding Scheme was borrowed from the European Commission, DG Research, within the Marie Curie Actions of Excellence. Such a model for the full project cycle (i.e. 2 step evaluation, with remote phases and final consensus meeting) was adopted to guarantee a proper evaluation and selection of project proposals . As a result, the 2008 WaCS Fund Call of the Venetian Water Agency was structured around a set of selection criteria awarding primarily the integration of traditional knowledge/local practices with western water technologies and the empowerment of beneficiaries. The specific procedures of evaluation and selection of project proposals, and the main features of negotiation and monitoring of the funded projects will be further discussed.

Conclusion

The ATO Water Agency of Venice Lagoon is heading the line of an innovative Programme of decentralised (regional) cooperation with TWCs that other Italian Water Agencies are ready to follow, for its innovative approach and sound methodology aimed to better achieve some MDGs related to water.

In 2012, the results of this pilot action will be disseminated also through the UNESCO web site, having the UNESCO Venice Office fully cooperated with the waVE for the reframing of the WaCS Fund, and so for launching what seems to be the first European Funding Scheme especially devoted to promote, in TWCs, an innovative combination between local, traditional knowledge and techniques and western water technologies.

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