

Case Study: Sverdlov Water Committee

Forward

The main question this case study explores is the following: To what extent is the Sverdlov project sustainable post donor funding, particularly examining acceptance of the Committee amongst the population and the extent to which the Committee is able to be self sufficient, with particular attention to finances? Furthermore, the question what problems persist was also analysed.

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Map of Armenia



1. Introduction

In many areas of rural Armenia, access to water is extremely problematic and limited for its civilians. The Lori region in particular is one of the poorest in the country and is generally suffering from underinvestment, lack of infrastructure, as well as widespread poverty. Sverdlov, a mountainous village in this region, near the border with Georgia, has water sources nearby, as well as an existing infrastructure. However, the piping system and infrastructure were built by the Soviet Union in 1972, and after independence, the collapse of the state infrastructure and later decentralisation all led to an absence of power; the lack of authorities to manage and maintain the water system led to deterioration of the pipes and reservoirs. Even though the municipalities did attempt to repair portions of the water system, lack of funding meant an inability to prevent the complete failure of the water system.

¹ Lonely Planet (2011), 'Map of Armenia' [accessed 09 January 2012]
<<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/europe/armenia/>>



Due to such problems, villagers used to gather their water from various sources, usually having to go a large distance by foot, with a horse or donkey, or in cases where available- by car. Water was available for a few hours two times a week, and villagers would line up to fill buckets or containers with water. Often, those at the end of the lines would not have access to water because it would be turned off. Those people would take water from the river, polluted by other villages upstream. The limited availability of water caused the villagers to live in unhygienic conditions. For instance, the same water was utilised for washing dishes and washing fruit which would lead to illness.

Photo 1: Former drinking water source

After a complete deterioration of the system, a project has been facilitated by Women in Europe for a Common Future (WECF) and World Vision with Lore Eco-Club, have been developed and implemented that is focused on increasing villagers' access to safe water in 2009 and 2010. The project consisted not only of installation of new pipes as well as repairing and constructing reservoirs of the gravity system, but also of facilitating the set up of a Water Committee with elected members and agreed financial contribution from the water users in order to contribute to sustainability.

2. Objectives

The objective of the Sverdlov project was to obtain a sustainable community based rehabilitation and maintenance of the water supply system. The objective of the field visit described in this report was to analyse the extent to which the project has attained the above goal, and to assess the water situation post-project implementation.

2.1 Study area

The study area of this project was the village of Sverdlov, Lore region, Armenia. Individual homes, water piping in the mountains, and reservoirs were examined during the field visit in 2011 to Sverdlov.

Methodology

4.1 methodology of the rehabilitation and establishment of the committee

In March 2010, two experts from the Kyrgyz Alliance for Water and Sanitation (KAWS) from Kyrgyzstan as well as WECF regional consultant Anna Samwel visited Sverdlov in order to assess the feasibility of setting up a Water Committee, and then facilitated the establishment thereof. A monthly budget for the committee was calculated based on



Photo 2: Establishing Water Committee from WECF database

a contribution of 50 dram per person (11 euro cents).

The board and the supervisory commission of the Water Committee were elected by the general assembly of all water users, where only locally elected members of the community hold positions. There are currently nine members of the Water Committee, including: a Chairman, an accountant, technical assistants, general members, and an individual whose purpose is to ensure that payments are gathered.

The issue of waste water was discussed during a village meeting and a demonstrational dry toilet is constructed for the school.

4,2 Methodology of investigation on the results

Most of the information presented here has been gathered by a WECF representative during a field visit to Sverdlov and Stepanovan in Armenia during 01 August to 04 August 2011 in order to assess the current situation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two committee members, with the director of Lore Eco-Club, with the mayor of Sverdlov, and with eight villagers. For each of the aforementioned groups, the questions posed during the interview were created based on the role of the particular person. For example, questions for the director of the Lore Eco-Club varied from the questions posed to villagers. A standardised set of questions was utilised for all villagers.

The demographics of the villagers interviewed varied including those with access to water from the project, those without, and included both women and men. All interviews were conducted by the WECF representative in Russian, and a United States Peace Corps volunteer was also present who speaks Armenian and interjected where the villagers had difficulty understanding either the questions or expressing themselves in Russian. This happened infrequently and most participants spoke Russian fluently.

Problems arose only when interviews were corrupted when the presence of certain individuals during the course of the interview could have and sometimes did cause dishonest responses. This was largely the case because the Committee lacks a functioning, designated room where they can work. As a result, the interviews took place either in the Mayoral building where space is limited or at the home of the Mayor. Interviews were corrupted because in some cases the Mayor 'briefed' the villagers on the 'proper' answers to provide the interviewers. For example, he told one woman (in Armenian) to explain that water was functioning without fault and that she was pleased with the Committee. The Peace Corps volunteer translated this information to the Russian speaking WECF representative, and the mayor realised that any information he conveyed regarding how respondents should respond to questions, would be understood and conveyed to the WECF representative, the 'briefing' ceased. In other cases, more explicit corruption of the interview process took place when individuals, such as the Mayor or members of the Water Committee were present during the interview itself and interjected to answer the questions for the villagers.

For instance, the accountant of the Committee, who is female, arrived during the interview of one villager and sat next to her during the remainder. She frequently interjected her opinion regarding the answers to various question; she continued to do so after being given instructions by the interviewer that she would be asked the same questions herself but that it was vital to obtain the opinions of the villagers separately from members of the Water Committee. Regardless, the accountant interjected to provide answers to questions for this villager, such as 'How has your life in your household changed since the project was carried out?'. At another point in time, the villager was asked regarding what she perceived as the most effective means of resolving Sverdlov's water problems. The question asked

was ‘Do you personally view the Committee as the most effective actor to resolve water problems in Sverdlov? For example, the state government or government authorities at other levels?’ The response given in Russian can be translated as, ‘No, we [the residents of Sverdlov] know what is best for us – the Committee’. However, apparently not realising that the Peace Corps volunteer speaks Armenian, the villager asked the Committee member in Armenian, ‘Did I answer correctly’. Eventually the interview was abandoned due to the inability of the villager to answer without the presence of the Committee member, especially concerning questions regarding the effectiveness and functioning of the Committee itself.

Although the corruption of the interviews can pose a problem for the assessment of the local situation, in many ways, this also has led to interesting insight as to the same situation. The Mayor and Chairman of the Water Committee showed both the Peace Corps volunteer and WECF representative problematic areas within the village as well as new pipes and reservoirs that were constructed with the funding from WECF and World Vision project. However, the inclination to answer positively to questions of functionality could give a contradictory impression – that the Committee is functioning perfectly, that there are not significant problems with access to water, even where old pipes prevent households from having running water in their homes. This situation is confusing, but insightful. The Mayor and Committee members are aware of the problems their village is facing and clearly listed them during their interviews. However, they also desire to make it clear to the interviewers that the previous project was appreciated (from WECF), and believe that the presence of WECF staff in the city could and should lead to increased funding. They therefore attempted to balance a tight line between showing the areas that require further work, and expressing gratitude towards the past project.

5 Results

Overall, the project and the Committee have led to drastic improvements in the lives of the villagers, and the gratefulness of the villagers for this situation is felt immediately. During the course of each interview, whether with the mayor, director of the Lore Eco-Club, Committee members, or individual members of the community, gratitude for the past project was expressed. Several pipes bringing water to the village and four reservoirs were repaired within the realms of the project, leading to about 80% of the households having access to water in their house.

Water is essential to all aspects of human life – drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing, hygiene more broadly, etc. In Sverdlov, access to generally clean and safe drinking water has become a reality due to the WECF project. Now, families say they have enough water to drink, with which to cook, bathe, and carry out household chores. Also, some households use this water in order to provide drinking water for their animals and to water their crops. Now, many people even have washing machines and started to construct bathrooms, where previously, household access to water was not tangible.

5,1 The Water Committee

The Committee has been in place therefore for the majority of two years. Since its creation, monthly meetings have been held, where between thirty and fifty members of the community will attend. Villagers are able to present problems in access to water or present general complaints to the Committee during monthly meetings. Based on interviews with Committee members as well as villagers, after a complaint is presented, the Committee will immediately discuss measures to be taken to resolve the complaint, and if these measures are within their means, they will organise the proper response. The committee decides how to fix a problem, how much money is required, when to fix it, who will go, and generally organise the response. However, the Committee lacks regular access to tools and must rent them, which is also adds significantly to the costs of their operations. As a result, the type of work the Committee can do is restricted largely to repairing damaged pipes or replacing small portions of piping that is beyond repair. When a severe problem exists and funding from the allocated budget of the Committee is insufficient, the Committee has organised additional means of funding by asking village members for additional donations in order to finance the repairs of a specific problem. For example, in one area, significant repairs needed to be done to the piping system, and 50,000 dram were gathered for a particular project.

The mayor of Sverdlov, Kamo, is also very enthusiastic about the Committee and is actively involved in the Committee. He has been involved in the water project from the beginning, and continues to have a role in providing assistance to the Committee and the villagers. Aside from attending each of the monthly meetings, villagers may also address concerns regarding water to him. He also provided physical labour during the course of the project, and often continues to assist with repairs as is within his means. Kamo aided in helping to explain to villagers the necessity of a Water Committee in Sverdlov and why the Committee should have a budget. He provides assistance to the Committee if problems need to be solved, including helping to find a solution, helping to implement this, and/or if it is necessary to buy certain necessary materials or tools, he may be the one to do so. If the Mayor is unable to attend a meeting or assist the Committee, he sends a Deputy.

The members of the Committee and Mayor are also very open to the community, and do not limit their willingness to interact with villagers to the public meetings. For example, the Chairman explained that 'Sverdlov is a small village, and everyone knows each other. So if villagers have problems, they can always come to my home.' He continued on to explain that villagers may stop him in the street to tell him if there are certain areas of concern, and he will welcome their concerns. The other members of the Committee and the Mayor also have similar attitudes towards the Committee and community members. Aside from the monthly meetings, the Committee will also gather depending on the quantity and nature of problems as they arise, especially if problems are presented to them outside of the regularly held meetings.

Generally, the Committee members are very dedicated to their positions, and the villagers. When the Committee was first being developed, a budget was calculated that would be utilised for paying the salaries of the members of the Committee. However, they all agreed that until the problems of water access within the village were resolved, they would utilise all of the occurred money for achieving this goal rather than paying themselves. Today, the members still lack financial reimbursement for their roles.

In spite of the significant progress made by the Committee, it faces several barriers to its continued success and ease of operations outside of the problems connected to water. These include:

- Lack of a room or specifically designated place to work outside of public, monthly meetings
- Lack of a computer to document and keep track of (for example), the villagers who have paid their monthly dues, an electronic registration of the houses with and without access to water, budget, repairs, etc.
- Lack of bookshelves or drawers for handling paperwork (which amounts to a large quantity of loose leaf papers due to lack of electronically registered data)

- Lack of salaries for Committee members

Even though these problems persist, the members remain committed to the Committee, and the villagers participate actively.

5.2 Acceptance of the Water Committee and involvement of the local community

The villagers were hesitant to accept the presence of the Water Committee within their community initially. As the mayor, Committee members, and villagers all explained, they looked at this with some speculation. They did not understand why they would have to pay for water when this has always been free, and because the source of water is within their village, they thought that they should have a right to extract it without paying. However, especially due to the assistance of the Kyrgyz experts, villagers began to change their minds. For example, when asked to compare the quantity of money they spend on cigarettes or vodka to the amount they would be asked to pay the Water Committee (50 dram), they seemed to reassess their positions.

Generally, the villagers explained that they were sceptical not only of the Committee, but also that the project would be realised. When representatives of WECF first came to assess the situation, some villagers did not initially believe that they would actually obtain donor funding to change the pipes and to increase access to water. This is because the problems with water had been persisting for years, and the villagers had come to accept the need to travel long distances to obtain water that the thought of household access to clean water became intangible. What is more, even more scepticism was found regarding the success of the Water Committee.

As one villager with access to water at home explicated, 'I did not believe that the project would work. However, slowly WECF and Lore Eco Club staff came and helped [to explain how the Committee would function and the nature of the project]. We learned more, started to get more interested, and then started to work.' Quotes such as these explain the necessity of education and that after a campaign was carried out to explain what the project would entail and how the Committee would function, people became more inclined to accept both. In addition, as benefits of the existence of a Water Committee slowly became clear – access to water within their homes or the homes of their neighbours, clean water, and constant flow and access to water, villagers became increasingly enthused about the Committee and began to participate more and more actively.

In terms of the project, after it became clear that donor funding was guaranteed and that a project would take place, the villagers were extremely enthused and completed all of the physical labour. All members of the community participated, including women and children. Men completed most of the physical labour with occasional aid from women. Women often cooked food and brought it to feed the workers, and children also helped to carry smaller tools or food to the mountains where the labour was being completed. The terrain is very difficult, and most of the labour was carried out without the aid of a car to carry cement, sand, or other materials to the points where they would be utilised. This work is very tasking physically; nonetheless, there was not a single point in time where labour was insufficient. The entire village came together, which is a testament to their enthusiasm and desire to help themselves and each other.

Today, when pipes require repair, the villagers still come together in this way. The villagers who do not have access to water within their household also assist in repairs. Again, men tend to provide the majority of the physical labour and women tend to provide food.



Photo 3: Construction of reservoir obtained from Mayor

Generally, the villagers seem to be pleased with the existence of the Water Committee, both as an institution and with the competency of the members.² Many villagers attend most of the meetings of the Committee, depending on their work and presence within the village³. Both men and women tend to attend; however, based on an interview with the Chairman of the Committee, the presence of men seems to outweigh the presence of women due to women's responsibilities within the household.⁴ The villagers recognise the limited resources of the Committee as they are the ones providing the money for it. When asked if the Committee was performing based on their expectations, villagers replied that the Committee was functioning to the best of its abilities.⁵ They all expressed hope that new donor funding would be allocated to the Committee or the village in order to obtain a complete overhaul of all of the old pipes, and then explained that the Committee would be able to continue upkeep and would be better able to fulfil its duties to the villagers.

When the villagers were asked whether they thought that the Committee was an effective way of resolving their water problems, the responses were very positive. For example, a villager explained that 'if there was no Water Committee, nothing would have worked - there would not be any water, no pipes, and no flow of water.'⁶ He believed that the Committee was responsible for maintaining the pipes and maintaining the villagers' access to water post-donor funding as well as during the funding due to the Committee's role as an organisational body, which was the case.⁷ He seemed to be aware of the problems the village is facing as well as the role of the Committee, which demonstrates the success of the educational campaign.⁸ Furthermore, during the same interview, this villager was asked whether and how he thought the water situation would have changed with government involvement and an absence of the Water Committee. His response was concise, 'this would have been a catastrophe'.⁹

The same questions regarding the effectiveness of the Committee and whether the state should be involved in Sverdlov were posed to all villagers. The answers given were generally the same – with a positive attitude towards the Committee. Another villager answered, 'if you cannot solve your own problems within your own family, how else can you resolve them?' This sort of response was common amongst the villagers, who view the inhabitants of Sverdlov as a family unit and feel very connected to their community. When asked about the role of the government, one villager responded that 'of course it would be better if the government helped, but if there's no opportunity, we have to do it. You saw our roads...' This response was very telling of the situation and perception the villagers have of the Armenian government. The people generally feel neglected and disillusioned with the government, and are not expecting any attention from the state. The Armenian government has yet to show interest, intent, or initiative in addressing Sverdlov's problems – partially perhaps due to lack of resources, whether funding, personnel, etc. The villagers expressed the attitude that the members of this community know their problems better than external authorities and should therefore be involved in the processes of alleviating their own problems.

The villagers seem to be pleased with the members who are currently working in the Committee, as well. This is evident because the same individuals have been elected to the positions from the beginning of the existence of the Committee. The voting process consists of the villagers casting votes by ballot into a box, where the individuals who have voted are registered in order to prevent double voting.

² Interviews conducted by the author 03 August 2011 to 04 August 2011.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Interview conducted by the author with Chairman of the Water Committee on 03 August 2011.

⁵ Interviews conducted by the author 03 August 2011 to 04 August 2011.

⁶ Interview conducted by the author with villager on 03 August 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

The villagers have also come to accept that they ought to pay for their water, especially because they see that the Committee and the water project were on the whole successful. They tend to pay the monthly fees, but many people do not pay regularly or do not pay the same quantity of money each month. Last month 7750 Dram were gathered.¹⁰ The ability of villagers to pay their fees depends on their access to work; many men leave the village to work abroad, and some of those that do remain may participate in agricultural work, which leads to a seasonal salary. Therefore, some villagers may pay less one month, and twice the amount the following month.¹¹ This sentiment can be summarised by the statement of one of the female villagers: ‘If we can pay a lot, we will pay, if we can pay a little, will pay a little, [we pay] as much as we can.’ Some villagers lack access to water in their homes and therefore do not pay the Water Committee. These individuals have made clear that if/when they would receive access to water within their homes, they would have absolutely no objections to paying the Water Committee.¹²

Even though, the inhabitants of Sverdlov are poor, many lack access to constant work, many have expressed willingness to pay an increased the monthly fee, up to double the negotiated fee. During interviews, villagers were asked about the water fee of 50 dram per person and whether they thought this was a ‘fair’ or sufficient sum given the resources of the villagers. Many people answered that this was a small sum of money, and access to clean water was worth this fee and more. For example, one respondent said, ‘I can just say, it’s not a lot of money, 50 dram. What is that? If there is water, let it be 100 dram!’.¹³ The villagers, especially given their previous situation regarding water, value the existence of the Committee, their improved living conditions, and the decreased burden on their lives. Especially, this is felt by women who were and continue to be largely responsible for handling the water (by cooking, doing the washing, caring for children, cleaning, etc).¹⁴

5,3 The current problems

At the moment, in spite of numerous achievements of the project, several barriers remain. Specifically, there is a street in the northern portion of the village which lacks access to the water system because the gravity system on which the piping system is based does not reach them. What is more, not all of the pipes could be replaced by the WECF project, and the inner piping system within the city was left largely untouched. Ideally, these old pipes should all be replaced in order to guarantee constant access to water for the villagers. Old pipes also leak, causing water loss.



Photo 4: New piping



Photo 5: Broken pipe

¹⁰ This is based on the written records of the Water Committee.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Interviews conducted by the author 03 August 2011 to 04 August 2011.

¹³ Interview conducted by the author with villager 04 August 2011.

¹⁴ Interviews conducted by the author 03 August 2011 to 04 August 2011.

Right now, some villagers lack access to water due to leakages or rusted pipes, which pollute the water and make it undrinkable. In the winter time, these old pipes also freeze and decrease villagers' access to water. The pipes which have been replaced with plastic ones do not have this problem and provide a constant supply of water. However, because of the inner piping within the city was not replaced, the water supply generally becomes smaller in the winter.

The sources of water are not generally protected, which allows animals to contaminate otherwise clean water. For example, a dead cow was found in one of the rivers, near a reservoir, and this water was consumed by villagers without their knowledge of this for days before the animal was discovered and removed. For this reason, fences are still required. This would also be useful because the water supply may also become dirty after heavy rains, where dirt and garbage may be washed into the river. Furthermore, some reservoirs are not hygienically closed, which also causes contamination of water. Below is an example of an unhygienic and a hygienically closed reservoir.



Photo 6: Unhygienic Reservoir



Photo 7: Hygienically closed reservoir

Also, many villagers expressed the need for water meters in order to measure household use of water. This is because some individuals utilise the water for their crops, while others only utilise it for household chores and drinking. As a result, many people claimed that they would prefer to pay only for the water they consume. Several people used a Russian saying to express their feelings towards the Committee and their water situation 'hope dies last'. Even where they say lacking points, they said they are hoping and waiting for the future.¹⁵

5,4 Sustainability

In order for them to exist without external assistance, an initial investment beyond the realm of the WECF project could be beneficial. For example, as a villager explains that the current problem that the village faces is that 'some poor pipes give unclear water. If we change these pipes, then the entire village will have clean water.' If all or most of the old pipes within the inner city piping system are also changed, then the Water Committee could continue to exist and could make amendments to the water system without requiring heavy investment from external donors or the state

In addition, as an institution, the Water Committee is sustainable and is able to carry out the operations within its budget without external aid and has done so since 2010. Since the end of the WECF project, the Committee has existed largely independently, especially after World Vision has reduced and nearly eliminated support to the village due to its own internal problems. The existence of the Committee itself entails a sustainability aspect. The Committee has a means of generating funds (the 50 dram monthly fee per individual), has a staff, and community members who provide

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by the author 03 August 2011 to 04 August 2011.

labour. The members are themselves very active and motivated to work for their community, and this is also made clear because they refuse to take a salary for themselves until the village's water problems are largely resolved.

The villagers are also actively involved in the actions of the Committee, both in terms of attending meetings and by providing labour and/or food. Even the individuals who do not have household access to water do participate in Committee meetings and provide physical labour during the project and post-donor funding. The villagers' own interest in the Committee and their water problems entail sustainability because this shows that the Committee would be able to and has continued to exist without external pressure or oversight (from WECF, World Vision, or Eco-Lore). What is more, the mayor also explained that the project as well as the Water Committee post donor funding all obtaining a significant quantity of media attention, showing that the Committee is able to broaden knowledge about the Water Committee and events that took place in Sverdlov without aid from donors per se.¹⁶ During the interview process, villagers and Committee members were asked if they thought the lessons of Sverdlov could be shared in other villages in Armenia. Most individuals had a very positive attitude towards this, and even expressed enthusiasm and desire to teach others about their experiences and the benefits of a Water Committee. Of course, many expressed two prerequisites that would be essential for a successful project based on the experiences of Sverdlov:

1. The presence of water
2. Donor funding for a larger overhaul of problematic pipes or reservoirs

What is more, there are tools in place in order to ensure proper oversight of the funds available to the Committee based on the water fee. Even though the mayor claims to assist in making sure that the Committee spends its budget wisely, there are other tools institutionalised within the Committee in order to guarantee that the budget is allocated to the most pivotal problems and to prevent theft, as well as ensure public access to any information and transparency.

The mayor explained that villagers themselves are interested in how their money is being spent. This is evident at the public meetings of the Water Committee, and according to the Chairman, 'there are people that constantly ask this question – "what did you do with our money?".'¹⁷ Villagers are proactive in Sverdlov, and this assists in keeping the Committee a viable option in their village. The continued water supply serves as evidence that the Committee and villagers are fulfilling their roles in providing a sustainable and clean water supply.

6 Conclusions

The post-project implementation follow-up on the Sverdlov project demonstrates that the Water Committee has proved to be a sustainable and viable option for this village. The villagers are generally enthused and actively participate in the Committee. This project has successfully led to the installation of new pipes, new reservoirs, and a Water Committee that carries out repairs on broken pipes and replaces small lengths of piping. All of this has contributed to the regular household access to water for 80% of villagers.

The Water Committee itself is an immense success, and with an independent structure has been able to manage money, mobilise community, and has gained the trust and influence within the community. The Water Committee has support from Mayor, has involvement and assistance from the local NGO, and has mobilized the community to pay the fee and to carry out work. The existence of the Water Committee is a guarantee for future projects to be sustainable and effective, and an extra

¹⁶ Interview conducted by the author with Mayor 03 August 2011

¹⁷ Interview conducted by the author with chairman of the Water Committee 03 August 2011

encouragement for donors to invest in particularly this village. The fact that there is an independent structure in the village that has proven its effectively and ability to handle and administer money, to mobilise villagers, to carry out work in a faithful manner and to cooperate with donors has proven the reliability of the committee.

In spite of the immense success of this project, limitations remain because all of the pipes and all of the reservoirs were not renovated, leaving problematic areas that still require attention. If and when a complete renovation does take place, the Committee would be better capable of maintaining upkeep of the pipes. Then, the remaining 20 percent of households should also have access to water at their homes. Furthermore, water meters, sanitary zones, and waste water management are also required. This is due to financial constraints that currently prevent the Committee from replacing all of the old piping. In spite of these problems, the availability of clean water at the homes of villagers (or neighbours) has proven to enhance their living standards significantly.