



# Case Information Sheet

Sharing information on good practices from around the world for improved water integrity

Kenya

## Water Action Groups

Engaging with utilities to improve water service delivery

### BACKGROUND

Before 2000, Kenya's water sector was characterised by deficiencies in the management of water and sanitation services leading to growing discontent of water users in both rural and urban areas. Kenya's Ministry of Water and Irrigation commenced comprehensive sector reforms to increase efficiency. A key change was the removal of Government from direct service provision, with a number of institutions introduced to manage infrastructure, provide services and undertake regulation.

The water sector reforms introduced were focused on consumers of water utilities requiring continuous efforts to improve services. The Water Services Regulatory Board (Wasreb) became the custodian of consumer protection initiatives, developing several instruments in the process to ensure that institutions charged with service delivery would discharge their mandate effectively. However, there was no system to provide feedback on whether consumers were actually satisfied with the services delivered.

The surveys on citizen perception of the state of water and sanitation services in the country revealed that citizens

desired to strengthen the relationship with service providers. This became the impetus for the development of a feedback mechanism to channel concerns and complaints from consumers through a process that would involve Water Service Providers (in charge of service provision), Water Services Boards (in charge of infrastructure development) and Wasreb (in charge of regulation).

In 2009, four Water Action Groups (WAG) were established in the main towns of Kenya, initially as a pilot project. The role of the WAGs were threefold: to disseminate information to consumers; to engage service providers on issues of concern to consumers and the underserved; and to provide feedback to water services sector institutions regarding the state of services, thus giving consumers and the underserved a voice.

### ACTIVITIES AND INTERVENTIONS

The creation of Water Action Groups (WAGs) requires the WAGs to introduce themselves and to make the public aware of roles discharged by WAGs within the communities. They then engage communities and Water



WAG member in discussion with citizens in Kakamega town, Kenya  
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#### BOX 1 About:

**The Water Service Regulatory Board (Wasreb)** is a state corporation established in 2003 as part of the reforms in Kenya's water sector. The aim of regulation is to protect consumers, while ensuring that Water Services Boards (WSBs) and Water Service Providers (WSPs) provide efficient, affordable and sustainable services.

#### Further information

<http://www.wasreb.go.ke/>

Service Providers on issues affecting consumers and the underserved, capturing these in reports that are presented to water utilities, to push for action. Public hearings are conducted, giving sector institutions an opportunity to engage directly with the communities represented by the WAGs. Concerns that are not adequately addressed by utilities are forwarded to Water Services Boards. Finally, if the Water Services Boards do not adequately address the complaints forwarded to them, the WAGs forward the same to Wasreb, the regulator, for for action. The methods used by the Water Action Groups:

- » **Focus Group Discussions** (FGDs) are held within communities to help consolidate consumer experiences with water and sanitation services. The results of these experiences are presented to the utility.
- » **Community/public forums:** WAGs are able to support service providers by mobilizing community leaders to participate in forums where their their concerns are addressed. This role is particularly useful in lower income communities which 'outsiders', like utilities, find difficult to access, unaccompanied, due to security concerns.
- » **Public hearings** serve as a platform for sector institutions to hear uncensored, structured feedback directly from consumers and to respond to the community.
- » **Structure meetings** are periodic meetings held between WAGs, water utilities and Water Boards. They are designed to serve as the backbone of the feedback mechanism and provide the chain for escalation of unresolved issues. The meetings have been very valuable in enabling sector institutions to build their understanding of consumer experience of water services and their perception of the sector.
- » The **complaints form** serves as a tool for WAGs to record consumer concerns and present their findings to water sector institutions.

## IMPACTS

Two years since the initiation of the programme, the WAGs have demonstrated that feedback from consumers has a strong impact on the focus of sector reforms and can dramatically influence public perception of the sector. Beyond helping Wasreb to deliver on its mandate

**“Regulation of corruption must start with the companies themselves taking action. Very few Kenyans can tamper with a pipe without the help of the utility staff because they don’t know where it is buried or how it works.”**

**Eng. Robert Gakubia, Wasreb chief executive**

of consumer protection, the introduction of WAGs also addresses the growing recognition of water as a human right by bringing “consumer voice” into the planning, operation and audit of the sector.

- » Within the first year, WAGs handled 405 consumer complaints touching on billing and metering, bursts and leakages (both sewerage and water), illegal connections, dilapidated infrastructure, open manholes and vandalism, overcharging, corruption, quality of service and conflicts between consumers. About 63 percent of the complaints handled by WAGs were resolved to the satisfaction of consumers within the year.
- » Cumulatively, thousands of community members have been reached through the public forums, public hearings, and Focus Group Discussions convened by the WAGs. This has provided opportunities for dissemination of information about sector reforms and enabled sector staff to address the consumers directly
- » Six months after the initiation of the WAGs programme, the security of WAG members began to emerge as an issue. Two cases of threats made against WAG members – one from Kisumu and another from Mombasa – were reported to the police. In all situations mentioned by WAGs, threats arise specifically when they touch the issue of corruption much of which is alleged to involve or is facilitated by members of staff of utilities.

WAGs argue that corruption is the cause of many of the problems currently experienced in the sector from over-pricing of water, to diversion of water, to billing and even disconnection and re-connection of supply. It affects land allocations for public utilities, installation of illegal water and sewer connections, direct theft of materials for construction and a host of other concerns. Many of the utility staff remain resistant to information about corruption.

### BOX 2 Lessons Learned:

- » **Tolerance & Cooperation:** the WAGs programme brings together capacities of actors from diverse sectors – government, State Corporations, non-governmental organisation and communities. Building of partnerships is required to bring the voice of citizens in decision-making in the water sector to ensure that development of the sector responds directly to consumer needs and priorities as articulated by consumer representatives themselves.
- » **Workload:** The workload of the WAGs can tend to be unusually demanding for a mechanism based on voluntary service. Employment of modern technology can be useful in improving reporting, and cutting the costs of meetings and communication.

The views expressed in this sheet are specific to the project described and are therefore not necessarily those of WIN.