

Good Practice Contribution to the Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

Submitted by the Ecumenical Water Network (EWN) and the ACT Alliance on behalf of the Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation (ART)

“Drinking water, an essential need”

Rehabilitating water supply in rural Armenia

Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation

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Description of the practice:

Name of the practice: “Drinking water, an essential need”

Providing fresh drinking water to people in the remote rural areas of the Republic of Armenia. Projects are implemented by the Armenia Inter-Church Charitable Round Table Foundation (ART) in cooperation with local churches and NGOs.

Aim of the practice:

The aim of the programme implemented in Armenia by the ART is to improve the situation of the targeted rural communities with a focus on health and sanitation.

Target group(s):

Starting in 2002 the ART initiated a number of projects on rehabilitation of drinking water systems in rural areas. A total of 16 rural communities (Azatamut, Kirants, Sarukhan, Chkalovka, Norashen, Verin Getashen, Varsar, Gavar, Matsamour, Dzoravank, Antaramej, Dprabak, Kalavan, Barepat, Aygut, Aygepar) with a combined population of more than nine thousand were targeted. Projects were successfully implemented, enabling around 9000 people to improve their drinking water quality and thus, health and sanitary situation.

Partners involved:

In implementation, the ART and ART local partners, NGOs and Churches, actively cooperate with local governments, community groups, water and sanitary units of provincial governments.

Duration of practice:

From 2002 - ongoing

Financing (short/medium/long term):

Financing for specific projects is short term (not more than 1 year), but some medium terms funds are available for the whole programme.

Brief outline of the practice:

All ART projects build on several components, including integrated community development (ICD), the presence of spiritual elements, the promotion of human rights and capacity building as a cross cutting issue. The most important is community empowerment, meaning that community groups take part in all stages of the project: from the development of the idea to the project's monitoring and evaluation.

ART focuses on the rehabilitation of drinking water infrastructure (pipelines). Among other aspects, the programme addresses and tries to prevent unequal access and use of water due to economic and political power disparities as well as geographic conditions, e.g. through the installation of "daily distribution basins". Trainings/workshops are held on the efficient use of water and activities are organized to raise the environmental awareness of the youth and in many places safe waste disposal is undertaken.¹

As mentioned above, the components all ART projects are build on are

1. Integrated community development (ICD):

The ART approach is based on integrated intervention, that is ART is trying to enable the communities through a step-by-step process to become stronger through training and project work. Community empowerment and ownership issues are the focus of ART activities. ART also tries to integrate its projects into the overall development strategies of the country. ART addresses social, economic and ecological issues which are in line with MDGs and the PRSP of Armenia.

2. The presence of spiritual element in the projects:

ART considers spiritual renewal as an issue of utmost importance for the people of Armenia. In each of the ART projects promotion of Christian values, what is carried out is important, but how it is done is still more significant for the ART.

3. Promoting human rights: The cross cutting issue for ART in all its activities is the improvement of human rights situation, to capacitate beneficiaries in this challenging area as well.

4. Capacity building as a cross cutting issue: Capacity building of the partners is carried out in two ways. First through on-the-job training, that is, day to day discussions and consultation on various project relation issues, starting from idea development to project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This is a very efficient way to develop ART partners' skills and knowledge to implement projects. The second is theoretical trainings and workshops organized by the ART for local Church and NGO partners. Several training cycles are designed and implemented, such as strategy plan development, proposal writing, methodology of computer literacy training and many others.

Results of ART intervention related to water and sanitation can be summarized as follows:

- Renovated/rehabilitated pipelines, daily distribution basins, observation pits, fenced and cleaned areas: in some places baths and laundry areas are established for all the population taking into consideration their different needs
- Increase in water quantity
- Improved water quality
- Decrease in intestinal disease cases, as people stop using contaminated water
- Improved sanitary situation as cooking, washing and bathing organised in a more efficient way.
- People improve their knowledge on environmental protection and conduct practical activities such as waste cleaning in their community
- Women and children do not carry water from far away places, organize their daily responsibilities in a more effective way and have time for leisure, education and working out of home.

¹ In the rural communities garbage is not collected for further utilisation. Piling waste in a designated area is considered as the best way of disposing of it. However, in the majority of the rural communities even such a designated place does not exist, and the garbage is disposed of into the streets, rivers, or road sides.

1. How does the practice meet the criterion of availability?

Explanatory note: Availability

Availability refers to sufficient quantities, reliability and the continuity of supply. Water must be continuously available in a sufficient quantity for meeting personal and domestic requirements of drinking and personal hygiene as well as further personal and domestic uses such as cooking and food preparation, dish and laundry washing and cleaning. Individual requirements for water consumption vary, for instance due to level of activity, personal and health conditions or climatic and geographic conditions. There must also exist sufficient number of sanitation facilities (with associated services) within, or in the immediate vicinity, of each household, health or educational institution, public institution and place, and the workplace. There must be a sufficient number of sanitation facilities to ensure that waiting times are not unreasonably long.

Answer:

Water issues comprise one of the most serious problems faced in Armenia. The amount of water available and quality is sufficient, but not all people can access it. Coupled with this, the water is not effectively used.

Drinking water is available only for a few hours a day in towns and cities. In rural areas problems are more serious, as there are communities where drinking water is brought in trucks and sold in canisters. As a rule, drinking water is taken from mountainous springs, only in few places deep wells are utilized. The existing drinking water systems (pipelines, catchment basins, etc) have not been repaired for decades, resulting in leakage and pollution of drinking water. In targeted areas mainly women and children carry water in buckets from faraway points. Limited access to drinking water results in bad social and sanitary conditions. Migration to Russia and Europe is common in these communities. Ecological problems (leakages, waste, and pollution of water) also add to social and economic ones.

2. How does the practice meet the criterion of accessibility?

Explanatory note: Accessibility

Sanitation and water facilities must be physically accessible for everyone within, or in the immediate vicinity, of each household, health or educational institution, public institution and the workplace. The distance to the water source has been found to have a strong impact on the quantity of water collected. The amount of water collected will vary depending on the terrain, the capacity of the person collecting the water (children, older people, and persons with disabilities may take longer), and other factors. There must be a sufficient number of sanitation and water facilities with associated services to ensure that collection and waiting times are not unreasonably long. Physical accessibility to sanitation facilities must be reliable at day and night, ideally within the home, including for people with special needs. The location of public sanitation and water facilities must ensure minimal risks to the physical security of users.

Answer:

ART targets the most vulnerable areas and the most defenseless in the communities. For example, when a drinking water pipeline feeding a street is rehabilitated, it must reach and serve every household in that particular street.

There are cases where politically, economically and socially privileged people and clans take the main amount of water, be it for irrigation or drinking. These groups can easily install pipes with a bigger diameter and take the most part of the water while nobody dares to speak up against such a practice. In other cases those living in the higher locations can easily take as much water as they like, even irrigating their orchards with drinking water.



Construction of daily distribution basins.

A number of techniques are utilized by ART-ACT to ensure fair access. For example, in order to ensure fair distribution of water to all and its equal quantity, we construct daily distribution basins in a

way that each household has a separate outlet. In this case it is not possible for one household to use the whole or a disproportionately large amount of water. We usually install several reservoirs down the slope, for four to five houses each. Each of these houses is connected using separate outlets and pipes. This idea is a local initiative and was first utilised in the village of Dzoravank.

The participation of church structures in the work also helps in ensuring equal approach to each one of the project beneficiaries and thus fair distribution of water. Before the project starts a town meeting takes place to present and discuss the project. Decisions on who are the most vulnerable in terms of access to water and who will be involved in project implementation and monitoring are taken during these general meetings. The main work is carried out by local population, they build for themselves. As a rule the project invites a hydro engineer to lead the work.

3. How does the practice meet the criterion of affordability?

Explanatory note: Affordability

Access to sanitation and water facilities and services must be accessible at a price that is affordable for all people. Paying for services, including construction, cleaning, emptying and maintenance of facilities, as well as treatment and disposal of faecal matter, must not limit people's capacity to acquire other basic goods and services, including food, housing, health and education guaranteed by other human rights. Accordingly, affordability can be estimated by considering the financial means that have to be reserved for the fulfilment of other basic needs and purposes and the means that are available to pay for water and sanitation services.

Charges for services can vary according to type of connection and household income as long as they are affordable. Only for those who are genuinely unable to pay for sanitation and water through their own means, the State is obliged to ensure the provision of services free of charge (e.g. through social tariffs or cross-subsidies). When water disconnections due to inability to pay are carried out, it must be ensured that individuals still have at least access to minimum essential levels of water. Likewise, when water-borne sanitation is used, water disconnections must not result in denying access to sanitation.

Answer:

Water pricing in Armenia differs for rural and urban areas. In urban areas water meters are installed, the price is considered not low but is affordable for the population. Water measuring meters are not welcome by the population, so their introduction in rural areas has been postponed. Currently, drinking water price in rural areas is calculated based on the number of population and livestock, each family paying not more than about 1 euro quarterly.

4. How does the practice meet the criterion of quality/safety?

Explanatory note: Quality/Safety

Sanitation facilities must be hygienically safe to use, which means that they must effectively prevent human, animal and insect contact with human excreta. They must also be technically safe and take into account the safety needs of peoples with disabilities, as well as of children. Sanitation facilities must further ensure access to safe water and soap for hand-washing. They must allow for anal and genital cleansing as well as menstrual hygiene, and provide mechanisms for the hygienic disposal of sanitary towels, tampons and other menstrual products. Regular maintenance and cleaning (such as emptying of pits or other places that collect human excreta) are essential for ensuring the sustainability of sanitation facilities and continued access. Manual emptying of pit latrines is considered to be unsafe and should be avoided.

Water must be of such a quality that it does not pose a threat to human health. Transmission of water-borne diseases via contaminated water must be avoided.

Answer:

In Armenia drinking water sources are mountain springs which are not only clean, but also very tasty. Moreover, chlorine is added in most places for sanitary purposes. At the same time, sanitary inspection of water reservoirs in rural areas is not common due to the high price of the service. With rehabilitation of drinking water systems clean drinking water is ensured for consumption, thus decreasing gastro-intestine disturbance and diseases. The sanitary situation is improved as washing and bathing is organised in a more efficient way. In six rural communities we have constructed baths and laundries, which ensure better sanitary situation, and decrease hand washing of laundry by elderly. For older people and people with disabilities baths and laundry services are free, while others pay very small sums.

5. How does the practice meet the criterion of acceptability?

Explanatory note: Acceptability

Water and sanitation facilities and services must be culturally and socially acceptable. Depending on the culture, acceptability can often require privacy, as well as separate facilities for women and men in public places, and for girls and boys in schools. Facilities will need to accommodate common hygiene practices in specific cultures, such as for anal and genital cleansing. And women's toilets need to accommodate menstruation needs.

In regard to water, apart from safety, water should also be of an acceptable colour, odour and taste. These features indirectly link to water safety as they encourage the consumption from safe sources instead of sources that might provide water that is of a more acceptable taste or colour, but of unsafe quality.

Answer:

Water quality is good in rural areas where the system has been rehabilitated and maintained. It is considered safe for consumption. There are no special social and cultural restrictions or limitations different from those of European standards.

6. How does the practice ensure non-discrimination?

Explanatory note: Non-discrimination

Non-discrimination is central to human rights. Discrimination on prohibited grounds including race, colour, sex, age, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, physical or mental disability, health status or any other civil, political, social or other status must be avoided, both in law and in practice.

In order to address existing discrimination, positive targeted measures may have to be adopted. In this regard, human rights require a focus on the most marginalized and vulnerable to exclusion and discrimination. Individuals and groups that have been identified as potentially vulnerable or marginalized include: women, children, inhabitants of (remote) rural and deprived urban areas as well as other people living in poverty, refugees and IDPs, minority groups, indigenous groups, nomadic and traveller communities, elderly people, persons living with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS or affected by other health conditions, people living in water scarce-regions and sanitation workers amongst others.

Answer:

Problems connected with the absence or lack of drinking water are multiple, ranging from sanitary problems to gender concerns. One of the main beneficiaries of the ART water projects are women, who carry water in buckets and are overall responsible for clean households and healthy food. If provided with fresh and ample drinking water, women and children will not carry water from far away places in buckets and canisters. They will manage healthier and cleaner households; their children will be protected from intestinal diseases. Women will have more free time to attend to their education and training.

Six communities targeted by the ART program are inhabited with refugees, ethnic Armenians who fled from Azerbaijan. Many of them found themselves in Armenia without any means of living.

As mentioned before, the decision on the target location is taken during the general town meetings. When rehabilitating pipelines, all households connected to an affected pipeline benefit from this intervention, be it wealthier or poorer households. However, it should be borne in mind that even those who are not very poor in the chosen locations are still vulnerable in terms of access to water. In some cases, the relatively well off have also ensured their water supply through separate pipelines, in such cases it is particularly the most vulnerable and poor who benefit from the rehabilitation of the community pipelines.

7. How does the practice ensure active, free and meaningful participation?

Explanatory note: Participation

Processes related to planning, design, construction, maintenance and monitoring of sanitation and water services should be participatory. This requires a genuine opportunity to freely express demands and concerns and influence decisions. Also, it is crucial to include representatives of all concerned individuals, groups and communities in participatory processes.

To allow for participation in that sense, transparency and access to information is essential. To reach people and actually provide accessible information, multiple channels of information have to be used. Moreover, capacity development and training may be required – because only when existing legislation and policies are understood, can they be utilised, challenged or transformed.

Answer:

An important aspect of the project is community participation in all steps from the project idea development stage through to implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Communities also actively contributed in the form of labour, supplying pipes, mechanisms, etc. About 20-25 villagers from each community participated in construction work coordinated by village mayor's offices and local clergy. Community members were organised into groups to participate in the project monitoring and evaluation as well as in the construction activities.

The communities got mobilised very quickly and were working in an organized and timely manner to implement the activities sooner than it was even foreseen in the project.

The cooperation with the privately run local water committees/branches went especially well. Drinking water throughout Armenia is managed by a private company which has its branches in all regions. Their responsibility is maintenance of the system. The existing system is so old with corroded pipes and leakages everywhere that these water committees/branches have no resources to do all the needed work. Our idea is to help far away and vulnerable communities and not let these communities utilize polluted water saying that it is the responsibility of the company. At the same time, the company willingly supports our work and provides all the needed special equipment free of charge as well as consultancy by a hydro engineer.

8. How does the practice ensure accountability?

Explanatory note: Accountability

The realization of human rights requires responsive and accountable institutions, a clear designation of responsibilities and coordination between different entities involved. As for the participation of rights-holders, capacity development and training is essential for institutions. Furthermore, while the State has the primary obligation to guarantee human rights, the numerous other actors in the water and sanitation sector also should have accountability mechanisms. In addition to participation and access to information mentioned above, communities should be able to participate in monitoring and evaluation as part of ensuring accountability. In cases of violations – be it by States or non-State actors –, States have to provide accessible and effective judicial or other appropriate remedies at both national and international levels. Victims of violations should be entitled to adequate reparation, including restitution, compensation, satisfaction and/or guarantees of non-repetition.

Human rights also serve as a valuable advocacy tool in using more informal accountability mechanisms, be it lobbying, advocacy, public campaigns and political mobilization, also by using the press and other media.

Answer:

From the first steps of project implementation community based groups are elected during community meetings, thus becoming accountable not only to ART but also to the whole community. As for monitoring we have witnessed many times how all the members of the community control each step of the implementation. All responsibilities are clearly designated, based on the resources of each party: ART is responsible for funding and monitoring, the local community for labor, water units for consultancy and provision with special purpose equipment and know-how.

Community meetings are held for information sharing related to project implementation, and for problem discussions, which ensures transparency and accountability.

9. What is the impact of the practice?

Explanatory note: Impact

Good practices – e.g. laws, policies, programmes, campaigns and/or subsidies - should demonstrate a positive and tangible impact. It is therefore relevant to examine the degree to which practices result in better enjoyment of human rights, empowerment of rights-holders and accountability of duty bearers. This criterion aims at capturing the impact of practices and the progress achieved in the fulfilment of human rights obligations related to sanitation and water.

Answer:

Access to safe drinking water (one of the MDG goals) is increased as a result of the ART programme. The methodology employed by ART and its partner churches and NGOs (community participation and accountability, transparency of all activities, handing over of the rehabilitated systems to communities for further maintenance) has created the basis of fair water distribution, irrespective of social status, gender, nationality or church affiliation.



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A total of 16 rural communities (Azatamut, Kirants, Sarukhan, Chkalovka, Norashen, Verin Getashen, Varsar, Gavar, Matsamour, Dzoravank, Antaramej, Dprabak, Kalavan, Barepat, Aygut, Aygepar) with total population of more than nine thousand were targeted. Projects were successfully implemented in those communities, allowing about 9000 people improve their drinking water quality and thus, health and sanitary situation.

10. Is the practice sustainable?

Explanatory note: Sustainability

The human rights obligations related to water and sanitation have to be met in a sustainable manner. This means good practices have to be economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. The achieved impact must be continuous and long-lasting. For instance, accessibility has to be ensured on a continuous basis by adequate maintenance of facilities. Likewise, financing has to be sustainable. In particular, when third parties such as NGOs or development agencies provide funding for initial investments, ongoing financing needs for operation and maintenance have to be met for instance by communities or local governments. Furthermore, it is important to take into account the impact of interventions on the enjoyment of other human rights. Moreover, water quality and availability have to be ensured in a sustainable manner by avoiding water contamination and over-abstraction of water resources. Adaptability may be key to ensure that policies, legislation and implementation withstand the impacts of climate change and changing water availability.

Answer:

When communities apply to the local churches and ART with requests to help them to solve drinking water problems, they presented pledges of their own contribution, in the form of labour and mechanisms, thus ensuring ownership of the project outcomes. Upon project completion the system is handed over to local authorities, maintenance becoming their responsibility (it is not very expensive and possible to cover from local budgets).

The ART project tries to solve drinking water problem in a way that makes it sustainable for years, not only rehabilitating the pipes, but also repairing basins, fencing them, etc. An important aspect of the project is community participation in all steps of project development and implementation.

Final remarks, challenges, lessons learnt

The experience of ART has shown that community participation is a pre-requisite which contributes to the success of activities related to water system rehabilitation. Local knowledge of the situation and conditions allows work to be undertaken in an efficient and quick manner, solving many problems without unnecessary tensions, and, most importantly, in a fair manner and without violating the rights of vulnerable people.