



CASE STUDY

Kenya: Water for the Maasai

Summary

The Maasai live in an area of Kenya that has no water in the rivers for half a year. To address the water scarcity, the Water for the Maasai project was initiated. The Maasai, the donor, and the NGO work closely to cooperate in the key issues of education, training, and long-term guidance. The key lesson is that it takes time to build trust among donors, NGOs, and native populations.

Background

In the Kajiado district in southern Kenya, pastoral nomads called Maasai, reside with their own specific culture, traditions, and worldview. These families are fully dependent on their cattle, sometimes comprising thousands of animals.

Naturally, water is of vital importance to these people and their animals. Like most arid regions however, rainwater pools and ponds are scarcely available in the Kajiado district. The ancient volcanic area is quite dry and for half of the year there is no water in the rivers. Surface water is heated in this tropical area to 30 °C in a short period of time and can be a source of harmful bacteria. The best option for health is to use groundwater from boreholes.

In the district there is a borehole available roughly every 25 km if it is working. The Maasai men bring their cattle from the savannah to the borehole daily or every other day. The districts inhabitants primarily depend on man-made wells, mostly drilled between 1970 and 1990. These wells, having deteriorated over the years, are now in need of repair. Most boreholes, including the generators and pumps (called gensets in this description) are malfunctioning or not working at all. Some are clogged, with collapsed walls; others equipped with broken pumps or damaged aggregates. In addition to the costs of repair being too high for the Maasai, another critical aspect is that there is no system to maintain and manage the existing water supplies. In the past, a donor would provide a new pump or generator for free and then leave. When the newly supplied generator failed, the Maasai would need to move to another borehole as no donors were available to provide new generators. This approach to aid provision has proven to be unsuccessful for many boreholes throughout the district.

The Maasai are highly dependent on the water. They need it for sheep, cows and donkeys. When there is no water or fresh grass the men have to move around with the cattle. Women and children who live in villages are highly dependent on water from the boreholes.

Actions taken

The ten year long “Water for the Maasai” borehole rehabilitation project started in 1997. Prior to undertaking the work, the donor Water Supply Company Drenthe put a lot of energy into a pre-assessment of the situation to determine how to best assist the Maasai communities. Of primary interest were the areas physical geographic and social geographical aspects (i.e. how to provide assistance without infringing upon the culture and traditions of the Maasai).

In the project Water Supply Company Drenthe from Holland and AMREF Flying Doctors (NGO) are working together closely. Water Supply Company Drenthe provides their experience, funding sources, and guides the project. The non-governmental health organisation of Africa, AMREF, facilitates the project.

The project aims were formulated after the physical and social aspects were determined to have been adequately studied. The project aims included; the rehabilitation of as many boreholes as possible in the Kajiado district; the creation of an association responsible for borehole operation and maintenance within the first 5 years; and the financial and technical transfer of the project in the following 5 year period. After ten years it is expected that the project will be owned by the Maasai.

Training in relation to the project is also in organizational terms. If a Maasai community wants to join the project they have to agree to all details and regulations such as paying for 25% of the hardware and as owners being responsible for maintaining it. Furthermore, they must install a water committee (6 men, 4 women), pay contribution for the association, get training in capacity building, be able to run the organisation, and open a bank account for saving money. Support from the NGO AMREF will continue for a long time and the technical people from AMREF will get salary from the association after the project has finished in order to ensure that boreholes do not fall into disrepair.

In order to let the 34 communities cooperate in one Association, the communities are clustered in 6 Borehole Cluster Association Committees (BCAC) and have begun to merge into one Association. This Association for the district will contain a warehouse for spare parts and repairs. This Association will be guided for at least another five years. The aim for 2007 is that the Association will be fully self-supporting. The Maasai families will contribute financially to gain ownership and responsibility for the association, including technical personal, cars, spare part stores, etc. All Maasai agreed to pay and received training to run the associations. They were trained by AMREF people, who will be depending on their salary from the Maasai associations. This mutual relationship is one of the keys to the success of the project.

Outcomes

Good quality groundwater at a relatively short distance is now accessible throughout the year. Through the project training the Maasai people now maintain the diesel engines on the borehole sites, with the AMREF crew providing some assistance with repairs if necessary. Trust was facilitated through the use of a local NGO and group meetings that include the donor once or twice per year.

Aid programs often give little or no attention to the cultural, traditional, and technical

differences of the local communities the donors are trying to assist. Misunderstandings and distrust often result in project failure within a very short period, it is therefore critical to note that the success of the “Water for Maasai” project can be attributed to the Maasai’s, the NGO’s and Donor’s respect for one another’s cultures, traditions, and technologies through a comprehensive trust-building initiative.

Gender issues and empowerment of women is vital to the project. Women join committees and get influence in them, children in general have more time to go to school, and more girls go to school until the age of 18.

Since the start of the project in 1997 about 40 communities (villages) have joined the project. This means that about 60, 000 Maasai have been involved. They have all paid 25% of the hardware and contributions for the association. IWRM focus is also seen from the high attention paid to education, training, and capacity building, and transfer of ownership.

Today the Maasai grow corn and vegetables on large scale in order to generate money for improving living standards and the water supply system. They sell vegetables to hotels and neighbouring communities and are able to save money for the future. They are also able to supply water for cattle markets.

Lessons Learned

Building trust between Donors, NGOs and native populations takes time. A pilot project, using a local NGO to link the Donor and native population, recognising cultural differences, and identifying the most suitable people for and training can be useful.

Translating the significant financial contributions required into proportional terms, identifiable to the locals is important. Donors must be sensitive to cultural values in order to avoid making propositions that are unreasonable to the local people.

It became apparent that applying the idea effectively in one community would encourage others in the region to adopt the initiative.

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