



Empowering rural communities

Rainwater harvesting by women
groups in Rakai, Uganda

Julianne Rugasira

Millie Abaru
Rolf Winberg



RELMA

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By her house, a member of the Katuntu Twekembe Women's Group has a 15 m³ tank for water storage (photo: Anna K Lindqvist)

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Foreword

No one knows me better than I myself – of course. My own family is best known by myself, my wife and our sons. Väsby, my home town in Sweden, is best known by its own people. By “known”, I mean we have knowledge of our present situation, successes, failures and daily routines. When it comes to my own problems and the things hindering my progress, I know things best, I dare to say. But, when talking of new ideas, challenges and opportunities for the future, very often we need input from outside.

I believe that most individuals, families, groups and villages all over the world will describe their situation in a similar way. They know their lives. They know the obstacles. But they do not necessarily know the right way forward.

The world of development cooperation is packed with abbreviations. One of them, PRA, means “participatory rural appraisal”. It is widely used these days. Sometimes it is successful, though quite often it is misused. It involves two risks. Either development workers say “the people themselves know best, so let us assist them to solve the problems they identify”. Or they say, “now we have done a good PRA and know the situation, let us bring in our machinery and develop”.

In Rakai District in southwest Uganda, a “participatory rural development” concept was used. Knowledge about the existing situation and the tough local conditions were provided by women groups, and new ideas were brought in from outside. The partners have been in constant dialogue, debating development ideas, pros and cons, in a manner respectful of each other’s competence. The cooperation among the women groups, local authorities and external development organizations has worked smoothly because of this respect and a good understanding of each other’s roles and contributions. What strikes me most when meeting with the Rakai ladies is their natural pride: “Look here at what we have done!”

Åke Barklund

Director, RELMA

Preface

This book describes how women in Rakai District in Uganda organized themselves to solve a serious problem: the lack of safe, clean water. The groups of women built tanks to collect rainwater from the roofs of their houses. At the start the focus was on solving the immediate problem of bad water: neither the women, nor their supporters, planned a long-term commitment. The expansion that later took place was almost accidental.

The people in the Rakai communities have become empowered in important ways. The women have taken the lead, but men have also been involved in the work and have shared the benefits. There is clear potential for the range of activities to grow, and for larger numbers of people to be involved.

We hope that the Rakai success story will spark valuable discussions and experiments by other communities and change agents.

This publication builds on a study commissioned by the Uganda Rainwater Association, carried out by Julianne Rugasira in 1999. We are grateful to all members of the Rakai women groups who provided information about their experience. We deeply appreciate the efforts of the District Water Officer, David Balibuliza, who has believed in the women of Rakai, given them a chance to prove themselves, and promoted their efforts. This support was crucial to the motivation of the groups. The late Harriet Namuyanja, Assistant Chief Administration Officer in charge of Water and Environmental Sanitation, was mother, mentor, counsellor and advisor to the groups, especially in their infancy.

The Uganda Rainwater Association, and especially Gilbert Kimanzi and William Kalega, have supported training in other districts, and have enabled the Rakai successes to be replicated elsewhere.

Our appreciation also goes to the entire district staff who helped make this project and book a reality, in particular the Community Development Officer, the District Health Inspector, the Health Assistant, and staff of Ddwaniro and Bgakabanda Sub-counties.



Map of Rakai District

Introduction

Rakai District lies in southwestern Uganda, about 200 km SW of Kampala. The district has four counties (Kabula, Kakuto, Kyotera and Kooki) and 22 sub-counties. The majority of the district's 383,500 people belong to the Baganda tribe, the largest ethnic group in Uganda.

A major problem in Kooki County is the lack of clean water. According to Ugandan government and World Health Organization standards, the highly mineralized groundwater in this area is unsafe for human consumption. Local people are forced to use contaminated surface water, so water-borne diseases are common.

The Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA) and the Rakai District administration agreed to explore rainwater harvesting as a way to provide safe water to the communities in Kooki. The area receives about 800 mm of rain a year during the two rainy seasons, so rainwater harvesting has the potential to supply much of the local people's needs.

Representatives of the Rakai administration travelled to Kenya in mid-1996 to see various rainwater-harvesting projects there. They visited Nakuru, Laikipia, Nyahururu, Machakos and Kitui districts, where women groups were making rainwater jars of manageable sizes. The Rakai team were impressed by the tank construction itself, by the groups' high degree of organization, and by their subsidiary activities that had helped improve their livelihood.

On their return to Rakai, the team asked RELMA to help local people learn how to make tanks. RELMA sponsored some Kenyan women to teach groups of Rakai women how to build two types of tanks.

This book describes how groups of Rakai women learned to make tanks and built a rainwater collection system for each family in the group.

The book also shows the supportive role the donors have played. This role has been deliberately in the background, so as to create room for local initiatives and empowerment, thereby increasing local ownership and sustainability. The approaches used are relevant not only for rainwater harvesting projects, but also for other interventions that require community participation.

The activities described here are still continuing today.

Study methods

This report is based mainly on a study by the Uganda Rainwater Association. At the time of the study, 26 groups of women in Rakai were engaged in building tanks. The study focused on three of them: the Katuntu Tweekembe and Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Groups (the first two groups, which had been trained by the Kenyans) and the Basooka Kwavula Women Group (one of the first groups to take up tank-building afterwards). These groups were chosen because of the length of time they had been involved in tank-building and because they had experiences to share.

The study team made three field visits and conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with farmers, local leaders, other stakeholders and extension staff. The team encouraged all group members to speak, to ensure that the opinions expressed were representative of the groups rather than of factions or individuals. The team also used personal narratives to elucidate stories, and observed the groups at work.

The study aimed to discover:

- Why and how did the women decide that rainwater harvesting was a priority?
- How are the groups organized, and what positive elements help sustain them?
- What impact did the training in tank construction have?
- What roles did different stakeholders play in mobilizing the community, resources and technical advice?
- What have the spin-offs been, and how do these affect local livelihoods?
- What have the outcomes (structures, benefits) been?
- What has the impact on gender and the socio-cultural situation been?
- What are the limitations? Is it possible to replicate this experience, and what lessons can be learned?

Intervention methods

After identifying the problem of fresh water availability, a team composed of Rakai District officials and a RELMA staff member identified two local women groups that could be trained in making rainwater tanks. The two groups chosen were the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya and Katuntu Tweekembe Women Groups.

From the outset, the district officials and RELMA took the bold step of entering a partnership of trust with these groups, which had no outstanding capacities and no prior knowledge of rainwater-tank construction. But they had a common problem – a

lack of clean, safe water, and long distances to walk to ponds where they drew dirty water. This trust was all it took to get the women moving. All the women focused on a shared vision for improved living standards and for clean drinking water.

Trust has immense potential. As a result of this partnership, these women – and other women in Rakai they had taught – have made more than 100 tanks and have generated many other spin-off benefits.

The development agents worked with existing groups rather than forming new ones. This ensured a direct, easy entry to the community. It also motivated the group members, because they felt that they themselves had laid the foundations of the project. They realized that the outsiders trusted them enough to support them. This in turn stimulated participation and promoted the project's sustainability.

Entry points

The entry point in a community is very important: it can make or break a project. As often advocated but rarely practised, an intervention should start where the local people are, letting them identify their immediate needs – as opposed to forcibly involving them in activities identified by donors or local leaders.

Groups with a purpose

Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group

- Founded in 1992 with 18 members.

Original objectives

- Home improvement (each member had to have a latrine, drying rack and clean compound before joining the group).
- Improving household income through a revolving fund of US\$ 5,000 (USD 3.33) each month from each member. Each month, one member in turn receives the pooled money to buy household items such as jerricans, saucepans, plates, cups and mattresses.

Katuntu Tweekembe Women Group

- Founded in 1995 with 13 members.

Original objectives

- Improvement of women's status through money-making activities, especially baking.
- Helping the disabled and orphans in the community.
- Improving household income through a revolving fund.
- Home improvement.

At the time the rainwater construction activities were being started, the group's bakery business was experiencing problems because of competition from other groups.

The project also used government structures instead of establishing a parallel donor-driven system. This facilitated ownership and generated participation by the district leadership. Integration of the project activities into the district work plans made it easy to get support, supervision and follow-up from district technical staff.

The district officials made it clear from the start that they would be able to provide only some transport, technical support and advisory services. Danida donated most of the seed capital, in the form of cement. Each group member making a tank was given four bags of cement, out of the six or eight needed. The groups themselves provided the remaining cement, plus sand, hardcore, chicken net, weld mesh, gutters, pipes and the tap.

Training and group initiatives

Once the Rakai groups had identified the problem, it was evident that they needed technical skills in building rainwater tanks. The most suitable trainers were Kenyan women who already made such tanks and could act as role models.

In early 1997, RELMA sponsored six experienced Kenyan women and a technician to teach women groups in Rakai and Mbarara districts how to organize tank-making and how to harvest rainwater from roofs. The training lasted two weeks. A technician accompanied the women as their guide, and the district administration and the water officer provided backstopping.

In Rakai, the Kenyans trained members of the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya and Katuntu Tweekembe groups. The trainees learned how to make two types of tank: a 2,000-litre jar costing about USh 160,000 (USD 106)¹, and a 3,500-litre ferro-cement tank costing about USh 240,000 (USD 160). With good construction, such a tank may last 50 years. The discussion was one among equals, from woman to woman, and addressing common interests.

The two Rakai groups then started a programme to build a tank and a rainwater collection system for each of their houses. After they had gained experience from

Building capacity

Capacity building should always be linked to identified training needs. The training should provide the skills that the person or institution immediately needs. The environment may also have to be changed to allow the person or institution to achieve its goals. The facilitators should be role models and inspire the learners.

¹ Exchange rate: USD 1 = USh 1,500 (in year 2000)



Tank construction as training.



A 2,000-litre jar, made by the Katuntu Twekembe group at Angelica Nalubega's homestead.

making their own tanks, selected members were given additional training to reinforce their new skills. The District Water Officer assisted with the follow-up and quality assurance of the tanks built.

After their success, the women started to train other groups, and took on tank-construction contracts for a fee. They have since expanded their activities beyond their original purpose, and have transformed their own lives and their communities. They have requested to learn other technologies of water harvesting and land management.

Group management

The groups have developed a number of bylaws and agreements on how they will operate. Some of these are listed below.

- Each group has a code of conduct and a management committee to oversee changes in it. Members arriving late for group activities are fined USh 500 (USD 0.33). A disciplinary committee enforces the bylaws.



Ferro cement tank of around 5,000 litres, constructed by Katuntu Tweekembe Women's Group at Nalongo Kikomoko's homestead.



Tank construction under way. The base has been built and the tap fitted. The wire mesh is being put in place.



Angelica Nalubega, of the Katuntu Tweekembe Women's Group, with her water jar. In the background a drying rack for kitchen utensils. She was among the first to have a tank built. She is very happy with the tank – though she wishes it were bigger.

- Each group has a savings programme. Members contribute an amount to a kitty, and each month the kitty is given to one of the members in rotation. The amount saved depends on the members' needs and abilities. The group also maintains a fund to pay for its activities. Some groups have opened a bank account with this money. To ensure that group members have food, each member is encouraged to earn a minimum of US\$ 200 a day (USD 0.13) by selling labour or services.
- Each member has an improved homestead with a latrine, drying rack, bathroom, etc.).
- Each member must have clean water containers and other household utensils. Because of the groups' sanitary bylaws, the district leadership has decided to channel some of the district funds that promote sanitation through the groups.
- All members should send their children to school. This supports the Ugandan government's universal primary education programme, which requires all children below the age of 16 to be educated. Schooling for up to four children per family is free; the family must pay to educate any extra children.
- The next group member to have a jar or tank built is selected by ballot. This avoids misunderstandings and promotes transparency.

Factors for a group's success

- Visionary leaders and motivated members.
- Cohesion, mutual trust, and a capacity to organize themselves.
- A willingness to learn and try out new ideas.
- Land security.

Imitating success

"After seeing the success of the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group, we realized the need to come together, work and solve problems as a group. After they trained us, we started to raise money to build tanks for our members. After all the members have got tanks, we want to ask the extension officers to train us how to farm better – especially in growing bananas – and how to build wood-saving stoves so we can save time looking for firewood."

—Federesi Nassozi Ssebowa,
Basooka Kwavula Women Group

Such bylaws help the groups maintain their cohesiveness and give them a sense of identity and solidarity. The chairwomen of the two initial groups say that their groups continue to work well because they set their own rules – and stick to them.

The fact that the groups function well shows that such communities have great potential that can be activated by development workers and donors.

Diversification

The groups have diversified into money-making ventures apart from tank construction. In the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group, each member contributes US\$ 1,000–5,000 (USD 0.67–3.33), depending on whether the harvest was good or bad. The group has invested this money in coffee growing and animal husbandry. The group has bought 100 coffee trees, which it owns jointly, and sells beans and cuttings. Members themselves pay US\$ 300 (USD 0.20) per seedling, while non-members pay US\$ 500 (USD 0.33). The group has also bought more than 2,000 coffee seedlings to plant in each member's homestead. The proceeds from these seedlings will go to the individual, but the group does the planting, weeding and harvesting in each member's garden in turn, so cutting labour costs.

The group plans to re-invest the income in a pick-up. They hope to use this vehicle to take them to train other groups, and to transport products for sale in larger markets in bigger towns.

The Basooka Kwavula Women Group makes money through activities such as handicrafts and pig-raising. The group hopes to imitate the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group (which trained them) and to open a bank account so that they can get loans to buy piglets to fatten and sell in the towns. At the moment each household raises its own pigs, but the women aim to establish a group-owned piggery.

The women earn about US\$ 40,000 (USD 27) for each pig they sell. Half the money goes to the group activities; the other half is divided among the members.

The Katuntu Tweekembe Women Group has excelled in businesses such as handicrafts, pig-raising and jam-making. This group has also started rearing cattle, and plans to start zero-grazing units and to sell slabs for making toilets.

All three groups train other groups of women within the county and in other districts. They charge US\$ 5,000 (USD 3.33) per day for training outside the district; the trainees must provide accommodation, meals and construction materials. The groups will also build tanks on request. The charge of US\$ 60,000 (USD 40) for a tank covers labour and facilitation; materials are extra.



With less time spent on collecting water, the women can devote more time to coffee – an important cash crop.



They also have more time to cultivate bananas, a staple food and an important source of cash.



Group members raise pigs to sell.

Gender and social issues

Men and women have different roles and responsibilities in society and the economy. Women generally take care of the family. Such chores as cooking, washing, etc., usually do not earn money, and are sometimes called “reproductive work”. Men, on the other hand, more usually have “productive” roles (such as wage labour) that earn income. Among the Baganda, women and children (both boys and girls) have the task of fetching water, while construction of any kind is seen as the men’s job. Men are also responsible for maintaining boreholes, community wells, etc.

The division of labour between men and women is not fixed. With the women’s work to build and maintain tanks, it is possible to see the beginning of a change in roles, and a shift in responsibility to maintain tanks from the community to individual households.

By building tanks and through other activities, the women contribute to the family’s income. The man is no longer viewed as the only breadwinner. Families appreciate their womenfolk’s support, and they work together as a team. The shared responsibility improves relationships between men and women. The women’s involvement in “productive” work will in the long run be reflected in higher national income.

The social stigma attached to single mothers, single women and widows is also being eased. At first, many men ridiculed the women tank-builders: they said the women did not respect themselves and that they wanted to be equal to men. The women carried on regardless, and as the fruits of their work began to be visible, the men started to admire their accomplishments. Husbands of group members began to brag about their wives’ ability. These women are now viewed as assets to the community and are accepted in their new role as tank technicians.

The water project has facilitated direct links and working relationships with the extension service, and has improved extension for women. The extension service is male-dominated, and is usually directed towards men, who are expected to pass on messages to the women. The women tank-builders can now work directly with male extension staff, and their husbands and the community accept this.

Access to and control of household resources are beginning to change. Traditionally, cash crops are seen as “men’s crops”, while food crops are “women’s crops”. Coffee gardens and their proceeds belong to the men; banana plantings belong to the women, but the cash from any sales goes to the men. By growing coffee, the women groups will own and sell coffee, so this relationship is likely to change. As production improves, bananas are becoming a cash crop, and men may become owners of banana plots.

Another shift is the growing demand by women to do zero-grazing. Traditionally, men and boys own and herd cattle; women can only have access to and sell the milk. As a result of zero-grazing, women can now own and take care of cattle themselves.

Empowerment

Many development agencies define empowerment as development by the people, and not only for them. This implies that it is not possible to empower people, but rather that people become empowered over time, i.e., empowerment is a process. As a result of the water-harvesting intervention, the group members have become empowered both directly and indirectly.

Economic empowerment

- The groups have acquired marketable skills: they charge villagers USh 60,000 (USD 40) to construct a jar, and USh 80,000 (USD 53) for a tank. They train other groups for a fee.
- The women no longer have to fetch water, so can use their time in more productive ways. For example, they earn money by working as a group in people's gardens to earn the USh 200 (USD 0.13) required by the group every day. They also pool their produce, increasing their bargaining power and earning higher prices.
- With more time available, the women manage their banana plantations better and produce more *matooke* (banana) for sale. This increases both their incomes and their food security.
- The groups have decided to diversify their activities. For example, the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group grows clonal coffee in its tree nursery, and sells the seedlings to make money for its members.

The women can use the money they earn to meet some of their basic household needs. This is a major achievement because the man had always been viewed as the sole breadwinner in a home. The women's earnings help relieve domestic tensions if the husbands are unable to pay for family expenses. The husbands and the community appreciate the women's contribution to the homes and to the society.

Political empowerment

Some of the women have joined their local village councils. Their ability to participate in making decisions for the community is vital if women's and children's needs are to be addressed.



Mat-making is another income-generating activity.



Surplus food is stored for family members and orphans taken care of by the group.



Members of the Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group admiring Maria Nabukenya's improved stove. She can now prepare a whole meal at the same time, with less firewood.



One woman's story

"Before I was involved in this project, I was not able to speak in public, or even go to the sub-county or district offices and speak to any officer. But today I can speak to anyone without fear. As a chairperson of the group, I now promote our activities wherever I go. Members of my group can also address anyone, without fear. Recently, I went to the Buganda Kingdom offices to brief the officers about our activities and find out what assistance we could be given. I was invited into the Lukiiko (meeting), and at the end I was elected representative of the Buganda Queen (Nabagereka) in my sub-county."

—Maria Nabukenya, leader of the Bakyala Kwekula-kulanya Women Group

Individual empowerment

As individuals, the women have lost their shyness and become more confident. They now take the initiative to solve their problems and to seek and demand services. They view themselves as partners with their husbands in improving their homes and lives. They have recognized the need to share responsibility in the home and to work together as husband and wife. When a couple realizes they are partners and not competitors for power, the experience gained is meaningful and sustainable.

Many of the group members are single mothers, whom the culture traditionally scorns. For example, men often refuse to allow their wives to be in the same group as unmarried mothers. Now, however, such women are respected and can even address an audience of men. When they undertake non-traditional and economic ventures such as tank construction, they are looked at with admiration.

The group members even want to learn music, dance and drama so they can publicize their work and other health-education messages.

Support

Several development agencies operate in Rakai, but few address the water problem. The main organizations that assist the women groups are as follows.

- RELMA provided the initial support for the women groups. Its major input was in the form of training.
- The district offered (and continues to offer) technical guidance to ensure quality, promotes the group activities within the district and outside, and provides supervision.
- The sub-county leaders offer moral and material support where possible.
- Rakai District is a beneficiary of a long-term Danida integrated rural development programme. Although it has no water component, this programme cooperates with development agencies interested in water issues. It provided cement – on a cost-sharing basis to ensure that outsiders did not take over the local initiative.

Other organizations interested in water issues that have contributed to the groups are:

- Vi Agroforestry Project
- World Vision
- International Care and Relief
- Lake Victoria Environment Management Project (World Bank-funded).

Since cost-sharing has been the mode used so far and is accepted, assistance from other organizations should be treated in the same way, reducing dependency and building capacity in the communities.

Outsiders have intervened little in the management of the groups and their activities. This may seem risky, but it has given the women the ability to manage their own problems and not to depend on outside help. They have developed the ability to seek assistance from district officials or other donors when necessary. The groups have had a chance to become autonomous and take control themselves: a foundation for sustainability.

Council support

“As a local council we have managed to work together with the women groups when they have approached us for assistance. For instance the council on many occasions has provided transport for construction materials. We have also mobilized other communities to get involved in rainwater-harvesting activities, and we have promoted the groups outside our sub-county and district. Of late we have managed to interest the International Care and Relief programme to fund some rainwater activities. We are still working out the modalities on how to use the women groups’ services.

—Tom Yiga Mulindwa, Chairman,
Ddwaniro Sub-county

Impact and outreach

By early 2000, a total of 54 jars and 87 tanks had been built. More are still under construction. The Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group has made 20 jars or tanks – one for each member. The Katuntu Tweekembe Women Group has made seven jars and eight tanks for the group members, as well as one tank for a disabled man.

The Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Women Group has appointed a special construction team of two female and two male members to meet the demand for tanks. Over a 6-month period they built 30 tanks.

The groups have modified the tank design: for example, by lowering the position of the tap to minimize the amount of water wasted. The lower tap means that water must be collected in cooking pots holding 5 litres or less.

As other community members saw the benefits of the tanks, they wanted to learn how to make them. Since 1998, the women groups have trained 302 people (including 82 men) in 26 other groups in Rakai District. Bakyala Kwekulakulanya alone has trained 16 of these groups (204 members, including 61 men). All these groups are functional. The District Water Department has trained another ten groups.

Bakyala Kwekulakulanya has also trained eight groups outside Rakai District, with a total of 190 members (including 24 men). These groups were from Kibale, Kisoro, Mbale, Mbarara, Mpigi, Rukungiri and Tororo districts. A team of trainers from Rakai and Kenya also trained women in the Southern Province of Zambia.

Training is difficult to evaluate: it is often hard to see an impact on people other than those who have attended the training. This has not been the case in Rakai: the effectiveness of the training is clear from the tanks that have been built, and from the

Social returns

“Finally we are beginning to see large social returns for women and their families in particular, and for the community in general. Improved sanitation and hygiene translate into improved health and productivity. Also, we encourage women to bring their husbands to participate in the groups, so making community mobilization easy. This is because in general men are not active in groups.”

—Regina Nayiga, Community Development Officer, Rakai

Eager to learn

“We do training in groups so that each one can get exposure and practice. This gives everyone the zeal to learn because we know that sometime any one of us will have to go out and train others.”

—Gloria Kamindi, Katuntu Tweekembe Women Group

transformation that has taken place in the women's community, in their homes, and most of all, in the women themselves.

Impacts of the training include the following:

- The women have gained access to clean, safe water within walking distance.
- They have time for other important activities because they no longer have to fetch water.
- The women have been exposed to areas outside their district, raising their confidence and allowing them to share their experiences. Two have been to Zambia to train women there.
- Health in the community has improved because of access to clean water and improved sanitation.
- The women's incomes have risen because they can sell services such as tank-building and training to people outside the group.
- The women have changed the lives of other people in and outside the district by building tanks and by training others to do so. The "cascading" of training has produced a good multiplier effect.

Success is not always easy to replicate. The state could not afford to subsidize water tanks for everyone. However, the women groups have shown that the community itself can replicate the tanks in a cost-effective and sustainable way, with little or no donor intervention. Together with district and sub-county officials, the groups have started promoting the tanks. They market their skills through the quality work they do, and they take advantage of local council meetings – which costs them nothing.

The women have helped train existing groups and create new ones. This training is effective because the groups have equal status. The Rakai women are motivated by the economic benefits of training and construction work, and because they get to travel outside their district.

District staff offer the women technical support, and the district and sub-county leaders help the groups build connections within and outside the district. The district leaders promote the replication efforts because they see themselves as part of the project. This ownership is a result of the limited donor involvement in the day-to-day rainwater-management activities. This ensured that the leaders had an opportunity to be innovative and to develop strategies to promote the groups.



Over the years, bigger and bigger tanks are being built. This member of the Katuntu Twekembe Women's Group is the proud owner of a 15 m³ tank, constructed 2001.



Clean water means improved health for the family.



Better health means hope for the next generation.

Sustainability

Sustainability should be at the forefront when projects are planned to avoid skills and achievements being lost in the long term. The Rakai water intervention is new, but shows potential for sustainability.

- The groups have achieved a high degree of autonomy – an important basis for sustainability.
- The groups have developed the ability to demand and seek assistance. They have also mobilized savings, started income-generating activities, and improved their farm production – all factors that will enable the groups to grow and to expand their activities.
- Group members are also looking at the groups' future. To pass on the torch to the next generation, members are encouraged to bring their children to activities when the schools are closed.

Constraints

Despite the communities' increased income, they still face various constraints.

As the groups open bank accounts and diversify their activities, they need to acquire skills in areas such as bookkeeping, management of group funds, communication, marketing, leadership and group management. Donors can play an advisory role here.

Because all members depend on farming, they are heavily dependent on a good harvest. If the harvest is poor, they find it hard to mobilize resources for materials that are not locally available. They need to earn money from their income-generating activities and their farms, and cut costs on their farms. They also need to strengthen their networking and develop partnerships with other organizations (government, community-based and non-governmental).

Many women who would like to participate in the programme face financial problems. The district is not able to support all groups with seed capital, and even if support is available, it is given on a cost-sharing basis to encourage ownership and avoid the dependency syndrome. The financial constraints of low-income groups greatly limit the expansion of the programme.

Another limitation is that not all groups, especially those of the vulnerable members of the community, are registered. These unregistered groups are not known, so they are left out of interventions that use a group approach.



Bakyala Kwekulakulanya Group with a jar built previously (on the left), and a semi-underground tank built in 2001.

Best practices

The Rakai experience highlights several considerations necessary for sustainable community change. These conditions are not restricted to rainwater activities. All community-based initiatives should consider the following:

- **Give people a voice** Communities should be facilitated to identify their own problems. Donors and the government should not decide where funds should be channelled. Failing to listen to, learn from, and engage with the poor risks missing important opportunities in the quest for rural development. Only if the poor have a say in why, what, and how programmes and projects can be made to work for them can real development occur.
- **Start from where the community is** In Rakai, existing women groups were identified as an entry point to address the priority problem. Involving the existing groups helped to build strong partnerships and effective collaboration.
- **Use existing structures** at the lowest possible level, foster the integration of activities in district plans, and develop clear measures for follow-up.
- **Minimize outside interference** in terms of offering funds and handouts except for seed capital, technical support and follow-up. This will increase the beneficiaries' independence and sustainability, and encourage replication of the positive behaviours and empowerment of the community.
- **Encourage ownership** To institute true ownership, the beneficiaries should pay for the cost of the interventions they themselves have planned. External partners should contribute with capacity building and advice as requested.

- **Invest in individuals** For interventions (like roof-water harvesting) that need close supervision and good maintenance, investment in individuals as opposed to communal interventions has positive aspects. Individual ownership brings low maintenance costs, appropriate use and control, and avoids misuse of the facilities.

Communal facilities depend heavily on individuals committed to their maintenance. Group members can contribute USh 60,000 (USD 40) for an individual's water jar, yet a community of 300 people can fail to raise USh 2,000 (USD 1.33) to buy grease to maintain a borehole. Individual facilities can be provided through organized groups.

- **Focus not only on income** Some development agencies set economic empowerment as their main objective, so initiate income-generating activities in communities. But the Rakai experience shows that priority problems are not always income-related. The water intervention eventually led to different types of empowerment – political and individual as well as economic.
- **Encourage spin-offs** Addressing the immediate problem of clean, safe water within a walking distance has led to economic, health and home improvements. The need to pay for the water supply systems stimulated improvements in the Rakai women's animal husbandry, banana cultivation and use of run-off water, and prompted them to diversify into other activities to earn money.
- **Mobilize local funds** Development agencies commonly believe that the poor are too poor to save money. On the contrary: there is a high potential to mobilize local funds for development projects that local people think are relevant.
- **Involve others** It may be necessary to involve various sectors in a project. For example, the community services department mobilizes communities; the water department assists with the technical aspects, etc. They all work as a team with shared responsibility.

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The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has supported rural development programmes in eastern Africa since the 1960s. Through its Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA), Sida promotes initiatives to strengthen the role of small-scale land users in order to enhance food security and reduce poverty.

RELMA, the successor of Regional Soil Conservation Unit (RSCU), is based in Nairobi and operates mainly in six eastern and southern African countries: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. RELMA's goal in the region is to improve livelihoods of small-scale land users and enhance food security for all households. In pursuit of this goal, RELMA promotes environmentally sustainable, socially and economically viable farming and marketing systems, and supports policies that favour small-scale land users.

RELMA organizes, on a regional level, training courses, workshops and study tours. It also gives technical advice, facilitates exchange of expertise and produces information material for the dissemination of new knowledge, techniques and approaches. A variety of reports, handbooks, posters and other information materials are published and distributed in the region on a non-profit making basis.

About this book

Empowering rural communities is a story about how a poor community can develop itself if the people themselves are given a chance to make decisions and tackle their problems.

The women of Rakai, in southwestern Uganda, had to walk long distances to collect dirty drinking water. RELMA introduced them to the idea of "rainwater harvesting" – collecting rainwater from the roofs of their houses – for drinking, cooking and other household uses.

The women learned how to build large, cement rainwater tanks – big enough to hold enough water to last a household through the dry season. Groups of women have built tanks for each other, and they earn money by making tanks for their neighbours.

Clean water means better health. And spared of the need to walk to collect water, the women have more time to spend on other work. They are investing their income in farming and small businesses. They have grown in confidence and have gained respect within the community, breaking centuries-old gender barriers in the process.

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