

Our water, our waste, our town

Supporting civil society to engage in urban water and sanitation reforms

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Top tips for CSOs to engage in urban water and sanitation reforms

Drawing on the first seven sections, this section highlights key advice for CSOs planning to engage in the process of reform of the water and/or sanitation services in their town or city.

Top tips for CSOs to engage in urban water and sanitation reforms

Welcome reforms

CSOs should welcome the drive for reforms, which may come from a variety of sources. Water is a political issue and rightly so. Ideally, the drivers of reform should be local politicians responding to pressures from local communities. Sometimes this happens, as some of the case studies in this manual show.

The spread of democratic government in developing countries has increased the rewards to successful water supply reforms. The development of global approaches such as the MDG targets means that a certain intergovernmental peer pressure is emerging.

Pressure for reform can also come from a variety of non-political sources. The utility itself may be a driver, its staff frustrated by the thankless task of running a poor service, and inspiration from success among their peers elsewhere may also initiate reform. External donors can be motivated by a desire to see that investments are completed and sustained and progress is made towards their agency's anti-poverty agenda.

Motivation can therefore take many forms at different levels. CSOs should

not sceptically assume that politicians are only interested in winning votes with easy promises but rather work with politicians and use these reform opportunities to improve the living standards of the poorest.

Be proactive

CSOs have the potential to be drivers for reform. Arguably, that is one of CSOs' prime functions. But in many instances, CSOs have responded to, or even impeded, rather than driven forward, the reform process - running in the slip stream of other agencies. One of the purposes of this manual is to help CSOs move from reactive to proactive mode; to motivate and equip citizens to become the principal agents of pro-poor change and reforms. This is a good way to ensure such reforms are sustained.

Keep politicians thinking pro-poor

Politicians may have the will but they may not always have the resources or expertise necessary to instigate reforms. Large scale investment projects may seem more appealing to them than something more modest, appropriate and cost-effective. It's important that CSOs ensure reforms focus on improving the lives of the poorest people.

Work together

Contact other CSOs and work together to push for change. Working together in a network is more effective and efficient than working alone. Choose a lead organisation that is committed and passionate about the cause and can motivate others to become interested and supportive.

Listen

Work with the communities of poor people that you're representing, and ensure that you listen to and understand their perspectives and wishes. Your work should be built around and promote their priorities.

Research, network and be innovative

Invest time and resources to understand issues thoroughly. Be flexible on strategy and approaches. Allow for continuous innovation and improvements as your research provides you with new evidence. Do not be too rigid to respond and change your perspectives based on new evidence. Use your process of learning and research to build networks with other CSOs as well as with professionals, officials and donors.

Develop options and alternatives. Use your influence to involve as many local communities and experts as possible in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies.

Be tough skinned

When public policy is involved, and large investments are at stake, critics

are likely to label CSOs in various unfair and unkind ways. Do not give in to cynics or pressures to ignore the rights of the poor.

Learn by doing

Don't be afraid to engage in discussions about policy and reforms even without a complete knowledge of the issues.

Work with government

Work with government, rather than against it. Government can be more accountable to local stakeholders than international finance institutions (IFIs). But be sure to maintain your independence.

Be alert while working with government. In any reforms, provide critical support, look out for merely token benefits for the poor, unsustainable 'quick fixes', and corruption and profiteering.

Push for transparency

Freedom of information is gradually being accepted as a major right of citizenship and a governmental obligation, for example, in India (all public services). Transparency is crucial to maintaining any successful reforms. There need to be clear and published accounts, easy to understand and meaningful performance indicators, as well as proper recording of important decisions and how they were made.

Be one step ahead

CSOs that participate in regulatory bodies or company boards may become trapped in obligations of

confidentiality, which may make it difficult to share information with their own members. It is wise to check whether these obligations exist in advance before getting involved. In other words, think through commitments before you make them.

Communicate your frontline knowledge

Share information about what it is actually like to live without access to clean water and basic sanitation. Make your credible communication channels with marginalised communities available to others. This is something you should be doing all the time, not only when the reform programme is starting.

Stay positive

Just reading the case studies in this manual shows that CSO involvement in urban water and sanitation reform brings results. CSOs don't have answers to all the sector's problems, but they clearly make a positive difference. So, when you're feeling stressed or disillusioned, stay motivated, trusting that your reform efforts can really make change happen.