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Tanzania: Cell phone SMS brings instant relief

Gertrude from Shinyanga in Tanzania used the latest technology to tackle an age old problem – and cut through months of delay and frustration. The familiar problem was that the well in her village was out of use – and villagers could not get any help to repair it. The new technology was her mobile phone that she used to send an SMS message to a number she had seen on a sticker. “What can I do ... I am trying to convince others to repair it, but it is difficult”, she asked.

Nor did her plea go unanswered. The message was received by a pioneering “Uliza Ujibiwe”, service, which means “Ask a Question and Get an Answer” in Kiswahili.

The first answer was to direct her to the Community Based Research Centre (CBRC) or to the local Water and Environmental Development Company, (WEDECO).

And fortunately, when Gertrude approached CBRC, the Tanzanian not-for-profit organisation was facilitating a workshop on institutional mapping in Shinyanga. Participants decided to use her question as a case study for the prompt handling of requests. They assisted the village to reorganise its water user group, to buy spare parts and to start a new facility management scheme.

Pitio Ndyeshumba from the Water and Sanitation Network in Tanzania (WATSANET) said, “We understand from CBRC feedback that she was delighted to be assisted to restore the water they needed.”

Gertrude had seen a sticker in Kiswahili that is becoming familiar in and around Dar es Salaam. It urges people: “Send your question in the form of SMS, you will get an answer on spare parts, pumps, policy issues, Water User Groups and other water supply services. Use mobile number  0748 946393 .



SMS use Tanzania

169 questions so far

This SMS Question and Answer facility is a pilot project under the Resource Centre Development network that started in August 2004 in Tanzania, supported by IRC. The resource network on water and sanitation requires the ability to assess information needs in the sector. The ability to respond to demands from the sector and the public depends on the capacity, strength and commitment of the players. Strengthening coordination and assuring the quality of responses are essential.

Gertrude's is one example of 169 questions from the public that have been answered since the service started operating in Tanzania in early 2005. Answers are provided by one of the partners of the Water and Sanitation Network launched in late 2004 in Tanzania. The basic idea is to bridge the information gap that exists between grass-roots communities and individual consumers on one hand, and water service providers on the other. It also aims to improve the ability of community-based Water User Associations to access information, with the aim that this will lead to a better service and improved management.

Most queries from Dar es Salaam

Analysis of the Q&A service over the first three months shows that most enquiries came from individual water users in the Dar es Salaam area complaining about the low service of DAWASCO, the local water service provider. These enquiries were forwarded to DAWASCO. Handpump manufacturers and spare parts dealers have also responded to questions about availability, location of dealers and prices of hand pumps and spares.

Other questions are answered directly by SMS by the core group of the Resource Centre Network (RCN) in Tanzania, with supplementary materials sent by post. Sometimes callers are asked to make contact with experts, other staff, or responsible officials.

The RCN-Tanzania is training 10 Water Users Associations (WUAs) to use the Q&A service and to apply the answers in their daily water service management and provision. A larger proposal, currently under development, seeks to train 100 WUAs in three districts for the same purpose and to measure use of Q&A and its effects on water service performance.

Pilot for other activities

Tanzania is one of the 21 countries in which the IRC Resource Centre Development Programme is running. IRC supports organisations in these countries in their efforts to build a national network. Organisations in the sector share information and build their collective ability to absorb and repackage information and in an accessible form so that it is used by target groups in response to needs.

And that number again? From within Tanzania, text to number  0748 946393 

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Keywords

- [Information and communication](#)
- [Participatory methods](#)