What do you need to pay attention to when you want to set up sustainable projects in the area of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)? The financial, institutional, environmental, technological and social (FIETS) aspects of sustainability.

The Dutch WASH Alliance believes that all of these aspects require attention; not separately, but as a whole. This fact sheet explains the relationship between social sustainability and each of the other FIETS elements.

The Dutch WASH Alliance

... is active in the fields of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Africa and Asia. We always work in partnership with local parties: from local community and governments to businesses and civil society organisations. The solutions vary from hygiene awareness campaigns to business support programmes and from training courses for WASH committees to the construction of water systems or sanitary facilities. Our work is always focused on achieving sustainable results. In order to realise these goals, we follow the ‘FIETS’ strategy. ‘FIETS’ stands for Financial, Institutional, Environmental, Technological and Social sustainability of WASH interventions.

1 Social and financial sustainability

WASH projects are financially sustainable if they can stimulate the local market to maintain the WASH services. Communities will have to obtain local financing for these maintenance services, for example through government grants or through contributions of the users. The management of the financing mechanisms is a social process. If loans are involved, social structures have to be set up and utilised to guarantee refunding. If government contribution is involved, these social structures need to make sure the government contribution is properly paid.

2 Social and institutional sustainability

The rights of communities, their needs and demands, need to be taken seriously in order for communities to have a positive attitude and willingness to change behaviours and to participate during implementation and during operation and maintenance. For example, poor people, women and other marginalized groups might lack the social power to get their needs to be taken into account, and to demand and claim their rights. The groups that are targeted in some projects might therefore not be the ones that are in most need for the services. Community management through WASH committees is an interesting way to make sure that marginalised groups are involved in WASH management and the financial processes around it.

3 Social and environmental sustainability

WASH projects are environmentally sustainable when taking the local ecosystem as a starting point. Selection of WASH interventions should be done in such a way that the quality of life of the local community is being improved without detriment to the natural environment. This makes it important to understand what natural resources and ecosystem services are available to meet the specific WASH-related needs of the community? And how the local community can contribute to these needs. Also, making local communities aware of environmental sustainability and their specific role in it is key to reach sustainable results. Involving them from the start helps realising this.
Social and technological sustainability

WASH projects are technologically sustainable when the technical tools used are low-tech, high quality, durable and affordable. The local community should be able to assess and solve technical problems, as they are the ones who eventually have to operate, maintain, repair, reproduce and (hopefully) expand the technical installations.

To link the technological and socio-cultural aspect, the community must be involved in every phase of the project. This provides valuable information on locally available material, technological knowledge and the specific needs of the local community. At the same time, the used technologies must be socially accepted by the community. This helps ensuring that the methods or tools do not conflict with local habits or paradigms.

Institutional sustainability in action

One interesting way of involving the entire community in WASH projects is setting up WASH committees. In 2013, the Dutch WASH Alliance facilitated the development of a piped extension from an existing borehole in the village of Kurkura in Ethiopia. We made a cattle trough and tapping points for the community. This way the community does not have to walk on the main road to fetch water, which prevents many accidents.

The taps and trough are governed by a water committee, consisting of seven members. Four of these members are women. There are also two technically trained members who are able to do small repairs and one member that focuses on sanitation and hygiene practices. The community selected the members of the water committee. If one of the members does not function properly, he or she will be replaced by the committee. The members are proud of their function. It is an honour to serve the community, because you guarantee sustainable provision of water, which is an important livelihood asset. This plays an important role in the success of the community management model. Another contributor to its success is that the majority of its members are women: they tend to care more about long term goals and are better in saving money for future demands, thus guaranteeing the sustainability of the facilities.

The community is very pleased with the water community. Every household pays 30 birr per month for using water. Half of it is spent on the electricity usage, the other half is saved for maintenance and repair work. Water committees take care of the financing, operation and maintenance of water access points. Hereby they guarantee that water is not only available today, but also tomorrow. For instance, if the system breaks down, there is money and knowledge to fix it. The water committee is a social entity that composes the core of sustainable water management. A perfect example where social and institutional sustainability come together.