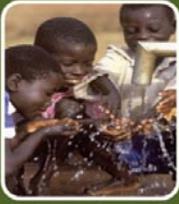


## **May-day! May-day! Our handpumps are not working!**





In the centre of many rural water supply schemes stands the handpump. Handpumps are single purpose machines. Their meaning in rural water supply is:

*"To provide safe water to the users."*

Once they stop giving water they have no more purpose at all.



Experience tells us now, with the minimal training given to the communities, they often are not in the position to solve the problems without support. The result is that at all time 30% of the handpumps are not functioning.

*Handpumps have become orphans, abandoned by their parents (the investment programmes) and abandoned by their foster parents (the users).*

Estimates say that in Africa at all time 30% of the handpumps are not working. As with most complex issues, this failure has many causes. For sustained provision of rural water it is necessary that a variety of conditions are fulfilled, we need:

- soft conditions such as ownership, perceived need, skills, behaviours, norms and practices;
- hard conditions such as human resources and suitable technologies;
- financial conditions such as availability of finance for capital expenditure, and ability of users to pay for services.

For a functioning system, all conditions have to be in place. Where one or more are missing the system is endangered or might collapse completely.

The downfall of handpumps is that they are **not "fit and forget"** technologies. They need TLC (tender loving care) to keep on going. Without the touch of the grease brush, the weekly tightening of the bolts, or the occasional replacement of a wearing part, they stop soon working.

Another downfall is that they are the visible and wearing part of an expensive system, the water point. Finding water and drilling a borehole constitute the main share of the investment. Thus, even though handpumps are not really expensive themselves, when they fail the whole expensive system fails.

For the rural poor the investment in safe water is often unaffordable. Taking this into account, the Governments with help from donors embarked on big investment and construction programmes to give them access to safe water. Some decades back the Governments were also responsible for the upkeep of the water facilities. Unfortunately, over the years the Governments had proven to be incapable and unwilling to provide the necessary operation and maintenance services in remote areas.

Alternative solutions had to be sought. The easiest way out was to make the users responsible for long term operation and maintenance. Community management became the dictum, village level operation and maintenance (VLOM) was created as the panacea. Communities had no say in whether they wanted to take on this duty and were not asked what support they would need to fulfil this task. Governments were happy as VLOM gave them an easy way out from the chore of looking after dispersed handpumps in rural area and thus the burden of O&M was happily shifted on to the shoulders of communities.

These many broken down water points go unnoticed by the parents because the monitoring systems are inefficient or not existent. The foster parents are overwhelmed by the problems and neither have the technical nor the financial means to repair the pump. The orphan, or what is left of it, stands in the village alone without a purpose.

What does that mean from the economic viewpoint? We can assume that in Sub-Saharan Africa 600,000 to 800,000 handpumps have been installed in the last 20 years. If 200,000 to 250,000 of these pumps are not working this represents a total investment of USD 1.2 to 1.5 billion.

**Can we afford to loose this investment due to negligence of O&M?**

About the Author: "Erich Baumann is heading the secretariat of RWSN, the learning network for low cost drilling, self-supply, sustainable handpumps, and public domain handpump standardization."