



Improved well with hand pump owned by Salato Women's Group. Photo: Laura Lemunyete

Securing access to water in Ngurunit

Laura Lemunyete

Ngurunit location lies in the foothills of the Ndoto mountains in the semi-arid environment of Northern Kenya. The local Samburu and Rendille pastoralists live in scattered villages and depend on their livestock for milk, meat and other products. Water is a problem for both humans and livestock. Though many riverbeds cut through the foothills, most have no surface flow except during the twice-yearly heavy rains. The main river, which is also fed by some mountain springs, can sometimes flow for three to four months at a time but then becomes progressively drier further and further up the mountain like the other riverbeds.

These dry riverbeds provide most of the water for livestock and people when wells are dug at strategic points. During and after the rains water can be drawn from shallow holes dug in the riverbed. After the rainy season, when the area dries up, more extensive wells are dug deeper and deeper as the water level in the riverbed drops. These can reach up to 30 or 40 feet deep.

Traditional wells

In the past, wells were dug in the riverbed or in areas where water accumulated. During the rains, these were usually destroyed and re-dug in the dry season. Traditionally, those who

dig and maintain the wells are considered the owners. As this is laborious work, only the men are involved and they are recognised as the sole owners of the wells. Those who have not dug their own wells and women in general have access to wells under traditional rules.

The owner of the well has first priority, first for his livestock and then for his family's needs. Afterwards, if there is water, others can use it for their livestock. Women and children are the last to get water. As the dry season progresses, traditional rules start coming into play and people must respect the owners of the wells and the complex schedules regulating water access. Directly after the rains when there is plenty of water, women can get it from anywhere along the riverbeds by digging shallow holes and do not have to rely on the deeper livestock watering wells.

Problems

During the rains and immediately afterwards, everyone has easy access to water. However, when it starts to dry up problems arise. These include women and children having to walk long distances to existing wells and then waiting for the livestock to be watered. During times of drought when there is very little water, this can mean waiting into the night for the well to recharge because it has been emptied by a large herd. Sometimes they get no water at all.

Common problems associated with the traditional system of well construction and use, especially when water is scarce are:

- School children having to wait to get the water they need to take to school for cooking and cleaning, thus missing classes.
- Women having to wait for hours for household water, sometimes even into the night.
- In dual purpose wells (livestock and human) water is easily contaminated making it unhealthy for human consumption.
- Households that are not able to dig their own wells, especially women-headed households, become dependant on the good will of well owners.
- Digging and maintaining traditional unprotected wells requires much labour because they collapse when it rains.
- During times of severe drought people resort to stealing water at night and well owners must guard their wells to ensure their livestock get enough.

Solutions

From April 1996 to April 1997, there was severe drought in Ngurunit and wells up to 30 or 40 feet were dug in the main river bed because all other sources were dry. Women and children were hard hit. When the rains came and water became easily available again, the community, especially the women, decided to deal with the problem of water access.

One group, Salato Women's Group, started looking for ways to build their own wells. They used funds from various sources including their profits from craft sales, a grant from a development organisation and some assistance from a church group in America. In 1998, they started to build two wells next to their group plot. The well for their group livestock was finished in mid-1999. The other well was covered and fitted with a hand pump donated by a German aid programme in 2000. Once dug, both wells were protected with cement to prevent them collapsing.

These wells were the first in the area to be owned by Samburu/Rendille women rather than by individual men. Having separate wells for livestock and humans and especially the covered household well also set an example for hygiene. Although owned by the women's group, all households in the surrounding area could access the covered well.

The Salato Women's group was successful in building the wells because they had funds to hire labour. Women generally do not have their own property. Since coming together as a group, they had been able to get funds they could not have accessed as individuals. Over the years, the group's activities earned the respect of the men. As the group started to earn an income and build connections to outside assistance, men's attitudes started to change. They were willing to help them dig their wells and appreciated being paid.

The Salato women's decision to build wells fitted into the general pastoralist perception of the importance of water resources. Men in the area were able to support this choice because they also benefited from the wells, even if they did not own them. In Ngurunit, water scarcity is relative. There is water in many of the dry riverbeds if wells are dug deep enough. The major constraint is the labour needed to dig the well, hence the ownership rules. When a women's group was able to get resources to dig more wells, men were prepared to welcome this development.

From mid-2000 when the Salato Women's group second well was completed, the attitude towards water and access to water began to change in Ngurunit. The community started to try and get funds to build covered, hand pump wells that women and

children could use for household needs. One well was built for the primary school so children would no longer have to wait for long hours at individually owned livestock wells. A second woman's group also raised funds and built their own well to provide water for their tree nursery and their families.

In 2002 there was a drought. Even so, with some rationing, the availability of hand pump wells meant that everyone was able to meet their needs with less waiting and trouble than under the traditional well system. That year Salato Women's group also raised funds for a preventive health practises project. They built three more covered hand pump wells in villages that were farther away from the main riverbed. With clean water nearer to home, the group succeeded in reducing the workload of the women and young people who no longer had to walk long distances for household water.

By March 2003, Ngurunit sub-location had eight community hand pump wells for household water, five of them owned solely by women's groups. In addition there was also the original livestock well built by the Salato group in 1999.

Plans

The success of the hand pump projects and the empowerment of the women who own some of them, has shown there are workable solutions to the problem of water scarcity in this semi-arid area. Some outlying areas that now depend on the Ngurunit wells but do not have appropriate places for hand pump construction, are working on their own solutions such as rock rainwater harvesting systems and protected water pans. In Lebendera, Meingati Women's Group is the driving force behind developing their own community water sources. After seeing the success of the Salato Women's group in accessing water, they have realised that men were not the only ones who could control water, and that to care for their households, women also need secure access. In the villages of Illaut and Arsim, women's groups are also trying to get enough resources to develop wells for community use.

Women in the Ngurunit area are becoming increasingly independent in their access to water. In addition to the important changes in water access and control, the successes of the various women's groups in securing water has affected other aspects of their lives as well. Through the support and actions within women's groups, they have been able to gain control of many assets they did not have in the traditional system. These include ownership of livestock and group plots for income-generating activities and an increased capacity to run business enterprises such as beadwork and marketing local commodities and livestock products both on a group and individual basis. Any resistance men may have shown to these changes in the traditional pastoralist system has been largely neutralised by the clear benefits that these activities have brought to the community and individual households.

Laura Lemunyete. Pear Group, PO Box 352, Maralal, Kenya.
Email: lemunyete@wananchi.com