BRIEFING NOTE:
Towards Improved Rural Sanitation in Georgia
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Throughout Georgia, inadequate water supply and sanitation poses a potential threat to human health and the environment. Current efforts aimed at improving those services give priority to water supply and urban areas, despite the great need for improvements in both urban and rural sanitation.

In October 2009, the Sanitation, Hygiene and Wastewater Support Service (SWAT) received a request for support to a large infrastructure improvement project. SWAT suggested a joint activity with the Hydrology Expert Facility (HEF) to more comprehensively study sanitation issues in Georgia. While HEF would look at areas with sewerage networks—generally the more urbanized areas, SWAT would assess the sanitary situation in small towns, villages, and rural areas without sewerage networks.

SWAT found that rural sanitation has been neglected and that many sanitation technologies are not well known in Georgia. To increase attention to rural sanitation, SWAT formulated a roadmap for future rural sanitation investments with short, medium and long term recommendations. SWAT and HEF work will contribute to the design of an overall Wastewater Management Strategy for Georgia, and has already improved wastewater treatment techniques.

In response to the renewed attention to rural sanitation in Georgia, the international donor community has increased investments in this sector. To build on the momentum and define the approach towards substantial sanitation investments, a workshop involving the government of Georgia (GoG), donors, and stakeholders is planned in Tbilisi for late 2010. Recognition of the importance of the rural sanitation sector by the GoG is crucial to ensure that the international donor community will continue to engage in this sector.

Georgia and Sanitation

Georgia, with a population of about 4.4 million, is bounded to the west by the Black Sea and to the east by Azerbaijan. Georgia’s topography, hydrogeology, climate, and population density vary considerably across the country. A relatively populous, temperate central valley is surrounded by sparsely populated mountains that can be inaccessible for months during the winter. Georgia’s nine administrative regions are divided into 69

The Sanitation, Hygiene and Wastewater Support Service (SWAT) is an Expert Support Team (EST) of the Water Partnership Program (WPP). SWAT provides easy-to-use, just-in-time high quality support for sanitation and hygiene at critical junctures in World Bank projects, aiming to contribute towards the Millennium Development Goal Target of halving the fraction without access to sanitation.
municipalities; most municipalities cover large areas and include small cities, towns, villages, and rural areas. About 32,000 of the estimated 129,000 people displaced after the August 2008 armed conflict with Russia over South Ossetia still live in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) settlements (USAID, 2008).

Access to improved sanitation is lower in rural than in urban areas, and infant mortality in the former is higher. According to the Joint Monitoring Program (WHO/UNICEF, 2010), 4 percent of Georgia's urban population and 7 percent of its rural population did not have access to improved sanitation as of 2008. However, in many places, the rate of access to improved sanitation is likely to be lower than suggested by the data.

Bringing in the SWAT Team

Based on a request from the GoG, the Bank's Task Team Leader (TTL) for the RMIDP asked SWAT to specify a range of "package" wastewater treatment plants for small towns in Georgia. SWAT noted that package plants are not necessarily the most cost-effective or viable option, and that the type and extent of wastewater treatment required varies with local conditions (population, density, hydrogeology, climate, etc.). In agreement with the GoG, SWAT suggested a joint mission with HEF—likewise an EST funded by the WPP—to more comprehensively examine the overall sanitation and wastewater management issues in Georgia. HEF would address wastewater treatment options for secondary cities and towns with sewerage networks, mostly in urban settings, while the SWAT support would focus on sanitation in small towns, villages, and IDPs settlements, i.e. in rural settings without sewerage networks.

Rural Sanitation is Neglected

Rural sanitation in Georgia currently receives little attention and few resources: virtually no efforts to increase access to hygienic sanitation in rural areas, villages, and small towns are underway or planned, except in IDP settlements. Further hampering progress are the unclear roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in rural water supply and sanitation. Moreover, there are gaps and conflicts in the roles and responsibilities of the agencies and in the institutional and regulatory frameworks.

The majority of households in rural areas, villages, and small towns—and in urban or peri-urban areas without functioning sewerage—use simple pit latrines that they finance and maintain themselves. While the latter can provide hygienic sanitation, these latrines are often not well built or maintained in Georgia. Moreover, there is no provision for hygienic disposal of fecal sludge emptied from the latrines. Hence, simple pit latrines often still pose a threat to health and the environment.

In Georgia, the technologies currently available for rural sanitation are very limited. Proposed national sanitation policies recommend extending sewerage networks to cover the entire population of Georgia, even in rural areas. However, for most rural and semi-urban households, on-site sanitation options such as improved latrines are likely to be more cost-effective, more easily available, and much less expensive than sewerage systems. Unfortunately, very few people—even government technicians and water company staff—are aware of sanitation options other than simple pit latrines or conventional sewerage.

Lessons learned from the SWAT support on rural sanitation in Georgia:

As the SWAT activity progressed, it became evident that technical solutions alone would not ensure sustainable sanitation improvements. An enabling environment, including comprehensive and coherent cross-sectoral plans, policies, and frameworks, is also needed to scale up improvements.

The SWAT activity highlighted the cross-sectoral nature of sanitation. Ministries and agencies involved in health, the environment, infrastructure, and finances must all play a role in the design and implementation of sanitation projects. Furthermore, water supply must be taken into account when targeting sanitation (and vice versa); and rural sanitation must be improved along with urban sanitation if the environment and human health are to be protected.

Expert Support Teams such as SWAT and HEF can add considerable value to Bank projects in countries such as Georgia, where aspirations for water supply and sanitation services are high, but where local agencies and authorities are hampered by weak institutions, lack of experienced, trained personnel and lack of other (financial and material) resources.
Rural Sanitation can be Improved

SWAT recommended that the GoG, with the support of the international community, lay the groundwork for substantial investments in rural sanitation and hygiene. The general approach is to be developed collaboratively at a workshop to be held in Tbilisi in late 2010. The workshop would include stakeholders at all levels and from all sectors, including community leaders, and would consider several recommendations, of which the most important are described below.

In the short term, a proposed pilot project would test and assess improved on-site sanitation technologies and approaches in selected municipalities. The pilot experiences would serve as the basis for future rural sanitation programs, plans, policies, strategies, and for institutional and financial frameworks. Key elements of the pilot project (with estimated costs ranging from $1.2 to $2 million) should include the following:

- Collection and analysis of data on consumers’ ability and willingness to pay for sanitation, on hygiene practices, and on other factors that affect environmental health;
- An assessment of (i) proposals for strengthening stakeholders’ capacities and collaboration, with an emphasis on community participation; and (ii) appropriate improved sanitation technologies and approaches (such as the double-pit or EcoSan latrines), sanitation marketing tools, and public-private partnerships;
- A clear strategy for disseminating lessons learned in regard to rural sanitation; and
- Adequate water supply and sanitation in IDP settlements and neighboring communities.

In the medium term, the SWAT team recommends the following:

- Municipalities should have the authority, resources and technical capacity to support improvements to rural sanitation;
- A sewerage system should only be extended or constructed if it has been shown to be the most cost-effective solution for hygienic excreta disposal in that area; and
- Solutions such as waste stabilization ponds and constructed wetlands are in principle preferable to “package” wastewater treatment or conventional wastewater treatment plants.

In the longer term, SWAT recommends that the GoG, with the support of international agencies, including the World Bank, undertake the following initiatives:

- Implement plans, strategies and policies as well as comprehensive institutional, financial, and legal frameworks for water supply and sanitation, especially for the rural areas;
- Support community-led rural sanitation improvement interventions that are in line with the national strategy to ensure the sustainability of these improvements; and
- Actively promote private sector participation in rural water supply and sanitation.

Kick-starting a Discussion on Rural Sanitation in Georgia

Georgia had previously focused on sanitation and other infrastructure investments in urban areas. The SWAT support initiated an important shift towards a more integrated approach to water and sanitation issues, in rural as well as urban areas. The work on rural areas nudged the Municipal Service Providers Association (MSPA) to request support for improving rural sanitation, and led the international donor community to
As a result of SWAT support, several donors (for example the World Bank, USAID, the EU, and SIDA/UNICEF) are including allocations for sanitation in their new projects.

increase their investments. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, is currently preparing a $60 million project for municipal and IDP settlement infrastructure.

Building on this initial success, SWAT is proposing a collaborative workshop involving the GoG, donors, and stakeholders, to be held in Tbilisi. The objective of this workshop is to develop a concrete action plan and strategy to fast-track rural sanitation investments. SWAT hopes that the GoG’s recognition of the importance of the rural sanitation sector will prompt the international donor community to engage more widely in the sanitation sector. A number of donors have already shown interest in co-sponsoring the workshop.

The main results of SWAT support are summarized below:

- SWAT and HEF recommendations have already led to improvements in the design of pit latrines for IDPs and wastewater treatment techniques for small towns and (semi-)urban areas under the RMIDP in Georgia;
- SWAT and HEF work will contribute to the design of an overall Wastewater Management Strategy for Georgia;
- A consultation workshop was already held to present results to various stakeholders and government agencies. A larger scale workshop, bringing together all domestic stakeholders and international donors, is planned for late 2010. This workshop will develop a strategy for substantial rural sanitation investments.
- Several donors are including allocations for sanitation in their new projects (e.g. the World Bank—preparing $45 million in additional financing, USAID, the EU, and SIDA/UNICEF). This shows that the international donor community is already acting on the GoG’s expected shift in priorities towards rural water and sanitation.

References


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