

Bottom-Up Approaches to Rural Water Security: Lessons from the Rural Nurture Initiative's WASH Project in Nigeria

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Note: This report offers key insights from our research, with the complete findings forthcoming in an academic journal.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to clean water remains a critical challenge in rural Nigeria, with over 60 million people lacking safe drinking water (World Bank, 2021). This report highlights key findings from the Rural Nurture Initiative's (RNI) Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) project implemented in Ibarapa East Local Government Area, Oyo State, Nigeria. Using a qualitative case study approach, we examined how participatory, bottom-up approaches addressed rural water challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our findings reveal that community participation throughout the project fostered strong ownership and sustainability. The community's preference for well water infrastructure over solar boreholes demonstrated the importance of contextually appropriate technology selection. Additionally, integrated WASH education significantly improved hygiene practices among beneficiaries.

THE WATER CRISIS AND RNI'S RESPONSE

Nigeria's WASH sector faces significant challenges, with rural communities disproportionately affected. According to UNICEF (2021), contaminated drinking water and poor sanitation contribute to more than 70,000 child deaths annually. Women and girls are particularly impacted, spending considerable time collecting water that could otherwise be used for education or income-generating activities.

The Rural Nurture Initiative implemented a WASH project benefiting three villages in Ibarapa East LGA: Agele, Mogba, and Gaa-Agele. These predominantly agricultural communities were selected based on a needs assessment that revealed approximately 70% of households relied on unimproved water sources prior to the intervention.

KEY FINDINGS

• Community Participation and Ownership

Community involvement throughout the project cycle created a strong sense of ownership:

"Unlike other projects where outsiders come and tell us what we need, RNI asked for our input and valued our opinions. This is why we feel that this water project belongs to us and we must maintain it."

— Female participant

Each community established water management committees with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, creating sustainable governance structures.

• Technology Selection and Sustainability

Communities chose well water infrastructure over solar boreholes based on practical considerations about maintenance capabilities and long-term sustainability:

"We chose the well because we know how to maintain it ourselves. With the solar borehole, if something breaks, we would need experts from outside to fix it, and it would be expensive." — Male participant

• Impact of WASH Education

The educational component significantly improved hygiene practices, with participants reporting changes in water handling, storage, and treatment:

"The training we received changed how we handle water at home. Now, we treat water before drinking and store it properly. Our children have been falling sick less often since we started these practices." — Female beneficiary

4. Gender Mainstreaming: Address gender equity considerations in water management, recognizing that women and girls "disproportionately bear the burden of poor access to clean water" (Nigeria Health Watch, 2024).

For Practice

1. Contextually Appropriate Technology: Present communities with comprehensive information about technological options, enabling informed decision-making.

2. Capacity Building: Include robust training on infrastructure maintenance using locally available materials and skills.

3. Adaptive Implementation: Build flexibility into plans to accommodate changing circumstances.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Policy

1. Institutionalize Participatory Approaches:

Develop frameworks that require meaningful community participation throughout water projects.

2. Technology Selection Guidelines:

Create guidelines that balance technical considerations with community preferences and maintenance capabilities.

3. Integrated WASH Approach:

Mandate the integration of infrastructure development with education components in all water interventions, aligning with Nigeria's National Action Plan for WASH (Nigeria Health Watch, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The RNI water project demonstrates that effective rural water interventions require more than technical solutions—they necessitate thoughtful engagement with social, cultural, and economic dimensions of community life. By centering community voices in decision-making processes and integrating education with infrastructure, the project achieved sustainable outcomes that extend beyond physical water access to include enhanced community capacity and collective resource governance. Such approaches are increasingly recognized as essential to meeting Sustainable Development Goal 6, which according to the World Bank (2021), will "require extraordinary efforts" for Nigeria to achieve by 2030.

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About The Rural Nurture Initiative

Rural Nurture Initiative (RNI) is a research-driven non-governmental organization spearheading evidence-based, community-centered approaches to rural transformation across Africa. For more information, visit www.rnionline.org

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