Quantification of qualitative data in the water sector: The challenges

Description

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Published in Water International, Volume 33, Issue 2, June 2008 pp. 150-161 (Full text >here<)

Abstract

Participatory methods are increasingly used in water-related development and management. Most information gathered with such methods is qualitative. The general view is that such information cannot be aggregated and is therefore less interesting for managers. This paper shows that the opposite can be the case. It describes a participatory methodology that quantifies qualitative information for management at all levels. The methodology was developed to assess the sustainability of community-managed improved water supplies, sanitation and hygiene. It allows correlation of outcomes to processes of participation and gender and social equity and so assess where changes are needed. The paper also describes how elements of positivistic research such as sampling were included. Application in over 15 countries taught that such quantified qualitative methods are an important supplement to or an alternative for social surveys. While the new approach makes statistical analysis possible, it also increases the risk that participatory methods are used extractively when the demand for data on outcomes dominates over quality of process. As a result the collection of qualitative information and the use of the data for community action and adaptive management gets lost. However, when properly applied, quantification offers interesting new opportunities. It makes participatory methods more attractive to large programmes and gives practitioners and donors a new chance to adopt standards of rigor and ethics and so combine quantification with quality protection and developmental use.

Tags

1. participation
2. quantative

Date
18/10/2026
Date Created
03/06/2009
Author
admin