

Integrity risks in professional borehole drilling

Writing on behalf of Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN), Justine Haag and Marian Ryan, of Water Integrity Network, examine how preventing corruption in the professional borehole drilling can pave the way to sustainable infrastructure

Integrity risks can be high in professional borehole drilling projects, particularly the risk of corruption, but too often such risks are brushed over or not even acknowledged. However, we plan to discuss in detail some of the reasons why addressing corruption in professional borehole drilling is important.

Corruption contributes to poor delivery in groundwater development projects and is a factor in the failure within one year of construction of 15–30 per cent of newly built wells (UNICEF/Skat 2016).

The good news is that by acknowledging and addressing integrity risks from the earliest project stages, WASH managers in both government and NGOs can take steps to prevent these risks and ensure sustainable infrastructure.

CORRUPTION ADDS UP

Across the world, a great deal of money goes into the drilling of boreholes. At the local level, while it might appear at first glance that the money lost to corruption on small borehole drilling projects in rural or remote locations is limited, even insignificant, the impacts are certainly not. Corruption results not only in wasted money but, all too often, in sub-standard delivery of projects. This, in turn, results in downstream social, economic and environmental impacts.

From a purely financial perspective, corruption in groundwater development projects may result in inflated costs which undermine the financial sustainability of the project. Equally, corruption in decision-making processes may result in technical choices that ignore community needs, disregarding the local socio-cultural or economic context.

It may also mean that already-limited funds are not used where they are most needed. In many cases, corruption means those with power and influence can pay to get improved services, while the most vulnerable are left behind.

When local users do not see the promised results or services from their duty bearers, mistrust may grow. This can complicate other interventions in the water and sanitation sectors. Poor service delivery may also mean that communities resort to informal systems which may offer lesser guarantees in terms of quality and safety.

Corruption in borehole drilling projects also undermines health and security. Private operators who benefit from favouritism may not be subject to regulations and



What effect does corruption have on borehole drilling?

oversight, resulting in poor-functioning and ultimately decaying, unsustainable infrastructure and water systems.

Ultimately, corruption can threaten food, water, and energy security, greatly impacting the poorest residents.

VULNERABILITY

Corruption can take place at a number of points in the project lifecycle.

The tendering process is well known to pose a high risk of corruption: project owners may demand or receive bribes for awarding bids. They may exclude bids for spurious reasons in order to favour particular bidders.

Bidders may organise as cartels, manipulate prices, or block smaller bidders through intimidation. We have previously examined how these practices serve to deter experienced professional consultants and drilling contractors from the bidding process, threatening the quality and sustain-

ability of project infrastructure.

But corruption risks exist throughout the project life cycle:

Regulatory environment: Corruption can weaken the rules of the tendering process and weaken sanctions for misconduct. Corruption in licensing can also improperly ▶

“Corruption in groundwater development projects may result in inflated costs”



Corruption can contribute to poor delivery in groundwater development projects, greatly impacting the poorest residents

- restrict who can drill and where. Corruption can also result in biases in who water is allocated to.

Planning: Corruption at the planning level may result in services being provided to certain groups and not to others.

Financial management: Corruption here can take the shape of falsified accounts in local budgets, or funds which are embezzled or allocated to 'ghost' drilling sites or the villages of family or friends.

Project design: Corruption in project design can take the form of design specifications being rigged to favour certain companies, such as those with higher-capacity rigs.

Construction: Corruption in the construction phase can result in poor-quality work and/or the use of poor-quality materials, the bribing of officials to ignore it, and fraudulent invoicing and documentation.

Post-construction: The post-construction operation and maintenance phase is critical in the delivery of sustainable and effective services. Corruption in the operation and maintenance of groundwater systems can, for example, include nepotism in the appointment of staff, and the appointment of poorly qualified consultants and contractors. Lack of community input into the well's operation can allow such corruption to flourish.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS

It is possible to prevent these dangers from taking hold by building barriers to corruption throughout the project life cycle and by promoting integrity and planning ahead to close gaps where corruption can arise.

Promoting integrity from the start adds value by fostering transparency, accountability, and participation

"Corruption can weaken the rules of the tendering process"

among the project's stakeholders. Just as corruption has a wide impact, promoting integrity and anti-corruption can support each stakeholder's efforts across the value chain. When we anticipate and avoid corruption risks, we reduce the likelihood of failure of wells and water points, decaying infrastructure, and disrupted water services.

WHERE CAN I START?

Project owners and WASH managers in government institutions or NGOs can take advantage of existing tools to promote integrity and prevent corruption to help ensure successful, professional borehole drilling projects which result in sustainable infrastructure and benefit local communities.

RWSN's *Code of Practice for Cost Effective Boreholes* emphasises the role of greater professionalism in ensuring that projects achieve optimum value for money invested over the long term. The UNICEF *Guidance Note on Professional Water Well Drilling* is a valuable resource for following professional standards in borehole drilling, including costing, procurement and contracting, siting of wells, and supervision of water well drilling.

MORE TOOLS

Integrity pacts – these help to ensure that contracting parties in a water project abstain from offering, accepting, or demanding bribes; monitor adherence to the contract and compliance with procurement legislation; and enable the placement of sanctions on any parties breaching the pact.

Integrity, quality and compliance for project managers – this set of simple project management tools and templates helps improve project management and address common integrity issues from planning through operations, specifically in water-related programmes. ▼

Key first steps:

- **Establish procedures for key risk areas** like procurement and accounting, and make sure procedures are followed by providing training and support to all stakeholders (such as authorities, bidders, regulators, project monitors, utility accounting staff).
- **Clarify budgets and responsibilities** and ensure this information is easily available to the public.
- **Set up monitoring processes** for tendering, construction, and O&M. Social monitoring, including local users or stakeholders, can be particularly helpful and ensure more independence in the process.
- **Ensure institutional responsibility** for long-term operations or properly functioning infrastructure over the entire lifecycle.
- **Consult** water users and water-user associations in decision-making.

Justine Haag and Marian Ryan are part of the Water Integrity Network which supports and connects an open network of partner individuals, organisations, and governments promoting water integrity to reduce corruption, and improve water sector performance worldwide