

Listening to Enable Change: What Communities Say About Water



Real-Time Evaluation of the Water Supply Improvement Project (WSIP) in Guyana – Caribbean Development Bank

This note is intended for community leaders of the Neighbourhood Democratic Councils (NDCs), residents, Community Liaison Officers, and social specialists working in the project areas. Its purpose is simple: it turns what communities say about water into practical steps that build trust, strengthen accountability, and ensure the new water system truly works for households.

Why Trust Matters for Water to Truly Improve Lives

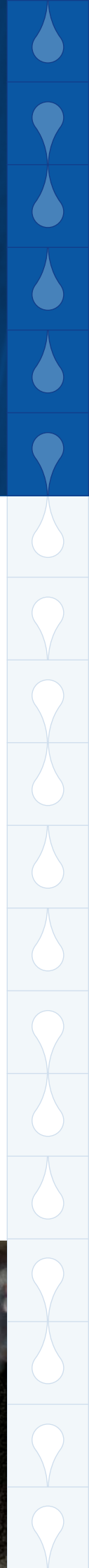
The Water Supply Improvement Project is building new treatment plants, pipelines, and systems. These are important investments. But infrastructure alone does not guarantee change. **Real change happens when people trust the water enough to use it every day**—for drinking, cooking, bathing, and caring for their families. **That trust cannot be assumed. It must be built.**

Across communities, one message is clear: people want better water, but they are cautious. Many residents remember rust-coloured water, unreliable service, and past initiatives that did not last. These memories shape expectations. Trust is not automatic. **It grows when people see consistency, clarity, and follow-through.**

Residents have described how rust-coloured water has affected daily life—damaging clothes, staining sinks, creating extra work, and increasing the need to buy bottled water. For households, this means paying twice: once for piped water and again for bottled water. People want this to change. When improvements are made, it is essential to clearly explain what was tested, what the results mean, and whether the water is safe to drink. Simple explanations matter: “Safe for children.” “Safe for cooking.” “Less money spent on bottled water.” These messages connect technical improvements to everyday life.

Health concerns also influence behaviour. Some residents associate past water quality with skin irritation or discomfort. These experiences shape habits. Behaviour is shaped by lived experience, not only technical standards. **To support change, communication must focus on what families care about most: health, money, safety, and time.**

Awareness of the project remains uneven in some areas. Some residents are unsure what is changing, when it will change, and how it will affect them. When information is unclear, uncertainty grows. The practical response is repetition and consistency. What is happening? What will



change for households? Where can questions be asked? Using familiar channels—NDC meetings, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages—helps ensure the message reaches people where they already are.

How communities can be actively involved

One of the strengths of this project is the **introduction of a Real-Time Evaluation approach**. This means the project is not waiting until the end to listen. **It is designed to listen continuously and adjust as it goes.** This creates an opportunity for communities to shape how the project operates before habits are set and problems become larger.

The MEAL system (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning) includes practical tools that communities can use. These include structured community listening sessions, short perception check-ins, community issue logs, and feedback channels through NDC meetings and digital platforms. These tools are not only for reporting problems. They help identify **early signals**—small concerns about quality, service interruptions, billing confusion, or communication gaps—that can be addressed quickly.

Communities can participate in several concrete ways. Residents can attend structured listening meetings and speak openly about their service experience. Leaders can help organise small-group discussions to ensure that women, elderly residents, and vulnerable groups are heard. Households can document concerns clearly: what happened, when, and where. Even simple records help the project team detect patterns early.

The Community Liaison Officer (CLO) plays a central role in this process. The CLO is not only a messenger from the project to the community; the CLO is also the community's channel into the project. If information flows only one way, trust weakens. If it flows both ways, accountability strengthens. The CLO can help ensure that concerns are documented, that responses are tracked, and that follow-up is visible. When communities see that feedback leads to action, confidence grows.

Real-time listening means communities do not have to wait for problems to accumulate. It also means the project team can adjust communication, sequencing, or response mechanisms based on what people are experiencing. In this sense, community participation is not symbolic. It directly influences whether infrastructure translates into real benefits.

Building the Future Through Partnership

Communities have expressed optimism. Improved treated water is **linked to better health, lower household spending, and time savings**—especially for women who often manage household water responsibilities. This means women must be directly included in communication and listening processes. Women-friendly meetings, targeted digital messages, and collaboration with trusted local networks are essential.

Local ideas also offer opportunities to build trust. In one area, residents suggested visible water testing demonstrations. When people can see how water is tested and understand the results, confidence increases. Trust grows when quality is observable, not only declared.

Schools and youth groups can also support behaviour change. When teachers reinforce messages about safe water use and conservation, new habits spread more easily. **Behaviour change is social. It grows through trusted spaces.**

In summary, infrastructure creates opportunities for improvement, but **trust determines whether those opportunities become reality**. The Real-Time Evaluation system provides a structure for continuous listening and adjustment. Communities have a role in making it work—by speaking up early, documenting concerns, participating in meetings, and working with Community Liaison Officers.

The future of this project depends on partnership.

This Technical Note is part of the deliverables of the Real-Time Evaluation (RTE) of the Water Supply Improvement Project (WSIP), that was conducted by the Office of Independent Evaluation (OIE) of the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), through the collaboration with two consultancy firms: Technopolis Group, and Integrated Sanitation Solutions for Urban Development (I-San).