

conference call

'Towards the Millennium Development Goals'

The 29th Water, Engineering and Development Centre's (WEDC) annual conference 'Towards the Millennium Development Goals – Actions for Water and Environmental Sanitation' took place in Abuja, Nigeria, 22–26 September in collaboration with the National Water Resources Institute and at the invitation of the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Water Resources. It was attended by 85 international and more than 280 local delegates, and over 100 conference papers were presented.

The focus of the conference was on whether and how the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and targets arising from the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) can be met. These include an intention to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and to basic sanitation.

The conference was structured around the five themes of water supply, environmental sanitation, water resources, institutional issues and policy and cross-cutting issues. Small, open discussions are an important feature in addition to the paper presentations at WEDC conferences, which in turn feed into the final conference recommendations. There were also project field trips and a 'Nigeria day', when locally specific topics were discussed.

Water supply

To achieve improved water supply in developing countries, innovative and appropriate technologies – not all of them low tech or low cost – must match local conditions. Papers gave examples of effective water treatment methods such as household candle filters, submerged and floating filters, low-cost activated carbon for iron removal and appropriate disinfection for rural areas. In addition, papers showed how new

technologies such as GIS could be used to help support development activities. Another important issue was that of the need for firm partnerships and community participation and training.

Environmental sanitation

The scope of this theme was broad, incorporating excreta management, wastewater, drainage and solid waste, through to technologies, finance and hygiene promotion. A lack of political will, resources and legislation were pointed to as constraints and barriers to successful implementation of such schemes.

Water resources

Papers in this theme focused on measures to plan and manage water resources, including safeguarding groundwater sources from over-extraction and pollution, and monitoring water quality. There were several case studies of irrigation in Nigeria. In discussion, several ways were suggested for achieving targets in this area, such as ensuring that an independent body is responsible for monitoring and protecting water resources, allocating scarce water in consultation with stakeholders and capacity building in Integrated Water Resource Management.

Institutional issues

The institutional theme covered water services and financial management, sector reform, decentralization and scaling up community management. Emerging lessons included the need to change the role of government from service provider to enabler or facilitator, in order to delegate more responsibility to stakeholders – central and local government, utilities, the private sector, community-based organizations (CBOs), NGOs and communities. Examples given of rural sector reform were of ongoing support to CBO federations in South Africa and Sri Lanka, and local government support in Ghana and Uganda. In the urban sector, there were

examples of innovative solutions for small town water services, such as management contracts with the private sector and CBOs. To achieve the sustainable access aspect of the MDG, appropriate water and sanitation indicators should measure access (from service provider records), the type of service used, and time taken and distance to collect water.

Cross-cutting issues

A wide range of topics was covered within this theme under the sub-themes of poverty and vulnerability, gender mainstreaming, knowledge and information, and policy and sustainability. The key findings included the importance of understanding the dynamic nature of poverty and vulnerability in different contexts, and of understanding the coping strategies of the poor. In the area of knowledge, the need for robust systems of capturing and transferring knowledge was emphasized and South–South partnerships for information sharing and networking.

From targets to actions

Ambitious international goals need to be translated into realistic national and local targets, where commitments – supported by a strong political agenda, financial and human resource allocation, legislation, accountability and other factors – enable progress towards these targets. This progress should be carefully monitored and evaluated, and increased awareness raising is vital to this. Communities themselves must be involved, and also professionals and politicians responsible for setting policies and budgets, for whom water and sanitation may not necessarily be important targets.

The 30th WEDC conference

This will take place in Lao PDR in September 2004. For more information visit: <http://wedc.lboro.ac.uk/conferences/conference.php> or contact wedc.conf@lboro.ac.uk

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