

Editorial

KNOWLEDGE SHARING is the theme of this second *Waterlines* issue in the International Year of Sanitation. Four of the five papers in this volume, and the Crossfire debate, focus on ways and means of getting useful knowledge into the hands of those who most need it. The fifth paper deals with the difficult topic of latrine maintenance in high-density urban settings.

In the absence of up-to-date and high-quality knowledge among practitioners and professionals in the field, much effort is wasted on ineffective initiatives, or 're-inventing the wheel'. The water and sanitation sector is dogged by weaknesses in knowledge transfer and knowledge management, for at least the following three reasons.

First, relatively few professionals anywhere are effective independent learners. Many education systems spoon-feed information to students, and encourage them to regurgitate that information for examinations, and then promptly to forget it. Independent thinking and problem solving are the exception rather than the rule within the education system. Furthermore, information is often treated as facts and rules, rather than being assimilated as internalized knowledge with which professional judgments can be made. Many individuals fail to make the transition from wanting facts and rules which they can follow, to taking personal responsibility for finding the knowledge needed to solve problems. Sometimes this tendency is expressed as the 'lack of a reading culture' (as it has been put to me more than once by professionals in one particular developing country); in another country I have had senior professionals requesting me as a consultant to 'tell us what to do, and we'll do it'.

Second, even if there is a willingness to learn and to acquire knowledge and experience, the opportunities for developing country professionals – those who most need good knowledge – to access books, internet resources and even journals such as *Waterlines*, can be very limited. Inadequately equipped libraries and resource centres, slow internet connections, and insufficient financial resources for investing in electronic and hard-copy documentation, all contribute to these difficulties for practitioners – and the more so the closer they are to the field.

Third, while there is an enormous amount of knowledge 'out there' among professionals and practitioners in the field, much of it is inaccessible, for at least three reasons:

- practitioners have little time to write down their experiences, and their job descriptions do not place priority on this activity;

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- practitioner experience rarely makes it into published journals, as it is considered insufficiently rigorous or academic in nature – this journal is actively trying to counter that tendency, by combining a practitioner focus with sufficient methodological rigour;
- there is understandable but unfortunate competition among sector agencies for funding, and their knowledge is a major asset in that competition – hence the tendency to preserve ‘trade secrecy’. In recent correspondence with a colleague in one of the major charitable foundations, we discussed this issue and my colleague asked ‘why do we accept this state of affairs, while recognizing that it weakens our efforts considerably?’

We clearly need to find better ways of disseminating information and knowledge, facilitating its assimilation, and managing the vast quantities of knowledge of varying reliability and quality which already exists.

The Learning Alliance approach described by Joep Verhagen and others is an attempt to ‘do things differently’ (and better), by bringing together those people who have a real interest in solving problems and bringing about change. Martin Mulenga also describes an approach in which local teams ‘own’ the problems which they are trying to solve, and learn from each other. The papers by Robert Cartridge and colleagues, and by Camille Dow Baker and others, focus on knowledge transfer, both by means of physical knowledge resources (Practical Action’s ‘Practical Answers’) and through consultancy and training.

As the Crossfire debate makes clear, our professional field of work needs not only a wealth of documented experiences, case studies, research findings and information resources, but also appropriate ways of turning that exterior information into internal knowledge, and through extensive practice and reflection, into sound professional judgments and sector wisdom.

Competition – ‘From our water correspondent’

For a fourth year, *Waterlines* is looking for a regular correspondent working with developing country populations on their water supply and sanitation problems. Entrants should write an account (up to 1100 words) of a typical day as a water or sanitation field worker. Issues might include, for example, building, repairing or running the water supply, getting spares, facilitating hygiene or sanitation programmes, efforts to increase community participation and accountability, etc. You should tell us how you came to be working there and how your work affects you, including the highs and lows and personal anecdotes. Diagrams of technical solutions or photos are welcomed where relevant. Entries should be entitled ‘From our water correspondent’ and emailed to Clare Tawney at clare.tawney@practicalaction.org.uk by 20 April.

The winner will receive a year’s subscription to *Waterlines* and a £50 Practical Action Publishing book token. He or she will have the winning submission published in *Waterlines* and will have the opportunity to have at least three more submissions published in subsequent issues.