

Editorial

IN LESS THAN 10 YEARS the water safety plan approach has become widely accepted as the main strategy for assuring the quality of drinking water, in the words of its proponents, 'from catchment to consumer'. The approach involves the assessment, control and monitoring of all risks to drinking water quality, and it encompasses management procedures, routine and incident-related communications, training – indeed all those aspects which are necessary to ensure the delivery of safe water to consumers. The water safety plan approach uses a structured procedure to achieve its objective. According to the World Health Organization, water safety planning 'provides for an organized and structured system to minimize the chance of failure through oversight or lapse of management and for contingency plans to respond to system failures or unforeseen events'. Water safety plans focus attention on threats to water quality, and they do so because of the links between ingested water quality and health.

In low-income countries and in contexts where people lack adequate water services, people need numerous other beneficial aspects to their water supply. Water needs to be nearby or accessible, adequate in quantity as well as quality, reliable, affordable, and not imposing a heavy management burden on its consumers. Furthermore, the impacts of these numerous dimensions of an improved service extend beyond health, encompassing time and energy savings and real social and economic benefits. So are water safety plans, with their narrow focus on water quality and health too limited in scope? Perhaps they represent the preoccupations of the public and providers in industrialized countries where issues of access, quantity, reliability, affordability and management have been sorted out, and failures in water quality truly represent the greatest threat to water-related health? Are water safety plans relevant in low-income countries, in non-piped systems, in community-managed systems, in rural rather than urban contexts?

The papers in this issue of *Waterlines* go some way to addressing these questions. Many thanks to Andrew Trevett (Unicef) for coordinating the submission of these articles, the majority of which come from the World Health Organization; we are especially grateful for the wealth of experience that they encapsulate. In various ways, and in relation to various countries, the papers address contexts where people are supplied from point sources rather than piped systems, in some cases using household water treatment rather than centralized

Richard Carter (richardcarter@wateraid.org) is Head of Technical Support at WaterAid, UK.

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treatment, and in some cases where specific water quality threats such as arsenic are experienced. Many of the papers emphasize the participation in or even full ownership of the water safety planning process by households and communities, not only by water providers or authorities. The extensive promotion of the water safety plan approach demonstrates the widespread belief that it has relevance to a wide range of systems and contexts.

Most interesting perhaps is the fact that the water safety plan approach provides for a structured and conscious way of managing water. Even if water quality per se is not the highest priority for maintaining the health of the community or for experiencing the wider socio-economic benefits of water, water safety planning provides an excellent entry point to the management of other water-related risks. Among the papers in this issue, the linkages between water safety plans (WSPs) and sanitation safety planning, and between WSPs and planned investments are highlighted. In a previous issue of *Waterlines* (vol. 28, no. 1) the links between WSPs and water resources management were made.

So what are the 'take-home messages' from this issue of *Waterlines*? First, that water safety planning provides a structured, easy-to-follow procedure for managing one important aspect of water supply services. It is not just a concept, but it has been effectively turned into a step-by-step guide which can be used and adapted to fit the context. It is at the same time sufficiently generic for widespread use and sufficiently detailed and specific to actually be applied.

Second, there is now a growing body of examples of the application of WSPs from a diverse range of contexts and countries to provide evidence that the approach has merit. The approach need not be the preserve of wealthy countries with piped, treated water supply systems.

Third, and possibly most exciting is the idea that WSPs in their philosophy (risk-based), approach (structured and systematic) and focus (water quality and health) may actually have most potential when they are focused on other aspects of water and environmental management which are equally important to people. Perhaps it is time for water safety plans (in the narrow sense of water quality and health) to evolve and be applied as *water security plans*, in which all threats to water security are assessed, prioritized and managed because of their possible impacts on the lives and livelihoods of water users.

Richard C. Carter