

Report: Waterlines 30th anniversary celebration event

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At a meeting in November 2011, a panel discussion between five academics and practitioners addressed some of the most pertinent questions in our sector. Their discussions touched on targeting of services; waterborne sewerage; humanitarian WASH; human-rights approaches; and participation in service provision.

ON 7 NOVEMBER 2011 *Waterlines* celebrated its 30th birthday amongst some of the highest-level researchers and practitioners in the water and sanitation (WATSAN) sector in the UK. The event took place at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), taking the form of a debate hosted by Professor Richard Carter, Head of Technical Support at WaterAid (London). It was an entertaining and informative evening with some great contributions from the four panellists as well some thought-provoking input from the audience. The agenda was organized around key achievements and challenges in the WATSAN sector over the last 30 years, the aim being to find answers to the following five questions:

Should water and sanitation services be targeted?

Professor Sandy Cairncross, Research Director of the SHARE Consortium at the LSHTM, opened the discussion, making a very strong argument with regard to the provision of sanitation facilities and its impact on health. 'It's not your toilet that protects your health but your neighbour's', he said, thus making it clear that targeting services to a particular sector of the population would ultimately increase the risk of disease amongst entire communities. Targeting mechanisms were termed 'faulty' and to corroborate this, light was shed on the Indian programme of subsidies which was primarily introduced to support the poor but instead, was evidenced to be captured by the middle classes, essentially people for whom the help was not necessary.

Having said this, should the lack of appropriate targeting mechanisms be a reason to abandon support to the poor and hardest to reach? This question encouraged further

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© Practical Action Publishing, 2012, www.practicalactionpublishing.org
doi: 10.3362/1756-3488.2012.013, ISSN: 0262-8104 (print) 1756-3488 (online)

thought. By doing this, does one not run the risk of excluding a group which has already been marginalized? ‘Sanitation is about dignity and life.’ This profound statement was put forward by Simon Trace, Practical Action’s CEO. He added that by leaving the poor to manage their own systems, we forget those who have the least knowledge to decide what changes are required in order to ensure appropriate hygiene and behaviour practices, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Is waterborne sewerage a viable aspiration for low- and middle-income countries?

This question was first addressed by Barbara Evans from Leeds University. ‘Networked sewerage is currently the only solution in densely populated environments’, she said. Urban settlements such as Dhaka and Dharavi were highlighted as the biggest sanitation challenges and waterborne sewerage facilities were identified as technically viable, cost effective, and sustainable. The system allows for large quantities of waste to be transported to one single point, maximizing the potential for treatment and energy recovery. Given all the comments that were made and keeping in mind rapidly increasing fuel prices, sewerage

began to seem like quite an attractive option.

However, an opposing viewpoint, centred on the often forgotten piece in the sewerage puzzle – water – brought us back to reality. ‘In order for sewerage to work, households must have access to water.’ With this brief but crucial point, Sandy ended his argument. Taking into account the severe lack of access to water in numerous low- and middle-income countries, the attractiveness of sewerage suddenly became questionable.

Is the human-rights based approach to WATSAN an aspirational aim or could it be made to stick in law and practice?

Following a declaration from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR), the largest attempt to formalize the right to WATSAN took place in 2010 with numerous countries enshrining this in their laws. Although a step in the right direction, examples of a formal rights-based approach, where the state has been evidenced to prioritize and guarantee equitable access to safe water and sanitation, have been difficult to identify in practice. As a consequence, billions of people worldwide remain deprived of enjoying these rights.

Instead, it was noted that support for this approach has

followed a much more informal trajectory, one which effectively relies on citizens as drivers rather than simple beneficiaries of change, and their willingness to hold governments accountable for the delivery of WATSAN services.

Tom Slaymaker, Senior Policy Analyst at WaterAid, was next to intervene. 'What is the ultimate goal of the delivery of these services?' he asked. More often than not, the human-rights based approach simply considers the technical and engineering aspects of the delivery of WATSAN services. Discussions end up revolving around taps and toilets. However, 'human rights is about a lot more than that', he continued; 'it is about why the delivery of these services is important'. This evolution in thought from what we do, to why we do it, encouraged participants at the event to contemplate the bigger picture. After all, what is the true purpose of this sector?

The delivery of WATSAN services underpins human development, enabling people to overcome poverty. This notion encourages professionals to look beyond the sector and understand how each one's work fits in with the greater goal of poverty reduction. Interestingly, he brought attention to the 50 per cent of people that will remain unserved after the MDGs are met and posed a question, 'how do we reach them?'

Should there be a link between humanitarian emergencies and long-term development strategies?

Barbara's argument here was very simple: 'there needs to be a link between the two simply because of what the consequences could be if there isn't'. She pointed out examples of her work in Kabul where households traditionally used dry sanitation systems functioning in cooperation with farmers who would remove the waste for free and sell it as fertilizer. This non-financial transaction which was seen to work reasonably was completely swept away and destroyed. This is often the case in emergency settings; decisions are made in a haphazard fashion with no regard to longer-term consequences, and thus they involve no notion of sustainability.

However can sustainability be a component of the humanitarian relief equation? Tom pointed out that humanitarian interventions are simply about saving lives using very short funding cycles. During emergencies immediate action is required during a limited span of time and, as such, interventions are not meant to be sustainable. To further clarify his point he explained that 'the fundamental rules that govern humanitarian relief and development are entirely different and as a consequence, although mindful of one

another, these two cannot be expected to be linked’.

Should we encourage participation or leave water management in professional hands?

‘Participation is inherent and absolutely necessary.’ This opening argument by Simon set the scene; he noted that if an inventory was carried out pertaining to water infrastructure, a large proportion of the systems would not be working, mainly because people weren’t consulted and there were no management processes there to operate and maintain. He added that contrary to the general belief about participation being very vague and complex, it was ‘hard-nosed negotiation’ with communities involving some serious decision-making. It has long been recognized that participation is an essential component in the planning and delivery of services since it ensures that infrastructure suits those for whom it is designed and generates a sense of ownership which ultimately encourages sustainability.

Addressing the second part of this question sheds light on one of the most important conclusions of the night. Does the water and sanitation sector

have enough good professionals? This point was brought up at different points during the event, recognizing that there is a great need for better qualified and mindful professionals: people who endeavour to understand local capacities, institutions, and pre-existing infrastructure. ‘There is never a blank sheet’, expressed Barbara, ‘there is always something there’.

One of *Waterlines’* aims is to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners in the water and sanitation field. This 30-year celebratory event was a perfect reflection of this, with academics, practitioners, and researchers sharing knowledge and experience in an informal setting. The discussions ended on a very friendly note, with some very strong and stimulating arguments and a pool of ideas on what the focus of the sector should be during the next 30 years.

As for a final conclusion? Ideally, when implementing WATSAN solutions, professionals need to take into account the bigger picture; the key questions are: What is the overall purpose of these projects? Who is being served? And, finally, what are the long-term prospects (if any)?