

Editorial: Business as usual will not do ... but there are alternatives

THE CONTENT OF THIS JOURNAL is written primarily by practitioners, for practitioners. It is about 'doing' WASH. As 2015 approaches, and as nations and international organizations develop goals and targets to succeed the Millennium Development Goals, it is worth pausing to reflect on how we 'do' WASH, and how we could do it better in future. It is becoming increasingly apparent that 'business as usual' simply will not achieve sustainable services for all. The mix of articles in this issue of the journal amply demonstrates this assertion.

Business as usual can be summarized as follows:

In rural water supply the focus is on capital investments in heavily subsidized physical infrastructure, in parallel with attempts to bring about community management of the service. Inadequate attention to the financing and management of services post-construction too often leads to premature failure and abandonment of the physical assets.

In urban water supply, utilities concentrate on services to the wealthier segments of urban settlements, although even here they often fail to operate in a financially viable manner. Part of the reason for this is their neglect of the populations of unplanned urban settlements who then resort to 'unconventional' means of acquiring water from public supply systems – leading to high rates of non-revenue water.

In rural sanitation the norm in many developing countries is so-called community-led total sanitation (CLTS). Despite the successes of this approach in some cultural and socio-economic contexts, the pure approach (involving triggering, then leaving communities to implement and invest in their own sanitation improvements) has not always recognized the importance of follow-up and facilitating availability of supporting goods and services. Consequently 'slippage' back from open-defecation free (ODF) status is common.

In urban sanitation in most developing country towns and cities, sewerage is at best a distant dream. Where the majority population dwells in unplanned settlements and uses a combination of open defecation and pit latrines or hanging latrines, no satisfactory solutions have yet been proven at scale – either to provide acceptable alternatives to existing options, or to address the problem of latrine emptying.

Hygiene is different from water and sanitation in the sense that: 1) it is far less dependent on physical infrastructure than the enjoyment of water and sanitation services; 2) to an even greater extent than water and sanitation use, it is mostly about changes in individual and household behaviour; and 3) it is a relatively neglected and young discipline. Hygiene promotion efforts fall broadly into two camps: those which are systematic and based on sound field-based academic research and the

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majority which are unsystematic and generally ineffective in bringing about lasting behaviour changes.

Business as usual appears superficially successful in the short term, as it delivers visible physical assets (pumps, taps, toilets, and handwashing facilities). It can deliver numbers of people 'served', although the quality and longevity of that service is highly questionable. Pursuing business as usual simply to tick the numbers box will not do any more. We know better and can do better.

One of the main dangers of business as usual overall is that it focuses attention solely on the unserved. Those already reckoned to be served are neglected, and their rate of slippage back into non-service may match or even exceed the rate at which new services come on-stream. In this way national coverage levels stagnate or even reverse.

We need to find ways to break away from the known shortcomings of past practice, to build on experiences and lessons learned at pilot- or small-scale, and to pursue approaches which have a greater prospect of delivering sustainable services – numbers which really count.

A number of general points are crucial in this endeavour:

- *New services, existing services.* Any attempt to serve the unserved must pay full attention to the need to keep existing services working too. Coverage levels can only increase steadily if those already served stay served.
- *External support to community management.* In the case of household- and community-managed services, both existing and newly served populations need support from entities external to the community. In the case of CLTS or rural water supply, for example, local government with small-scale private-sector providers of goods and services (e.g. latrine artisans, handpump mechanics) should generally provide that backup.
- *Changes and trends.* As rural–urban demographics change, new ways of managing and financing rural water supply services need to be developed. Community-based management systems which were appropriate in the 1980s may no longer be fit for purpose in the 21st century.
- *Central government roles.* Local government in turn needs support from central government, not only in the generally accepted areas of policy-making and monitoring, but also in addressing important aspects which cannot be undertaken locally, such as facilitating the importation and distribution of handpump spare parts.
- *Public sector capacity development.* Because of the importance of local government support to community management and the tasks of central government (in terms of making policy, undertaking monitoring, and strengthening local government), all programme work should include a systematic component of capacity assessment and development.
- *Post-construction public finance.* Financing of local and central government support functions must match the need. As more water supply systems and ODF communities come into existence, it is clear that a greater proportion of national and local budgets should be devoted to post-implementation support,

as opposed to capital investment in physical infrastructure and investment in sanitation promotion.

- *Urban services.* Two keys exist in urban service provision: 1) convincing urban utilities and city authorities that those living in unplanned settlements are potentially good customers; and 2) enabling and supporting local private sector suppliers of goods and services (especially in relation to sanitation).
- *Hygiene promotion.* Thoroughgoing programmes based on good formative research and systematic design and delivery can achieve sustainable behaviour change. Ad hoc hygiene promotion actions should be rejected as they are ineffective and represent poor value for money.
- *No blueprints.* There is no formula, no blueprint, by which sustainable services can be provided for all. Future WASH work should apply continually updated principles learned from experience in very different ways in different local contexts.

The papers in this issue of *Waterlines* highlight key aspects of user preference, behaviour, and demand (see Rheinländer et al.'s paper on smell, Flanagan et al. on household water treatment, Black's paper on the 'Healthy village, Healthy school' (*Ecole et Village Assainis*) programme in Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sebastian et al. on menstrual management). Parker and Summerill discuss institutional behaviours in relation to the implementation of water safety planning, and Van Dijk and Tilay discuss the place of the informal private sector in solid waste management. The insights provided by such grounded experiences and field research demonstrate clearly the constant need for WASH practitioners to dig deeper, understand better, and do differently.

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