

# waterpoints

## Conference call

Squeezed into the limited column inches of the Diary, they promise to be essential events for the water professional anxious to keep up-to-date, and who wants to retain and meet new contacts. Water conferences — exciting forums not to be missed? Or expensive, self-indulgent talking shops? In the first of an occasional series of reports, Ben Page and Chris Rudall share their impressions of the 22nd WEDC Conference, held this year in New Delhi, while Ben also reports on the Second Western Africa Water and Environment Conference.

## 22nd WEDC Conference, New Delhi, 9-13 September 1996

WEDC conferences are primarily for fieldworkers, aimed at providing them with an opportunity to share practical lessons, whilst also receiving assurance that they are not alone in their problems. Participants can talk about their work in a relaxed environment that is not over-academic.

Over 500 delegates from 35 countries gathered in New Delhi, and the vast bulk of the papers outlined stories of specific projects. Given that the delegates were a largely self-selecting group, it might have been worth asking whether WEDC reached the fieldworkers they would like to reach.

As well as project-related papers, a substantial number introduced new technologies, or described the field-testing of familiar technologies. There were useful ideas on the construction of low-cost spring catchments, the use of natural fabrics in filtration, secondary uses for *moringa*-seed husk, and further reports on the value of the SanPlat system. Probably the main technology message to come out of the conference was that technology choice should always be open-minded: there is a danger that both individuals and organizations may become too wedded to a particular technology.

As usual, some of the most valuable ideas emerged in informal dialogues triggered by the presentations. Discussions centred around three different relationships developed over

the five days: between engineers and communities; between donors and implementers; and between NGOs and government departments.

□ The **engineer/community** relationship seems to be crystallizing around information, education, and communication issues (the buzzword is 'advocacy'). World Bank representatives made an appeal to project teams that rules be made very clear to the community; the division of responsibility should be clear from the outset. Furthermore, they accused engineers of dictating to communities what they needed, rather than listening to what they wanted. Some delegates found this hard to stomach, and feared that the emphasis on rules was a code for enforcing community cash contributions (a notion which, particularly in India, seems to provoke great antipathy). In general, participants felt that engineers are ready to listen to a community's

donors. Some donors also seemed to be suggesting that, having taken on board implementers' ideas of community involvement, the implementers should actively consider the donors' agenda: issues such as tariff structures, and ending urban subsidies. Irrespective of such arguments, however, both donors and implementers now recognize that community-based strategies can work on a larger scale.

□ **Government departments and NGOs:** there was a definite feeling at the meeting that attempts should be made to reduce the antagonism and competitiveness that can arise between organizations. Government engineers were clearly 'on the defensive' and needed to assert their legitimacy as representatives of the State. NGOs, on the other hand, felt that they might be an 'endangered species', as they threatened the political establishment. Some felt that they were being forced

into accepting engineering responsibilities that were beyond their capabilities, whilst others wanted to broaden their role by moving away from the existing emphasis (especially in India) on restricting NGOs to software issues. In short, NGOs and government departments need to recognize each others'

strengths and share responsibilities more effectively.

## Gender appropriate?

Two sets of papers were devoted to gender. Individually very good, the special categorization ensured that women came together as a group, but might it now be possible to eliminate gender as a specific topic? If relevant, gender should be incorporated into every conference section.

Certainly, women were prominent, and financial support is set aside for female delegates. But a real problem arises when women feel obliged to attend special gender sessions. At New Delhi, it was ironic that, while women were talking about empowerment in one room, they were missing discussions on finance — a critical aspect of power!

Two final thoughts: first, there was a worrying lack of papers about hygiene-education and health issues. Secondly, whilst true that conferences may boost the morale of fieldworkers, many delegates felt uncomfortable with the degree of opulence offered by the five-star hotel — a more modest setting might be more fitting, given that delegates claim to be representing the interests of the world's poorest people.

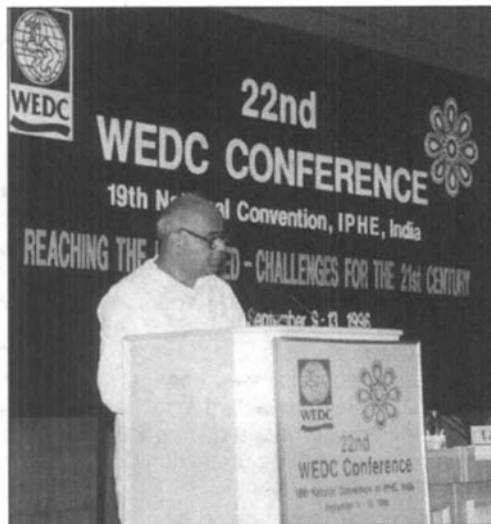
## A view from the floor

The plenary sessions were largely devoted to the policymakers, giving an interesting if sometimes bizarre view from the top writes *Chris Rudall*. On the subject of the woeful world sanitation statistics, one Unicef official in New York was quoted as saying 'We've got to make shit sexy.' — well ... I understand what he's getting at, but maybe it's time they installed pit-latrines in Unicef's New York offices.

There was indignation at one agency official's remark about the need to market water as a good, according to demand rather than need. Thankfully, many were uneasy about this, concerned that it would once again fail the poorest. Policymakers seem to group all the poor together, assuming that community-level management will take care of everyone. Our experience here in rural Nepal suggests this is not true — the poorest of the poor tend to be marginalized by their own communities.

It was generally accepted that we need to be in touch with users (principally women and girls), and NGOs working 'on the ground' are well placed to do this. But NGOs came under attack both for failing to talk to one another, and for 're-inventing the wheel': a common criticism, and not always justified. As one delegate commented, 'Re-inventing the wheel may be a necessary part of a community-based action-reflection approach'.

A more important criticism



India's Prime Minister, Deve Gowda, addresses WEDC's 1996 delegates. He declared that water and sanitation are his government's top priorities.

expressed wants, but will not shy away from identifying what they consider to be a community's true need.

□ **Implementers and donors:** there was considerable support for the speaker who pointed out that pressures to complete projects to rigid deadlines ran counter to effective community participation. If a community is to dictate the pace at which a project moves, implementers must not be pressurized by their

was that NGOs tend to undermine local government authority. This is a key issue, since it is the local government structure that will remain long after the NGOs move on. Interestingly, a Unicef worker was pleased with the fact that the agency was reaching down through government structure as far as district level. In Nepal, the district government officials are usually the highest level we communicate with!

Not much new on the technology front. It was generally agreed that, with sanitation, it is good to offer a range of options for the consumer. Mr Rai, an engineer with 50 years' experience in the Indian public-health sector: 'Whatever people can afford, let them do it — the main thing is that it (excreta) is not left exposed.'

Established wisdom came under attack. One speaker was highly critical of the VIP Latrine, a design that has been widely promoted since the 1980s. The VIP design goes to some expense in attempting to eliminate flies, but it is expensive, and relies on the cubicle being dark, which is inconvenient to users and attractive to snakes. 'The main vector in disease transmission from pit latrines is not flies, but people failing to wash their hands.'

Another paper challenged the community-based approach: 'Is community management not just an inefficient surrogate for sound local government structures?' Its basis was the statistical evidence which shows that we are consistently falling short of our grand targets — clean water for all by 2000... 2010?...2020? Thought-provoking stuff. The speaker suggested that we should be addressing the wider institutional issues which block development (lack of institutional capacity; skilled manpower; training opportunities; credit etc). He could have added: government bureaucracy and corruption; local political tensions; caste and gender inequalities. Maybe it's not enough for us to target low-caste groups or women and children in our development programmes: it is the underlying systems which perpetuate these inequalities that must be tackled.

The prize for the slickest presentation went to Dr Bineshwar Pathak, founder-director of Sulabh International, a large Indian NGO which is successfully promoting clean, well-managed pay-toilets in urban areas and twin-pit pour-flush toilets for domestic use. Sulabh is particularly known for its efforts to emancipate 'scav-

engers', a low-caste group whose traditional role is to carry 'night-soil' from other people's toilets. Freeing them from this degrading work was an unfulfilled dream of Gandhi. The field trip to Sulabh's headquarters in a Delhi suburb was an elaborately choreographed PR exercise — very impressive, but we were left wondering what the problems are. Whilst inspecting so many full-size models I became increasingly in need of a toilet myself, and caused consternation by asking to be shown one that I could actually use!

What did I gain? I came away with a better overview of the sector, but also with some doubts as to how in touch the policymakers are with the grassroots organizations. I was challenged to consider more carefully the relationship between NGOs and local government: whilst it is right to engender a sense of community ownership of a development programme, this must not be at the expense of alienating local officials.

New buzzwords? Well there was 'stakeholder networking' which, I think, refers to people with a common interest talking to each other. Also 'gatekeepers' who are the influential people who need to be on-board

if an idea is to succeed (I think).

Overall impression? This was my first experience of WEDC conferences, and I wondered if their success may to some extent be limiting their effectiveness in that such a diversity of interests was represented. And there were too many 'key-note' speeches for my liking — but that may have been out of deference to the traditions of our hosts. On the other hand, vital issues were aired and some preconceptions challenged. It would be wrong to judge an event like this solely on what was said from the podium at the time: its value can really only be seen in the practical working out of what was exchanged and learned. It was encouraging to know that we are all pulling in roughly the same direction and, at the end of the day, as someone once said: 'It's good to talk'.

*Until recently, Ben Page was working in Cameroon for SAFAD, a British NGO. He is now researching the political ecology of water supply at St Antony's College, Oxford. Chris Rudall works in a Community Health Programme with the International Nepal Fellowship in the Western Region of Nepal. He acknowledges the Baptist Missionary Society for sponsoring his attendance.*

## Western Africa Water and Environment Conference, July 1996



The scope of this meeting was so broad, and the delegates drawn from such diverse backgrounds, that it always ran the risk of losing any sense

of coherence. Perhaps it was an ideal opportunity for consultants, engineers, civil servants, and NGOs to meet but, sadly, it seems as though the mere mention of communities still sends most of those from the commercial sector to sleep, while the intricacies of a GIS (Geographic Information System) covering Lagos' entire water system left most delegates in awe ... but baffled.

The papers *Waterlines* readers would probably find most useful came from within Ghana. These started off with a commitment contained in the politicians' opening remarks towards greater community involvement in rural water supply. This was supported by the managers of the Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation (GWSC) who described the efforts they have been making since 1990 to manage their own water supplies.

The critical leap from rhetoric to action

was exemplified in a paper by Gariba and Derkson who described how ten small northern Ghanaian towns fared with their experimental transition to community management; a project supported by GWSC, funded by CIDA, and managed by Wardrop Engineering Inc. (Canada) and GAS Development Ass. Ltd. (Ghana). The project is concerned with the rehabilitation of 41 town systems — each supporting between 2500 and 50 000 people.

The story was an encouraging one: the savings made by reducing the staff costs when management was transferred to the community were reallocated to operating the electric borehole pumps more often. Because residents were getting a better service, they were more willing to pay water levies, and the resulting increased income allowed the community management team not only to continue to increase the number of days in the week when water was supplied, but also to start putting money aside to cover future maintenance costs. The various communities had pooled their savings to open a foreign-currency account in order to protect the value of the money they had put aside.

Employees of the GWSC were obviously nervous about this experiment, and about the ability of communities to run small-town supplies in the long-term. Transition will only ever be permitted

in towns where GWSCs are losing a great deal of money, and the success of an individual town, it was felt, may well depend on the precise technical circumstances. Questions were raised about the ultimate need to pay the community managers a salary, and the nitty-gritty details of how to get consumers who use public standposts to contribute to the management committee.

Broader issues also remain: localizing town supplies in this way leads to uneven levies, because of the differing costs relating to the precise natural conditions in different places. How will communities with very high costs be supported? Also, protecting a proportion of the national population from paying towards the cost of running the GWSC must surely increase the burden on the remainder (even through these were loss-making systems), unless the central agency actively reduces its staff costs.

From a technological point of view, the conference also provided two useful case studies. From South Africa: Marx and Johannes provided further evidence of the cost-effectiveness of slow sand filtration; whilst Ghanaian delegates, Salifu and Brown, talked about the design, construction, and value of a non-conventional (shallow) sewage system in Kumasi.

*Ben Page*