

The politics of water and sanitation in developing countries

Speech by Jon Lane, Executive Director, WSSCC

at the Honorary Symposium for Ueli Bundi and Roland Schertenleib:
 "Water Policy of the Future – what can we learn from 30 years of experience?"
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Thank you for asking me to speak at this event. I have not had the pleasure of working with Ueli but have known and worked with Roland for many years. I am delighted to honour both Ueli and Roland's work in this way. Chris has asked me to talk about the politics of water and sanitation in developing countries, while concentrating my remarks mainly on sanitation. Since 1987, I have been lucky to be present at a number of the critical meetings and turning points in policy in our sector, so I am talking subjectively from my personal experience rather than from a rigorous analysis of the subject – please excuse me for this.

I will start by looking back briefly, then I will air a few current political themes and will say something about the International Year of Sanitation, before ending with some pointers for the policy of the future.

Looking back

I believe that the story really starts in 1977 at the Mar del Plata conference. It established water and sanitation specifically for developing countries as a respectable topic in its own right. It set out many of the principles that guided our work since. It started the long process to increased political awareness for our subject, notably by prompting the UN to designate the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade 1981-1990.

The Decade in turn triggered off many programmes and activities, brought more funding to our sector, and fired the imaginations of many professionals including myself. In particular the pioneers of our sector developed two lines of work that had huge consequences for the politics of water until the present date: community management and appropriate technologies. Community management – which we at WSSCC call the people-centred approach – emphasized the importance of the people themselves as active participants in their own water and sanitation solutions not passive recipients of services from somebody else (usually the government). Appropriate technologies enabled the people to construct, operate and maintain their services for the first time. Of course these two went hand-in-hand. As the Decade ended we gathered in New Delhi, rallying to the cry of "some for all not all for some" and incidentally founding WSSCC at the same time, and we moved on determined to bring water and sanitation into the political arena.

Throughout the 1990s water did become increasingly prominent as a political topic, though sanitation did not. This culminated in 2000 at the Millennium Summit, where the now-familiar target for water was adopted (It's hard to remember a time when we didn't chant the "reduce by half" mantra, though incidentally WSSCC has always placed more emphasis on access for all.) But a sanitation target was rejected – the delegates felt there were too many targets in the list. So sanitation's political career seemed in doubt before it had even really

begun! But a few people, including some in this room today, began a vigorous campaign to persuade the world's leaders to adopt a sanitation target. They did it – the target was adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. Indeed many commentators pointed out that the sanitation target was the only concrete achievement of the summit.

Meanwhile in water the two main policy controversies were about dams and the private sector. Both are topics that generate a lot of emotion, and I am sure you are all familiar with the various arguments about them.

The people-centred approach evolved into a rights-based approach. The legalistic debate on whether water and sanitation are basic human rights dragged on, but many governments started to put a rights-based approach into practice both in their legal frameworks and their working methods – the fundamental point being that water and sanitation become a right and a responsibility of everyone, not a charitable dispensation.

Some current political themes

First let me say something about water.

As the squeeze on water resources increases, policies on water supply and on water resources are becoming more unified, and politicians are paying more attention to both. The concept of virtual water has enabled everybody to start to appreciate the universal importance of water, rather than simply thinking of it as a local issue.

Finally we are putting behind us the years arguing about privatisation of water supply in developing countries. Even the World Bank has stopped advocating that assets should be sold to the private sector, and stopped claiming that the private sector would bring in funding to fill the chronic shortfall from public sources. The big multinationals came into developing countries like spectacular comets, blazed briefly and exited. Now some of them are working there more modestly providing specific services (to about 7% of the urban population of developing countries) but not owning assets nor bringing in much funding.

There is more understanding about the importance of local government and utilities. For years we knew that they bear the main load of water and sanitation service provision but they were difficult for outsiders to get to know and to learn their collective experience. Now local government has become much more involved in, for example, the World Water Forum, sub-sovereign lending is better established, many countries have actually implemented the decentralization that was established as policy years ago, and south-south collaboration such as the Water Operator Partnerships is increasing.

Some of those policy developments apply to sanitation also. Notably people are finally realizing that centralized waterborne sewerage is economically and environmentally untenable for the vast majority of people around the world. So sanitation policy nowadays acknowledges on-site sanitation as most viable for rural areas and even for low-density urban populations. The policy headache remains the high-density urban settlements in which an increasing proportion of the world's poor people live. Some policy analysts still feel that sewerage services can be extended to those people, others that public or community toilet blocks are a more realistic option.

We still have a problem on overall direction of sanitation policy. Until recently, most sanitation policies – if they existed at all – were based on subsidizing the cost of latrines or toilets, i.e. building toilets for people whether they wanted them or not. Good research by many people, including Sandec, shows that across the developing world about half of those toilets are used for their intended purpose, while half serve as store rooms for food, goats, bicycles and other valued possessions.

So we still have to work hard to maintain the dialogue between technical and political people regarding sanitation services.

2008 – the International Year of Sanitation

Mentioning that dialogue naturally brings me to the International Year of Sanitation. I have a positive analysis of the Year. First, the very fact that it was designated showed that politicians have finally realized the importance of the subject. Secondly, it succeeded in its aim to raise the political profile of the subject. Global meetings, regional sanitation conferences, numerous campaigns and events at national and local level all contributed to this political momentum.

How did we, the sanitation people, do this? I believe that the key was to stop arguing among ourselves about the technicalities of sanitation (my toilet design is better than yours...) and instead unite around a small number of simple clear messages. We finally spoke to the rest of the world with a unified voice: sanitation is important for health, sanitation generates economic benefit, sanitation contributes to social development, sanitation helps the environment, sanitation for all is achievable. These are powerful political messages. Now we hear these messages coming back to us whenever political leaders stand up to talk about sanitation, which is the best compliment they can give to the IYS. The World Water Forum in Istanbul two weeks ago was a good example: sanitation was much more prominent than at previous fora, not just as a topic in itself but as a consideration that was acknowledged right across the spectrum of practitioners and policy-makers.

The International Year of Sanitation has raised the importance of the subject, and now we must ensure that it does not fall back again amid the clamour of other topics: the economic crisis, the grave threat of climate change, and so on. I think we will succeed especially by emphasizing one of our key messages in particular, namely that sanitation generates economic benefits. Ultimately, for all our professional concerns about health or the environment, the economic arguments are the most powerful both with householders themselves and with political leaders.

Water and sanitation policy of the future

Of course water will become more prominent in political debate around the world. Water supply, water resources and climate change will have to be considered together – one only has to think about the billion people living in the Indo-Ganges plain, whose rivers are diminishing while the groundwater table is dropping and the sea level is rising, truly a ghastly combination of problems to overcome. As to the much-touted water wars, notably in the Middle East, as a natural optimist I still trust that working together to solve shared water problems may actually be a catalyst for peaceful co-existence rather than a source of conflict.

Talking of working together, the water and sanitation sector has suffered for years from fragmentation. The Global Framework for Action, now being started, is a good step towards getting our collective act together and hence raising the importance of our sector in general.

As to sanitation, I firmly believe that we are on the brink of the most exciting policy development yet. We are transforming sanitation from a neglected minor development sector to a major everyday human economic activity. What do I mean by that? Until now, most governments and agencies have seen sanitation as something done to people – and usually tacked on to water programmes as a minor aspect. But now that is changing. Government after government is changing its policy to emphasize hygiene promotion, demand creation and sanitation marketing. Most of the external agencies have already changed their policies in this way. So in future the aid money and government budgets will be spent on persuading people to raise sanitation up their own priority lists, then they will automatically want to improve their own sanitation service – for which the local entrepreneurs and service providers will be ready. Just as almost anybody in the world can now get a cellphone and good customer service, so everybody will soon be able to get a toilet with full customer service – supplying the components, constructing it, maintaining it and collecting the contents to use for their economic value. People will no longer have to struggle on, digging their own pits and trying to work out what to do when they are full. Human shit (properly composted) will be recognized as an economic commodity not a waste product. Of course the Chinese have recognized this for centuries, but now the rest of us are catching up. Now we are bringing that good science into the political arena.

I have one specific question for your consideration: what is your view on the future of phosphorus supplies? Do we need to be working now at the political level to avoid the nutritional devastation that could result from lack of phosphorus in the future? I suspect that we must capture and reuse the phosphorus content of human excreta, and we must explain this to everybody else, alongside the much more publicised issues of peak oil and food and water shortages.

To summarise, I don't know exactly what the water and sanitation policy of the future will be, but I do know that it will be vitally important both for the human race and for our relationship with the planet. Good science, as practised by Ueli and Roland and everybody else at EAWAG, will remain vital to inform wise and effective policies for the good of our children and grandchildren.

Thank you.

(as delivered: 23 minutes)