

The importance of public awareness

Developing a country model for WaSH capacity building

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The developed country model for building capacity in water supply, sanitation and hygiene is inadequate for Asia, Africa and Latin America. Developing countries require a different approach.

The world is facing an imminent water crisis that calls for urgent action.[1] Without concerted efforts in enhancing human resources and institutional capacities, developing countries in particular are unlikely to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) relating to water supply and sanitation, or any of the MDGs. Yet it is well documented that water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) are fundamental to broader national development ? vastly reducing global disease burdens, allowing more children (especially girls) to gain access to education, reducing the time women spend on collecting water and triggering other forms of economic growth and livelihood development.[2] Nearly half of the people in the developing world lack access to safe drinking water, sanitation and proper hygiene.[3] Despite this, WaSH capacity development tends to be overlooked, and this problem requires urgent redress.[4]

The lack of progress in the delivery of basic WaSH services is not only a matter of infrastructure and finance, but also of failure to provide resources that can ensure that the required knowledge, skills and behavioural changes exist.[5] Although there is a wealth of knowledge and experience in the developed world, access to the right information and resources is limited ? including inadequate human resources and institutional structures to support knowledge transfer to developing countries.

The need for capacity building is ubiquitous throughout the developing countries. But capacity building must not be restricted to the developed world view of human resources, institutions and infrastructure. Water supply, sanitation and hygiene in the developed world are managed within organisational and legal frameworks that are very different from those usually encountered in developing countries. A typical developed world model of capacity building for WaSH begins with human resources development (emphasising scientific and technical training) and would further include institutional development, financial resources development, material capacity building (maintenance, monitoring) and public relations (vertically to government and media; horizontally to stakeholders).

Does such an approach really work in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America? Probably not entirely, and a new approach must be developed for these countries. The developing country model for WaSH governance proposed here would begin with public awareness as the foundation for viable governance, stressing that the respect and trust of the

public has to be earned through sustained public dialogue.

For this to succeed, however, the conception of a largely one-way traffic of information from the experts to the public, and from developed countries to the developing ones, has to be replaced by a more reciprocal partnership among those involved in the process of WaSH governance. This new concept requires manifest innovations in institutional arrangements and the building of capacities to perform well. The new cadre of water supply and sanitation managers, working intimately and interactively with members of the general public, must earn the respect and trust of the general public, while the society as a whole must play its role in taking social responsibility for sustainability of the WaSH services.

This approach requires a sustained public dialogue and social interactions at all levels of society to an intensive degree that has not been seen before, except in times of emergency, war, pestilence and famine. It demands a search for viable, practical solutions. Verbal literacy is required for this type of socio-psychical communication, not merely intellectual, rational debate. If such a groundswell of concerned public sensitivity were to be crafted together, the largest and most important surveillance and monitoring system for freshwater sustainability and health would have been integrally placed right in the performance calculus of WaSH governance.

The new cadre of water supply, sanitation and hygiene managers must be armed with relevant, ethical-social knowledge, ethical-legal learning, scientific and engineering knowledge, long-range environmental understanding and policies and development plans for entire watershed basins. They can then build trust with the various stakeholders and users, and agree on solutions for waters supply, sanitation and hygiene that are tailored to the local requirements now and in the future

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Footnotes

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- [5] WHO-UNICEF (2006)
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