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**The British water industry and the Water Decade:
the experience of WaterAid**



WaterAid came into being in 1981. It is a response by the British water industry to the 1980's Water Decade. Support - by the institutions and the employees of that industry - is the special feature which makes it a little different from other organisations. But WaterAid is not a subsidiary of the British water industry. From its inception it has been self-governing as a non-profit-making registered UK charity.

What was this new organisation created to do? Some people believed that it should be concerned simply with the climate of opinion in Britain. To disseminate information and to generate understanding about the needs which the Water Decade addresses might lead to a public opinion ready to support increased resources for the Decade (whether through its government or through voluntary contributions) and a water industry ready to lend its experience and its personnel to operational work, carried on by others, overseas.

But WaterAid decided that, though such development education is important, it is insufficient. What authority or experience would it bring to bear upon British opinion, if it was not itself engaged in practical work in the Third World? Indeed was there not a risk that it would pass to the British public the wrong messages? In particular it could fall into the trap of assuming that the solutions are largely those which Britain itself had been able to adopt at a time, some generations ago, of considerable industrially-based wealth.

And so the decision was taken, early in WaterAid's life, to become operational overseas as well as attempting to arouse concern in Britain for the Decade. But then two questions immediately arose. Could any significant resources be generated for this? And in what overseas circumstances should WaterAid respond to requests for its support? The answers to these two questions are of course inter-dependent, but they are best discussed consecutively in the next sections of this paper.

WATERAID IN UK

First, what support has been generated in UK? England and Wales have in all ten Water

Authorities, each in its region responsible for the whole range of water and sanitation services. Between them they employ more than 50,000 people. Also there are 30 smaller Water Companies, concerned with water supply and not sanitation, and operating by agreement each in a part of one or other region. These Water Authorities and Companies have provided the UK framework for WaterAid's growth.

They have no legal power to give money, since this is collected wholly for services to their own rate-payers. Instead they provide valuable support in kind, such as free offices for WaterAid, and (more important still) they encourage the interest of their staff, and sometimes of their consumers too.

In 1982 each of the ten Water Authorities designated one senior member of its headquarters staff, who had volunteered for these extra duties, to become the focal point of all WaterAid activity in the region. These ten people have in the ensuing years developed each a network of anything from a dozen to a hundred WaterAid activists who, at divisional and workplace level, are a potent force both for development education and for fund-raising. Their efforts have been greatly helped by the vigorous co-operation of all of the industry's trade unions.

Slowly WaterAid's income has grown - from £25,000 in 1981-2 to £352,000 in the year ending last March. Present indications are that £750,000 will be raised in the year ending March 1986, and considerably more than £1,000,000 in 1987.

Almost entirely this is coming from voluntary sources. Several private-sector companies (for example manufacturers supplying the industry, and consulting engineers) have made donations. Small fund-raising initiatives by WaterAid activists are many and various: one young scientist from Thames Water took a week's leave for a sponsored run along the river's bank from its source to the sea; retirement gifts and wedding gifts are renounced, and collections held instead for WaterAid; ties and greeting cards have been sold; competitions with glamorous prizes have drawn in further people; and slowly WaterAid has become better known.

Supporters have also capitalised on their leisure-time membership of such as Rotary Clubs and churches. Several thousand talks and filmshows have now been given, contrasting the water services which most British people take for granted in their own homes, with the needs faced by the Water Decade - and suggesting what can be done to improve things. Films, tape-and-slide sets, publications and briefing notes are supplied to all regions for dissemination.

Early last year Wessex Water produced the first edition of an eight-page WaterAid newspaper called Oasis. This is now published twice a year, and distributed by the industry to each and every employee. It attempts further to inform and enthuse those who are seeking to engage the wider public in the concerns of the Decade.

The Wessex initiative concerning Oasis is illustrative of how a new organisation moves forward: a group of enthusiasts test out the viability of something which they want to do; the whole organisation then reviews the outcome and judges whether to implement on a national scale. Two other illustrations of this theme are worth recording.

Lotteries by payroll deduction. Following a pilot scheme run by Northumbrian Water in 1984, all ten regions now have a monthly WaterAid Lottery. The cost of a single share in it is ten pence a week or just over forty pence a month. The employee simply advises his or her pay office to deduct the cost of one or more shares regularly from pay until further notice. Attractive cash prizes are won each month. The net yield to WaterAid is above £100,000 a year.

Writing to the industry's consumers. The Water Authorities and Companies mail almost every household in Britain at least once a year with a water rates bill. North Surrey Water Company broke new ground in 1983 by enclosing a further leaflet explaining the Water Decade and inviting financial support for WaterAid. Several other Authorities and Companies have since taken the same step. Particularly where the consumer is allowed to make just one simplified payment by 'rounding-up' his water bill (the Authority or Company passing on the sum total of excess money to WaterAid) this is very simple and effective fund-raising. There are signs that up to five per cent of the population will so round-up, and this would yield several million pounds of income each year if eventually all ten regions approach their consumers in this way.

WATERAID OVERSEAS

Clearly the ground-swell of support described above was only going to come into being if

people could see their efforts having some practical effect overseas. But what kind of practical effect? Without doubt there were some activities which would enthuse these potential supporters and some which would not. WaterAid's resources, now and in the future, are tiny compared with the multi-lateral and bilateral government donors. For it in a very small way to be doing work similar to theirs would not fire the imagination. An alternate approach was needed. And since WaterAid was based on the voluntary effort of concerned people, then a policy of supporting similarly concerned people overseas - through indigenous non-government organisations, women's movements, self-help committees and church groups - was attractive.

Projects of a human scale

So WaterAid opted from the outset for projects of a human scale, seeking to create basic improvements at points of acute need, and with those who would benefit directly involved in planning and execution. Now four years later, several hundred such micro projects have been supported, nearly always at a cost to WaterAid of less than £10 per person benefiting. Their range is predictable: hand-dug wells; the protection of springs; gravity-fed supplies to stand-pipes; the introduction of simple forms of non-water-borne sanitation; the rehabilitation of equipment and machinery out of commission through lack of spare parts; health education initiatives in schools and elsewhere. Credibility has demanded that in every case an independent person visit the proposed project, vouch for it to WaterAid, and subsequently monitor and report back on progress. Numerous engineers, doctors, teachers and aid officials have filled this role, acting as WaterAid's honorary assessors in places where it has no personnel of its own.

Small and informal organisations can often work in ways denied to bigger and more formal ones. Analysis by the World Bank's Technology Advisory Group clearly suggests that the ventilated improved privy, as developed through the Blair Laboratory in Zimbabwe, could sensibly be adapted for use in many other countries. But how can this wider dissemination occur? Partly perhaps it may happen through the actions of big organisations, including governments, setting up wide-ranging programmes. But change is at least as likely to occur through small groups of determined people as through governments. There is clearly a case for smaller organisations like WaterAid supporting such people - doctors concerned about their clinics, or teachers about their schools - in their efforts to

test out the ventilated improved privy. This has happened in half a dozen different countries.

Such micro projects illustrate the potential of bottom-upwards development - through and by those who will benefit, rather than simply for them. Indeed I suggest that this is the essence of true development - increasing the capacity of the poor to change their own lives.

In the circumstances of the 1980s there is a further and more pragmatic reason for encouraging such bottom-upwards development. Governments throughout the Third World are greatly over-burdened. They are all the time struggling to do more than available resources will allow. Often their principal services have to be concentrated in the bigger centres of population. Yet hundreds of millions of those who are the concern of the Water Decade are dispersed in villages, hardly touched by public services.

Indigenous NGOs

From this WaterAid has concluded that it should be very ready to try to help increase the capacity of indigenous non-government organisations capable of multiplying this kind of bottom-upwards work in their own countries. Later this month I shall be talking with the committee of the principal women's organisation in Assam, the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samittee (APMS). Over the last two years WaterAid has funded construction costs for twenty village wells undertaken by one or other member group of APMS. But could APMS now achieve a great deal more, if WaterAid could perhaps underwrite the appointment of specialist staff, and the transport and operating costs to make such staff effective?

In Africa this kind of institutional support often takes a different form. Shortage of skilled manpower leads to requests for British water engineers to be attached by WaterAid, so that the technical capacity of local organisations is increased. Of course such engineers must always play an on-the-job training role so that, sooner rather than later, they are no longer needed. This is proving to be another practical avenue through which goodwill among the people of Britain's water industry can be expressed. Currently WaterAid has engineers working with the development programmes of the church (in Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda), with a specialist water ngo (in Kenya) and with the government itself (in Sierra Leone).

In all of these cases WaterAid is committed to a programme extending over several years. But there are also instances where a shorter

attachment is viable. In February and March an engineer will spend just six weeks visiting four hospitals run by the Baptist church of the River Zaire, drawing up detailed and costed proposals for basic water and sanitation improvements. WaterAid's role may then be complete. The Baptist church in other parts of the world is likely to provide the funding for implementation.

IMPLICATIONS

What are the main implications to be drawn from WaterAid's first few years? Engineers and other skilled people join the British water industry attracted by a public service ethos. But they come to realise that the great public health challenges in Britain were met by their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Personally and professionally they are seeking a challenge and the Water Decade provides one. Is that why so many of them have the goodwill to lend their time and their experience to WaterAid? Could other of the world's richer countries start similar organisations and expect similar support? Could India's own water professionals start their own equivalent to WaterAid, whether focussed on needs in the poorer parts of their own country, or upon the many Third World countries which have not one tenth of India's skilled manpower or of its experience in simple and adaptive technology?

Any such new organisations might draw a few lessons from WaterAid's experience. They will need to be very clearly non-profit-making, and committed not to the selling of their own country's goods and services but to real development priorities as seen by poor communities and their governments. They will need sufficient humility to see themselves always as the minor partner in any work with which they associate, ensuring that the major partner - and hence the 'owner' of what results - is an indigenous organisation or group.

There is one final thing which others might draw from WaterAid's experience. It is this. There are many millions of human beings on this planet who despair of the failure of governments to resolve the world's most fundamental problems. Offered a channel through which they can help overcome some of those fundamental problems - and the Water Decade is clearly concerned with one of them - hundreds and then thousands of those people will come forward and play their part.