

## The Way Forward

Sam Godfrey (WEDC Conference Editor)

---

### Introduction

The 30th WEDC conference was held in Vientiane, Lao PDR between 25-29th November 2004. It attracted a record number of international delegates (210 international delegates from 44 countries) making a total of 500 delegates in total. The presence of this high number of delegates reflected both the attraction of Lao PDR as a venue for hosting international conferences and the popularity of the conference theme *People centred approaches to water and environmental sanitation*.

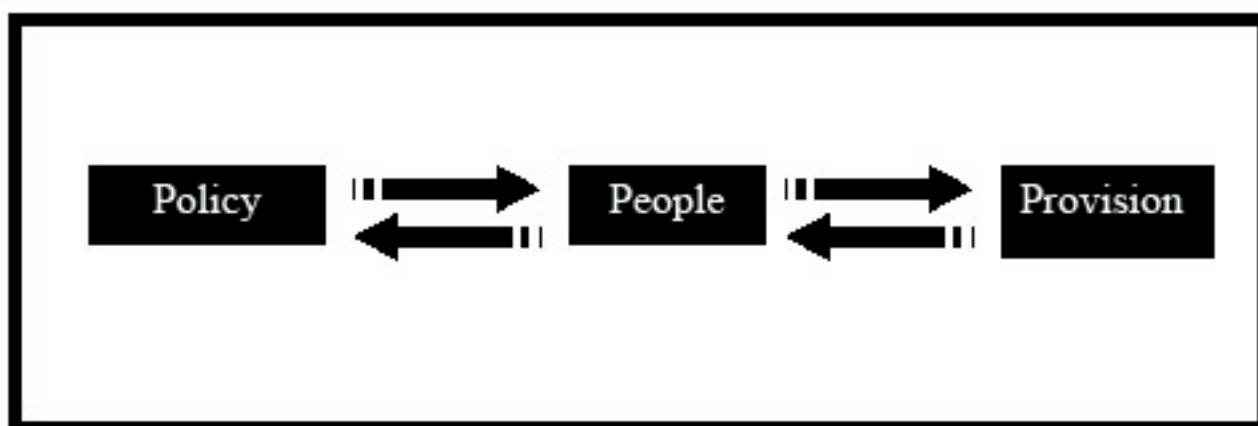
Following recommendations from the 29th WEDC conference in Abuja, Nigeria, the term *people centred* was selected as one of the most important concepts in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). One paper presented at the conference, interviewed 57 water professionals and asked them what were the key areas of concern in the sector at present. Of the 57 interviewees, the majority of respondents highlighted *people centred approaches* as a critical issue in the sector. The study further noted various interpretations of *people centred approaches*, according to who, and in what context, it was used. The study noted that *People centred approaches* can be considered in amongst other things, the context of its benefit to health, dignity, burden, poverty reduction and economic and environmental development. Understanding of this concept is critical in achieving interim Joint Monitoring Program targets that require improved access to safe water for 756 million people and to safe sanitation for 1.6 billion people.

The 30th WEDC conference continued this theme and attempted to address *people centred approaches* from a multidisciplinary viewpoint. During a keynote presentation at the beginning of the conference, the economic benefits of improved access to safe water and sanitation were emphasised. The speaker noted that “the economic case for water supply and sanitation (WSS) is clear...” and that “moral arguments and social/health benefits are important but investments will only follow when we show that WSS is a good investment” (John Soussan, 2004). The speaker noted that MDGs are achievable, if targets are considered in the context of their economic viability (i.e. where a percentage rate of return is mandatory on a set level of investment). This economic approach is more commonly referred to as the *livelihoods* approach where improved access to water and sanitation is an essential engine to economic growth. But does improved access to water supply trigger economic growth?

The 30th WEDC conference noted that for this to be achievable, water supply and sanitation needs to consider the three Ps; policy, people and provision (as in figure 1). Where the livelihoods perspective comprises of “*the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required to make a living.*”

### Policy environment

The creation of an enabling environment is essential to facilitate *people centred approaches* in water supply and sanitation. During the conference, examples from Lao PDR



Chambers and Conway (1992)

of the creation of a facilitative environment were presented. The evidence presented suggests that a structured approach to policy reform is required which involves all the stakeholders from the community to the government level. In order to make this tangible, examples from Lao PDR emphasise the importance of physical building blocks or activities as a catalyst to promote peoples' involvement in policy reform.

### People

People should be considered both the key to successful provision but also potential economic beneficiaries. In accordance with the livelihoods approach, the conference noted examples from South Africa of where economic activities doubled as a result of improved access to water and sanitation. Indeed, as noted in the UNICEF/WHO JMP interim report, a minimum water quantity (20 litres per person per day) is required to promote economic development.

### Provision

It is well known that improved *people centred* water and sanitation provision will result in health benefits. However, to optimise provision, the conference presented examples of the importance of viewing the water and sanitation systems from a more "holistic approach." Where issues of disability, gender, age, caste and socio-economic status are considered critical criteria in water supply system design, sanitation improvement or water resource management.

### The role of the conference

The 30th WEDC conference consisted of 145 academic and practitioner papers over the 4 day conference as well as 4 specialist sessions with invited speakers on topic issues such as Sector Policy Reform, Water Quality Guidelines and Arsenic Mitigation. Papers presented at the conference were divided into 5 themes, Cross Cutting Issues, Environmental Sanitation, Institutional, Finance and Management Issues, Water Resources and Water Supply. The conference highlighted the importance of the following key areas:

1. People and economics
2. Policy, People and Information Management
3. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) tools and people
4. Financing people centred water and sanitation
5. Water supply/resources and gender

### Cross cutting theme

#### *Dr S Kayaga*

The cross cutting session contained papers presented in the sub-themes of sector information-knowledge management, sector policy reform, governance issues, gender-poverty in Environmental Impact Assessment and community management-monitoring of sanitation coverage. The papers presented in the theme stressed the importance of the use of Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials.

It noted that for any water and sanitation development to be successful, we as professionals must respect the stakeholders and provide them with the information they require to make informed choices. This includes establishing Knowledge Management (KM) activities which are not necessarily Information Technology (IT) based but are more focussed on individual or organisational needs.

Furthermore, the theme stressed that decentralisation on its own is not enough to empower people to design, build, operate and manage sustainable infrastructure. Other considerations such as good governance, transparency and accountability are critical factors in ensuring sustainability. To achieve the MDGs, there is a need for greater involvement of all stakeholder from grassroots to disadvantage communities to sector level policy makers.

### Environmental sanitation

#### *Dr S. Chanthaphone and R. Scott*

The environmental sanitation session was divided into the sub themes of solid waste management, health and hygiene, wastewater treatment, environmental impact planning and programming. Recurring issues during the presentations and discussions included the debate on whether environmental sanitation is a process or is it a one off activity of service provision. Too often sanitation is viewed as a service and not a sustainable process. Technology must be considered a function of sanitation and that the process of sanitation requires consideration from the user to ultimate disposal/reuse. The session recommended that more choice and information is required for the user and that changes in mindsets of decision makers can only be brought about by persuasive information. The session supported the idea that people centred technical solutions are required but that they alone are not the solution.

To achieve sustainable environmental sanitation infrastructure, informed decisions must be made which "bridge the gap" between policy and practise. These require the use of a reliable information base to establish realistic targets at a decentralised level. For all of these activities, secure methods of financing are important. How, where and in what way sanitation infrastructure is financed remains a contentious issue. Discussions suggested the importance of the responsible use of subsidies in sanitation that just focus on construction, the creation of developing markets and creating demand and investment in small scale enterprises.

### Institutional, management and finance issues

#### *Dr C Njiru and K. Aphaylath*

The session was divided into the sub themes of sustainability, scaling up, social impacts, pro poor policies, effective regulation and cost effectiveness. Key issues of debate included institutional reform, decentralisation, partnerships, financing and capacity building. Innovative approaches presented dur-

ing the session included the use of franchising as a means of promoting cost recovery. For piped urban water supply and sanitation systems this was considered a well established option but the challenge lies in the translation of the model to smaller more remote water and sanitation systems where public-private-partnerships (PPP) may be an option.

Additionally, improvements in all types of management be it asset management, financial management or contract management were considered critical to the sustainable provision of water supply and sanitation. Central to this is the use of the local private sector and the incorporation of private sector “business” principles into water supply and sanitation service provision.

Critical gaps in the current people centred approaches included the lack of clarity and lack of coordination between sector institutions resulting in minimal communication and gross duplication. Included in this is the form of output monitoring to ensure that performance targets are established between sector institutions. This may involve financial monitoring, review of management options and contradictory definitions of the poor.

## Water Resources

### *C. Boualapha and P. Harvey*

The session focused on three sub themes of community management of water resources, integrated management of water resources and groundwater. The overarching premise of the theme was that people are managers of water resources and not just users. However to achieve this, people must be empowered and informed to be equipped adequately to manage water resources. This is particularly important during extreme periods of droughts or floods.

At a micro-level, partnerships are required. These may be between government and community and may involve greater gender focussed approaches at a local level. For example in groundwater management, decentralised level planning can create greater links between national and local government and communities. Critical to these approaches is involvement of local stakeholders in water resource allocation (particularly in water stressed areas). At a macro level, the link between government and community is of even greater significance. In order to inform effective policy making, a demand orientated approach to water resource management is required that should replace the traditional “supply driven” approach.

Emerging areas of interest include the impact of climate change on water resources, establishment of effective strategies for balancing targets of MDGs and finite water resources. This requires the development of more comprehensive decision making support tools such as “on line groundwater support and training” - Ultimately, people centred approaches to water resources must begin with informed decision making. This places responsibility on water professionals to inform politicians of potential technical, cultural, economic and socio-political benefits of effective water resource management.

## Water supply

### *S Kongmany, B Skinner and S Thammavongsa*

The session was divided into the sub-themes of water quality and treatment, rural water supply, water quality monitoring, water treatment and urban water. Although the theme was predominantly technical, a number of papers recognised the importance of addressing water supply in a multi-disciplinary way which was centred on the culture, practices, abilities, needs, skills and financial resources of the people for whom the water is being supplied.

The theme recognised that people centred approaches to water supply are not only focussed on the quantity and quality of the supply. A critical component of the water supply is the level of “safety” associated with the supply. A proper consideration of safety should avoid overemphasis on specific chemicals such as Arsenic and rather focus on sustainable provision of safe water devoid of both toxic chemicals and pathogenic micro organisms. Some papers presented recognised the importance of statistical methods of evaluation of levels of access to “safe” water supply. Specialist sessions stressed the significance of the 2004 3rd edition WHO guidelines for Drinking Water Quality and the move towards a risk based approach to water quality termed Water Safety Plans (WHO, 2004). The session further noted limitations in existing approaches to water supply that often do not use risk based approaches. Furthermore, the theme noted that the identification of a water quality problem will not necessarily lead to a solution and that monitoring needs to be backed up by investment.

Evidence was presented on useful GIS and computer based tools in the urban sector that could help promote greater inclusion of the marginalized urban poor. Although lagging behind the urban sector, the rural sector has also made great strides in promotion of community participation. To improve this process, greater attention is however required in a number of areas. These include consideration of the seasonal availability of labour, use of labour saving technologies when designing projects and an appreciation of gender and cultural issues.

Sessions on water treatment identified that household-level water treatment may be a viable alternative to centralised treatment in some situations. Advantages of household treatment systems (such as bio-sand and silver impregnated ceramic filters) include simple maintenance and high rates of removal of pathogenic organisms. However, further research is required in this area to convince decision makers that these are viable alternative technologies.

## Way forward

The conference addressed water supply and sanitation from a people centred approach. It agreed with similar viewpoints expressed by the World Bank Water and Sanitation programme in other parts of the world, that critical to achieving the MDGs is the issue of attracting finance for sustainable people centred development. One means of achieving this is

to demonstrate the impact of WSS investment. It is therefore proposed that the 2005 WEDC conference will focus on *Maximising the Impact of Water and Environmental Sanitation*. It is recommended that the 31st WEDC conference focuses more on the “how” rather than “what” and that greater attention is given to financing and economic benefits of water supply and sanitation.

## References

- Soussan, J., 2004, The Economics of Water Supply and Sanitation: Re-defining the agenda, 30th WEDC Conference, Vientiane, Lao PDR.
- WHO, 2004, Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality, Third Edition, Geneva, Switzerland.