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Water and Sanitation Panel

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT  
& GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

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### Introduction

In 2000, the World Water Forum at The Hague endorsed through Vision-21 four decisive foci for water, hygiene and sanitation effort around the world. The first and cardinal principle of these would be to build on people's energy and creativity at all levels by empowering households and communities to take action, technologies that respond to actual needs. On this foundation, the other three components would be rooted: acknowledging hygiene, water and sanitation as a human rights; relating them to human development, poverty elimination, environmental sustainability and integrated management of water resources; good governance through committed and compassion leadership leading to authorities and institutions that are capable of supporting people-centered approaches and being accountable to users as clients; and finally, a synergy among partners and sectors that can involve users, politicians and professionals. The Iguacu Action Plan was based on these principles, providing the mandate for local, national and region collaboration that could take forward the advocacy and mobilization objectives of the WASH campaign. The WASH effort, now on-going across the globe through the WSSCC network, aims to raise the commitment of the political and social leaders to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of making water, sanitation and hygiene a reality for all. Most recently, the global WASH Forum in Dakar November-December 2004 set out the need to create political will at the national and local levels which could translate vision rhetoric into action. A Road Map has been set out for achieving the MDGs. Among the good practices it suggests as essential for the journey is the importance of ensuring that women take the lead and that, the un-served poor, both rural and urban, are at the center of planning and implementation.

### Policy needs and supporting actions

This background is essential to understanding the policy option recommended below, actions that are essential if policy change is to lead to the real change envisaged by the MDGs.

Experience in India and elsewhere indicates the need to relate watsan to local resources: natural, human and physical. These resources naturally reflect specific geo-climatic and cultural contexts that are physical, social, political and economic. This range should make it clear that no one formula can fit the variety of circumstances in which the un-served struggle for survival today. Baseline surveys, studies of local knowledge/attitudes/practices, and inter-disciplinary approaches are all needed to solve local problems locally. Respecting traditional knowledge is a vital element. Building local individual and institutional capacities can also require positive discrimination for weaker sections, particularly women, so as to ensure that this voice is heard at every step of planning, implementation and management. One example of policy requiring translation into practice has been to ensure that protecting and improving local water resources is given priority over capital-intensive pipelines that transfer water from distant and often unsustainable sources. The importance of rainwater harvesting and eco-sanitation solutions relevant to location needs to be underlined, moving them now from the margins to the center of planning and implementation

Building capacities must mean that communities to make their own choices, including those of technologies and of alternative uses of limited funds. Rainwater harvesting and eco-sanitation are important examples of technology demystified and adapted to need and adjust according to resources and locations. These strategies must now be given financial and management priority.

The first step on the road to MDG achievement is to acknowledge hygiene awareness as a pre-condition for watsan goals and for human wellbeing. This was a critical lesson of the global consultation that led to Vision 21, and to all that has followed it. Without hygienic behaviors, action for latrines and safe water cannot deliver better health. Even today, resource allocation seldom reflects the need for building the capacities, curricula, materials and opportunities essential for hygiene education. In our region, these resource needs are at best lumped together with general estimates for sanitation infrastructure. There is usually little understanding of the long and patient processes of behavior change. Fortunately, we can see some change through the growing realization that achieving hygienic behaviors is a major task in itself. Yet this realization is still not translated into the resources we need.

Because attitudes and behaviors are not properly understood, sanitation is still most often seen as the supply of a limited range of so-called low-cost hardware. These supply-driven options seldom correspond to felt needs, particularly those of women and children. In India, communities are rejecting these offers not because they do not understand the need for better health but rather because they want solutions that respond to equally important aspirations of dignity and safety. The need for financial systems including micro-finance is emerging as the most important requirement to ensure sanitation action that responds to people's real needs and capacities.

Sanitation needs symbolize the importance of translating global knowledge in local terms, and using the people-centered approach that is the non-negotiable core of Vision 21, the Igauca Action Plan and the Dakar Road Map. I have given you a brief glimpse of the drinking water action that has been possible through community action in my state. Women have been at the forefront, facing and surmounting enormous challenges of entrenched power structures, including those of a patriarchal society, corruption and authorities still wedded to high-tech solutions handed down from above.

Institutional reform is essential to the movement towards Vision 21. Decades of plans and projects sent down from the top must now give way to innovating or changing institutions to serve decentralized management systems. In India, for example, the traditional self governing a village institution of Panchayati Raj has now to ensure that at-least one third of membership must be of woman and other vulnerable/marginalized groups, Traditional Panchayats often reflect traditional power structures, and it is these we need to break. Water committees, youth groups (meaning groups of both male and female youth), self help groups and women's organization are among the opportunity that need every support, particular finance and decision making . It is everywhere becoming clear that past institutions can not to deliver change without themselves undergoing drastic reform. This is politically difficult, because decision-making powers (including those of finance) now need to move away from politician and bureaucrats into the hands of the real users and stakeholders. A particular challenge today is that many older institution, threatened by change, have adopted the rhetoric of Vision 21 to pour old wine into new bottles. An organization set up in one India state to facilitated transition to community managed approaches has not a single member of civil society in its governance!

Policy must ensure that resources are available for building capacities for change at every level, from the household to highest levels of authority. It is not only the weak and vulnerable who must learn new roles and responsibilities. There is an equal need for authorities to learn what it means to move from away planning and control to facilitation and support.

Technical and financial support must reflect the ability of the communities, women, and other vulnerable groups to exercise their own choices. Sanitation solutions, for example, have often been restricted to selections made by authorities and donors usually these do not reflect what households, particularly women, really want. An example in India is an official latrine promotion scheme that offers subsidies for the construction of a so-called low-cost, two-pit latrine. Women reject this offer because the solution does not respond to their need for both privacy and dignity nor to their willingness to invest. Instead, they ask for access to finance that can help them build toilets (with related facilities) which protect them and can serve multiple uses.

The struggle for watsan as a human right also requires clear definitions of community and individual rights over natural resources. In many parts of the world, the right to water depends on patriarchal structures and on wealth that finances deeper borewells. The community therefore must have right not only to what can be easily recognized community property but equally to have a say over resources (such as groundwater) that so far belong only to those who can afford to reach them.

Related to the issue of the rights are issues of quantity and quality--- access alone is not enough. Water quality and water quantity is critical to survival and this requires an enabling environment of legislation, capacity building and M&E. The spreading threat of pollution (both man-made and natural) has become a major source of injustice and inequity, as industrial and urban pollution expands and deeper sources bring up Poisson of fluoride and arsenic contamination.

The implication here is for legal provisions that can protect the principles of the Vision 21 as non-negotiable fundamentals, protected by legislation by, and watchdog institutions. Systems of law and oversight must be close to the community, easily accessible and unbound by red-tape and bureaucracy. Conflict resolution and redressal mechanisms become important elements, ones that our new to most experience and require capacity building within both government and civil society. The right to information is an integral element within the exercise of rights as well as of new capacities in planning and management. In many parts of the world, watsan activists are exploring strategies for developing resource centers and People's learning centers which can inform, educate, train and counsel. These centers require bringing together stakeholder to articulate information needs, build reliable bases of data and knowledge, and assist networking and collaboration.

A key element in sharing experience can be the availability of documentation through which problem-solving processes can be shared. In the past, this has been a major lacuna, with authorities and NGOs either too preoccupied with program responsibilities or too obsessed with recounting success stories that can attract donor. As a result, much of the real watsan learning is lost. The long and patient process of trial and error remains unrecorded and confined to memories and anecdotes. Documentation requires time, ability and finance. This must be a present and future priority. The Vision 21 process over three years demonstrated the critical importance of learning from experience, learning that becomes impossible if experience itself is not set out.

In this review of policy development supported by action, three phases of implementation should be clear. The first begins with awareness and moves on to building capacities and institutional mechanisms that can support consultative and collaborative arrangements among stakeholders. Demonstration is essential spread awareness and takes action to scale. Demonstration needs also to be on the firm foundation of planning that is not confined only to 'watsan' but bring in related issues of geography, society, health, education and environment. The watsan sector is thus a 'sector of sectors', demanding that linkages and overlaps be identified and used. Program implementation also requires monitoring and assessment systems that are participatory and that can be continued not just for a project but for all the collaboration that can make projects sustainable. A key component in this process is the development of the indicators for every phase of activity---- indicators that go beyond physical output to include social, political and economic processes. Indicators for sanitation, for example, need to look beyond numbers to functioning toilets and water systems, as well as the enrollment of girl children so often excluded because separate latrines are not available for their use.

In the final analysis, the MDGs require most of all an environment of good governance. The basic challenge is to achieve an equitable and just society, in which watsan rights are guaranteed . Our experience is clear that the struggle is a political one which is not confined to any one sector. Rather it demands co operation and collaboration between every movement for a just society. Fifty years after freedom, we in India are still learning the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi's reminder that the earth's resources belong to all in this and future generations.