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Committing to a paradigm shift – a people’s vision for change

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THE WEDC CONFERENCE has taken for its theme the relationship between people and systems for water, sanitation and health. Is there hope that tomorrow’s systems can be those devised by people, for their own needs rather than the needs of distant authorities or distant agendas? All of us are aware that despite many years of concentrated effort, the intensity and extent of problems and suffering through lack of access to safe water, hygiene knowledge and sanitation services continue through most of the world. We have heard many times that 2.4 billion people still do not have any acceptable means of sanitation while 1 billion do not have access to safe drinking water. Despite so many gatherings like this one, and so many declarations, the impact of change is too little and often not sustainable.

The major reason for this seems to be the difficulty we all have in learning from the past. It was this realization that brought many of us in this sector together in Manila at the 4th Global Forum of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council in 1997. Manila led to a decision to go out to communities all over the world and to those with scientific and technical expertise, and to learn from them what needed to be done if this disgrace was finally to come to an end. It was clear that both the financial and technical resources were available. What was lacking was political will.

Vision 21: Towards a paradigm shift

This global effort at learning from the past brought together more than 3000 women and men at local, district, national, regional and global levels. It culminated in Vision 21, which was ratified as the future guideline on “Water for People” by the international community at the World Water Forum in The Hague last year. Vision 21 is all about the relationship between people and the systems that govern the sector. It is based on certain core principles. Of these, a people-centred approach comes first, founded on the human right to basic services. A Framework for Action indicates the immediate steps that can be taken at every level of decision-making, starting from the community and culminating at the global level. At the Collaborative Council’s Fifth Forum in Brazil last year, members came together to develop the Council’s own strategy for moving from Vision to Action. This is the Iguacu Action Plan, through which the Council will concentrate on key sectors of reform and assist its members in their choices of field effort. A particular priority will be the action promotion of community-based approaches to water supply and sanitation.

These efforts will represent the Council’s focus on a basic paradigm shift in governance, power structures and responsibilities. Such a shift requires new and stronger partnerships, including technical partnership with the leadership that many of you represent. Vision 21 reflects the most important single lesson we have learnt from the past. This is that over the years there has been a lack of genuine involvement of communities and households (and therefore of women as prime movers) at every level of decision-making. Drinking water, personal hygiene and sanitation practices are areas of family life managed largely by women. Their neglect leaves little wonder that we remain so far behind. The impact of today’s suffering is most severe on the poor, on women and on children. Any change requires the active engagement of their groups in both decision-making as well as in implementation. We need to move away from the dominant attitude that those with the knowledge and power to provide services are also the ones who must decide the nature and direction of services to be provided.

A key decision at The Hague last year was that each region and country would be encouraged to develop its own Vision and Action Plan, drawing strength from the Vision 21 experience. The first major experiment of this kind took place in my state of Gujarat in western India. With a population of more than 40.8 million, and an area of 196,000kms, Gujarat is bigger than many countries in the world. It also borders the great desert of Thar and has the largest coastline in India. It is a chronically water scarce area, which has just endured 3 long years of drought. Testing the Vision 21 approach in this setting was therefore literally a trial by fire. The test was reinforced by the devastating earthquake in January and its aftermath. The Gujarat experiment brought some 30 stakeholders together, representing authorities, communities, NGOs and research institutions. The outcome was Jal-Disha 2010, which translates as Flow 2010. Drawing together past knowledge and experience in every aspect of water and sanitation technology and governance, Jal-Disha also examined the neglected area of economics and finance for the sector. It reflected key lessons learnt through the long suffering from drought. The mobilization process of Jal-Disha reinforced the guiding principles of human rights, equity and decentralization that are the core principles of Vision 21.

Translating vision into action

During the Jal-Disha process there was a consensus among partners on the need for genuine decentralization. Moving from agreement to practice is now the challenge. Authorities in Gujarat appreciate the priority need for change towards community participation in decision-making and management, both in rural and urban sectors. Beginnings are evident in both policy and institutional reform. Yet achieving real change has not been and will not be easy. Power systems that have come down through many years find it difficult to start where people are, rather than from where current decision-makers think they ought to be. Yet communities have made it clear that they regard prior consultation and active involvement as a non-negotiable pre-requisite for change. Another challenge is to identify local resources and capacities, and then to build these to the level which new responsibilities demand, supplementing what people do for themselves with what others must do to facilitate them. Three years of surviving drought has proved beyond doubt the ability of communities to succeed through their own learning and self-reliance. Despite this demonstration, most projects continue to begin from the top, and to see community action as a supplement, rather than the other way around. There is documented evidence that surviving drought was most successful where communities took charge, through local conservation and water harvesting efforts. Yet the pre-occupation with massive, capital-intensive pipeline schemes continue to dominate, despite all the rhetoric in support of people's participation. This should come as no surprise, because the Vision 21 approach demands a virtual revolution in power sharing. So the question before us is how to mobilize the political will that not only change policies and decisions but which can also transform present institutions into new ones, appropriate to a genuine paradigm shift.

Because many of us here represent long field experience in the administration and provision of water services, let me dwell a little on Gujarat's experience with decentralized rainwater harvesting. There are important lessons here on policies which govern technology and the advocacy of resources.

During these years of drought, numerous communities both in rural and urban areas in Gujarat have demonstrated that they could survive by adopting water harvesting and recharging systems. Other villages were endlessly waiting for irregular tanker supply or pipelines to reach them. Violent conflicts over scarce drinking water have been common in these villages. Where water harvesting and recharging have been practiced, there has been improvement not only in the quantity of water available but also in its quality. There has been an incentive to improve hygiene practices so as to protect water supply and resources. Women have taken charge, empowered by their involvement in decision-making as well as management and maintenance. Disadvantaged communities were able to protect their water source and to establish ownership

over it. There has been a demonstrated sense of water sources as common property, protected by all sections of the community as a joint resource of drinking water. This has provided a major security factor for households and for women. They consciously rejected the official alternative of tankers sent in from afar, or waiting for huge pipelines to reach them. Resources in cash and in kind have been mobilized for building and maintaining tanks and household harvesting structures. None of this has been easy, but it has happened over many social & economic barriers. Despite this demonstration, there is considerable resistance to allowing decentralized activity to find ground and flourish. Communities are told that there is a lack of resources, while they watch huge investments in tanker contracts and long-distance water pipelines. While official expenditure through centralized schemes can be up to Rs. 3000 per capita on water supply (plus a huge amount on maintenance & a very poor rate of recovery), decentralized alternatives have been possible at Rs. 1500 per capita where a community accepts responsibility for management and maintenance factors.

The official demand for standardization is another trap. It reduces the space for large-scale implementation by insisting on a standard set of solutions, rather than permitting the flexibility required by the range of rural and urban needs experienced even in a single state such as Gujarat. For example, a government decision to standardize its support for roof rainwater tanks at 10,000 and 15,000 litres (along with official specifications of design, size and material), excluded a large number of communities from participation. Sanitation programmes insist on one or two alternative latrine designs, while the ground reality demands a whole range of alternatives, beginning with Mahatma Gandhi's injunction almost a century ago to "dig and bury".

The Vision 21 mobilization had another clear learning. This was that there can be no improvement to health unless drinking water supply is preceded and accompanied by hygiene promotion and sanitation services. Yet across the world hygiene and sanitation continue to fall through the cracks, whether it is at central decision-making, field action or at international fora. While drinking water is a politically volatile issue, the promotion of hygiene education and latrines appears of little political consequence. This, despite the quality of these needs for basic cleanliness and human dignity. Again, the reason is that the prime sufferers of neglect are women and children, whose voices are seldom heard. In Gujarat, for example, we find that the major cause of girl children dropping out of schools is that there are no toilets for them. Following the earthquake devastation, and the fear of disease in affected areas, signals sent out for relief and rehabilitation seldom stressed hygiene promotion and sanitation services. Another reality is that hygiene and sanitation do not fit easily into project schedules. Changes required in attitudes and behaviors takes time and patient endeavour. They cannot be evalu-

ated through short-term financial and physical targets. The first attitude that must change therefore is that of decision-makers at the top.

Another realization through Jal-Disha has been the urgent need to improve our experience in tackling the urban context. Mobilizing societal and technical resources in towns and cities is a challenge very different to that in rural areas. The Collaborative Council is therefore encouraging experiments that can strengthen our ability to respond to accelerating urbanization. New partnerships and new institutions are needed that can provide greater flexibility at the operational level. This must include access to financial resources through new banking and micro-finance structures, critically important to promote both sanitation and rain water-harvesting efforts. Technical options must respond to a wide variety of needs and capacities, rather than insist on technologies decided at the top.

Changing roles and responsibilities: perspective and understanding

Putting people at the center clearly demands putting women at the center of decision-making and action. Vision 21 recognizes this with its emphasis on integrating gender into planning and action. The IRC International Water and Sanitation Center facilitated mobilizing a gender network known as the Gender and Water Alliance for mainstreaming the gender perspective. It understands gender as a better partnership and sharing between women and men. If women are the ones most central to change in hygiene, sanitation and safe water, women can be empowered only with the cooperation of men. This requires calls for changes in the roles and responsibilities of women, men, and children from all sections of the society. Therefore a gender sensitive approach must link women, men and children jointly in any mobilization for sustainable change. It seeks enduring partnerships based on examples from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world toward equity in service provision and management. Sensitizing and training decision-makers so that gender issues are internalized is a major requirement. In this, WEDC can assist us. Training systems and tool kits have been devised and gender ambassadors have been appointed in each region to take the message to those who most need to hear it.

Decentralization now brings with it a new threat, when it is interpreted as the withdrawal by governments from traditional responsibilities, now being passed on to civil society in the name of decentralization, without clarity on a new role for governments in financial and technical facilitation.

Vision 21 was the “Water for People” component of the World Water Forum which also included the consideration of water for the needs of agriculture, industry and for ecological sustainability. While the Vision 21 and Jal-Disha experiences underline the demand that drinking water be given the first priority in allocation between sectors, we respect the urgent need to protect the funda-

mental resource, and for a holistic approach to integrated water resource management with an ecological perspective. In this, drinking water efforts must reflect interdisciplinary teamwork of a high order.

Despite all these challenges, the Vision 21 and Jal-Disha efforts have highlighted many opportunities now available for change. Experience and demonstrations are available throughout the world in this period of transition. Networks like the Collaborative Council and WEDC become critically important to the learning and solidarity which we need. Isolated experiments need to come together and be taken to scale. What needs to spread is not projects for replication, but rather principles and learning that we can extend from one center to others so that we stand together on the shoulder of the past and learn from it. The pre-occupation with so-called success stories and the fear to admit failure must end. The barriers to change are real and serious. However we have the strength of demonstrated alternatives and partnerships at every level, of which WEDC is a global example. This is our greatest asset and opportunity for the future.

Code of ethics: An appeal

From what I have shared with you, it should be clear that the essential pre-condition for taking Vision 21 into reality is that of new and better partnerships. There is no honest excuse left for prolonging the sufferings which prevail. We know what has to be done, and we know who has to do it. The resources for action exist. We need to link our hands as well as our heads. A change in thinking must begin within each one of us, and here is a special appeal through this WEDC opportunity. Over many decades major decisions in this sector have reflected the dominating experience and views of technicians. They have had long experience in this sector, but this experience has not included serious engagement with social and political processes. One outcome has been that people’s own experience and their technical knowledge is still little respected. Therefore there is an inevitable gap between projects delivered from above and the reality of experience and aspirations below. A more equal partnership and a more level playing field require a new professionalism from all of us. Ethics for the sector cannot escape the fact that Vision 21 represents and is driven by a value system based on people and their rights. This recognition has led to a Code of Ethics which we believe should be the foundation for professionalism within the sector. It reflects the core principles of Vision 21, and we invite its support and promotion through the partnership of WEDC, the Gender and Water Alliance and the Collaborative Council.

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