

WASH in South Africa

Kate Clement, Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
with inputs from Marie Brisley, Department of Water Affairs and Forestry and
Richard Holden, The Mvula Trust

“WASH in South Africa will be about shining the light on health, hygiene and sanitation as critical factors in stopping the spread of waterborne diseases ...”

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All (WASH) is the slogan of the WASH Campaign of the United Nations mandated Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

The Campaign focuses on simple messages such as the importance of washing hands with soap and water after going to the toilet and before preparing, eating or handling food. These small acts can have a major effect in our lives and are essential to a good, healthy quality of life. It has been estimated that handwashing at the right times can reduce illness and death from waterborne diseases by over 40%.

Good hygiene behaviour and adequate sanitation are critical barriers to the transmission of diseases, which cause thousands of deaths and every year. Some of the solutions to this situation are quite straightforward, and include adequate sanitation and healthy hygiene practices. These are some of the simple yet critical issues that the WASH campaign will focus on in South Africa.

The *White Paper on Water Supply and Sanitation* (1994) emphasised the importance of behaviour change, as well as the provision of infrastructure, as part of good sanitation. However, the provision of sanitation infrastructure and the promotion of good hygienic behaviour did not receive much priority until 2000 / 2001 when cholera broke out in different parts of the country.

Despite good progress by our government in providing millions of people with safe water, the slow progress in sanitation infrastructure delivery and hygiene promotion was a major shortcoming. The South African Government considered this situation to be a violation of dignity and human rights. As a result in September 2001, the *White Paper on Basic Household Sanitation* was finalised, and a commitment made to a programme of accelerated sanitation infrastructure delivery. The emphasis thus far of the sanitation programme had been on the provision of toilets, and in the water programme on the provision of taps.

The launch of the WASH campaign in South African during National Water Week in March 2002 served to remind everyone that the promotion of good hygienic behaviour is an essential element of improved health and standards of living. Without it the full benefit of the provision of water and sanitation infrastructure will not be realised. The government has recognised that a change in this situation requires a focused campaign that provides information to promote empowerment and sustainable development.

The aim of WASH in South Africa is “to improve the environmental health conditions of the people of South Africa and, in particular, to reduce the incidence and transmission of waterborne diseases”. This is no small goal, and is something that cannot be achieved by a single programme of a single department, which is why WASH is designed as a multi-stakeholder partnership.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry recognises that such messages must be sensitive to the situations of people. Promoting handwashing with soap in areas where there is a lack of water and low incomes will promote resentment rather than change, as it is a resource problem, and not a behavioural one.

The Department has established itself as a catalyst to bring together parties with an interest in the aims and objectives of WASH. It has committed resources to a social marketing campaign, and to providing assistance to existing programmes and activities. The next stage of the process is engaging with stakeholders to elicit their support and to set down a rigorous strategy together.

Learning from the Central American Handwashing Initiative and similar initiatives in Ghana and India, WASH in South Africa will engage meaningfully with the private sector in this process. Partnerships with other government departments are also being established; departments such as Health and Education are committed to promoting health and hygiene, and have put various resources and programmes in place to meet this commitment. WASH will not duplicate these efforts, but will create opportunities for them to be strengthened and complemented. Activities will be developed through a process of bringing on board partners and consulting with other stakeholders.

WASH in South Africa will be about shining the light on health, hygiene and sanitation as critical factors in stopping the spread of waterborne diseases, and will complement existing activities and promote key messages through a partnership approach.

For more information contact:

- The National Sanitation Programme, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (phone 012 – 336 6519 / 03)

Resources:

- Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council web site – www.wsscc.org
- Department of Water Affairs and Forestry web site – www.dwaf.gov.za

African Sanitation and Hygiene Conference

29 July to 1 August 2002: Johannesburg (Midrand), South Africa

Conference Statement on Sanitation and Hygiene in Africa

Every hour, a hundred African children die from diarrhoea. Most of these lives can be saved through better access to sanitation and improved basic hygiene; the simple act of washing hands with soap can reduce deaths from diarrhoea by a third! Poor sanitation and hygiene weaken Africans through disease, disrupt the environment, exacerbate poverty through medical cost and lower productivity, and rob the poor and vulnerable of dignity.

At least 300 million (40%) of Africans do not have access to basic sanitation and hygiene; this number has *increased* by 70 million since the year 1990. Those without access are concentrated among the poorest and most vulnerable, and the problem is particularly severe in rapidly growing peri-urban areas. Epidemics, however, do not respect geographical boundaries or social status, so a threat to the most vulnerable is a threat to us all.

Over 150 decision-makers (including eight ministers), sector professionals and activists from over 20 African countries and elsewhere met in Johannesburg from 29 July to 1 August 2002 to launch a major thrust for improved hygiene and sanitation in Africa. Never before have both sector specialists and senior political leaders gathered from across a continent to address this enormous challenge. But while the challenge is great, the opportunity is greater, and must be seized now.

We, the participants of the African Sanitation and Hygiene (African) conference:

- understanding the lessons of successful African programmes in hygiene and sanitation,
- considering the very limited resources and priorities so far accorded to sanitation and hygiene, and
- knowing the vast improvements in health, comfort, dignity, and environmental quality that better sanitation and hygiene can achieve

Therefore urge leaders and decision-makers in all fields to

- **Raise the profile of sanitation and hygiene in all political and developmental processes.** These include: international events such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and the Third World Water Forum in 2003; regional bodies such as the African Union and the African Ministerial Conference on Water; sub-regional and national parliaments and legislatures; and the full range of local government processes. The importance of sanitation and hygiene must also be recognised in national and regional developmental frameworks such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).
- **Develop and strengthen the clear policies and institutional frameworks needed to improve sanitation and hygiene;** as a first step, identify departmental leadership and clarify the responsibilities of the many government departments usually involved in the sector.

- **Develop realistic local , national and global targets for improved sanitation and hygiene;** in particular, support adoption and implementation of a global target of halving the number of people without access to sanitation and hygiene by 2015.
- **Increase the financial and human resources available to achieve these targets, and ensure that adequate resources are also available to monitor progress.**
- **Recognise the leadership of women in sanitation and hygiene.** As caregivers who suffer the consequences of managing health within the family, women have always been quicker than men to appreciate the importance of sanitation and hygiene; they have been at the forefront of efforts to improve them. This does not mean that men can “leave this challenge to women”, but rather that the role of women must be understood, respected, and supported if the challenge is to be met.
- **Make the most of public resources in sanitation and hygiene** by using them only for those items for which households and others cannot or will not pay (for example, hygiene promotion and awareness creation, school sanitation and hygiene). Where subsidies are required, they must be carefully targeted to the most vulnerable.
- **Involve all elements of society in meeting this challenge.** Children, parents, individual households, CBOs, NGOs, and the private sector, (especially small scale providers), have a stake in sanitation and hygiene at least as great as that of the state. Each can contribute much to the solution, given the chance and a clear role to play. National campaigns such as the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Campaign can be one way to initiate such partnerships.
- **Support the implementation and monitoring of the African and Regional Action Plans developed at this Conference by the participants.**

More detailed recommendations, and further supporting information are presented in other conference documentation, including the African and Regional Action Plans.

Adopted by the participants of the African Sanitation and Hygiene Conference.

For more information contact The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (phone 012 – 336 7500).

(1 565 words)