

Speech by Jon Lane, Executive Director,  
Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council,  
at the WEDC Conference, Accra, 11 April 2008

Chair, Minister of State, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this closing plenary session. This is a great honour and I am very pleased to be here – I am just sorry I could not be with you for the whole week.

I have been asked to speak mainly about sanitation rather than water. First I would like to say a few words about WEDC.

WEDC has had an important role in our sector for decades: combining education, research, knowledge management and international networking. The WEDC conferences, such as this one, are well known particularly for enabling colleagues managing field programmes to share their experiences and ideas with each other. I myself derived a lot of benefit from attending two WEDC conferences (in Kuala Lumpur in 1988 and Hyderabad in 1990). Although I have no formal links with it, I think of myself as a friend of WEDC.

I would like to add a special tribute to the late John Pickford, founder of WEDC. He was a very influential figure in the early years of establishing water and sanitation in developing countries as a distinct professional subject. He was especially important in making the study of sanitation respected, along with other pioneers of the subject including Albert Wright (who is here today) and Peter Morgan. He inspired many younger people including me. His hobby was looking down other people's toilets, and every talk would include a barrage of slides of toilets from around the world – this is a hobby that I share, although I will spare you the slideshow today. We honour his memory.

He would want us to do that by talking about sanitation, so I will. First I will give a brief global overview of sanitation, then a description of the International Year of Sanitation, then talk a little about the links between fieldwork and policy in sanitation. I will describe WSSCC's work especially on sanitation, and will end with messages for you about taking sanitation forward in your work.

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Globally, as I am sure you know, about 2.6 billion people lack sanitation. Of these roughly 0.7 billion are in India, 0.7 billion in China, 0.7 billion in Africa and the remainder in other places. Progress in sanitation services is struggling to keep up with population growth, and Africa is lagging most. The largest number of unserved people live in rural areas but the urban population is growing rapidly. Overall this doesn't sound good but I do see hope and positive signs. Among the major trends I see are:

- the recognition of sanitation as distinct from water and hence as an important subject in its own right,
- increased understanding of why people do or don't want sanitation,
- people-centred approaches such as Community-Led Total Sanitation, especially in rural areas,
- much more attention to shared sanitation solutions and facilities, especially in urban areas,

- an emphasis on sustained use of services rather than simply on provision of facilities,
- more emphasis on hygiene especially handwashing,
- promotion of ecological sanitation, which is definitely the goal towards which we should be working in the medium- to long-term future,
- just starting, loan finance mechanisms and social entrepreneurs applying their talents and ideas to sanitation, to complement existing grant finance mechanisms.

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Moving on to the International Year of Sanitation: to explain why it was needed, let me tell you a story.

The Martians have landed. But don't worry, it's not an invasion, just a mother and her kids who have come to visit. It's true that they can see the Great Wall of China from their home so they thought they would come and have a look round our planet. Now they have, and they are resting just here on the hill overlooking us:

*"That big wall was great!"*

*"And those neat bridges joining up all the little islands!"*

*"I liked the little cars and trains."*

*"But they can't even fly, the aeroplanes are much cooler."*

*"Oh, be quiet kids, and give me a rest for a minute."*

*(pause)*

*"Mum, which species is it that has done all these neat things?"*

*"Well, you see the ones walking on two legs, with the fancy clothes, looking pleased with themselves. It's them. They think they know it all."*

*"Oh good, so can I go down and talk to them about galactiball and how to dematerialise better?"*

*"No dear, they're not that clever. But you can talk with them, they can't do you any harm. Just watch out for one odd thing about them."*

*"What's that, Mum?"*

*"They kill each other."*

*"Yuk, that's awful! Why do they do that?"*

*"I don't know why, but I do know how. Some of them use guns and bombs, which is terrible. But many more kill each other in a very odd way."*

*"How, Mum?"*

*"Well, I've been watching them. They put stuff called food in at the top, and stuff called shit comes out at the bottom."*

*"How odd, what's in the stuff called shit?"*

*"It is all the waste that their primitive bodies can't cope with, and it also contains millions of little things called germs that kill other people. So they leave this stuff lying around on the ground and other people – mainly kids, I'm sorry to tell you – get it all over their feet and hands, food and water, and so it kills them."*

*"Mum, you're pulling my antenna!"*

*"No, it's true."*

*"Yuk, this is all disgusting. I don't think I want to talk with them after all. Can we just go home now?"*

That is why we need an International Year of Sanitation, because we live in a dysfunctional world. It's a world of two halves: half have good sanitation, half don't even have basic sanitation.

The International Year of Sanitation was devised by the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. It is essentially a political activity, to raise awareness about sanitation and to raise new resources (of people, ideas, money) for the subject. This is our big chance – we have one year to raise the profile of sanitation up a level, so it won't go back down again.

I believe it is working. The general direction of the year is being managed overall by the UN-Water Task Force on Sanitation, which is a small group of which I happen to be a member. We are urging all our colleagues to throw our energy into advocacy, with five key messages for us all to use:

1. Sanitation improves health. (This is the argument typically used by sector professionals. A notable recent example is the finding of the Disease Control Priority Project that hygiene promotion to prevent diarrhoea is the most cost-effective health intervention in the world.)
2. Sanitation generates economic development. (This argument appeals most to decision-makers such as heads of government and ministers of finance, and is mainly based on the value of time saved by not being ill. The headline figure is that one dollar invested in sanitation generates economic benefit valued at nine dollars.)
3. Sanitation promotes social development. (This is the argument that people themselves actually use, mainly thinking of privacy, dignity, safety, convenience and status.)
4. Sanitation helps the environment. (This is a neglected argument, with two main aspects of preventing pollution of water sources, and re-use of excreta for agriculture.)
5. Sanitation for all is achievable. (This is the rallying-cry of the Year. I will return to it in a moment.)

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There are strong links between field work and policy: sound policy comes from good fieldwork, and policy in turn directs fieldwork. This link applies particularly to sanitation

because it is both a public good and a private good. Households improve their sanitation and everybody else benefits.

Meetings such as this help to bring the good innovative field work to other people's attention. For example if you listen to major agencies such as the World Bank talk about sanitation now, the points they make are those that the NGOs were saying ten years ago. Policy-makers and media really do listen to people who know what they are talking about, i.e. people with field experience. This is what advocacy is all about.

There are plenty of links between policy and field work in the three places with the most people lacking sanitation. In China the government is improving sanitation in the inland rural West to reduce migration to the big cities of the East; farmers are moving from using fresh human shit as fertiliser to composting it first; biogas generation from human shit is spreading widely. In India the government has moved its emphasis from implementing to enabling others to do so; Community-Led Total Sanitation is evolving from a shame-based to output-based concept; there are plenty of good innovations coming from civil society. In Africa, ministers across the continent are starting to take responsibility for sanitation, to allocate budgets for it, and to develop national sanitation policies; there are many good sanitation projects in different countries and increasing connections between them.

Scaling-up is a prime example of the link between field work and policy: everybody talks about it, but what does it mean? To some people it means replicating a successful type of work in many different places, to others it means doing work at a large scale that simply can't happen at a small scale, for example mass media campaigns. Both types of scaling-up work better with a demand-driven approach to sanitation than a supply-driven one because many people can improve their sanitation at the same time, rather than one after another.

I feel there is a danger of too much introspective analysis and criticism within the sanitation sector. (This is well-described in the January 2008 edition of *Waterlines* and in *The Last Taboo* by Black and Fawcett.) Internal arguments among sanitation specialists is divisive and weakens our influence on policy-makers. That in turn reminds us of the purpose of the International Year of Sanitation, to communicate concerted clear messages to others. In doing so, we should not let the best be the enemy of the good.

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Turning to WSSCC, it has recovered from a low point in 2006 and is now growing rapidly. It has adopted an overall strategy to concentrate on sanitation, because most other agencies concentrate on water more than on sanitation whereas the work to be done in sanitation is much greater. It works in three complementary areas.

First, WSSCC is continuing its twenty-year activity in networking and knowledge management. This includes national networking in over 30 countries and thematic working groups on various topics. It is strengthening its strategic cooperation with other organisations including WEDC and several others that are here today.

Secondly, WSSCC is expanding its advocacy and communications work especially on sanitation. It has recently updated the WASH campaign materials, which are available for all to use. It is working on behalf of UN-Water to produce a range of advocacy materials

for the International Year of Sanitation, to promote the key messages that I described earlier.

Thirdly WSSCC is starting a new activity, a financing mechanism entitled the Global Sanitation Fund. This is the world's first fund specifically for sanitation and hygiene. It uses the professional understanding that WSSCC has gained over many years to disburse money for hygiene promotion, social marketing of sanitation, raising the priority that people give to sanitation, and hence creating demand for improved hygiene and sanitation. It is not supporting subsidy-led supply-driven construction programmes. The Global Sanitation Fund is not a new organisation or a parallel system. In each country, under the guidance of the government and in accordance with the national sanitation policy, the major stakeholders in sanitation jointly decide the scope of work for the Global Sanitation Fund to support in that country. Then a WHO tender process selects one Executing Agency per country that gives subgrants to the organisations with demonstrable track records to implement that work. The Global Sanitation Fund was launched on 14 March 2008 and to date has over \$50 million in committed funding, with an aspiration to grow to around \$100 million per year soon. In future it may link semi-formally to loan mechanisms also.

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To conclude: you, especially the younger people here, are the key to success in water and sanitation, the John Pickfords and Albert Wrights of the future. I know we have a big task ahead of us to achieve sanitation for everybody. But I believe we can do it, and this is how. I have four points:

First, hard work. Doing sanitation well is difficult, combining social sciences, political, institutional and technical work. It is slow steady work, house by house, community by community. There is no substitute for hard work.

Secondly, plain speaking. We must speak out about the subject using plain language that everybody can understand. This will bring sanitation and toilets and shit into regular professional and policy dialogue.

Thirdly, strong leadership. A good example is the leadership by the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. Another example is the 32 Ministers from countries across Africa who gathered recently at the AfricaSan conference and made strong political commitments.

Fourthly, creating demand. Successful sanitation is led by hygiene promotion, demand creation and raising sanitation up people's own priorities, not by centralised supply-driven programmes building subsidised toilets that people do not want.

Ladies and gentlemen, as our WASH campaign says, 2.6 billion people want to use the toilet. We must not fail them. When those Martian kids ask you what you did to help other people's sanitation, what will you say?