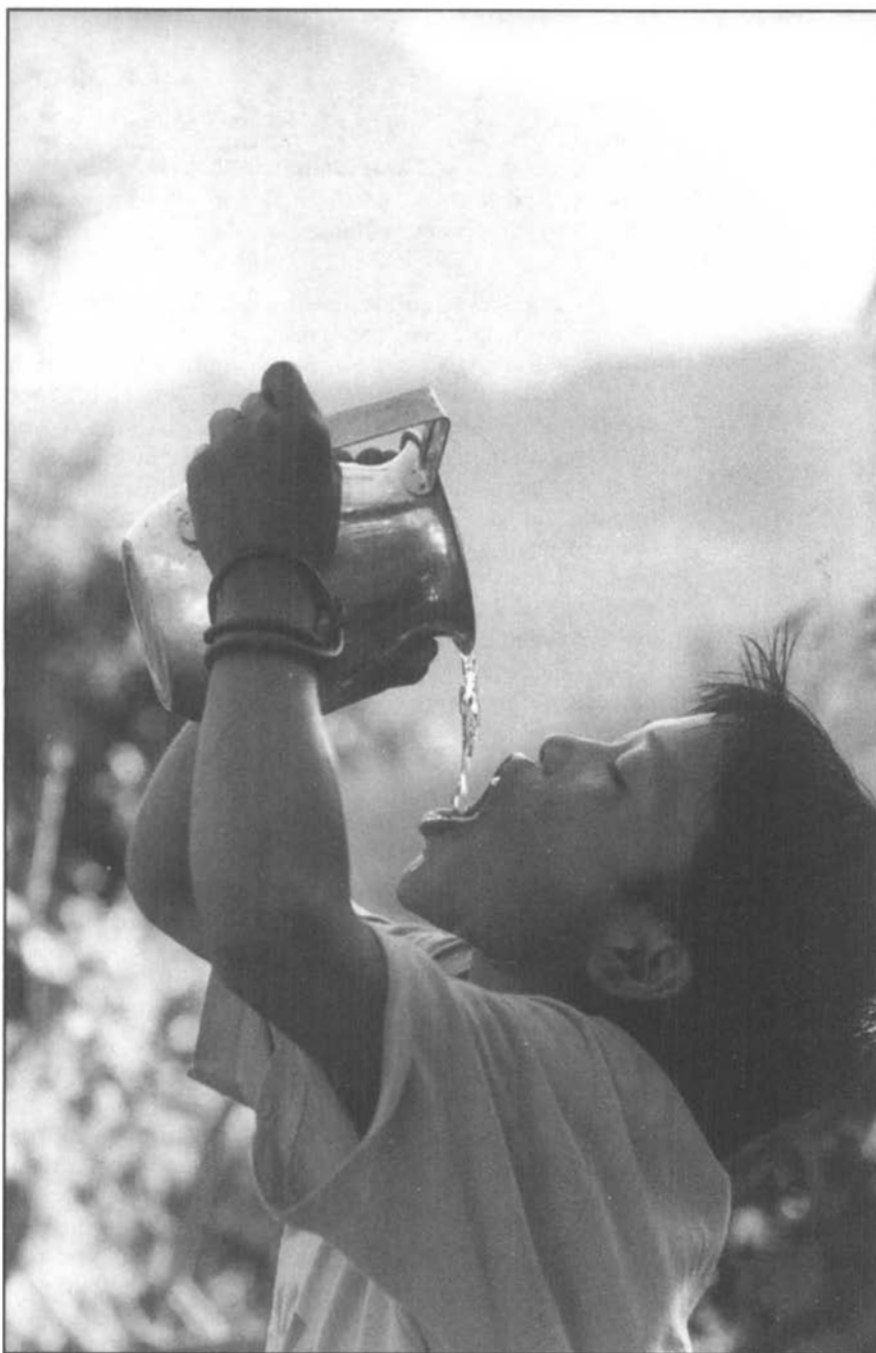


Six years on — what happened to the Dublin principles?

by Jon Lane and Julie Jarman

In 1992, Dublin was the setting for the International Conference on Water and the Environment. Attended by the great and the good from governments and major agencies, the Conference issued a statement which neatly encapsulates the principles and policies which guide the W&S sector. But are these principles being implemented effectively — or are they nothing more than Irish mist?



Water Aid/Caroline Penn

Ek Bahadur Ale, aged 14, drinks water in Satu Pasal, Nepal.

THE DUBLIN STATEMENT incorporates four key principles:

- *fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment;*
- *water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policymakers at all levels;*
- *women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water;* and
- *water has an economic value in all its competing uses, and should be recognized as an economic good.*

If we take these four statements in turn, what progress been made in terms of implementation?

- *Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment.*

There has been an obvious increase in the level of awareness of this question at the global level— and this is to be welcomed. Water received considerable attention at Rio II in April 1997, and will be high on the agenda again at the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1998, when a global fresh-water initiative will be launched.

As both a cause and an effect of this raised awareness, new international bodies have been created. The World Water Council was set up in 1995 to identify critical water issues, provide a forum for debate and promote solutions, and later in the same year the Global Water Partnership was established both to support integrated water-resources management by governments in developing countries, and to propose practical policies and good practice.

But despite this dramatic rise in awareness of the importance of fresh water, and of the need for integrated water management, it is difficult to find good examples of successful policy implementation in developing countries. This gap between policy and implementation can be accounted for in a number of ways:

- the effective management of water resources is often held back because this tends to be a weak and poorly resourced arm of government;
- fragmentation is a major problem: various ministries set policy, and various departments do the work, but communication is often poor;
- different ministries are often responsible for different services, for example, drinking-water, irrigation, and hydro-



WaterAid/Jim Holmes

Golabaia Village, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Hironbala Sheel — the handpump caretaker — in action.

power. Integrated solutions are, therefore, elusive; in any case, irrigation often receives top priority: its links with commercial agriculture secure it the backing of powerful forces, whereas drinking-water and, in particular, sanitation, lack powerful champions.

● *Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policymakers at all levels.*

The gap between policy and implementation is being bridged in a number of cases — and there are good examples of the participatory approach where projects and programmes engage users, planners and policymakers. But there is no room for complacency.

WaterAid has identified a number of constraints which can retard the development of participatory approaches:

- it is always difficult to reach the people in greatest need. The poorest will be the most marginalized, and the elderly, those with disabilities, and the sick are less likely to attend meetings or be actively involved in a project;
- it takes time, effort, skill, and commitment on the part of policymakers and fieldworkers to reach out to and engage all members of a community. NGOs have invested, and should continue to invest heavily to build up the capacity of their partners to do this more effectively;

- organizations responsible for implementation need sufficient resources to consult in detail with communities before drawing up project proposals — this demands a flexible approach to funding;

- communities are not homogenous: different people have different priorities, so consensus may be hard to reach;

- inter-sectoral collaboration is often problematic: it can be hard to break down traditional barriers between professions and departments. Entrenched approaches need to be abandoned and, perhaps, this can be best brought about by a move away from the meeting-room into the field; and

- participation needs to be recognized at all levels, otherwise the decisions made by an active community may well be frustrated by bureaucratic decision-making at another level in the system.

Solutions to such constraints can be found. We acknowledge that the participatory principle is better suited to small-scale projects than to major urban areas, where a strong regulatory framework can be an effective surrogate. City or national authorities with a democratic mandate can act on behalf of the wider community, setting socially desirable goals and demanding compliance from contractors and suppliers. In turn, the community can pass judgement on the authority's performance through the ballot box. In all cases,

participation is without doubt an inherently political question, presenting all the dilemmas and difficulties that are involved in the political process.

- *Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.*

The need to involve women in decision-making and in the management of water resources is increasingly acknowledged in policy statements, but the move from rhetoric to action is more difficult. Progress in the implementation of this policy is patchy and much remains to be done.*

Like other sector NGOs, WaterAid seeks to ensure that women play a central role in all of its projects, and with some success, but experience also shows how difficult it is to overcome the constraints which include:

- women already have huge demands on their time and, although a water project can reduce the time spent collecting water, the management of a project adds to their workload;
- when women are involved they tend to take the more time-consuming, less prestigious roles on water committees, which are often chaired by men. Women-only committees can work in some contexts, but in other situations it is just as important to ensure that the work generated in implementing and managing a project is equitably shared

between men and women; and

● in WaterAid's experience, the decision-making stage of a project is the most critical, and the participation of women at this point is often held back because traditional decision-making structures do not allow for this.

We have already suggested that the participatory approach is easier to apply in small-scale projects. The same can be said for the involvement of women. The centres of power and decision-making in all cultures tend to exclude women and be dominated by men, and the participation of women is, therefore, often defined and controlled by men. There is no reason to suppose that the situation is any different in our own sector. Equally, where women are involved in, and empowered by, a water and sanitation project, this can have a positive impact in other areas of their lives.

● *Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good.*

The assertion of the economic value of water has significant policy implications and, whilst the consensus is clearly shifting, this notion remains extremely controversial. For example, many national governments no longer aim to provide a free water service, but levy charges. The World Bank opposes subsidies and supports charges at cost price. Also high on the current agenda is the question of the privatization of the water sector in developing countries. This is, again, the preferred option of the World Bank, although many national governments remain unconvinced.

The questions that flow from the implementation of such policies are difficult to answer. Are they likely to leave the poorest people better or worse off? Does the concentration on the economic value of water overshadow the equally important idea that water is also a social good?

Sector NGOs are committed to working with partner organizations to bring safe water, sanitation and hygiene

education to the poorest communities in both rural and urban areas. Central to this approach is that communities, or occasionally individuals and families, should take responsibility for financing the operation and maintenance of their water projects. The contribution they make to the initial capital costs varies from minimal to 100 per cent. In this way, projects are based on an understanding that water has an economic value, but that the assets are best owned and managed by the community, for its benefit, and should not be in the private sector.

There are also many people in the water sector whose commitment to a public-service ethos, or to the traditional idea that water is a common property, may render them reluctant to implement the policy of privatization.

Mind the gap — a summary

The process by which policy is implemented is neither fixed nor clear. There is an assumption that there is a 'trickle down' effect: in other words, policy-makers make decisions at the top and these then filter down through the system to be implemented by practitioners on the ground. But, of course, those responsible for implementing policy are at a distance from its initiation, they are unlikely to feel any sense of ownership of the policy, or may disagree with it entirely. They often have considerable leeway in implementation, particularly in countries where communication is difficult.

We have already suggested that some of the most important policies for our sector are not being effectively implemented in practice. We have discussed some of the more obvious constraints, but we have also suggested that the water sector faces the same barriers to the implementation of policy as faced by the providers of many other services.

One solution may be to address more seriously the question of grassroots involvement in policy formation. Where practitioners are consulted they can contribute views and experiences from the field and act as a conduit for community views. In this way, practitioners are far more likely to have a sense of policy ownership and, therefore, be more committed to their implementation.

Jon Lane is Director and Julie Jarman is Advocacy Manager at WaterAid. Both can be contacted at WaterAid, Prince Consort House, 27-29 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7UB, UK. Tel: +44 171 793 4500. Fax: +44 171 793 4545. E-mail: wateraid@compuserve.com

* In recognition of this, the July 1998 issue of *Waterlines* examines how far women and women's issues have progressed in the W&S sector.



WaterAid/Caroline Penn

Kullumpatti, Tamil Nadu. Nagarathinan (left) and Sirumbayer (right) — pump caretakers — carry out routine maintenance.