Sixth Annual Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Forum, 7th April 2011

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) experts gathered at a recent forum to debate the key research needs and evidence for the critical importance of WASH in development – from food security to education, and from nutrition to gender equality – and the challenges and benefits of private sector involvement.

The Minister of State for International Development Alan Duncan MP gave the keynote address at the Sixth Annual Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Forum, held at ODI on 7th April 2011. The event, organised by DfID-funded research consortia RiPPLE and SHARE, brought together key actors in the UK to present findings, review progress, share experiences and outline the challenges ahead.

Session 1: DfID support for water, sanitation and hygiene

Keynote address: Alan Duncan MP
Chair: Andrew Norton (ODI)
Comments: Sandy Cairncross (SHARE/ LSHTM), Roger Calow (ODI)

In his keynote address, Alan Duncan MP detailed the commitment of the Department for International Development (DfID) to ambitious aims over the next four years, including making sure:

- 15 million more people have access to clean drinking water
- 25 million more people have access to improved sanitation facilities
- 15 million more people are reached by hygiene promotion

He also underlined the importance of designing more accessible services for women and girls, disabled people and hard-to-reach communities. The Minister encouraged feedback on DfID’s policy and identified six key areas for further research:

- More evidence of what works at scale
- Greater certainty on the unit costs of interventions
- How to improve sustainability and maintenance of existing services
- How to reach the poorest and the most vulnerable
- How to leverage the role of the private sector
- The most cost-effective ways in which to mitigate against climate uncertainty and water insecurity

Professor Sandy Cairncross welcomed the speech as further evidence of DfID’s commitment to sanitation, for which it had provided more funding than any other donor in recent years. Roger Calow emphasised the centrality of WASH services and their impact on other sectors, including health and nutrition, food security, education and resilience to climate change. He said sustainable solutions remain a “big challenge” and called for better monitoring and evaluation to strengthen the evidence-base.

Session 2: From evidence to impact: new directions in research and evaluation

Speakers: David Woolnough (DfID), Sandy Cairncross
Chair: Jonathan Glennie, ODI
Discussants: Tom Slaymaker (WaterAid), Nigel Wright (University of Leeds)
David Woolnough, Senior Energy and Water Adviser, explained DfID’s increasing focus on results, evidence and costs to justify interventions, explaining that DfID’s spending is being monitored by an Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI). He made a reference to DfID’s willingness to take more risks and to encourage work with the private sector. Despite the growing emphasis on results, Woolnough also acknowledged that the benefits of some of the most successful programmes have not been immediately measurable, and explained that these kinds of programmes will continue to receive DfID’s support.

Professor Sandy Cairncross assessed the relative merits and limitations of different types of evidence, including randomised controlled trials and systematic reviews. He underlined how adequate water supply and sanitation have many advantages beyond the health sector, including female empowerment, saving time for economic activities and education. The importance of market research was highlighted to ensure that every latrine is wanted and used.

Comments from the panel highlighted the challenges of constructing the compelling story. It was suggested that research and evidence is available, but that access to WASH services, particularly in urban areas, is closely related to land, housing and other non-water issues, and political failures. It was argued that there is a danger in restricting research to aspects and projects that are easy to measure, and members of the audience recognised that it is difficult to find a balance between cost-effective approaches and reaching the most vulnerable groups and individuals. A long-term perspective is needed to really understand and demonstrate what works. Maintenance of systems and participatory mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation were highlighted as a key issue, relating to stakeholder involvement. It was also argued that it is important not to get stuck in the sector and recognise how access to WASH impacts other development issues (such as educational attendance).

Session 3: Extending and sustaining access to WASH: looking behind the headlines

Speakers: Dominick de Waal (WSP), Alan MacDonald (BGS)

Chair: Roger Calow (ODI)

Discussants: Martin Mulenga (IIED), Sanjay Wijesekera (DfID), Sally Sutton (SWL Consultants)

Dominick de Waal outlined the regional disparities in WASH services across sub-Saharan Africa, not only in outcomes (coverage), but also in terms of the institutional functions for delivering those services. He presented the findings from 32 sub-Saharan African countries as part of the second round of Country Status Overviews prepared for the African Ministers’ Council on Water (AMCOW). The results deviate from the global trend for access to water and sanitation to increase with GDP. This unclear relationship between water and GDP in Africa implies that other factors, such as political commitment and public interventions, do make a difference. De Waal observed that low-income stable countries – recipients of the lion’s share of $25 billion in aid in recent decades – have made more progress than resource rich countries, in terms of both coverage and reform. He also attributed this to their having participated, for longer, in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper process, with its accompanying technical support (e.g. procurement, civil service reform).

Dr Alan MacDonald shared his findings from a 12-month project looking at the resilience of groundwater resources in Africa to climate change. Groundwater supports water supply across much of the continent, and in rural areas in particular, groundwater development remains the only cost-effective way of meeting dispersed demand. Despite its importance, little is known about groundwater conditions and sustainability in relation to changes in recharge from rainfall and changes in demand. Preliminary findings from the project, based on innovative water dating techniques, suggest that even shallow groundwater systems have significant storage, providing a buffer against climate variability and climate change. However, while storage may be sufficient to support domestic supply from community wells and boreholes, developing groundwater for irrigation needs to be carefully managed to ensure sustainability. The findings suggest that groundwater
access, rather than absolute water availability, is the key constraint to achieving the MDGs across much of sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr Martin Mulenga highlighted the importance of urban poverty issues and urged donors to work more closely with organisations on the ground. Sally Sutton, of SWL Consultants, called for more research to understand the market and explore the role of the private sector and how to trigger such investment.

Session 4: Links between WASH, childhood nutrition, and food security
Speakers: Oliver Cumming (SHARE), Eva Ludi (ODI), Bruce Lankford (UEA)
Chair: Anna Taylor (DfID)
Discussants: Lyla Mehta (IDS), Rob Hope (Oxford University)

Oliver Cumming outlined links between WASH provision and nutrition. Researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine are conducting a systematic review on these connections as part of SHARE-funded research, aiming to build the case for the impact of WASH on nutritional status through multiple causal pathways.

Eva Ludi shared some of the experiences of the RiPPLE programme in Ethiopia, with a special focus on climate change and food security. She outlined the micro- and macro level linkages between water availability and access and food security, particularly in rural areas. She demonstrated the impacts of climate change on livelihoods as well as how wealth affects water use and livelihoods during different seasons.

Bruce Lankford talked about water and irrigation in sub-Saharan Africa, expressing his concerns in relation to irrigation investment and expansion plans in the region. He outlined the risks and challenges particularly in relation to allocations for urban and domestic water and sanitation, and the environment.

The panel and participants discussed the importance of political economy approaches and the usefulness of both macro and micro level studies, to understand why certain pathways are not taken, or why people invest in certain things and not in others. It was suggested that there is a need to focus on the “bigger players”, such as the financiers and investors, and how to engage them. The emerging issue of land and water grabbing was raised, followed by a call for more weight on the impact of innovation and new technologies. Panellists agreed that linkages between food, health and water go beyond donors and projects. The session chair Anna Taylor (DfID’s Senior Nutrition Adviser) concluded that forums such as this provide a tremendous opportunity to work more effectively across WASH and nutrition, offering real potential for mutual gains.

Summary:
The key themes addressed during the day can be summarised as:

- Sustainability of systems and maintenance – not every latrine is necessarily used
- Private sector involvement – understanding and benefitting from incentives, markets and investments
- “What makes sense?” Maintaining the quality of research in the face of increasing demand for measurable outcomes.
- Ongoing emphasis on fragile states and the most vulnerable people (women and girls in particular)
- Need for a wider political economy approach: putting access in the context of non-water sector issues and political structures alongside a need to consider the provenance and reliability of data (potential discrepancies between research findings and government figures)
- Links between WASH, nutrition, and education: how access to WASH impacts on other development issues
- Monitoring and evaluation at a local level - question of ownership

Reporting by Guy Collender (SHARE) and Anu Liisanantti (ODI)