



# A voice in policy and practice: advocacy in the water and sanitation sector

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**It is now time for all watsan NGOs to put aside their fears and become fully involved in the development of advocacy work. Ignoring it is a luxury that can no longer be afforded.**

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**A**head of steam is building up. NGOs in the water and sanitation sector are increasingly being called upon to engage in advocacy work beyond their immediate project concerns. The conditions for responding to this call are favourable.

Several international conferences have called for a people's movement on freshwater issues. The 1998 Commission on Sustainable Development's Freshwater Agreement and the recent Second World Water Forum and Ministerial Conference Declaration for water security for the 21st century, amongst others, both recognise that political will of both governments and peoples have to be mobilised in order to address basic water and sanitation needs. The political and economic nature of the problems are clearer to governments, donors and professionals in the sector, in part as a result of the two-year attention focused on freshwater issues that the process for developing a global vision for water security in this century engendered. In different countries, national and sub-national level networks on water and sanitation, as well as on broad freshwater issues are being formed by NGOs and other civil society actors in response to needs for information sharing and presenting a common voice in policy discussions on freshwater issues. And at the Second World Water Forum, NGOs in the watsan sector have had the opportunity to share views and link up with those working separately on environment, trade, development, and food security issues, further opening up possibilities for joint advocacy work on watsan issues as well as improving understanding and skills in advocacy work at the international level.

At the core of these calls for increased advocacy work is the size of the water and sanitation challenge. In spite of huge

numbers gaining access to safe and adequate water and sanitation, the fact remains that at the start of the new millennium, nearly half the world's population live in squalid conditions for lack of adequate sanitation, and amongst them, more than a billion are still without access to adequate and safe water for domestic needs.

The immediate tasks, as agreed at the Hague Forum, include the building of public consensus and development of national and sub-national level frameworks for action, targets and standards to achieve water security. These frameworks need to be guided by principles of integrated water resource management, and have at their core the achievement of the fundamental right to water and sanitation for all, poverty eradication and sustainable development. It remains to be seen whether watsan NGOs, working with broader civil society, can rise up to the challenge and respond to these calls for increased advocacy.

## Understanding advocacy

A common definition of advocacy work is that it is a set of planned activities to effect changes in public policy, programme, practice or behaviour by those in positions of power and authority over a particular issue. These usually mean government (national and sub-national) and global agencies. Increasingly, the corporate sector is becoming a target for advocacy work, not just by environment groups.

Apart from policy changes, research by the Institute for Development Research also identify three other dimensions of advocacy work. These include the strengthening and expanding of civil society's capacity, organisation and clout

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or power; increasing democratic space including expansion of participation and political legitimacy of civil society as well as accountability and transparency of public institutions; and improving the situation and opportunities of individuals and increasing their self-awareness as citizens with rights and responsibilities.

Within and outside the watsan sector, there are many examples of NGO advocacy work demonstrating that success in this work relies on a good balance between 'oppositional' advocacy (highlighting differences, working to stop implementation of poor or bad policies and programmes) and 'engagement' advocacy (constructing alternatives to perceived negative policies, calling for adoption of positive policies, programmes, principles, etc.).

## Challenges to watsan NGOs

Some NGOs in the water and sanitation sector are uncomfortable with the concept of advocacy work. They claim it politicises basic service provision and would put them in direct conflict with government – a necessary ally in getting water and sanitation services to people. Others, though still grappling with the idea of advocacy work are nevertheless convinced of its need, but are less sure where and how to start. For others still, the challenge is one of organisational focus and size: how can small project-based NGOs working in a few villages be involved in national advocacy work?

It is important that there is recognition that basic services – who gets it, who doesn't and why – is essentially an issue of political economy. Politically unpowerful sections of society who are mostly the poor are also often those who are denied basic services that should normally be guaranteed by the state. Many government officials would also confess to the political constraints posed by economically powerful 'lobbies' that result in the inability to stop practices which degrade freshwater resources and reduce domestic water supply, often in spite of the existence of good policies. It is no accident that much of what is generally considered good practice in watsan service provision starts with the mobilisation of communities and the creation of structures of community power – whether these are women's self-help groups or the

many variations of the watsan committees – to gain access to water.

Advocacy work acknowledges and does not deny the political nature of water and sanitation issues. On the contrary, critical collaboration with government is necessary to strengthen the political will to guarantee basic services, to develop necessary legislation, programmes and institutions and commit resources to activate these guarantees, and to ensure that provision follows standards of generally accepted good practice. Criticism or opposition and collaboration are both needed.

Can small, village-based and project-focused NGOs be engaged in national and international level advocacy work? The quick answer is yes. Many of these NGOs, who also face the most difficult of local circumstances, are already involved in advocacy work. Their experiences range from village women forming a human barricade around visiting district-level politicians and officials to secure promises and actions on water supply in India, to village leaders forming delegations to village and district governments in Ethiopia to press for permission to start water supply projects. The experiences of these NGOs provide the platform for national and international level advocacy of alternatives to costly and inefficient programmes and projects often favoured by politicians, government officials and donor agencies. Their strong bonds with communities are assets for national level campaigning around water and sanitation issues. Links between village-based NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs), national and international NGOs need to be forged to build the sector's



Jeremy Hartley/Paros Pictures

Value for society – men of Mewell village, Senegal, discuss monetary contribution for digging a well for the village and how it will continue to be organised.

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Villagers in Maharashtra, India, overlook a recently flooded reservoir which submerged acres of valuable farmland without providing them any more irrigation water (they are upstream) – no compensation was paid.

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capacity for effective advocacy work.

Strengthening individual organisational capacity to undertake advocacy work confidently at national, sub-national and international levels also need to be addressed. In many cases, this would require watsan NGOs to commit and dedicate resources of time, personnel and finance to this area of work. Skills in documentation, social analysis and communications will need to be enhanced. Relationships based on sharing information and learning with other NGOs and civil society actors working on other aspects of freshwater issues will need to be built, through participating in sectoral networks, or geographic and issue-based alliances. And an organisational culture that values learning will have to be developed. This challenge to improve advocacy capacity becomes more acute as NGOs are also being courted by donor and government agencies to become relatively cheap contractors of water supply and sanitation services.

### **Current trends in watsan NGO advocacy**

WaterAid is currently undertaking a base line study of the current advocacy activities, capacities, needs and issues addressed by NGOs in the water and sanitation sector, focusing on 12 countries in Africa and Asia where it works with local NGOs. Initial findings based on interviews with key informants in Uganda,

Ghana, India, Ethiopia give an encouraging picture in terms of the potential for developing strong national and international NGO advocacy work in the watsan sector.

Most NGOs in the sector engage in advocacy work, though this work is mostly carried out in response to immediate issues faced in project work (as a precondition for projects to begin at all, as in getting permission from a reluctant village government to start work in their area). Most advocacy work addresses lower levels of

government (though increasingly focusing on district agencies and officials) which are responsible not for national policy decision-making and resource allocation, but for policy implementation.

### **Exploring the potential**

Advocacy work vis-à-vis bilateral and multilateral donors for water and sanitation at country, region or international levels (i.e. in the countries of the North where these agencies have their headquarters) is at a very early stage, mostly focusing on getting NGOs accepted as legitimate policy actors who have their own inputs to make. Much NGO advocacy work is also focused on changing practices or improving programmes, i.e. calling on government agencies to use participatory approaches, or for integrating hygiene promotion activities and sanitation promotion within water supply projects. In the context of the World Water Forum, an agenda for NGO Advocacy work would include engaging with national governments to develop Frameworks for Action and agree national goals or targets for watsan services. There is also a need to increase the public's understanding and commitment to Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). People's participation in IWRM decision-making needs to be developed. Watsan NGOs would have to work closely with other civil society organisations in the environment and food security sectors to build people's capacities for IWRM.

# Vision 21

In some African and Asian countries, national-level coordinating bodies or networks of NGOs working in water and sanitation have been formed recently. In part, these networks are born of the challenges faced by watsan NGOs to take a seat at the national policy-making table. They are also responses from government and donor agency calls for better liaison and communication with the NGO sector. These networks act as forums for sharing experiences and advocating good practice amongst member NGOs primarily. They also have the potential to develop as forums for sharing information and analysis of water and sanitation policies and for jointly planning and undertaking advocacy campaigns.

There are national level information and resource centres in the watsan sector in some countries in Africa and Asia that could perform a catalyst role for increased NGO advocacy work in their countries and regions. Originally set up to build capacity of water and sanitation agencies to implement projects, these resource centres could assist in building NGO advocacy capacity through providing assistance with information gathering and dissemination and knowledge generation. These centres have now formed an international coalition called Streams of Knowledge or simply, Stream, which was formally launched at the Second World Water Forum.

## A global network?

Regional and international networks are also being formed, specifically in relation to work around Vision 21 and to link watsan sector NGOs with other NGOs concerned with freshwater issues and with the broader concerns of private sector involvement in urban water and sewerage services. At the Hague Forum, NGO inputs into the Ministerial Declaration were co-ordinated by an NGO advisory committee co-chaired by World Wide Fund for Nature-International and Centre for Science and Environment of India. The advisory committee composed of environment, development and watsan NGOs will continue to focus NGO preparations for the Earth Summit in 2002 as well as work with the Commission on Sustainable Development. At the NGO workshop on advocacy hosted by WaterAid during the Forum, participants agreed to continue to work together on

advocacy-oriented research on water policies and practice, capacity-building for advocacy work, and planning advocacy actions in future. Responses to a questionnaire in preparation for this workshop also showed considerable interest for international networking on water and sanitation policy issues.

## Eyes on the prize

There is much at stake in this whole process of building up watsan NGO activity in advocacy work. Experiences of NGOs and other civil society organisations in advocacy work to reduce developing country debt, for fairer trade and investment rules, food security and a host of environmental issues all point to a bigger prize to be gained by all. This is the global vision of a fairer world, a more sustainable world for our children, a clean and healthy world where every person has safe and adequate water and sanitation and lives in a hygienic environment.

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