

A healthy debate



Encouraging debate and collaborative action by all those engaged in the Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion Sector

A discussion paper around sanitation and hygiene promotion, focusing on a WSSHP project in Tigray, Ethiopia – 2005

Main acronyms used:

WATSAN – water and sanitation

WSSHP – water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion

NGO – non-governmental organisation

A healthy future?

Access to sufficient safe water and to adequate sanitation and hygiene education for people in Ethiopia is a matter of great - and urgent - importance. Living in one of the world's poorest countries, the Ethiopian population are also amongst the worst off in terms of water and sanitation. With estimates of only 24% having access to safe water and 12% to adequate sanitation (Human Development Report, 2004), water-related diseases are rife and child mortality is high. The extremely limited nature of the health service available compounds the severity of the situation.

The challenge facing all those working in the WATSAN sector in Ethiopia is vast. Yet progress is being made, particularly in improving access to water. There is widespread agreement that water supply has to be delivered in conjunction with appropriate community capacity building - to enable people to manage their supply in a way that is sustainable and equitable. However the sector has often struggled to give equal emphasis to sanitation provision and hygiene promotion. In many cases this is evident in the slow rate of building appropriately designed latrines, but a wider issue is the challenge to ensure proper use of any latrine built, and to facilitate the type of education that can create a radical attitudinal shift in the population as regards water and hygienic practices. After all, it is only when people change their attitude that they work to maintain their water supply and to protect the health and wellbeing of their community.

For some time now WaterAid Ethiopia (WAE) has joined others in highlighting the importance of instigating sanitation and hygiene promotion work from the very start of a project: stating that these components must be fully integrated with all water-related activities and that they may require far greater investment of time, money and energy than has been provided to date. This stance is the result of years of working with partner organisations, of learning from difficulties and successes, and attempts to encourage improved sanitation and hygiene in every case.

Making it happen

With this general sanitation/hygiene scenario, the year 2005 brings with it the possibility of great change in Ethiopia. In a concerted effort to turn around the situation where less than 1% of the country's health budget is dedicated to sanitation and hygiene improvement, and where around 250,000 children die from related diseases each year the government's National Sanitation Strategy (from which these statistics are taken) sets out a goal of 100% coverage of improved sanitation and hygiene for the country. Importantly this strategy comes within the framework of the Millennium Development Goal that aspires to halve the proportion of Ethiopians without access to improved sanitation by 2015.



The government paper proposes 3 strategic pillars: an enabling framework, sanitation and hygiene promotion and improved access - and is putting political commitment, finances and action behind this strategy. However there is no question that such an ambitious plan will require the collaborative efforts and combined wisdom of all working in the WATSAN sector.

With this in mind, WaterAid's intention with this publication is to present a range of pertinent issues that have the potential either to block, or to enable, a change in Ethiopia's WATSAN situation. By encouraging readers to debate with their colleagues, to meet with others whom they may not ordinarily have met with or to take their ideas to a wider platform, it is hoped we can move forward together in ways that are both innovative and effective.

A focus for debate

"A healthy debate" draws on a field visit to an Ethiopian Orthodox Church-implemented (EOC), and WaterAid-supported project, in Hintallo woreda close to Mekelle in Tigray. There are several reasons to look at Hintallo now. One is that since the project is achieving 100% sanitation in some villages, it is important to consider the approach or circumstances that have helped make this possible, and consider how the same success might be brought to other villages in the project area. A second reason is that several key staff are leaving the project to take up new posts and this is an opportunity to discuss some of the processes they have worked through in recent years. Another consideration is that giving a snapshot view of Hintallo - as a case study from the north of the country - could provide a starting point to unpack any challenges facing the new sanitation strategy in other regions of the country.

"A healthy debate" is split into several sections and related questions are given within the blue strip at the bottom of each page. The same questions are presented on page 10 for use in workshops. It is hoped these will help stimulate useful discussion.

Additional acronyms:

woreda – Ethiopian administrative district

tabias – grouping of villages

kushet – village

Hintallo-Wajerat: heading for success

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Interchurch Aid Commission (EOC-DICAC) has been working in the woreda of Hintallo Wajerat, Tigray, since 2001, with funding and capacity building support from WaterAid Ethiopia. The project covers 18 tabias from 20 within the woreda, improving traditional water points and developing unprotected water sources. Key to the project is a strong emphasis on sanitation and hygiene promotion, with more funding and staffing dedicated to this than ever before. The outcome after 4 years is a trend towards 100% sanitation. In several villages, remarkably, every single household has its own well-constructed latrine that all family members are using and keeping clean. This is part of a clear change in attitude and understanding, whereby families have built separate kitchens, keep their compounds spotless, and are housing animals away from humans. However, in addition to these physical signs of success, what is noticeable in these villages is people's tangible energy and desire for progress.

A snapshot view of Hintallo reveals a number of key attributes and actions that may have played a role in the project's success to date:

- The possible positive impact of local environmental conditions and cultural attitudes
- Adopting learning from other projects and regions
- Giving sanitation and hygiene a central focus
- Investing in hygiene promotion with paid staff
- Actively engaging with current government policy
- Good relationships with actors at all levels – with community members fully involved at every stage

A variety of influences may be involved in each of these but, as a starting point, it is worth considering something that is there as "raw" material from the outset: the local environment and cultural attitudes of the people. To what degree then, is a project's success dependent on the environment where it is based?



Women of Tigray (photos above and left). Women are key players in WATSAN issues. Could we do more to understand and work creatively with the specific cultural norms and historical realities of women in the different regions of Ethiopia?

Environment, culture, history – do they play a role?

In Tigray the effects of soil erosion, deforestation and recurrent drought have all had an impact on the environment. However this same environment may well have helped develop a strength of character in its people to overcome hardship. Could it be that this shared difficulty has played a role in forming a regional identity and a tradition of collaboration whereby people pull together in times of crisis or political upheaval? The opportunities of this possible cultural trait seem to have come together positively in the Hintallo project: local people, local government and locally recruited NGO staff demonstrate a strong determination to work together to bring about change. Are similar qualities identifiable in other regions, and how can we build on such strengths together?

It's not because we have it, but that we use it

Tigray is full of stones and short of trees. For most of the population who are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, this is a disadvantage. But in the case of latrine construction the stones are a blessing. Where people in many regions struggle to find strong termite-resistant logs for a platform and sufficient wood for the superstructure, in Hintallo people can not only use the stones to build a strong structure, but they can also find flat stones to serve as slabs – removing one of the greatest problems for latrine construction. Furthermore with stones so abundant masonry skills are common, and families need not call in experts to help them.



- How can we better adapt project proposals to suit the reality on the ground and become more sensitive to local people - their history, traditional beliefs and their own priorities?
- Do we always explore and make use of local resources wherever possible?

Aiming for excellence

Much of Hintallo's success to date can almost certainly be traced to a mix of actions taken and attitudes realised. The project has adopted learning from other places, introduced mechanisms tailored to the specific conditions of the locality, and encouraged the local culture of collaboration, so as to support innovation and promote an energetic commitment to the project goals.

Even while some villages in Hintallo are moving rapidly towards 100% sanitation coverage, thereby showing the potential of the project design, the fact is – as with projects everywhere – there are other villages within the woreda that lag far behind. It is anticipated that by the end of the 6-year project cycle the approach in Hintallo will have succeeded in reaching everyone in the community, but this cannot be guaranteed. Any number of reasons can conspire to make us fall short of our project goals. This may relate to individual personalities – whether staff or community members – to an inappropriate project design, to poor relationships, heavy workloads, opposing priorities and limited resources. But how can we - as individuals and as a sector - manage these difficulties with more style and more energy? Would it help if we communicated more, were more honest, identified problems at the right point and took action, built on innovative solutions, collaborated more proactively, thought more creatively? Are we being as dynamic as we can be?



Fikre Alem kushet: Kes (priest) Aklil Gufae (left) talks with Yibrah Beyene about latrine construction. Aklil found an old tank panel near the family home and - as its shape is perfect for the job - they are now planning to use it as a slab. Yibrah is one of two EOC-employed field supervisors. He and his colleague Yared Hagos divide Hintallo's 18 tabias between them to support the day-to-day project activities.

Taking the road less travelled

In the Hintallo case the EOC have chosen to embrace the increasing evidence that WATSAN projects must devote more staffing and more budget to sanitation and hygiene if they are to make a real difference. Where the majority of projects employ individuals to work on water sales as well as sanitation and hygiene promotion, the NGO separated the roles – with Junior Hygiene and Sanitation Officers (JHSO) recruited to focus entirely on promoting environmental cleanliness and personal hygiene.

This decision was influenced by a number of experiences with other models. One example is the Village Hygiene Communicator role that is linked to the water hardware timeframe, and thus often moves on to a new area before a community has time to take in all the learning and put it into practice. By contrast JHSOs spend longer in one area, and work house-to-house with frequent revisits and follow-up. The JHSOs are well trained in the full range of hygiene-related issues: from practical skills, such as building know-how so as to help villagers construct latrines and even animal housing, to theoretical knowledge about the new health extension package, as well as water management.

Timing and focus are key to this approach:

- Sanitation/hygiene work starts early in the project cycle (in some cases before water supply work)
- All project staff at all levels and of all professions have a sanitation/hygiene remit
- JHSOs have responsibility for a limited number of villages, rather than being spread too thinly

In line with WAE's current strategy of encouraging its partners to be more innovative and to seek new ways to create an improved balance between water supply, on the one hand, and sanitation provision and hygiene promotion on the other hand, EOC took the initiative to propose a budget with a significant proportion assigned for software components. In relative terms the amount for JHSO salaries etc. is not great. Instead what increases significantly is the coordination work for managers – be that the senior staff based in Mekelle or the two supervisors whose remit includes management and support of the water supply foremen, as well as the JHSOs. Clearly this increased software focus is having a significant impact, but the inescapable reality is that however large the budget, nothing will work without staff and communities who are motivated (or can be motivated), who are industrious – and who are accountable for their actions against agreed plans.

- How do we measure whether we have the emphasis on sanitation & hygiene well balanced in relation to water supply work? Can we think “outside the box” and consider new approaches?
- Do we give enough time to sanitation & hygiene, and deliver it with enough imagination and creativity so people integrate the issues fully into their lives, rather than simply responding to external instructions?

“Dynamic”: relating to activity or things in movement, causal, forceful, very energetic

A meeting of minds

WAE is endeavouring to promote learning in all aspects of its work and with all partners. New insights around WATSAN can emerge at any stage in the life of a project and from anywhere within a community. Developing a stronger culture of exchanging ideas is crucial if Ethiopia’s sanitation situation is to improve, but disseminating information widely is a challenge.

In the case of Hintallo, the project coordinator travelled with WAE to Mozambique to explore alternative sanitation options. Even if the technologies from one region are not always appropriate for a different region, this kind of experience sharing, whether at the local or international level, can encourage new thinking and an increased sense of purpose. Learning from their previous work with the EOC, the Hintallo team realised that where money had initially been used in the Adwa project as an incentive for latrine construction, in the end effective promotion work was sufficient to motivate people and to ensure sustainability. In situations like Hintallo (and indeed Adwa), where all the building materials are readily available, encouragement and training are more effective strategies.

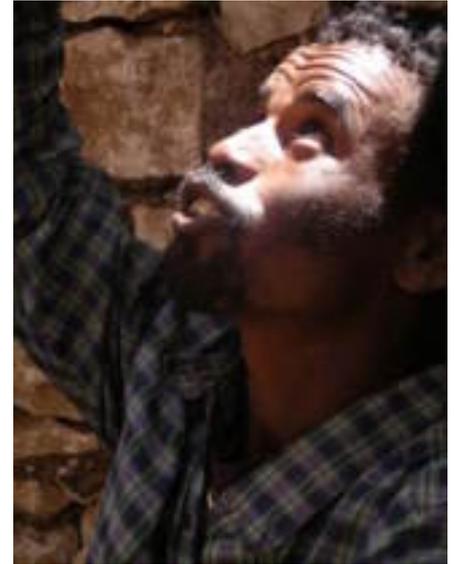
Taking time to revisit: obstacles and opportunities

Most of us have to fill in monitoring formats from our seniors and donors. Very often we perceive these as tedious obligations, rather than the opportunity they are: to critically evaluate progress and debate with colleagues about different ways forward. Can we start to view such formats as the practical tools they are and use them regularly with our team and in the community? Doing this could prevent many difficulties in the future. By identifying strengths and weaknesses and revisiting these regularly we can choose to take action at the right point or ask others for support.

As referred to earlier, the Hintallo project was at a critical point when this publication was being researched with key staff leaving mid-way through the project period. When all staff participated in a SWOT analysis it revealed a number of areas that could hinder continued success if not addressed, e.g. committed field staff may become de-motivated if they are not offered the ongoing training that other staff are receiving. Can we use such tools and formats in a less rigid way that will encourage everyone to give their views confidently and to be more proactive in discussing problems with others?

The power of personality

Success in sanitation and hygiene work seems directly correlated to the intensity and frequency of promotion, but also to the energy and imagination brought to it. Are we sufficiently aware of the impact of these qualities in our own work, in recruitment, and in community elections?



Eager for change.

Haile Meles (above) from Korkora explains his latrine construction techniques. Before the project he defecated outdoors, but his eyes were opened to the potential of good sanitation two years earlier: “I saw a latrine for the first time when I went to Jimma. It was very nice. You could even sleep in such a place!” Inspired by the training and encouragement provided by the JHSO house-to-house hygiene promotion and the imaginative drama club plays, Haile and his family dedicated 9 days to constructing their latrine. He explains how they now use soap and water to wash their hands at the critical points of the day, that they wash their bodies regularly, keep their home clean and have constructed a separate building for the chickens. But Haile is not stopping here. His next plan, he says, is to build a special place for the family cattle.

Taking extra trouble

Semaetu Gebreski (below left) from Korkora is a widow who has built her own latrine. The pride she feels in her latrine is evident in the extra innovative steps she has taken. The latrine is used daily by her family, but she keeps it spotlessly clean with a jerry can of water and brush stored inside, as well as a tin for used paper. To ensure the latrine is smell-free she has made a clay cover for the hole. She has adapted easily found materials to create a simple but functional hand-washing system outside: a bamboo tube forms the tap in a jerry can, with an old pen on a string as a stopper. There is even a drain protected with bamboo slats.



- What kind of obstacles does the sector struggle with (e.g. bureaucracy, lack of experience)? Can we develop a culture of taking action early on, engaging colleagues in productive debates and experimenting with alternatives?
- Do we support and share creative innovations made by community members or colleagues?

Acronym:

JHSO – Junior Hygiene and Sanitation Officer (EOC)

CHP – Community Hygiene Promoter (EOC)

TBA – Traditional Birth Attendant

Agents for change

Eyerusalem Alemseged (pictured below, left) works as a Junior Hygiene and Sanitation Officer (JHSO) in one of the 18 tabias that the Hintallo project covers. The role is designed to encourage families to build latrines and to raise awareness as to how poor hygiene practices and environmental sanitation can create serious health risks. Although her home is in Mekelle, when she joined the project she moved to Hewane town in order to live amongst the people of the four kushets for which she is responsible.

Eyerusalem is a 12th grade graduate. She received training for her JHSO work via the EOC, which was given in collaboration with the local government health bureau. Previously she worked collecting data for another NGO, but says she finds this job more interesting. "The work is not difficult for me because the community is open and understands quickly. I now work in two kushets: Korkora and Abieto. Then I will move on to work in the other two kushets. Korkora is a success, but Abieto is more difficult. The reason for this is connected with mobilisation. I use the same methodology in my work, but the mobilisation is carried out by the leaders."

Eyerusalem is supported by a number of volunteer Community Health Promoters (CHP) who are selected from each kushet to work on a broad range of hygiene issues. Many of these are Traditional Birth Attendants and the community already respects them.

While the JHSO role takes the house-to-house visit mechanism to a deeper level than similar hygiene promotion roles in other projects, and the rate of coverage and increased awareness seem to prove the

value of this approach, the working style is not without its challenges. Eyerusalem explains that it is often hard to find the whole family together, which means not everyone has the same level of understanding and she must visit again and again. She comments that men and children are more open in discussions around sanitation and hygiene issues than the women, and says that the urban communities in her area are resistant to change, with far fewer people prepared to dig their own latrine than in rural areas - comments that make us consider whether such gender and urban/rural differences are common everywhere.

Supporting the centre

Although hygiene promoters are paid less than others in a project team, and trained to a lesser degree, their work is absolutely central and they have the potential to bring momentous changes to thousands of lives. The role is hard for many reasons: it can be lonely, involves walking long distances in all conditions, and can involve coming into direct daily contact with many of life's harshest realities. Although many people take on the messages of change with enthusiasm, others may be resistant for a number of reasons: cultural, economic, environmental, a gender bias, community leadership style, or even because of something as apparently simple as personality.

Do we provide sufficient support to these pivotal "agents for change"? Should we invest more in promotion work in general? To give one example: could we work more closely with JHSOs (as well as tap attendants etc.) to analyse the blockages in specific micro-communities, and help develop promotion strategies that are tailored to such groups?

Good teamwork.

Eyerusalem, pictured left alone, and to the right with colleagues: community member Haile Meles and Asmelash Gebreselassie (centre), Hintallo's Sanitation Coordinator, discussing hand-washing options. Asmelash came to Hintallo from the EOC's Adwa project, to which the government seconded him. Whilst EOC would have liked such a secondment system in Hintallo, the government was unable to spare a local sanitarian. Convinced of the need for a full-time sanitation expert, EOC and WAE agreed to dedicate funding to such a post.



- Compared with rural communities, what challenges have we faced in motivating urban communities to build latrines and adopt hygienic practices?
- How can we manage the difficulty that projects need to employ volunteer staff (to ensure project sustainability) whilst the reality for the individual is that they need to be paid for their time and work?

Collaborating for health

In discussing the posts dedicated to sanitation and hygiene work in the Hintallo project, it is important to remember that such staff do not work in isolation. Furthermore the body of government health staff working in the community will increase considerably this year with the gradual introduction of the Health Extension Package (HEP).

The Ethiopian government has been criticised for some time for its focus on curative health. By contrast the HEP emphasises preventative health, thus giving more priority to sanitation and hygiene work than ever before. Recruited to deliver this HEP are Health Extension Package Workers (HEPW) who are required to move around the community and spend time with people at their homes – much as the EOC/WAE Junior Health Officers do. The HEPWs cover food hygiene, vector control, malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS - as well as latrine construction, safe water use, hygienic practices etc.

The question is whether the HEPWs will manage this load working house to house, or will they be tempted to work from the health post as before? As the JHSOs can testify, house-to-house work is difficult enough for them. How might NGO staff such as the Hintallo JHSOs and the new HEPWs collaborate effectively, and how can others in the sector better support their efforts?

The Hintallo team are already working closely with the HEPWs newly assigned to the woreda, not least because the continued success of sanitation work started by the JHSOs will depend on the energy of the HEPWs once the 6-year project comes to an end. Hintallo's Sanitation Expert, Asmalesh Gebreselassie, is liaising closely with government colleagues around this work, helping facilitate meetings between JHSOs and HEPWs to discuss problems, and encouraging the HEPWs in their house-to-house work. As JHSOs can work more quickly with their more limited remit, the project team has suggested HEPWs and JHSOs work in different kushets to complement the differing amounts of promotion work that each has received to date. But one thing is very clear: good house-to-house contact works. In Hintallo's case two phases of promotion work have transformed a remote and water-scarce tabia into a model one.

There are clearly other ways in which to support the new sanitation emphasis. A good example in Hintallo is where some tabia leaders have proposed latrine construction as one of the government development works to which each community is obliged to contribute labour each month.



Left behind? Helfie Kahsaye (above) lives in Abieto kushet, one of the communities in Hintallo that is slow to adopt sanitation. As JHSO Eyerusalem has pointed out, in general this has more to do with the lack of commitment from the leadership than a lack of energy from the householders. When the “A healthy debate” research team visited Abieto most adults were away on a food-for-work irrigation programme – not an unusual situation after a time of poor rains and failed harvests in this part of Tigray. Clearly this is an important programme in several regards, but it is taking villagers away from their own homesteads for 20 days in the month. The reason for Helfie being at home was a severe health problem, but her surroundings and her story betray a more general sense of vulnerability. In comparison to the spotless compounds and functioning latrines in nearby Korkora (see page 4), the impact of poor sanitation provision and limited understanding at Helfie's home is startling. She says in general the family defecates everywhere and “my children sometimes get ill because they have diarrhoea. I don't know the cause.” Although Helfie's husband has made some efforts to start digging a pit she admits things are not moving fast. Helfie's situation highlights two points: the need for all local leaders to keep sanitation in balance as a development priority - it should not be allowed to come last; and how to ensure the most vulnerable in society are not left behind in terms of involvement, understanding and support.

- What simple - or innovative - steps can we take to support the work of the new HEPWs? How can we use our position or contacts or skills to put people in touch with each other, or to motivate and encourage?
- How can we be sure our sanitation and hygiene promotion work is really reaching the poorest of the poor? What barriers exist to stop us identifying the most vulnerable people in a community?

Sustainability – as central to sanitation

The Hintallo team are confident they can achieve close to 100% sanitation throughout the woreda before the 6-year project comes to an end. Whether they reach this goal or not will depend on a number of issues. Likely stress points relate to environmental circumstances, food security levels and staff continuity. The longer-term sustainability of sanitation provision in the area both in terms of inputs and attitudinal change will also depend on various situations and actions coming together. No one can afford to allow difficult situations to worsen or for people to become complacent about their work. A well-built latrine used badly can still be a source of infection.

The research visit highlighted a number of issues relating to sustainability for Hintallo, which might trigger readers to think again about the ongoing success and future sustainability of their own work. The most interesting of these are:

- **Appropriate design from the outset**

The Hintallo team chose from the outset to introduce latrines that used local materials (photo above left) and which offer durability, safety and sustainability. Advising people to build with local stone and to use stone slabs rather than cement ones means latrines take time and effort to build, but have no or little monetary cost. While the project kushets are completing latrine after latrine, the sanitation situation of villages just beyond the project boundaries looks quite different. In this neighbouring region a less low-tech latrine design is being promoted, and at the time of a brief visit things appeared to be at a standstill. People seemed de-motivated as they waited for expensive external components (cement slabs and metal pipes) to be delivered and their attitude seemed one of dependency and passivity. They stated that if a latrine were provided (with no sense of their own role in this provision), then, yes they would use it. But if not, then they would continue to defecate outside as they had always done. The interviewees appeared to have limited understanding of the health risks associated



with open defecation, and seemed unwilling to consider new ideas. Although the visit was short, it did highlight the importance of selecting technologies that are not only appropriate for the job, affordable and replicable, but also that are sufficiently accessible to people that they generate an impetus for change. If people can see that they already have the resources needed to change their lives themselves, then there is more chance they will continue to take action to improve their situation when project staff move on.

- **Ongoing monitoring and evaluation**

The Hintallo management team has worked hard to set up systems to motivate and encourage the JHSOs and CHPs in their daily hygiene promotion work. The Field Supervisors meet with the JHSOs regularly to evaluate their work and to seek solutions to problems with other stakeholders such as the kushet or tabia leaders. Similarly the JHSOs work closely with the CHPs, preparing joint monthly reports for the Coordination Office. Such support is essential to sustain work levels and maintain enthusiasm for what is a hard job.

- **Education strategies with a future**

The Hintallo project is using drama and sanitation clubs to generate enthusiasm for the issues as much as to educate. There is no doubt that education is more effective if people enjoy it, can participate actively in it, if it challenges their thinking or if it gives them new skills and self-confidence. Can the sector design educational methods that have a momentum of their own and that create an atmosphere of forward-looking self-reliance?



Men at the centre? (Left) Tesfay Gifue with his daughter Girmanesh from Fikre Alem, and (right) with the ventilation pipe he has made himself using scrap materials. Although this personal adaptation is admirable, latrines also work well without such a pipe, and the simple latrine design seems to be one of the strengths of the Hintallo project. It is excellent that men are particularly motivated around sanitation issues in this part of Ethiopia. Unpacking different gender interests around sanitation is crucial if we are to design sustainable solutions.

- To what extent do our working styles help maintain momentum during the project lifetime and what strategies can we develop to ensure the long-term sustainability of sanitation interventions thereafter?
- What experiences can we share with one another to improve the way we work on gender and sanitation issues? How do we respond to gender-related needs, perspectives and motivations?

Choosing to communicate better

Although WATSAN appears to be a technical or scientific field - populated by water engineers, sanitarians, health experts etc. – the fact remains that, as with all development work, skills that appear to belong with the more “artistic” professions are essential. Good human communication skills and emotional intelligence bring people together and motivate them to think, work and learn together. In our work with communities the ability to encourage people to express their views, the ability to be able to “read” an atmosphere or a motive, to use words in a way that will encourage or inspire people, or be able to facilitate difficult situations so that problems can be peacefully resolved – are all key qualities that any development worker needs to develop. However the demands on us do not stop there. Too often even those who are dynamic and approachable field managers or grassroots workers find it difficult to communicate both the technical and the human aspects of their work strategically to the right colleagues, at the right times and in the right way.

Do we take enough trouble to analyse situations and discuss these with colleagues when they happen rather than waiting for a crisis to emerge? Do we debate with our seniors challenges that are arising and ask for advice or negotiate change – a shift in approach or priorities, the facilitation skills of an external expert? Do we ask to meet those we work alongside (or those who appear to have a different agenda) and talk honestly about difficulties and opportunities? Do we communicate enough to ensure “joined up work”, and when we do communicate are we sure everyone understands the same thing, that we are “speaking the same language”?

In the life of any project there are new situations emerging all the time. Nothing is static. Clearly it is impossible (and also inefficient and unnecessary) to keep all the players up-to-date all of the time, but it seems the sector as a whole could be strengthened if we sharpened our ability to identify information that should be shared and if we could communicate it in a way that is more proactive, appropriate and timely.

When researching “A healthy debate” it became clear that the Hintallo project had unintentionally failed to communicate clearly regarding changes in roles and job titles. Organisational restructuring around the functions of community mobiliser, foreman and supervisor had not been clarified for all involved.

Choosing to communicate better may reduce potential cases of conflict, wasted resources, low morale - and instead reveal opportunities we might otherwise miss.



Two sides of the same coin

Asmalesh Gebreselassie (left) is the sanitarian in the Hintallo project and Haile Kiros Mersa (right), the government Health Extension Package Expert based in Adigudom. The two men have a good working relationship and share a determination to coordinate their working style, structures, policy and practice to bring improved sanitation and health to the area. Haile comments, “The woreda really supports the EOC because it fills the gaps in water provision and supports the policy structure of the government. The woreda will ensure the sustainability of the project. But if possible we would like the project to expand to the remaining two tabias. What is unique about the EOC’s work is the integrated way they work, the relationships they build between the grassroots and the other stakeholders, and their mobilisation of the community to participate and collect building materials. Some NGOs rely on payment as an incentive. EOC relies on relationships.”

Keep talking, sharing ideas, and telling stories

When the workloads of project work are already huge, how can we make sure we communicate well? One way to help ourselves might be to start thinking about issues as “stories” – to learn to see the small comment, the shift in attitude, the changing circumstance, the human tragedy or success as the seed of something bigger. Perhaps we should borrow from our roots of story-telling where meaningful information was passed on easily, and take this forward into our project work in a way that can be less burdensome and more human? With this in mind WAE has developed a story format, “**The story-teller**”, as a simple communications tool. Readers who would like to trial this should contact WAE in Addis Ababa. Such story-sharing should not negate the value of more complex, rigorous and analytical tools such as monitoring and evaluation formats, but might work as a simple mechanism for identifying the most important threads/changes/stories in our work and allow us to share these in a more immediate and readable form. They may influence project reorientation, be the basis for a policy report or inspire a meeting of colleagues who rarely get together. Ideally such identification of issues would sharpen monitoring and evaluation, ensuring project proposals and reality match each other, and increasing the effectiveness of our work.

- To what extent do we feel obliged to “modify” our project reality to fit into the reporting formats or agendas of others, rather than reporting reality as it changes and opening up discussion about this?
- What could be done to strengthen relationships between NGO and government staff in your project area, and especially as regards the Health Extension Package ?

“A healthy debate”: the research team (May 2005)

Gebre Girmay (Hintallo-Wajarit Project Coordinator), Asmalesh Gebreselassie (Sanitation Expert), Dawit Gebregziaberher (Supervisor), Daniel Tesfay (Administration and Finance Head), Kinfe Tesfay (Driver). Polly Mathewson (independent consultant), Manyahlshal Ayele (WAE Communications and Learning Coordinator)



Cut off from communications in the mountains?

Brehane Lema and her daughter Mulu (above) live in an isolated kushet beyond the EOC project borders. Brehane has received health education and says she understands the importance of hand washing, but her attitude towards using a pit latrine seems passive. She says she constructed a latrine before, but it collapsed when the logs rotted. Now, like many, she is waiting for a free cement slab to be delivered. Brehane says that slabs are given to those who dig a well-constructed pit. Discussions in this village raise all kinds of issues around using different approaches in areas that are so close to each other.



A case for streamlining strategies?

The case touched upon in this publication regarding the sanitation situation of a kushet bordering the EOC/WAE project area is a useful example of how we can miss opportunities to work constructively together.

Another organisation working in the area is promoting a different approach from that used in the EOC kushets, and it is one that depends on external components.

This creates a situation – perhaps like others around the country - where a number of sanitation experts are working in close proximity to each other – NGO, government and possibly visiting external donors or experts - and yet there seems to be little discussion between them about their approach. Could colleagues choose to meet up and brainstorm problems together, could local leaders and villagers from one area visit another to motivate their neighbours? Clearly the different approaches of different players will have their roots in past experiences, be the preferred technologies of individuals and reflect the priorities of funding agencies, but could we not learn from more widespread discussion and sharing of ideas? Moreover should we be more courageous in questioning or challenging situations that do not seem the most effective, even if this is directed towards our own organisation or means asking our funding agency for further discussion. In the end all of us working in WATSAN have the same basic agenda and ethos, and everything is to be gained by fostering good communication between us.

Even while communication seems inadequate between the different NGO and government players in this part of Tigray, the EOC and local government staff have proved that streamlining strategies does work. Having shifted their training emphasis from one of curative to preventative health, the government is now training the project JHSOs. Meanwhile the EOC staff are supporting the government HEPWs with their new house-to-house promotion work. Certainly the future success of sanitation in Hintallo will depend on the integrity of such collaborative, well-communicated work.

Spreading the word

WaterAid and its local partners are part of the international WASH campaign, working to raise the profile of water and sanitation issues. The WASH 2005 committee in Ethiopia chose the “Your Health is in Your Hands” slogan to highlight the importance of handwashing, acting together to communicate a fundamental message to the widest possible audience.

As well as involvement in such public education campaigns WAE is committed to developing as a “learning organisation” in other ways – using research, documentation, advocacy, policy and press work to share lessons learnt at all levels across the sector. Collaborating on campaigns, brainstorming ideas, pooling resources, sharing observations: all these can sharpen our work and increase our effectiveness. However working with others is not always easy. Good communication skills are undoubtedly central to good joint work, but do we also have the right personal attitude, organisational mechanisms or national forum in Ethiopia to help WATSAN work really take off?

- To what extent are we conscious of ourselves as part of a bigger WATSAN movement in Ethiopia and beyond?
- Do we take the time (which could ultimately save time) to read and respond to ideas published by others or to communicate our own thoughts to colleagues?

Pulling the questions together and putting our heads together



Reviewing the questions covered in
“A healthy debate” for use in workshops and meetings

The local context (see Hintallo: a snapshot, page 2)

- 1) How can we better adapt project proposals to suit the reality on the ground and become more sensitive to local people - their history, traditional beliefs and their own priorities?
- 2) Do we always explore and make use of local resources wherever possible?

A new dynamism? (see pages 3 & 4)

- 3) How do we measure whether we have the emphasis on sanitation and hygiene well balanced in relation to water supply work? Can we think “outside the box” and consider new approaches?
- 4) Do we give enough time to sanitation and hygiene, and deliver it with enough imagination and creativity so people integrate the issues fully into their lives, rather than simply responding to external instructions?
- 5) What kind of obstacles does the sector struggle with (e.g. bureaucracy, lack of experience)? Can we develop a culture of taking action early on, engaging colleagues in productive debates and experimenting with alternatives?
- 6) Do we support and share creative innovations made by community members or colleagues?

Putting sanitation at the centre (see pages 5,6 & 7)

- 7) Compared with rural communities, what challenges have we faced in motivating urban communities to build latrines and adopt hygienic practices?
- 8) How can we manage the difficulty that projects need to employ volunteer staff (to ensure project sustainability) whilst the reality for the individual is that they need to be paid for their time and work?
- 9) What simple - or innovative - steps can we take to support the work of the new Health Extension Package Workers (HEPWs)? How can we use our position or contacts or skills to put people in touch with each other, or to motivate and encourage?
- 10) How can we be sure our sanitation and hygiene promotion work is really reaching the poorest of the poor? What barriers exist to stop us identifying the most vulnerable people in a community?
- 11) To what extent do our working styles help maintain momentum during the project lifetime and what strategies can we develop to ensure the long-term sustainability of sanitation interventions thereafter?
- 12) What experiences can we share with one another to improve the way we work on gender and sanitation issues? How do we respond to gender-related needs, perspectives and motivations?

Communication – the key to joined up working (see pages 8 & 9)

- 13) To what extent do we feel obliged to “modify” our project reality to fit into the reporting formats or agendas of others, rather than reporting reality as it changes and opening up discussion about this?
- 14) What could be done to strengthen relationships between NGO and government staff in your project area, and especially as regards the Health Extension Package ?
- 15) To what extent are we conscious of ourselves as part of a bigger WATSAN movement in Ethiopia and beyond?
- 16) Do we take the time (which could ultimately save time) to read and respond to ideas published by others or to communicate our own thoughts to colleagues?



Writers: Polly Mathewson and Manyahlshal Ayele
Photographs: Mathewson, Ayele and Girmay/WaterAid

We hope you will feel motivated to discuss the issues in this publication with your colleagues and with WaterAid. Please contact WAE's Communications and Learning Coordinator, Manyahlshal Ayele, at the address below:



WaterAid – Water for life
The international NGO dedicated exclusively to the provision of safe domestic water, sanitation and hygiene education to the world's poorest people.

WaterAid Ethiopia
PO Box 4812
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia

Tel: 2511 465 4374
or Tel: 2511 466 1683
Fax: 2511 466 1679
Email: info@wateraid.org
Website: www.wateraidethiopia.org