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The Political Challenge Putting Sanitation on Top of the Political Agenda

The challenge:

Despite the indisputable importance of sanitation for the social, economic and environmental development of every community, the world faces a vast deficit in sanitation – a deficit overwhelmingly concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. The Millennium Development Goal target on sanitation in these regions will presumably be missed by a wide margin. Millions of people worldwide are forced to defecate in public places, fields and ditches or into bags or buckets.

One of the biggest obstacles that must be overcome is the unwillingness of national and international political leaders to put excreta and its safe and sustainable management on the national and international development agenda. Sanitation unfortunately still is a taboo subject.

The reasons:

- Official statistics on sanitation coverage are often inconsistent or whitewashed – needs and demands are often unknown by politicians.
- Many policy-makers and planners are unaware of the potential as well as the economic and environmental value of adapted and sustainable sanitation solutions.
- In many countries a lack of capacity – in national and local government and in civil society – inhibits the improvement of the sanitation situation.
- Last but not least, the sanitation challenge mainly affects poor people without a lobby – in many countries another reason for the lacking emphasis that is given to sanitation issues.

The way forward:

The MDG target on sanitation as well as the Declaration of the International Year of Sanitation 2008 have been important steps forward. Campaigns like WASH from the Water and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and Initiatives like the African Civil Society Network on Water and Sanitation (ANEW) play a major role in putting sanitation on top of the political agenda.

Furthermore, **National governments** need to seriously demonstrate their will to fulfil their commitment to the international and national sanitation and hygiene targets. They have to ensure that sanitation is included in PRSPs or national sector strategies and implemented accordingly, to ensure explicit budget allocations for sanitation and hygiene programmes as well as the availability of funds for awareness raising, training and capacity building. Sanitation needs do have a prominent place within a pro-poor national concept!

Local governments can show the importance they attribute to sanitation by allocating resources to public and school sanitation; by reviewing local planning for opportunities to improve sanitation and through comprehensive hygiene promotion and sanitation marketing measures.

Water Sector Institutions can tailor their infrastructure and services to promote sanitation for households and the public, such as customers' pay stations or management systems such as billing systems, customer inventories, etc.

Communities and civil society should enforce their lobbying for sanitation and hygiene promotion programmes. They give a voice to the poor, show the government what it means to live without access to sanitation and encourage through this the authorities to find solutions for the sanitation crisis.

International organisations, multilateral development banks and bilateral development agencies should promote the sanitation topic by bringing together international and national stakeholders, by supporting governments, sector institutions, utilities, NGOs and small-scale providers, as well as through the development of regional and national agreements. They can compile and publish examples of successful approaches and practices, develop norms and guidelines and allocate adequate amounts of money to sanitation and hygiene education.

The message:

It is time to lift the subject to the top of the political agenda where it belongs. The world needs political commitment at all levels and the provision of adequate financial resources for capacity development programmes and adapted infrastructure.

Governments, relevant sector institutions, utilities, NGOs and private small-scale providers need to gain the capacity to plan and implement sanitation related programs. Proper attention must be given to integrated solutions that seek to manage all aspects of water and sanitation and minimise negative impacts for the population and the environment.

National budgets and development aid efforts must focus on financing projects that will quickly benefit large amounts of people in a sustainable way. Therefore politicians, decision-makers and planners must know that:

- **Sanitation is linked to at least five other MDGs.** As the chair of the United Nations Secretary General’s Advisory Board, HRH the Prince of Orange put it: “Buy one, get five for free”: Improvements in the sanitation sector have positive impacts on the income situation of the poor, on primary education, the empowerment of women, child mortality rates and maternal health:
 - For example, the safe and hygienic recovery and reuse of human waste, faeces and urine can be used to increase agricultural productivity and in turn increase food security.
 - Globally, WHO estimates that 1.8 million people die each year from diarrhoeal diseases, 200 million people are infected with bilharziosis and more than 1 billion people suffer from helminth infections.
 - Studies show that safe and private sanitation facilities in schools are a major precondition for the school attendance of girls.
- **The economic benefits of sanitation by far outweigh the costs:** US\$1 invested in sanitation will give an economic return of between US\$ 3 and US\$ 34, depending on the region.
- **People are willing to pay for sanitation services,** primarily for reasons of dignity, privacy and personal safety.
- **Sanitation is affordable when the right technology is chosen:** A wide variety of sustainable and ecological sound approaches has been developed in the past years. Systems exist and are established, which are not only better adapted to the life circumstances of the poor and do protect the environment, but which are also less costly than most conventional systems.

Only combined efforts of all stakeholders and a strong poverty orientation will bring about a significant change in sanitation coverage.