Background

Over the past decade, a considerable amount of knowledge and experience on urban water supply and sanitation (WSS) reform has been gained, both within the World Bank, the Water and Sanitation Program (WSP) community and other partners such as NGOs, water utilities, and governments. However, little has been done in terms of sharing this knowledge and experience, and learning what works and what does not work.

One way of bringing together sector practitioners working in diverse areas around the world is through the use of advanced information and communication technologies such as videoconferencing (VC) and high speed internet. The World Bank and the Global Distance Learning Network (GDLN) are organizing such a platform to enable sector organizations, teams, and individuals around the world to communicate, share knowledge, and learn from each others’ experiences in a timely and cost-effective manner.

Objectives of the Dialogue

There is growing consensus for reform of the urban water sector in many developing countries. The broad goals of reform are to improve governance and financial sustainability of the sector, as a basis for increasing service coverage and quality. Substantial progress has been made towards these goals, but there is still some way to go. The pace of reform has varied significantly between countries. In some instances, good reform packages have been prepared, but the process of implementation often fails or is not sustained.

The success and impetus for reform is very often dictated by the commitment and will of governments, but there are still huge constraints to action and decision-making that have proved difficult for some governments to overcome. Reform requires not only new laws and institutions, but also new cultures and attitudes. While it is fairly easy to formulate policies and to pass legislation, it is much more difficult to change attitudes, human and organizational behavioral patterns. In addition, policy makers and their advisors have often fallen in the age old trap of “universal best practices” with little consideration to the context in which reforms are to be implemented.

Therefore, the overall aim of the planned dialogue is to share knowledge and learn from experiences on urban WSS reform in developing countries. Learning activities will centre on themes relating to the three main actors in the reform process: the service providers, the government, and the consumers. A fourth theme will focus on the reform process; including the question of what determines successful urban WSS reform implementation and how the process can be sustained.

Themes

Theme 1 - Service Provider Reforms

This theme will focus on service providers (both public and private) and the reforms necessary to improve their performance. The theme will highlight the characteristics of well functioning water utilities as a basis for reform; the recent trends in private sector participation and their implications; key ingredients of successful performance turnaround of a public water utility; and the role of small-scale independent service providers and how best to integrate them in the supply chain.

Theme 2 - Government’s Role in Urban WSS Reform

This theme will focus on the changing roles of central and local governments within the context of decentralized service delivery. In particular, discussions will centre on the following issues: separation of functions (policy making, regulation, ownership, service provision) and what it means for governments; tools and approaches for governments to drive reforms and fulfill their policy making, regulation, ownership and oversight functions; and the ways in which central governments can maximize the chances of success, particularly in fostering good governance among their agencies and local government units.
Theme 3 - Consumer Voice and Social Accountability

This theme will focus on the demand-side of reforms - the consumers. Consumer engagement has often been weak in the process of urban WSS reform. Paradoxically, achieving the ultimate reform objective of improving service delivery requires a thorough understanding of the concerns or the things that matter to the end users of those services. Thematic discussion will focus on sharing experiences and practical tools for involving users in the design, monitoring and evaluation of service delivery, and how to ensure that reforms are responsive to consumer needs.

Theme 4 – The Reform Process

This theme will focus on the question of how to approach reform in the urban WSS sector, including the issue of mainstreaming pro-poor strategies within sector reforms. Specific issues or questions to be addressed in this theme include: (i) factors that are critical to the process and outcome of reform; (ii) how to combine and sequence reforms; (iii) the main obstacles to reform and how to deal with them; (iv) how to mainstream pro-poor strategies within sector reforms; and (v) the roles of different stakeholders in the reform process.

Key Dates and Times

The dialogue will consist of a series of five sessions on the following dates: 13th, 20th, 27th March 2007 and 3rd, 10th April 2007. It is planned to have two hours of VC each day, followed by one hour of “off line” in-country discussions. The total duration of each session will therefore be three hours, starting at 8:00AM (DC time) and ending at 11:00 AM (DC time). The theme for each day will continue the following week with a VC global discussion and wrap up, before introducing the next theme (see table below for dates and sequence of sessions). The global VC discussion to be held in the first hour of every session will provide an opportunity for country feedback on the themes introduced the week before.

Methods and Media

The dialogue will make use of a mixture of power point presentations, panel discussions, video messages, and moderated live discussions. The language for all sessions will be English. Participants will also have a further opportunity to exchange through a web-based discussion group that will be specially set up for this activity.

Who should attend?

The target audiences for this dialogue are change agents and teams in government (senior to mid-level sector officials), WSS utilities, NGOs, the private sector, and World Bank operations staff. Due to the time difference, only audiences from countries in Europe, Africa, and South Asia are being considered in this series. The following countries/sites will be connected: Washington DC (GDLN center), London (UK), Delft (The Netherlands), Kampala (Uganda), Tunis (Tunisia), Accra (Ghana), Abuja (Nigeria) and Dhaka (Bangladesh). The targeted number of participants is 15 to 20 participants per site.

Sequence of Sessions

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<td>Intro theme 2 Government’s role in reform (online)</td>
<td>Intro theme 3 Consumers (online)</td>
<td>Intro theme 4 Reform Process (online)</td>
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