

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report is the main output of a process and organisational evaluation of The Water Dialogues (TWD): an international project spanning nine years from initial concept to closure (2001-2010). The main impetus for the project arose from:

- the polarisation which characterised the water supply and sanitation (WSS) sector in the first half of the past decade – a split between exponents of pro- and anti-privatisation positions; and
- the desire to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in relation to water and sanitation provision.

The temporal focus of the report is on the period 2004-2009 when National Working Groups (NWGs) in Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda explored the local realities of water provision and engaged in multi-stakeholder dialogue in the interest of effecting changes and improvements in policy and practice in their national sectors. By doing so, they also sought to contribute to increased understanding and greater effectiveness at international level. Internationally, the project was coordinated by an International Working Group (IWG) with the support of an International Secretariat (IS).

The form/structure of the project – a series of bottom-up national dialogues linked by an International Working Group – was quite unique and experimental. Therefore, special attention has been paid to the relationships between national and international subsystems within the project. In addition, the core process and secondary processes of the whole system have been explored and analysed, and particular attention paid to the functioning of the international elements of the project. A systems perspective informs this analysis.

The remainder of this Executive Summary draws on the findings and recommendations sections of the main report (Sections 5 and 6).

FINDINGS

SOME KEY TENSIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS *or* THE CHALLENGE OF ALIGNMENT AND COHERENCE

Several key tensions are explored. Of particular importance are the tensions between:

- engaging in an open, emergent process *and* managing a goal-directed, outcomes/outputs-oriented project;
- bottom-up direction and diversity *and* central coordination and unity (i.e. international coordination and management);
- sub-systems' interests (i.e. national interests) *and* finding a shared purpose and focus for the whole system

While these tensions *were* held – such that both aspects of each were allowed space for expression – in general, the former aspect of each polarised pair tended to characterise TWD more strongly than the latter. In other words, TWD was characterised by open, emergent process, bottom-up direction and diversity, and an emphasis on national-level interests. The NWGs functioned fairly

independently of the whole, and the space for effective, central (i.e. international-level) management was quite limited.

This made for a high degree of variability across the national levels of the project, as each NWG pursued strategies, modes of engagement and research agendas that seemed most appropriate to their specific contexts. It also resulted in a range of national-level effects and outcomes that defy easy synthesis. These effects do, however, point to the value of multi-stakeholder dialogue as a way of catalysing change in complex and often fragmented sectors such as the water and sanitation services (WSS) sector.

PRIMARY/CORE PROCESS: MULTISTAKEHOLDER DIALOGUE

Most projects, though they develop common practices and standard processes, are bounded primarily by their aims, objectives and predefined outputs; in TWD, however, process itself was primary. *The core process of TWD, was multistakeholder (MSH) dialogue.* It could be argued that research was a *secondary* process which resourced the dialogue. Advocacy too was a secondary process – it made use of the materials, agreements and insights arising from the dialogue.

Dialogue processes are often somewhat opaque to non-participants. This accounts, in part, for the tendency of outside observers (such as donors) to focus mainly on the visible outputs and outcomes of the process. While there are many of these in the form of publications and concrete changes to policy and practice at country level, these alone do not necessarily justify the input costs in terms of energy, time and other resources. To do this one must consider the value of the process *itself*: changes to relationships, ways of thinking, and attitudinal changes are largely invisible, though their impact on sector functioning may be profound in the longer term. Making the core process, and its value, visible to non-participants is a major challenge facing MSH dialogues in general.

PRIMARY OUTPUTS: CHANGED PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES OF PARTICIPANTS

In the same vein, the primary *outputs* of this core process, were participants with changed attitudes and new ways of thinking about and acting in the sector. From this perspective, research reports and other documents/publications could be seen as secondary outputs, achieved on the way to this more important 'product'.

The main *effects* of the project are summarised in the discussion of the project plan (logframe) towards the end of section 5 of the main report.

STEERING THE PROJECT: LIMITATIONS TO LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

One of the critical functions of leadership and management in organisational systems is to ensure a minimum of connection and coherence across the system – this is especially important for widely dispersed systems such as TWD. However, there were several systemic limitations to *what* could be managed and *how much*. This has already been addressed to some extent under the heading “Key tensions” above.

In summary, the capacity of any one part of TWD to provide leadership was quite limited; as one respondent put it, “*No one person owned The Water Dialogues; and no one person led.*” One could extend this

statement to note that, no one part of TWD owned or led the overall process, since the IWG did not direct or focus national-level dialogue and research towards specific types of outcomes – indeed, most members agreed that this was not within the IWG’s mandate.

The original mandate of a MSH process/system (and members’ interpretation of this mandate) creates boundary conditions which define what is and isn’t possible in terms of management and leadership. This is probably especially true of an international MSH process – where it is much more difficult to make changes to the system’s ‘rules’ (whether consciously agreed or not) once it has begun to function.

In support of this assertion, an IWG respondent commented that the work of the IWG was characterised by the following pattern: “[We would identify] problem areas, [have] debates on how to address them, [but] often return to the default equilibrium...” This seems to affirm that the initial design of the project, and the differentiated manner in which it unfolded at country-level, rendered effective management and steering from international-level challenging, and considerably limited its scope.

Although various parts of TWD seemed to resist attempts (for example, those made by the second International Secretariat [2005/6-2008]) at centralised management, it does seem clear that the system wanted a *facilitative leader*. The evaluator concludes that a more active, though still facilitative, leadership role at international level may have created the conditions for greater alignment across national dialogues and a more iterative and productive relationship between NWGs and the IWG. Again, the space for this kind of leadership to emerge was limited by the design, as discussed in the next sub-section.

PROJECT AND PROCESS DESIGN

It is tempting to state (somewhat reductively) that in MSH processes organised as large, diffuse and multi-layered systems – like TWD – beginnings largely determine endings. There is some truth in this observation, and it points to the critical importance of a coherent project/process design that is owned by all participants and to which all participants commit themselves.

TWD was effectively designed ‘on the hoof’ and in an emergent manner. The original mandate for the project arose from the Scoping Study and Berlin stakeholder workshop (2004) – this initiated the country-level work and set the International Working Group on a new trajectory (i.e. managing and overseeing the international process and supporting the work in countries). Ideally, a redesign step was needed in which all the actual participants at country level could feed into framing the questions, issues and outputs together.

However, NWGs took time to form, fundraise and begin working – and this happened at quite different paces in different country contexts. Therefore, it did not prove possible to reach solid, shared agreements on the purpose and desired outcomes (or even time frames) of the whole system’s work early in its life. By the time this was feasible, the trajectory and interests of the NWGs was already quite fixed. This is a significant challenge and one related to the difficulties around financing TWD (see “Resources” below).

Some of the implications of this are most easily seen with reference to TWD’s research outputs: research that was produced in different country contexts is not directly comparable, because there were no agreed, bottom-line outputs. While much high quality research has been produced, the quality and utility of the material also varies significantly.

An important caveat is that the structure of TWD was quite resilient and effective – especially at national-level. It enabled sustained dialogue over several years and facilitated many country-level effects, within and beyond NWGs. The international/national framework was also valuable because it provided motivation, some direct guidance and support and a means of exchange and learning to National Working Groups (NWGs) and did enable a degree of coherence across the system. What is questioned above, is the capacity of this structure to maintain a high level of whole-system alignment and effectiveness. It is significant that these limitations were not primarily *structural*, but more strongly related to *process* design.

In the view of several respondents, an additional gap in the project design was the absence of sustained dialogue at international level. Most TWD participants – and all IWG and NWG members – worked on a volunteer basis, so time and other constraints would have made this difficult to accomplish. Nevertheless, a small majority of those interviewed agreed that international-level dialogue could have enhanced the effectiveness and alignment of the whole system – and in particular, contributed to greater influence at international level, where the WSS sector remains especially fragmented.

RESOURCES

Accessing finance for TWD was a major challenge. In the early phases of the work, this was partly related to TWD's commitment to only access substantial funds from 'neutral' sources: i.e. donors which were seen as partisan in the private/public debate (e.g. the World Bank, which was viewed as pro-privatisation) were avoided. Early sources of finance came from participating organisations such as Thames Water and WaterAid, and from BMZ. Later, in 2006, DfID provided the main grant which sustained the process into 2009. Finally, PPIAF supported the last stages of the work by financing several international meetings in 2009.

These difficulties with financing were not only a consequence of the need to find neutral donors: MSH dialogue was simply not easy to finance – it does not fit neatly into the dominant international development discourse, which often sees the attainment of predetermined results as the grail of 'good' development practice.

One important implication of this fact was that National Working Groups had to find ways of financing their own work. They did this with widely varying success; and this in turn contributed to variations in national outputs and processes and to the challenges of alignment between the parts of the whole TWD system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations contained in this report (Section 6) are intended to provide ideas and suggestions for future MSH work, by drawing on the experience of TWD. In summary, the key recommendations are as follows:

- Involve all stakeholder groups in the project design.
- Design with the whole system and its parts in mind.
- Lay the foundations for effective group functioning.
- Allow enough time – but place limits on the expansion of secondary/support processes (e.g. research).
- Consider the extent to which the MSH groups you form will be closed or remain open.
- Reflect on your process as well as engaging in it.

- Trust the process.
- Things change – the process, the environment and the participants are not totally predictable (and may be thoroughly unpredictable!); work with what *is*.
- Recognise and honour natural rhythms and natural developmental processes.
- Keep the whole system reasonably well-aligned and coherent.
- Agree on the basis for leadership and decision making and clarify basic authority and accountability relationships.
- Acquire skilled, independent process support (facilitation) for key decision making steps – especially at the formative stages.
- Be clear on the *main* purpose of the research: is it an end in itself, a support to the dialogue, or both?
- Consider conducting a series of well-bounded, focused research activities woven through the process of dialogue, rather than seeing them as a kind of project within a project.
- Multistakeholder framing of, and input into, the research process can greatly enhance its rigour and the utility of research outputs.
- If you do not finance the research centrally, find alternative means to ensure that the core, basic questions are answered.
- As proposed in relation to research, advocacy and the process of sharing findings and engaging with stakeholders outside of the project might ideally be spread across the lifespan of the project.
- Meetings are essential.
- Make very conscious decisions about *who* needs to meet more often.
- Logframe is not the most appropriate planning framework for MSH work because of its reliance on straight-line causality and predictability. It needs to be supplemented by alternative planning and M&E methodologies which better contain complexity, relational change, and emergent process.

CONCLUSION

The material above is considerably expanded in the body of the report – this short summary contains some of the core meanings made in the evaluation process, but cannot adequately reflect its richness, texture and nuance. Please refer to the main report for a deeper and more nuanced analysis.

The main report stands as a companion piece to the many other documents and publications produced during the course of TWD. Please visit www.waterdialogues.org to access these.