

sustainable sanitation alliance

Towards more sustainable sanitation solutions

Introduction

The urgency for action in the sanitation sector is obvious, considering the 2.6 billion people worldwide who remain without access to any kind of improved sanitation, and the 2.2 million annual deaths (mostly children under the age of 5) caused mainly by sanitation-related diseases and poor hygienic conditions.

The United Nations, during the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, developed a series of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aiming to achieve poverty eradication and sustainable development. The specific target set for the provision of water supply and sanitation services is to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation by 2015.

As the Joint Monitoring Programme of WHO/UNICEF and the UNDP Human Development Report (2006) have shown, the progress towards meeting the MDG sanitation target is however much too slow, with an enormous gap existing between the intended coverage and today's reality especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.

The reasons for this are numerous. A major issue is the fact that sanitation rarely benefits from the political attention given to other topics despite its key importance on many other sectors. Political will has been sorely lacking when it comes to placing sanitation high on the international development agenda. This has pushed sanitation into the shad-

ows of water supply projects for example, and limited innovation in the sector.



Motivated by the UN's decision to declare 2008 as International Year of Sanitation (IYS), a core group of organisations active in the field of sustainable sanitation took the initiative to form a task force to support the IYS. In January 2007, a first meeting resulted in a large number of commitments by the participants from various organisations, and in drawing up a first draft of a "joint road map for the promotion of sustainable sanitation within the IYS 2008". During a second meeting which took place mid of April, the goal and the objectives of this global competence network were clarified and the joint road map was reviewed.

In order to have a joint label for the planned activities, and to be able to align with other potential initiatives, the group formed the "Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA)".





What is Sustainable Sanitation?

The main objective of a sanitation system is to protect and promote human health by providing a clean environment and breaking the cycle of disease. In order to be sustainable a sanitation system has to be not only economically viable, socially acceptable and technically and institutionally appropriate, but it should also protect the environment and the natural resources. When improving an existing and/or designing a new sanitation system, sustainability criteria related to the following aspects should be considered:

- (1) **Health:** includes the risk of exposure to pathogens and hazardous substances that could affect public health at all points of the sanitation system from the toilet via the collection and treatment system to the point of reuse or disposal. The topic also covers aspects such as hygiene, nutrition and improvement of livelihood achieved by the application of a certain sanitation system, as well as downstream effects.
- (2) **Environment and natural resources:** involves the required energy, water and other natural resources for construction, operation and maintenance of the system, as well as the potential emissions to the environment resulting from use. It also includes the degree of recycling and reuse practiced and the effects of these, for example reusing the wastewater, returning nutrients and organic material to agriculture, and the protecting of other non-renewable resources, for example through the production of renewable energies (e.g. biogas or fuel wood).
- (3) **Technology and operation:** incorporates the functionality and the ease with which the system can be constructed, operated and monitored using the available human resources (e.g. the local community, technical team of the local utility etc.). It also concerns the suitability to achieve an efficient substance flow management from a technical point of view. Furthermore, it evaluates the robustness of the system, its vulnerability towards disasters, and

the flexibility and adaptability of its technical elements to the existing infrastructure, to demographic and socio-economic developments and climate change.

- (4) **Financial and economic issues:** relate to the capacity of households and communities to pay for sanitation, including the construction, maintenance and depreciation of the system. Besides the evaluation of investment, operation and maintenance costs, the topic also takes into account the economic benefits that can be obtained in “productive” sanitation systems, including benefits from the production of the recyclables (soil conditioner, fertiliser, energy and reclaimed water), employment creation, increased productivity through improved health and the reduction of environmental and public health costs.
- (5) **Socio-cultural and institutional aspects:** the criteria in this category evaluate the socio-cultural acceptance and appropriateness of the system, convenience, system perceptions, gender issues and impacts on human dignity, the contribution to subsistence economies and food security, and legal and institutional aspects.

Most sanitation systems have been designed with these aspects in mind, but in practice they are failing far too often because some of the criteria are not met. In fact, there is probably no system which is absolutely sustainable. The concept of sustainability is more of a journey rather than a stage to reach. Nevertheless, it is crucial, that sanitation systems are evaluated carefully with regard to all dimensions of sustainability. Since there is no one-for-all sanitation solution which fulfils the sustainability criteria under different circumstances to the same extent, this system evaluation will depend on the local framework and has to take into consideration existing environmental, technical, socio-cultural and economic conditions.

Taking into consideration the entire range of sustainability criteria, it is important to observe some basic principles when planning and implementing a sanitation system. These were already developed some years ago by a group of experts and





were endorsed by the members of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council as the “Bellagio Principles for Sustainable Sanitation” during its 5th Global Forum in November 2000:

- (1) Human dignity, quality of life and environmental security at household level should be at the centre of any sanitation approach.
- (2) In line with good governance principles, decision making should involve participation of all stakeholders, especially the consumers and providers of services.
- (3) Waste should be considered a resource, and its management should be holistic and form a part of integrated water resources, nutrient flow and waste management processes
- (4) The domain in which environmental sanitation problems are resolved should be kept to the minimum practicable size (household, community, town, district, catchment, city).

Goal and objectives of the “Sustainable Sanitation Alliance” (SuSanA)

The overall goal of the SuSanA is to contribute to the achievement of the MDGs by promoting sanitation systems which are taking into consideration all aspects of sustainability. The MDGs and the UN’s “International Year of Sanitation 2008” are highly appreciated by the “Sustainable Sanitation Alliance” as they help push sanitation high up in the political agenda. The main focus of the work of the “Sustainable Sanitation Alliance” will be to promote the implementation of sustainable sanitation systems in large scale water and sanitation programmes, in line with the strategies proposed e.g. by WHO, UNDP-PEP, UNSGAB, and UNESCO.

General objectives of the SuSanA are therefore:

- to raise awareness around the globe of what sustainable sanitation approaches are and to promote them massively;
- to highlight how important sustainable sanitation systems are as a precondition to achieve a whole series of MDGs (e.g. to reduce child mortality, to promote gender equity and empower

women, to ensure environmental sustainability, to improve livelihood, and to reduce poverty);

- to show that sanitation projects must be planned with participation of all stakeholders at an early stage, must respond to the initiative and preferences of the users, and that these need to go hand in hand with hygiene promotion and capacity building activities for sustainable water and wastewater management.



Specific activities of the SuSanA are:

- to collect and compile information which will assist decision makers (including the civil society) to assess different sanitation systems and technologies with regard to the full range of sustainability criteria so that informed decisions can be taken;
- to demonstrate that sanitation systems (which produce soil conditioner, fertiliser, biogas, energy and irrigation water) can contribute to reaching the MDGs beyond sanitation, and consequently present a change of paradigm from purely disposal oriented to rather reuse oriented sanitation;
- to give examples of “smart (and less smart) practice” in sanitation for the “International Year of Sanitation 2008” and beyond;
- to identify and describe the mechanism to up-scale implementation of these examples and develop new financing instruments for pro-poor sanitation provision;
- to develop global and regional visions of how sustainable approaches can be used to promptly reach the sanitation MDG and to promote them in the IYS 2008 and beyond.





How to achieve the objectives? A joint road map

In order to achieve these objectives, a joint road map of sustainable sanitation related activities for the IYS was developed in the meetings of January and April 2007 by participants from more than 30 multi- and bilateral organisations, NGOs and research institutions. The roadmap consists mainly of a series of thematic working groups that will jointly elaborate a range of publications on sustainable sanitation issues, will organise or contribute to international events and will contribute to develop new funding instruments as well as sustainable sanitation capacity building and program initiatives.

The “Sustainable Sanitation Alliance” invites others to join in

SuSanA is not a new organisation, but rather a loose network of organisations working along the same lines, and open to others who want to join

and be active in the promotion of sustainable sanitation systems. The Sustainable Sanitation Alliance invites other international, regional and local organisations to join the network, contribute ideas, and to become active members in the thematic working groups. Feedback for the advancement of the joint road map is certainly appreciated, as it is work in progress that will be continuously up-dated, and will include all joint activities leading towards an increased implementation of sustainable sanitation systems.



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