WaSH and Wellbeing: A Different Dialogue
Changing Evidence and Evidence for Change in Rural Communities

Context

Lack of access to safe water and adequate sanitation coupled with poor hygiene are important threats to human well-being, especially within the context of global environmental change. Changes in temperature and precipitation patterns are altering the distribution of water-related pathogens and vectors. Increasing water scarcity reduces effective hygiene practices, contributing to skin and eye infections as well as gastrointestinal illnesses. A lack of, poor management of, or failing water infrastructure compound these issues, exposing rural populations in particular, to adverse health impacts. There is a critical need, both in Canada and globally, to address the problem of inadequate supplies of clean, safe drinking water in rural, remote communities in order to improve health.

Despite the availability of technological solutions the problems are not solved. The challenge lies in discovering suitable combinations of appropriate and effective hardware (technology) coupled with software (behaviour change, knowledge and understanding) (Schuster-Wallace, 2012). In order to tackle WaSH problems sustainably, it is essential to holistically address water, sanitation and hygiene interactions, effects, and prevention strategies (Elliott, 2011). A search of the relevant academic and grey literature exposed a gap; it fails to reveal systematic attention to these inter-relationships in either policy or practice. In other words, these complex problems require a concerted, transectoral response employing new, integrated, transdisciplinary approaches. Solutions exist that are both affordable and appropriate for many situations around the world. What is missing is an understanding of what works -- when, where and, more importantly, why and the what, where, and why well-intended efforts do not work. Much of this understanding is linked to how technologies become accepted by communities and what behavior change and decision-making processes are involved. This knowledge is critical for scale up practices and can be described as the “evidence for change”. Much of this information comes not from stories of success, but from stories of failure. What didn’t work? What conditions made success elusive? Are we continuously repeating our mistakes but hoping for a different outcome? Is it just a matter of money or are we tilting at windmills?

Purpose

This invitational working symposium will bring together international experts from a variety of sectors to engage in a dialogue concerning WaSH and related health issues faced by rural, remote and indigenous communities. Using the sandbox approach, created by Leitch (2007), this symposium aims to construct a WaSH sandbox that focuses on RRMs (rural, remote, and otherwise marginalized communities) in both developed and
developing countries. The sandbox is a model in which all stakeholders are invited to exchange ideas and best practices in order to negotiate an action plan for moving forward in a co-ordinated and integrated way on a research, policy and practice agenda. The sandbox model has a theoretical base in systems theory, addressing not only components (water, sanitation and hygiene) but the processes (planning, interaction and implementation), in an effort to construct meaningful and effective policy and practice interventions – (the sandcastle). In this instance, the goal is to create an action plan in relation to WaSH. The critical element is cooperation among the key stakeholder groups in order to achieve sustainable outcomes (“play nice”).

Water, sanitation, and hygiene are not simply technological, governance, or socio-economic problems; they are a combination of all of these issues making for a truly “wicked” problem exacerbated by population growth, urbanization, industrialization and climate change. The concept of a “wicked” problem has been applied to public policy dilemmas in which there is recognition of uncertainty about what the issues really are and how they can be resolved (Rittel and Webber, 1979; Weber and Khadmian, 2008). Looking at health and wellbeing from a transdisciplinary perspective, the symposium will retrieve lessons from the field in order to build upon the knowledge that has already been developed and identify opportunities to translate that knowledge into policies that work. An integral part of this process is to identify the gaps in our knowledge in making these translations.

Using the perspectives of knowledge generators, providers, and users, the purpose of the WaSH sandbox process is four-fold:

- To examine current knowledge in relation to sustainable and affordable WaSH approaches in rural, remote and otherwise marginalized communities and their links to human health and well-being [evidence synthesis and evaluation];
- To evaluate approaches in terms of what works and what does not work, at what cost, borne by whom, to promote WaSH in RRM communities [financing and acceptability];
- To examine WaSH impact measurements on health and well-being [monitoring and evaluation]; and,
- To develop a new transformative approach built to address the identified knowledge gaps and opportunities [knowledge translation and knowledge mobilization].

The main objectives of the conference are:
1. Building networks within and between appropriate sectors;
2. Exchanging lessons between researchers and implementers as well as between regions;
3. To broaden the range and efficacy of evidence used for decision making in WaSH;
4. To contribute a gap analysis to the evidence for sustaining and up-scaling appropriate WaSH interventions; and,
5. To identify a framework of engagement for implementing the proposed transformative approach.
**Expected Outcomes**

The symposium is expected to identify key research linkages and gaps, policy needs, and change opportunities which can provide a basis for future work in the field. Specifically, the symposium aims to:

- Synthesize challenges and opportunities in RRM communities in order to identify knowledge gaps related to practice, policy and research in the WaSH sector;
- Develop an action plan; and,
- Initiate the network.

**Expected Outputs**

A monograph will be produced, outlining the key information strengths and gaps identified by experts in the field. The “Framework for Co-operative Play in the WaSH Sandbox” will outline the key information gaps, a research agenda for high priority concerns, and call on policy makers to incorporate information related to WaSH and health into their political agenda.

Additional symposium products will include:

- A background paper exploring each of the components and how they link within the context of WaSH in RRM communities (pre-symposium);
- An action plan for resolving critical gaps and priorities;
- Core teams and one page draft research proposals for future funding opportunities;
- A symposium report highlighting the key messages and discussion points; and,
- An academic paper on adapting the sandbox model for the WaSH sector.

**Opportunities**

This working symposium will provide a unique platform for participants to engage researchers, private sector providers, civil society, and policy makers, across sectors, to create a vision for wellbeing, identify potential sustainable solutions to water and health related challenges in rural communities both within Canada and internationally, and identify gaps in both research and policy. In addition, the monograph will provide an opportunity for participants to influence policy agendas in their home countries. Finally, this conference will create a unique network that integrates knowledge from the environmental, health, industrial, and agricultural sectors in addressing water and health and in achieving the wellbeing vision.

**What’s In It for You?**

1. Get new ideas/knowledge
2. Share on the ground experiences
3. Gain a transdisciplinary perspective
4. Think about the policy-practice links
5. Test ideas about upscaling your practice/research interests
6. Join an international, transdisciplinary community of practice