



**Water & Sanitation Rotarian Action Group (WASRAG)**  
**Report of the Chair to the Annual General Meeting, held at the Rotary**  
**International Convention, Salt Lake City, June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007.**

Fellow Rotarians,

Thank you for becoming members of the Water & Sanitation Rotarian Action Group (WASRAG) and for attending this Annual General Meeting.

In the time available I propose to briefly review our experience during the four months since receiving authorization from Rotary International to form this RAG. More important I want to share with you my vision for the future and how WASRAG can play a truly significant role in bringing safe water and sanitation to the millions lacking this basic human right. But, I also want to allow time for questions and, more important, your input into our future. For that reason I will be brief, touching on the important issues and highlights, and suggesting that for those seeking more detailed information we meet later, or referring you to the quarterly reports which I have been submitting to Rotary International President Bill Boyd, and which will be available on our web site.

**The Rationale**

Over 1.2 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.4 billion lack access to sanitation. Some 6000 children die daily from water-borne and water-related disease.

The United Nations has set, as one of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that by the year 2015 the proportion of people without access to safe water and sanitation should be reduced by 50%.

This is a major challenge for humanity: 47% of the people in sub-Saharan Africa lack access, 28% in Asia, 18% in Latin America and the Middle-East. In rural Ethiopia 88% of the population, 40 million people, lack access. In India, 400 million people lack access to adequate sanitation.

Many United Nations and government agencies, NGOs, foundations and corporations are responding to this challenge. They seek ways to implement water/sanitation projects but their frequent lack of on-the-ground capability causes them to seek local partners. Rotary clubs are well positioned to be such partners. The community roots of the club, its familiarity with local culture and values, its semi-autonomous nature, all lend themselves to a natural alliance with these agencies.

But, there are problems with the current structure of Rotary that inhibit the effectiveness of such alliances. The scale of most projects that are of interest to these agencies is too great for the vast majority of clubs. Clubs need to come together to create “critical mass” in order to be an effective partner.

The autonomous nature of individual clubs and the desire to “do their own thing” during the year of the club president, results in much duplication of effort and the use of inappropriate technology.

Most meaningful water/sanitation projects take three to five years for successful, sustainable completion. The annual turnover of club officers, with their desire to complete “their” project during their year in office makes it difficult to be a major player in the search for safe water and sanitation.

For these and other reasons most Rotary clubs engage in small projects of limited scale and duration. While providing some relief to oppressed communities, their impact is relatively small and much below the potential of our organization.

Many Rotarians see the limitations of the current approach. They are concerned about the lack of sustainability in many Rotary projects. They want to have a meaningful impact on humanity which requires careful, time-consuming, delegation to the local community leaders. They want to enter into alliances with other agencies as an equal member, working together to bring relief to the chosen community. They worry that the technology being used may not be the most appropriate for the given circumstances.

Another limitation of the current annual cycle of Rotary appointments is the difficulty of building and retaining any significant level of expertise. Rotarians seeking the latest information on a specific technology must do their own research, must find for themselves the best source of know-how. And, every Rotarian faces the same challenge. The result too often is a failure to use the best knowledge, or the selection of sub-optimal methodologies. At best, it implies massive duplication as many Rotarians simultaneously seek the same information.

The purpose of the Water & Sanitation Rotarian Action Group is to address these and other related issues.

### **The Year To-date**

The Board of Directors of Rotary International approved the formation of the Water & Sanitation Rotarian Action Group at its meeting during the week of February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007. This approval was based on the document “Application for Recognition as a Rotarian Action Group” which was distributed widely among you and supported by over 200 names.

Following this approval we began to create the website [www.wasrag.org](http://www.wasrag.org) and to prepare content. On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, at the National Press Club we announced the launching of WASRAG. The website was up and running shortly thereafter—subject to fewer than normal start-up problems. At the same time I hired a part-time administrative assistant, Anna Shepherd, to help me with the substantial correspondence that resulted from the website and the administrative workload associated with the formation of a RAG.

The website is designed to assist every Rotary club throughout the life cycle of a project. It provides guidelines to help ensure sustainability from the very conception of a project. It will help a club or district identify another club with which to match—a club needing support, or a club offering support. It will eventually provide guidelines to best practices. It will help you access expertise—both technical, (e.g. how to go about a rainwater harvesting project), or procedural (e.g. how to apply for funding or a matching grant.)

It will inform you of future water and/or sanitation events, conferences etc and provide an electronic meeting place for exchanging ideas and sharing experiences and “lessons learned”.

The other major task has been preparing the display materials for this convention and soliciting members. We are indeed grateful to all those Rotarians and friends who have sent photographs and project descriptions which are on display. Our thanks also go to other organizations with which we cooperate, most notably UNICEF.

Communication with members and prospective members has been the other major demand on our time. Rotarians have many stories to tell. They provide examples of how to design and implement a truly sustainable project. They also, occasionally, show how not to proceed. Regardless of the impact, every project has a lesson for Rotarians wishing to embark on a water or sanitation initiative. We want to bring these cases and lessons to you. But, we cannot do it in a vacuum—we need your input. So, remember the place [www.wasrag.org](http://www.wasrag.org)

## **Our Vision for the Future of WASRAG**

I truly believe that providing access to safe water and sanitation is the great opportunity for Rotary now that we have almost eradicated polio. But, we don't need to wait for that event to set in motion a number of initiatives. Within this next Rotary year I would like to achieve the following goals:

### ***Production of a Compendium of “Best Practices”***

We have already made a start. A draft document on “Sustainability” has been circulated to a number of you. It remains to merge your collective input and produce a document that could be a guideline for all major projects. Many of you share my concern over the lack of sustainability, as do many in The Rotary Foundation where getting “best value” will become even more critical as Rotary expands its scope and scale of operation.

You will be interested to note that “sustainability” was the theme of the water and sanitation workshop at the Rotary International Institute just completed. It has to be a concern for all of us as we embark on larger programs and become more visible to the major funding agencies and foundations.

We also envisage the need for “best practice” guidelines for many of the technical aspects of our projects. Drilling borewells, installing slow-sand filters, utilizing clay pots, implementing SODIS® or rainwater harvesting, building latrines, check dams and pipelines are all within our scope. Many Rotarians are already contributing to this body of knowledge. For example, PDG Jitender Sehgal has written a text on rainwater harvesting.

And these “best practices” are not confined to technical issues. They must also cover the very important “soft” issues such as creating a local water/sanitation management committee, empowering the community, training and behaviour modification. In the past, because of the limited duration and scope of Rotary projects, we have tended to focus on the “hard” or technical aspects. Moving forward we must give at least equal attention to the softer aspects if we wish to ensure sustainability. We need to expand this work and create “models” or “templates” for the majority of repetitive projects.

#### ***Creation of “Expert” Panels***

As Rotarians have signed up for membership in WASRAG it is apparent that we have a lot of talent and expertise within our ranks—to no-one’s surprise I should add. We need to harness this talent. We would like to see a number of expert “panels”, able to provide technical support and know-how/do-how to any project seeking advice. We receive questions frequently such as “How much does it cost to drill a borewell? How do we go about a rainwater harvesting project? How appropriate is a particular filtration system under certain conditions? and so forth. I try to answer these questions to the best of my ability or, more usually, refer them to someone whom I think has the answers or can help. But, Rotarians deserve better. We have, among our members, experience and knowledge to address virtually every problem that will be encountered when implementing a water or sanitation project. We must organize to harness this talent.

#### ***Creation of Regional Councils***

Many Rotarians complain of overlap and duplication among projects in neighbouring communities. Others complain of lack of knowledge of such projects which, had they known about them, would have yielded economies of scale in procuring and/or leasing materials or equipment.

To overcome this situation and to generate synergies within the broader community we envisage a series of regional councils. In this context a “region” could be a country e.g. Kenya, Sri Lanka, Honduras, or it could be a part of a larger country such as Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh or Bihar. These councils would be informed of all potential projects. They would see opportunities for grouping projects together to

improve effectiveness and reduce costs but, more important, be better placed to solicit substantial funding from outside sources.

Initially we see them being a significant coordinating agency in the host country. But they would also find a role among clubs in donor countries where critical mass is necessary to solicit funding from major foundations or corporations.

### ***Creation of “Task Forces”***

The above tasks can only be carried out effectively with input from a number of Rotarians representing a microcosm of the Rotary world—large and small clubs, developed and developing countries, many cultures and socio-economic conditions. Consequently, when Rotarians join WASRAG they will be asked whether they will serve on a task force addressing one of the above or other issues that need to be evaluated.

Only by effectively addressing these issues can we position Rotary as the “NGO of Choice” when communities and/or other organizations seek an alliance to bring safe water and sanitation to the millions crying or help. The implication, of course, of this vision is the need for many more members. To truly fulfill this vision we need them from every part of the Rotary world representing every language, culture and tradition.

Please join me in spreading the word to all your Rotary friends. I would like to think that every Rotary club would have at least one member. This Rotarian will be a continuing link between the club and WASRAG. They will be the catalyst for water/sanitation projects. They will be the spokesperson on WASRAG issues. Most important of all, they will provide the continuity from one year to the next, so essential in international humanitarian service projects but difficult to achieve in the conventional “annual” Rotary cycle.

### ***501c3 Status***

As Rotary clubs undertake larger projects I see the need for significant funding from non-Rotary sources to complement club, district, DDF and TRF contributions. Major foundations will be one such source, as will corporations, government agencies and other NGOs. To access such sources, in North America at least, we need a structure that will allow a donor the benefit of tax reduction on the amount donated. With this end in view we have initiated discussions to obtain what is known in the USA as “501c3” status. In Canada the corresponding designation is a “Charitable - Not-for-Profit” organization. These discussions have only just begun. We will keep you informed during the year as the process evolves.

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Thank you for your continuing support. I look forward, subject to the results of the election of directors, to continuing with you along this exciting road.

F. Ronald (Ron) Denham  
Chair, Water & Sanitation Rotarian Action Group