Introducing the topic in the water sector:

How to conduct a first meeting on transparency, honesty, and corruption

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The argument has been made that the MDG targets can be achieved, without increasing current resources, only by enhancing transparency and reducing corruption[1]. These issues - transparency, honesty, corruption - have finally, after many decades, become a focus of attention in the water sector.

Discussions and meetings to share experience are usually the initial, but essential steps to help mainstream strategies for transparency and honesty in the sector. However these initial meetings and discussions can be difficult because the subject can inspire fear. In a first meeting about transparency/honesty in the water sector, our experience is that people can be afraid, can disagree or can withdraw. We have seen people express great interest and then not attend a discussion. We have seen participants in a first meeting try to compare the level of corruption in one country or continent with another, and through this they offend other participants. People sometimes attend meetings who do not, at first, want to give the name of the institution for which they work. In other cases, one or another particularly zealous participant may want to expose a person or company by name, which can disrupt any effort to share information and positive experience.

Because the subject is sensitive, extra care is needed to build trust. Here are some things we have learned about introducing this important topic. Some of these lessons learned may help you to work with colleagues and other professionals in the sector.

1. An introductory meeting

Some ground rules need to be explained. For us at IRC, these ground rules include:

- Attendance should be voluntary. People should not normally be told to participate in a meeting on this subject.

- Begin by giving an overview of the plan of the meeting or workshop. This will inform participants about what to expect. Emphasize that the meeting will be practical seeking, for example, to identify tools and strategies to enhance transparency and honesty.

- Remind the groups that transparency, honesty, corruption are issues of importance around the world. No country is immune. However this does not mean that corruption should be tolerated.

- Emphasize that there will be no particular "name calling", no exposures. Be positive about the benefits of dealing with the subject and about what is known.

People, if they are unfamiliar with each other, should be introduced but, unlike meetings on other subjects, our experience is that participants may not want or need to mention their institutional affiliation until the end of the meeting, particularly if they do not know the other participants.

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[1] See, for example, the WaterAid case study on achieving the MDGs in Malawi. This study has shown, through careful mapping and survey, that the MDGs can be achieved even with a reduction in resources. See www.wateraid.org.uk

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2. Beginning a meeting

Most people who attend a meeting on this topic have experience and ideas which they can share. We begin by asking each person to describe briefly why they have come. This can raise some interesting issues. One common observation is that, while the issue is important, perhaps the situation can not improve until civil servants, in general, receive adequate salaries, or until the politicians and government in all sectors have improved. In other words, they are asking: Can this subject be dealt with? Can we make a difference?

Indeed, it is very difficult to ensure transparency and avoid corruption if professionals with very low pay are required to manage large resources and donor packages. The urge for rapid disbursement of funds is also an enemy of transparency/honesty in the sector. However, unless a beginning is made, there will never be an improvement, no matter how modest.

3. Definitions

The attempt to establish agreed definitions of words such as *honesty, corruption, transparency* can result in lengthy and not always productive discussion. We prefer to "define" transparency, honest and corruption inductively. This involves listing and exchanging information about examples of "opacity" (lack of transparency) and corruption. For example, in recent meetings, we asked each person to make a list of all the different types of corruption or opacity that he/she could think of. The person who had the longest list then read it out slowly after which other participants added to more examples to the list. This was enjoyable, fairly rapid and informative. At this point it appeared that we had a common, agreed understanding of the scope of the issues.

4. Strategies and tools

It is very useful to share information about tools or strategies that can reduce corruption and enhance transparency. Mainstreaming proven tools and strategies is a key to future improvement. Participants usually have some interesting examples which deserve to be shared. At a meeting in June 2005, we provided a list of tools and strategies that had been collected from an e-conference of the preceding month. During the meeting, participants discussed various items and made several particularly interesting additions. These have been incorporated into the revised list which is shown at the end of this note.

Through this activity, it became obvious that several (although not all) strategies which can improve honesty or reduce corruption, are not specifically directed toward this. Rather many of them are aimed at good governance and effective management, in general. However, the processes of good governance and management, in themselves, increase transparency and reduce corruption.

5. Mainstreaming strategies and tools

For us, the issue is future-oriented. While many tools and strategies are known to improve transparency or reduce corruption, these tend to occur in isolated 'islands of success'. How can these tools and strategies be mainstreamed? How can they be scaled up? How can they be infused into projects and programmes? These types of questions, even though they are difficult, without immediately obvious solutions, still can lead to action. These discussions can be fruitful.

In two meetings, participants have raised the point, for example, that "scaling up" transparency/honesty tools and strategies happens only if people want it. In other works there should be clear answers to questions such as: *What is in it for me if we improve transparency? Why should I work to eliminate corruption?* Example: For politicians, one incentive can be votes. An honest programme can result in consumer satisfaction and more votes.

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Other examples of actions planned in these meetings include: Case studies of good practice. Action research on community management. Preparation of revised implementation plans.

Examples of tools and strategies

Political strategy
- Through honestly-managed programmes, politicians will appear more popular and win votes.
- Decentralization leads to less corruption (some agree, but some people disagree on this).

Stakeholders
- Involve politicians, media, religious leaders in advocating for transparency and honesty.
- Involve civil society, for example, NGOs/CBOs should design and implement water and sanitation projects (some say it will reduce corruption, but others doubt).
- Separate the implementer from the regulator in water sector.
- Reform the government engineering departments through democratization, experimental pilot programmes, voluntary staff participation in planning and quality circles, and so on. The reform leads to cost reductions and more honest working methods.
- Donors (bi-, multi-lateral, international) should implement their own policies on transparency, participation and anti-corruption.
- Involve the private sector more. Increase competition among private players. (Some people agreed, but others doubted this.)
- "Scorpion Unit" that identifies and publicizes corrupt individuals/groups. It can also have ability to initiate litigation.
- Choose work locations for engineers in Government engineering departments by lottery.

Planning
- Use sustainable water sources that are as close as possible to users (not far away to increase monies needed)
- Plan water service with the community. Involve leaders, rich/poor people, men/women.
- Community members participate in (and approve) site selection of water points, the design of water distribution nets, physical mapping.
- A representative community group checks the eligibility of "poor" households for subsidies, using agreed criteria.
- Develop the lowest-cost technologies that are relevant. Develop traditional water systems such as rain water harvesting systems.
- Make clear and agreed plans for O&M, sustainability, reaching the poor.

Implementation
- Perform quickly. Work rapidly in planning, release of fund and implementation. A long delay aids corruption and lacks transparency.
- Implementation strategies should be known and agreed among all stakeholders.

Tendering and contracts
- Tendering: control and openness: public tenders, open documents.
- An agreed code of "zero tolerance" for corruption.
- Include "no bribery", "no corruption" clauses in contracts.
- Private water providers must produce asset management plans showing how services will be extended to the poor.
- For expenses over $100 or $1000 per week (depending on the person or institution) two signatures are required on an A-4 form.

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- Joint signatures on financial and project documents.
- Create a list of contractors known for honesty. Create a list of offending contractors.

Construction
- Community and third party control of quality of construction.
- Materials: manufacturers and suppliers are told there will be no commission and are given immediate payments.
- Purchasing of local materials accompanied by community members.
- Check on quality of materials by one or two of: third party company, ISO, community, NGOs/CBOs.

Cost recovery, payment for water
- Fix water tariffs in blocks according to the quantity used. This reduces opportunities for corruption.
- Use water meters in each household.
- Set up centralized, "one-stop" application/approval points for household water connection.
- Monitor and publish water quality levels of bulk providers, water from treatment plants and bottling plants.
- Have frequent, responsible inspections. Inter-institutional membership.
- Establish and implement rules to immediately stop work if there is any corruption or mis-conduct.

Communication
- Give training in how to report.
- Set strict public reporting requirements for public reporting, for reporting to donors and so on.
- Household latrine construction: give simple plans, list of materials, costs, labour time and labour costs to householders and to masons/contractors.
- Urban water: Publish reports on utility performance levels.
- Publish technical information for public information.
- At the water point site, there can be simple information boards showing the total project cost, who contributes, amounts of contributions, contractor by name, prices, expected date of completion.
- Computerize data collection on water and management and make this available to the public.
- Media reports highlighting problems of corruption or lack of transparency.
- Media reports highlighting good practice.

Monitoring/reporting
- Check and act on unpaid for water by companies and institutions.
- Check illegal connections and fine (legalize) or stop service to these.
- Fault reporting and complaints systems for water: Set up fault reporting/complaints system, including planning with community members how/where to report.
- Protect the staff involved in transparency/honesty issues: transfers and tenure.

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