

# THE GROWING MOMENTUM OF WASH

*Water, sanitation and hygiene seek higher profile*

by Steve Werner

**I**n my speeches, I often open with the following lines: “Think about the first four or five things you do every morning. Use the toilet? Wash your face? Brush your teeth and have something to drink? Now think about what your life would be like if you didn’t have access to safe drinking water and proper sanitation.” The majority of people in the world, I go on to say, don’t have the safe drinking water and proper sanitation that we take for granted. Currently about 900 million people lack safe drinking water and about 2.6 billion people don’t have access to proper sanitation.

As Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, we probably appreciate the importance of safe drinking water, proper sanitation and hygiene education more than most citizens. And that is why the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector needs your active support; because most citizens in Western-industrialized countries don’t realize that water-related health concerns are collectively the largest health problems in the world. Over 6,000 people per day—mostly children under the age of five—die from water-related health illnesses.

In recent years there have been positive developments. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) include two goals related to halving the proportion of people in the world who lack safe drinking water and proper sanitation. There has been progress on the MDG for safe drinking water, but sanitation has been much more difficult to achieve. The United Nations’ designated World Water Day has been an opportunity for annual celebrations, awareness and pledges to do more to improve water



services to those more vulnerable. More businesses and foundations are making water-related programs part of their philanthropic strategies. Organizations like Rotary

International and Lions Club International are encouraging their members to support WASH projects. Water is even a prominent part of Rotary’s new strategic plan.

Peace Corps has also made water an important part of its new strategic plan. Peace Corps’ Water and Sanitation department not only supports volunteers whose service is focused on WASH programs, but they also assist volunteers who find out that there are many water and sanitation needs in their community or school, so many volunteers make a water project a secondary project.

Secretary Hillary Clinton has been the featured speaker during the last two World Water Day celebrations in Washington, D.C. She articulately shared her view that addressing water-related health concerns was not only the humanitarian but strategically important thing for America to focus on. For people at the bottom of the pyramid, one of the best ways for our country to demonstrate its values is to help reduce the risk of premature death and suffering from water-related health concerns. As a tangible way to put words into action, USAID appointed Christian Holmes, an experienced and senior staff member, as a coordinator for global water concerns. Chris will help ensure that USAID’s water strategy is coordinated closely across the agency and with other

important development priorities.

While the WASH sector is pleased to have strong bi-partisan leadership in the U.S. Congress, the amount of funds in the foreign affairs budget (which is under assault by legislators that want to make drastic cuts even in effective programs like Peace Corps and WASH programs) is tiny compared to funding for other health concerns. The goal isn’t to cut funding from other important issues, but to invest in programs that are making a difference in people’s lives. WASH programs aren’t “hand-outs,” but “hand-ups.”

Finally, many RPCVs work in the WASH sector either overseas, in senior staff positions, or with advocacy efforts and many RPCVs were personally affected by the WASH problems where they served. The WASH Advocacy Initiative, an independent and effective advocacy coalition in Washington, D.C., welcomes the active assistance of RPCVs, former staff and friends of the Peace Corps. Please go to [www.washinitiative.org](http://www.washinitiative.org) for more information and to learn how you can get involved. If not you, who? If not now, when?

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*Steve Werner (RPCV South Korea 1976 to 1978) served as a health program volunteer. He was a NPCA board member from 1985 to 1991 and NPCA board chair from 1990 – 1991. Steve has worked in the international development field for about 25 years with several organizations, including as executive director of Water For People from 2002 to 2007, member of the steering committee for the WASH Advocacy Initiative, and is currently consulting for many international NGOs that work on WASH programs*