



AGUASAN

**The Story of a Remarkable Community
of Practice Addressing Water Supply and
Sanitation in Developing Countries**



The Beginnings of AGUASAN

AGUASAN dates back to the beginning of the 1980s when a UNDP funded “Global Project on Low Cost Water Supply and Sanitation” was started. The World Bank was given the responsibility for the coordination of this project and a multidisciplinary team was created - the „Technical Advisory Group” (TAG). During the course of this project, the TAG wanted to produce a slide show on adapted technologies and the members were interested to learn more about what was going on in Switzerland. As the coordinator of the TAG already had contacts, he got in touch with IWRCD (now SANDEC), the Department for Water and Sanitation in Developing Countries at the Swiss Federal Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (EAWAG). IWRCD and the TAG planned to hold a meeting and the representative of IRCWD invited also four other colleagues he knew through his work: one colleague from DEH (now SDC, the Swiss

A spin-off of a meeting of the „Global Project on Low Cost Water Supply and Sanitation” in 1983

Agency for Development and Cooperation), one from the Swiss NGO Helvetas (Swiss Association for International Cooperation), one from EPFL (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne) and one from SKAT (The Swiss Centre for Appropriate Technology - now Skat Foundation). On May 3, 1983 two representatives of the TAG met with this small group of Swiss experts working on water supply and sanitation issues.

The meeting was lively and interesting. They shared their views and ideas and during the meeting it was felt by all that the group should meet more regularly. They decided to get back together for a second time, and in this way the first AGUASAN meeting took place on September 29, 1983 in the offices of IWRCD in Dübendorf - a village in the suburbs of Zurich. This was the start for a community that has continued to meet four times each year for one day for knowledge sharing – right up to the present date. Initially, they called themselves the “Water Supply and Sanitation” group, but they changed the name in January 1985 to “AGUASAN – Swiss Committee for Water Supply and Sanitation in Developing Countries”.

The Core and the Community

In the first few years, the membership of AGUASAN consisted mainly of its founders. With the exception of one organisation, the founding members still form the core of the group. The core has remained strongly committed to AGUASAN and its members have put heart and soul into ensuring uninterrupted exchange as the group matured and evolved.

Over time, AGUASAN gradually enlarged its membership along the lines of its thematic interests, becoming a larger and more interdisciplinary group. In 1989, a researcher from the ETHZ – the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich joined the group. In 1991, the first woman – a social scientist from the University of Zurich - became a member, reflecting the wishes of the group to have more women represented and to incorporate insights

The group wanted to keep its informal nature and its small size to ensure that everybody has enough time for discussion

from social sciences. In the mid-nineties, another expansion occurred. The group expressed the wish to discuss water and sanitation issues in a wider context and asked the Swiss Tropical Institute (STI), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) at the University of Bern to join the group.

AGUASAN started off with an informal character and a small size to ensure that all members would have enough time for discussion during a one-day, face-to-face meeting. The 2004 incarnation of AGUASAN has reached a critical size for this type of interaction; for the group to become any larger and still serve its members well, new modes for knowledge sharing would be necessary.

The circle of professionals within AGUASAN seems to be quite closed at first glance and AGUASAN has even been referred to as the “water mafia” – although usually with tongue firmly in cheek. In fact, the group has always sought external exchange with others.



Firstly, there is an outer circle of participants that attend meetings only irregularly. Secondly, AGUASAN invites guests for presentations and topical discussion at almost every meeting. The range of guests is rich in diversity. It includes representatives of international organisations and institutes, members of pensioners voluntary associations working for development cooperation, and 'less conventional' people - including a water diviner and a rainmaker.

Through its members, AGUASAN is also well connected to developments going on in international alliances such as the Global Water Partnership. Since its first contacts with the TAG in 1983, AGUASAN has kept close contacts with the Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP) of the World Bank. Moreover, AGUASAN members were actively involved in establishing the Water and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), and AGUASAN decided which of their members would participate in which thematic working group. The participants of the WSSCC working groups reported back regularly at AGUASAN meetings to ensure that the entire group was informed about what was happening inside each of the Council's focus areas.

Although (or perhaps because) AGUASAN is interconnected to many organisations, the group has been able to keep a considerable degree of independence. No community is fully independent; there are always external influences at play. But the organisations making up AGUASAN more or less took their hands off and gave their representatives free rein to exercise their creativity. This independence made it possible to build up an atmosphere of trust – the basic condition for true knowledge sharing. It gave the members the freedom to look left and right and to explore ideas without restrictions.

The independence of AGUASAN allowed the members to open up and enabled trust – the basic precondition for knowledge sharing

The independent reflection that takes place within AGUASAN is also possible because the group's constituents are financially supported – some with programme or core funding from SDC – in such a way that they can dedicate time to the community without having to show a direct impact resulting from their participation. This also means that the group's members were not forced to compete with each other for mandates from SDC.

Always a Full Agenda

What really happens at those regular AGUASAN meetings? The agenda is always full and issues to be discussed are never lacking. Even on the rare occasions when there are only a few agenda points, time gets very short.

There are some agenda points that come up more or less systematically at meetings. One such recurrent theme is "mission reports". The group decided that sharing the outcome of assignments would help the group to stay focused and relevant - by keeping in close contact with what's really going on in developing countries. Based on the personal involvement of several AGUASAN members in certain developing countries, a close follow-up of development issues was possible. This was particularly true for a case in Lesotho, where several AGUASAN members were

Sharing the outcome of assignments in developing countries helped the group to stay focused and relevant

involved in various water supply projects as they were subjected to the successive influences of decentralisation, the adoption of the sector wide-approach (SWAP) and privatisation. Those developments were closely monitored and regularly discussed at the meetings.

Another regular item on the agenda: researchers are invited to present the latest results of their endeavours. Other returning agenda points include the annual AGUASAN workshops, the policy of SDC in the water sector, and a variety of long-running topics like the development of SODIS (a household water disinfection system using just sunlight and PET bottles).

Certain topics and countries have regularly commanded more of the group's attention, mainly because of the preoccupations of its members. The recurrence of these priorities underlines the way AGUASAN works – it is a true community that is led by the interests of its constituents and it supports them in doing their work better.



An Informal Group with a Few Clear Rules

AGUASAN was always quite an informal group and many members think that this is one of the reasons for its continued success.

AGUASAN is an informal group without many administrative procedures

The members share a common passion for a range of thematic issues and not for administrative procedures. Nevertheless, the group has a few unwritten rules to guide it. Right from the outset, the group members decided that they would meet every four months (later changed to every three months) for one day. And this rule was really taken seriously: so far, AGUASAN meetings have always taken place according to plan - with just one exception - since the group was established in 1983.

The responsibility for setting the agenda, chairing each meeting, and taking the minutes rotates among the members. The member who takes the minutes at one meeting is responsible for collecting the agenda points for the next meeting and will then chair it, selecting a new volunteer for recording the minutes. The group shares these administrative responsibilities evenly. Although these rules are informal, the members are well aware of them and work together in a disciplined way. Up to now, the minutes for every meeting have been compiled. The members of the core group have

participated at almost every meeting – over a twenty-year period! Many of them are very busy professionals, but the dates of the AGUASAN meetings are sacred in their agendas. They participate because AGUASAN is an important source of knowledge, but also because it is a community for knowledge sharing. Their active participation is expected from the other members. If somebody wants to be a member of AGUASAN, he or she has to make a firm commitment from the outset to give as well as to take.

AGUASAN meetings are a sacred time for many members

One rule of the group is written down - a rule that shows how sensitive communities of practice can be with membership matters. From the beginning, it was clear to the group that private consultants or companies should not be regular members of AGUASAN. The group was afraid that such members would mainly lurk for mandates of SDC and that competition within the group could be created – something that could hamper open discussions and knowledge sharing. AGUASAN also wanted to remain a small community in order to maintain the high intensity of experience exchange. To make sure that the private sector is not excluded completely from AGUASAN (and vice versa), the group regularly maintains exchange through invited guests.

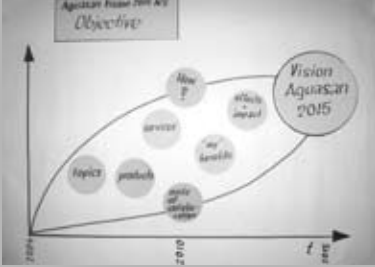
Keeping the Focus in a Changing Context

The focus of AGUASAN is and always has been on drinking water supply and sanitation. This does not mean, however, that the group neglected peripheral or crosscutting issues related to this focus. AGUASAN was open and members adjusted their areas of interest again and again in response to new developments.

Over the last 20 years, the development context - and corresponding approaches – has changed considerably. This constantly changing environment has influenced the evolution of AGUASAN. In 1980, the United Nations declared the first international water

AGUASAN always focused on the interests of its members: drinking water supply and sanitation

decade and numerical targets for “water for all” were formulated. To achieve those objectives, new and adapted technologies were needed; this was the starting point for AGUASAN. In the mid-eighties, the issue of maintenance for the new (and already failing) infrastructure became more important. At the beginning of the 1990s, the social sides of water supply and sanitation rose to prominence under the banners of community development and gender. Around 1995, the concept of “integrated water resources management” (IWRM) started to emerge. Regarding IWRM, AGUASAN was not sure how it could take up this much broader issue without losing its identity altogether. Finally, the group decided to maintain its focus on water supply and sanitation issues but to remain in tune with broader influences



(such as IWRM) to preserve the relevance of AGUASAN. In 1997, IWRM was chosen as the topic for the annual AGUASAN workshop “Less Water for more People”:

Right from the beginning, there was a deliberate distribution of thematic interests between the members. At the first AGUASAN meeting, it was decided that EPFL would be responsible for all literature and information on sanitation issues in French language, and IRCWD would carry the same responsibility for resources in German. Skat was designated as being responsible for literature and information on the thematic issue of water supply. Later, STI was considered as the

resource centre for health issues and CDE became the group's champion for water resources in general.

There have been several discussions about whether AGUASAN should widen its focus to include broader issues related to the central theme. Each time, the outcome was the same – the group remained convinced that “a cobbler should stick to his last” and decided to keep its focus. By keeping this focus, the content of meetings always had a high relevance for all participants, helping them in their work and motivating them to participate further. If occasions arose where a topic from beyond the central theme needed to be discussed, specialised external contributions were invited.

A Community with Spirit

What holds the AGUASAN together? First of all, it's the passion that the professionals who make up the group share – in particular those of the core group - for their work and for the theme of water supply and sanitation in developing countries. A strong, intrinsic motivation can be felt while talking with the members of AGUASAN. They love to share their ideas with other professionals and they appreciate the high quality of discussions at the AGUASAN meetings.

But the relevance of the content is not the only reason why this community is thriving. AGUASAN also has

The members of AGUASAN are good working colleagues

cultivated a unique community spirit that holds the group together. The members are always looking forward to meeting their colleagues; some consider each other as friends.

In AGUASAN - like every community of practice - individuals with different backgrounds and interest come together. There are always hierarchies in communities, but the hierarchy among the members in AGUASAN is very flat - in fact it is more a distribution of functions and roles. Some members are more active than others; there are members that are often quite expressive; others may be more introspective. It is important for the group spirit that nobody goes to the meetings just to gain without giving something back to the group - there is a win-win-situation for everybody. From the beginning, the group cultivated a positive attitude towards discussion. Many of the exchanges have been quite controversial but none have ever set off irreconcilable conflicts.

Invisible Outputs of a Visible Community

What has AGUASAN achieved over twenty years? Was it really worth all the time that the AGUASAN members spent at those meetings? The first simple answer is if AGUASAN had generated no benefit for its members, they wouldn't have continued to participate. For them, the participation represented a golden opportunity to access valuable information first-hand, an unequalled sounding board with which to explore new ideas, and an excellent networking opportunity by meeting with working colleagues on a regular basis.

Benefits from AGUASAN radiate well beyond the immediate circles of the group members, stretching into the water and sanitation

AGUASAN is an excellent sounding board to share and explore ideas

sector as a whole. For SDC, AGUASAN represents an excellent opportunity to solicit informal feedback from a comprehensive selection of skilled practitioners and researchers on a range of new ideas. Since SDC



is an active bilateral donor in the international arena of development - with a particular interest in water supply and sanitation issues and only limited internal capacity - AGUASAN's influence is potentially far reaching. The community has also acted as a multiplier, making it possible for SDC to enhance its impact in the water and sanitation sector with only very limited internal capacity. In addition, the group supported SDC with the coordination in the sector. AGUASAN's ongoing partnership with SDC is embodied in SDC's water sector policy, as the group made considerable contributions to the drafting of this important document. The impact of AGUASAN was not limited to its partnership with SDC. By actively participating in international working groups, workshops and

conferences, the members of AGUASAN were able to share the AGUASAN way of thinking with the water and sanitation community as a whole.

What may be surprising is that AGUASAN never produced any publications other than the minutes of meetings. The group does not operate a website or an online discussion platform. This apparent lack of identifiable output perfectly reflects the understanding of AGUASAN: it is a face-to-face community for learning and sharing, and not a tool for producing something. It is the individual members of AGUASAN who then produce something or offer their enhanced services, and AGUASAN is the forum for sharing what is produced or for developing new ideas.

The AGUASAN Workshops – The Think Tank

Something would be missing in the AGUASAN picture if the annual workshops did not get a mention in this paper. These famous, 5-day workshops take place each year in Rotschuo, an ideal retreat at the borders of the lake Lucerne in Switzerland. At the second AGUASAN meeting, SKAT proposed that the group should organise annual workshops on water supply and sanitation issues in developing countries. The idea was to have a forum for in-depth exchange, reflection and learning, bringing together project field staff, desk officers, researchers, experts and consultants. These workshops would also be an opportunity for the community to open up by inviting participants from developing countries.

The first workshop took place in July 1984. Ironically, it had to be abandoned after 3 days due to exceptionally heavy rain, causing flooding and threatening severe landslides into the lake. Clearly, the sorcerer's apprentices had much to learn before they would master their subject! However, following on from this rather jerky start, 5-day AGUASAN workshops have taken place in June each year, right up to the present date. Representatives of AGUASAN's core have always successfully chosen a "hot" topic for each workshop.

Each year, this group teams up with an external facilitator to carefully prepare and structure the next event; the group meets several times during the period between one workshop and the next.

AGUASAN workshops offer a perfect opportunity to disconnect from daily duties to fully explore new ideas and to learn from one another

AGUASAN workshops have always been funded by SDC. With this longstanding financial support, SDC is not just supporting workshop events; it is also supporting the AGUASAN community as a whole. Over the years, the workshops have become the yearly "moment fort" for the community. The workshops are an excellent occasion for AGUASAN to explore new issues and trends by listening to contributions and by discussing case studies through group work. The thematic inputs of the workshops considerably influence the work of AGUASAN, its constituents and its partners. Last but not least, the workshops refresh the spirit and cohesion of the community, and AGUASAN is revitalised for further work.



AGUASAN Workshops 1984 - 2003

No.	Year	Title
	1984	Water and Sanitation
1	1985	Appropriate Technologies in Water Supply and Sanitation
2	1986	Participation and Animation
3	1987	Sanitation
4	1988	Operation and Maintenance
5	1989	Monitoring and Evaluation in Drinking Water and Sanitation Projects
6	1990	Sustainability of Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Projects
7	1991	Communication in Development Cooperation
8	1992	Water and Sanitation Knowledge System
9	1993	Water is not a Free Resource (anymore) - Who Pays?
10	1994	Sustainable Water and Sanitation Projects through Fair Negotiations
11	1995	Urban Sanitation
12	1996	Transfer of Ownership in Water Supply and Sanitation Systems
13	1997	Less Water for More People
14	1998	Technology and Balanced Development
15	1999	Private Sector - Just a (new) Hope?
16	2000	HCA - The Household-centered Approach
17	2001	From Sector Reform to Sector Revolution
18	2002	Profits for all - Service for all
19	2003	This Shit Drama - Are there Ways out?

The Success of AGUASAN – No Simple Answers

The story of the AGUASAN community of practice is really extraordinary. For over twenty years, the members of this community have continued to meet with outstanding regularity. At a time when everything becomes faster and where reliability and continuity seem to fade away, AGUASAN has acted like an anchor - a stable pillar in the rough sea of development cooperation. The community avoided obsolescence and it did not get bogged down in ideological positions. New and younger members replaced those who left to group or retired. The community still is thriving and very lively. The "Vision 2015 Workshop" in February 2004 was an impressive demonstration that the community would like to continue its work. Many ideas were developed and first decisions for the next steps forward were taken.

**AGUASAN is mirror
of life – a multifaceted
lively organism**

What are the reasons for this exceptional track record? What is the secret behind this community? As with many lively and complex organisms – and a community of practice is comparable with a complex organism in many ways – it is quite hard to tell, even with the benefit of hindsight. Is it only by fortunate coincidence, or did the members just have a lucky hand? There is no simple answer, but clues can be found throughout this story – factors may include the good team spirit, the common and unrelenting focus, the shared passion, the degree of independence the group enjoyed, the funding situations of the organisations represented. Many more factors could be suggested, but finally the miracle of lively communities will always hide some of them.



About this Story

This brochure is a consequence of an SDC funded initiative studying the success factors behind AGUASAN as a community of practice and what other communities can learn from this experience. This story is a condensed summary of more detailed analysis. It is based on document studies, interviews with former and current members of AGUASAN and the observations of the author. A more detailed report will become available in May 2004.

Every community is unique and has to find its own spirit, structures and processes. This case study cannot be taken as a blueprint for other communities of practice. If you, dear reader, learn something from this practical example - what a community of practice is and how it works, or if you get inspiration for your own community of practice, or if you even get motivated to start up a new community, the purpose of this case study is achieved.

Contact

As with all stories, this tale has been told from the perspective of the narrator and it only focuses on a few aspects of AGUASAN. Every member of AGUASAN has his or her own story to tell. To read this brochure is one thing, but to listen to a member of a community of practice is quite another. Are you interested in more information? Would you like to know more about AGUASAN and how it works? Please get in touch with one of the following AGUASAN members:

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