CEO Water Mandate Speech

- **What are the primary ways through which companies can (and should) attempt to improve community access to water services and / or fulfil the human right to water?**
- **What types of corporate contributions are most needed / effective?**
- **What must companies do to avoid mistrust around the issue with key stakeholders?**
- **What can companies do to advance the issue in the absence of government management capacity or political will or when governments are corrupt?**

The activity around public policy interaction, the spirit in which the public policy briefing paper has been written and the interest in the right to water are really exciting developments. As I am not sure how much people in the room know, I would first like to introduce you to WaterAid, before beginning to answer the questions set in relation to public policy and rights.

WaterAid was set up in 1981 by the UK water industry in response to the decade of action on drinking water and sanitation. We are an organisation that is able to work to scale and that has gained the respect and trust of decision makers across the globe. Since it was set up WaterAid has enabled over 13 million people to access clean water

and over 8 million with sanitation. Last year alone we helped 1 million people access water and 2 million to access sanitation. We currently work in 26 countries across Asia, the Pacific region, and Africa. We have marketing, fundraising and back office functions in Stockholm, Melbourne, New York and London.

WaterAid has been able to successfully reach these numbers of people because communities are placed at the heart of our projects. The voice of communities, their needs and requirements, form the core of our work and are vital in helping to ensure the sustainability of water and sanitation programmes. However, given the scale of the situation, almost 1 billion without access to clean water and 2.6 billion without access to sanitation, and in order to deliver the biggest bang for our buck, we recognise that working in communities alone is not sufficient to address the problem. Our projects and the voices and the needs of the local people form the basis of an influencing agenda,

designed to capture the political will and resource required to tackle the issues. This approach ensures that WaterAid projects enable more people to access water and sanitation; than those we directly reach through building water and sanitation infrastructure. It's in this wider space for influencing and partnership which finds me here at the CEO Water Mandate. I am currently leading a programme of work at WaterAid, to understand how we might better engage with business to achieve greater access to water and sanitation for the poor globally.

In the next few minutes I will touch upon business fulfilling access to water through community water schemes, incorporating the right to water into water stewardship practices, the exciting space that cooperative policy engagement activities offer, the risks created from cynicism on the topic and the difficulty of tackling these issues in unstable political environments.

WaterAid's position on the right to water is clear. Our vision is of a world where everyone has access to an equitable supply of water. The right to water is intrinsic within Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and it is explicitly mentioned in the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. From WaterAid's perspective the right to water right should be respected by business ensuring that policy and practice does not compromise people's ability to access water.

Fulfilling people's right to water and respecting people's right to water are linked. Both are different and both very important. Having explained our interpretation of respecting the right to water, our interpretation of fulfilling that right relates to the provision of access. There are plenty of examples of how business has made real commitments to fulfil people's access to water and sanitation by investing in local community access projects.

Motivations for businesses vary but common reasons identified are the protection of social license, and demonstrating a wider contribution to society as part of CSR initiatives. The global situation is dire. And the more people able to access a sustainable water and sanitation supply the better. It is a hard point to argue against and when done in the right way is to be applauded. At this point I would urge that when business engages in community programmes, that it works with and consults civil society actors for whom community led water and sanitation projects are specialisms. There are examples where business has tried to tick a number of CSR boxes, such as including employee engagement, and have created problems for themselves by being sucked into programmes of work that are not core business specialisms. In these cases the employee involvement activities have directly replaced key elements of community ownership essential to achieving sustainability. These businesses are subsequently drawn into

management issues which should be managed by the community or the relevant local government authority. In the long term it is the responsibility of government, while they currently lack capacity or political will it is vital that ownership is taken by them. There is clearly a role for business to engage in direct service delivery programmes but I would strongly urge business to partner with NGOs that have this specialist knowledge. Working together will ensure that programmes of work can be coordinated and fit with national plans.

The world is littered with hardware that has failed and the more that can be done to try and ensure sustainable water programmes the better.

While direct access projects are a visible way of demonstrating to stakeholders that business are fulfilling the right to water. Based on water scarcity predictions; respecting the right to water is where business water

users have the potential to make a significant difference. Investing in local community water projects, while important, isn't necessarily the best way for business to ensure long term community access. Good water stewardship will undoubtedly play an important role in protecting the ability to access water. Stewardship schemes which aim for water neutrality or other similar concepts, when applied in the local context make real sense. As part of good water stewardship practices WaterAid believes that company policy should make reference to respecting people's right to water. Building on the recommended framework to protect, respect and remedy resulting from John Ruggie's current review on business and human rights, business will have an explicit duty to respect a wide range of rights. WaterAid would like to see business committing to this framework and to be transparent and open through public declarations of how company activities will do no harm. Water stewardship activities will help in relation to protecting water availability

but won't necessarily tackle the issue of people actually being able to access water on a wider scale.

This is where the public policy paper drafted by the CEO Water Mandate opens up a potentially very exciting space. The oft quoted power and influence of business could help apply pressure and focus political will in relation to people being able to access water and sanitation. The space for civil society and businesses pushing for amongst other things effective regulatory frameworks, increased regulatory monitoring and enforcement, for investment and infrastructure, and ensuring equitable access to water and sanitation is a space worthy of exploration. This space suggests there is the potential to make a positive difference for both businesses and local communities.

This opportunity brings with it risks for all sides. Civil society organisations have to balance the needs and

views of its stakeholders, these views will vary based on cultural context. Labels of cooption by business and supporting corporate green washing are quick to be applied by elements from across the diverse range of stakeholders. This is a real risk as reputation is hard won but easily lost. With this risk in mind the commitment and integrity of a partnership approach is absolutely critical. I would really welcome feedback to understand the risks that policy engagement holds and to understand better the challenges that this presents to business. From my opinion and without a complete picture on the business challenges, I can foresee a way of avoiding mistrust is to engage in the wider debate around water and sanitation. Engagement with water is open to public cynicism as it has been identified as a business risk. Sanitation on the other hand tends to be a taboo subject, and has been criminally overlooked for too long. It is the most off track MDG behind maternal mortality, and all evidence suggests that the greatest health benefits can be achieved through

sanitation. By truly engaging in the wider debate around water and sanitation, this could help build credibility and alleviate stakeholder mistrust. Outside of this broadening of horizons and speaking from experience, there is a nervousness of those businesses where the intention to engage in water projects stems from branding projects or where there are requirements made by corporate PR departments. This is where cynics can attack businesses as rhetoric from these initiatives is not typically backed up by business policy commitments. The good of the programmes in the eyes of the cynic is outweighed by the perceived harm being done through business operations. Clear and transparent commitments to respect the right to clean water as part of corporate water stewardship programmes could help avoid mistrust and demonstrate a much greater commitment.

The last point I have been asked to speak on is where in the absence of political will, government management

capacity or corruption, what companies can do despite these hurdles. The honest answer is that we all struggle to operate in unstable political environments and that there is no one right answer. Activities undertaken will be context dependent and in these situations it is fundamental to be as open and transparent as possible. This is where cross sectoral partnerships focusing on positive policy change, working with respected and knowledgeable civil society organisations and bringing the power and influence of businesses both individually and collectively can help minimise risk and bring about positive change in support of securing people's long term access to water and sanitation.

In summary, business has a role to play in fulfilling access to water through community water schemes. However by making provision to respect the right to water in stewardship policy practices, and adopting the principle of do no harm in relation to people's ability to access water.

There is the potential to make a far greater impact than through fulfilment projects alone. This impact can be further enhanced through the exploration of and the engagement with cooperative policy advocacy activities. All sides share risks resulting from external cynicism and operating in unstable environments. By entering into conversation and understating how collectively we can address business and social needs, there is real potential to make a positive difference to the global water and sanitation crisis.