

DEVELOPING VOLUNTARY INTERNATIONAL WATER MANAGEMENT STANDARDS: A CASE STUDY OF ISO TECHNICAL COMMITTEE 224

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations declared access to safe drinking water as basic human right in 2002. Yet more than one billion people around the world do not have access to clean water, and an estimated 2.4 billion lack basic sanitation. The international development community, as well as national and local governments, is struggling to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to halve the number of people without drinking water and sanitation. Concurrently, the private water services industry is growing rapidly, with estimated market size of nearly \$300 billion in 2005. Against this backdrop, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) launched an initiative to develop international standards in the area of drinking water supply and wastewater services.

ISO is the world's largest, and perhaps most widely recognized, organization that creates international standards. ISO began creating technical and engineering standards in the late 1940s for things like hardware and film, however, in recent years it has expanded into a broader range of areas relating to social and environmental policy. In addition to the water management standards discussed here, such issues include environmental management, climate change, and corporate social responsibility. As with many of these issues, the implications of ISO's voluntary private standards on water management remain unclear. This paper outlines ongoing work towards developing international water management standards and identifies several performance related issues.

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HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS

In May 2001, the French standard body put forward a proposal to develop water management standards within ISO. Although the required number of ISO member countries approved the French proposal, several countries including the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom voted against the development of such standards. Part of the concern may have stemmed from the fact that France is home to two private corporations that dominate the international water and wastewater sectors. It was feared that an ISO committee dominated by these industry groups might create global standards that disproportionately favor private compa-

nies and accelerate the push towards privatization of water services worldwide.

In late 2001, ISO Technical Committee (TC) 224 – Service Activities Relating to Drinking Water Supply and Sewerage – was officially formed to develop the new international water management standards. At the first meeting of TC 224 in March 2002, the overall structure of the standards was determined and four Working Groups – Terminology, Service to Users, Drinking Water, and Wastewater Systems – were created to develop their contents. Progress since the first meeting has been slow. After three years of discussions, multiple face-to-face meetings, and several rounds of drafting, the first formal versions of the standards (called 'Committee Drafts') were completed in March 2005. They have since been circulated to TC 224 member countries for review, comment, and voting by the end of June 2005. Comments submitted on the drafts will be discussed and incorporated at the next plenary meeting in Berlin, Germany, in October 2005. Assuming the present versions of the standards are approved during this interim ballot, the documents will still have to undergo at least two more formal iterations before being published as final ISO standards, currently scheduled for 2007.

Twenty-five countries are actively participating in the development of the standards, along with 18 countries serving in an observer capacity. Seven international organizations including the International Water Association (IWA), Consumers International, World Health Organization, and World Bank, are also participating in the work.

OVERVIEW OF THE STANDARDS

According to the TC 224 business plan (ISO, 2004), the main purposes of these water management standards are to:

- (1) further the dialogue among stakeholders, including consumers, local or national water authorities, public or private water utilities, research departments, laboratories;
- (2) develop a mutual understanding of responsibilities and tasks;
- (3) provide methods and tools to define, at local scale, objectives and specifications, and assess performance; and
- (4) monitor performance for possible bench marking among water utilities.

The scope of the standards is broad and the primary audiences for the standards are water utilities and public authorities, with a secondary audience being water users and other stakeholders. TC 224 will produce three separate standards. The first standard, titled

"Guidelines for the Service to Users," draws up an inventory of user expectations and provides for each a performance indicator and/or recommended guidance for meeting that expectation. Expectations cover access to water and sanitation services, quality of the service (price of service, continuity of water supply, etc.), contract management and billing (response to billing complaints, etc.), relationship with users (visits to the user, participation of the users, etc.), protection of the environment (efficiency in the use of resources, environmental impact, etc.), safety and emergency measures, quality of water, etc.

The second and third standards, one each for drinking water services and wastewater services, aims to achieve improved accountability in services by providing guidelines on management of water utilities. They describe physical (infrastructural) and managerial (institutional) components of water utilities, and list objectives for water services including protection of public health, provision of services, sustainability of water utility, promotion of sustainable development of the community, and protection of the environment. Sets of guidelines for the management of utilities are followed by possible actions that may be taken to achieve the objectives for each management activity. The two standards then list criteria for the assessment of service performance, as well as guidance on how to select performance indicators.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Addressing the issue of performance indicators (PIs) has been a major focus of discussions in this standards development process. Several countries have advocated that their own sets of PIs be included in the standards, and others have voiced concern about the usefulness of creating another set of PIs in addition to those already developed by IWA or through various national initiatives. Still others worry about the possible negative effects and burden for standard users by imposing a single set of PIs on countries and communities located around the world with vastly different socio-economic and environmental conditions. After much debate, the current drafts focus on providing guidance on selection of appropriate PIs and on including some example PIs. The standards characterize PIs as "one of the possible support tools for continuous improvement," and state that PIs "should not in any case be considered as a prerequisite or condition for the implementation of a water policy or for the financing of projects or programs."

In sum, the ISO water standards set out high level objectives, description, and criteria for better drinking water and wastewater services (i.e., they provide management related guidance to be applied on a voluntary basis). They focus on the results (i.e., better service), rather than specifying how these results should be achieved, such as management structure or design of construction of drinking water supply systems and sewage systems. They do not attempt to address an "acceptable level" of quality of service, nor do they address minimum values or performance ranges. The standards are not intended to substitute for any national/

local regulation, and exclude standardization of drinking water quality or limits of acceptability for wastewater discharged to the receiving waters.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

While these standards are yet to be finalized, there are some fundamental challenges and issues that have not been addressed in the ISO water standards development process to date – and it may not even be possible to address these given ISO's inherent structure and purpose. First, attention to – and participation in – these new ISO standards does not appear to correspond to the vast potential influence these standards could have on the water services sector worldwide. Historically, ISO standards have been produced as a result of pressure by an industry in need of an international standard in order to advance/develop a particular market, product, or technology. But this does not appear to be the case in the context of ISO's water standards, which seem to suffer from indifference or "defense-of-the-status-quo" participation by large segments of the services sector. This might be explained by the fact that water is a resource that is in large part managed locally (in some cases regionally) according to a wide range of socio-economic and environmental conditions.

Another ongoing challenge for the standards writers has been to develop guidance that is sufficiently precise to be of value to the users, while at the same time attempting to keep it broad and general enough to enable the standards to be applied in both industrialized and developing countries and in big cities, small towns, and rural areas, all with a range of socio-economic and environmental conditions. It remains unclear if and how the final standards will accomplish this fine balance. In many ways, the harmonization of water management practices in the form of an international standard makes the most sense for those who envision the globalization of water services delivery.

In addition to the relatively low level of attention, the quality and diversity of participation are issues TC 224 is facing. For a variety of reasons, ISO standards development has historically been heavily dominated by business. And even though this new area of work has implications for a much wider range of audiences and users, ISO's foray into water has not been accompanied by a parallel shift in representation and influence by important stakeholders. Because of the technical complexity and low public profile of ISO, many municipalities, regulatory authorities, and civil society groups that have a direct stake in ISO's new water management standards are unaware of the organization and its work in this area. Consequently, they are unaware of the quite significant discussions presently taking place in TC 224 about the degree to which the public should be privy to and involved in water management decisions taken by the service provider. If more balanced participation among stakeholders is not achieved, ISO might very well continue on its track of producing standards that harmonize to the lowest common denominator and are disproportionately influenced by private water service

providers (visit the Pacific Institute website for further information; the Pacific Institute serves as the Secretariat of the International NGO Network on ISO).

One of the major arguments in favor of the development of the water management standards was to improve water provision to underserved populations in less developed countries. Yet despite the best intentions and efforts of the TC 224 leadership, the lack of direct participation by less developed regions of the world remains a problem within TC 224. Further, considering that ISO's water management standards will likely have more significant implications in these countries than in the industrialized nations, the underrepresentation of Southern hemisphere countries is a cause for concern.

Other unanswered questions relating to ISO's water standards pertain to the area of trade in services and financing of water infrastructure projects. ISO's influence is exercised not only through its size and popularity, but also because of the status of its standards, which are recognized as "trade-legal" within the context of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO's Agreement on Government Procurement currently covers wastewater services and possibly drinking water services in the future. Under this agreement, government projects of a certain size, including, for instance, wastewater treatment facilities, are required to be open to international bids and proposals. In addition, there are discussions in the WTO to include water services under its General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), and treat them as goods for trade. This means countries choosing not to adopt these ISO standards as national standards could one day have their pre-existing national standards, and/or water management practices more generally, challenged in the context of a trade dispute. Thus, even though the current drafts of water standards state that they don't intend to overwrite or to interfere national and local regulations, there remains a chance that they will prove to be inconsistent with current practice in various countries and localities.

CONCLUSION

Since these new ISO water standards are still in the draft stage, it is too early to know with any certainty the impact they will have on drinking water and wastewater services globally. However, considering the characteristics of the TC 224 standards development process and potential effects of these standards described above, it seems clear that this ISO initiative definitely requires more attention and broader input from all affected parties. It is crucial to involve, and incorporate the needs of, a broader range of stakeholders in the standards development process in order to ensure that the final standards fulfill their stated objectives of helping to provide improved clean water and sanitation services globally.

REFERENCES

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