

# The challenge of standardizing water services



Service sectors turn to standards

by Laurence Thomas, Secretary of ISO/TC 224, Service activities relating to drinking water supply systems and wastewater systems – Quality criteria of the service and performance indicators

ISO entered a new area in the provision of service standards when ISO/TC 224, *Service activities relating to drinking water supply systems and wastewater systems - Quality criteria of the service and performance indicators* was created in 2001. This technical committee was one of the first to deal with service standards and remains a pioneer in this field.

## Where are we today?

The following three draft standards are being developed according to a single scheme and contain common elements mainly related to the evaluation of service and performance indicators:

**ISO/CD 24510**, *Service activities relating to drinking water and wastewater – Guidelines for the improvement and for the assessment of the service to users*;

**ISO/CD 24511**, *Service activities relating to drinking water and wastewater – Guidelines for the management of wastewater utilities and for the assessment of wastewater services*; and,

**ISO/CD 24512**, *Service activities relating to drinking water and wastewater – Guidelines for the management of drinking water utilities and for the assessment of drinking water services*.

**ISO/CD 24510** is directed at users and defines the following elements of the service:

- description of the components of the service for the user;
- objectives of the service based on the user's needs and expectations, considered to be globally relevant at the broadest level (such as access to water and sanitation services, provision of services, contract management and billing, relationship with users, environmental protection, water quality, etc.);
- guidelines for the actions to be taken in order to satisfy the user's needs;
- service assessment criteria;
- range of possible performance indicators linked to the criteria, that may be used for assessing performance of the service.

**ISO/CD 24511** and **ISO/CD 24512** focus more on the management of drinking water services and wastewater services.

## Main Focus

Beyond the globalization of the services market, several factors bring to the forefront the need to have tools at an international level to improve the governance of water services:

- water has become a major worldwide challenge, in terms of managing available water resources, the provision of access to drinking water and sanitation for the world's population;
- the world consumer movement is increasingly demanding and concerned with the quality of water service and more sensitive to the transparency of the management and quality/price ratio of the service;
- several local initiatives or surveys were carried out, like the development of French standards published between 2000 and 2002, describing good practices and a methodology for assessing the quality of service provided to users and the efficiency of the management of drinking water and wastewater systems.

These various elements, combined with the will expressed by ISO to develop international standardization in the field of services, led ISO's French member, Association française de normalisation (AFNOR), to propose in 2001 the establishment of a technical committee, for preparing ISO standards supplying guidelines for service activities for drinking water supply systems and wastewater systems. About fifteen countries expressed interest in the work and management of ISO/TC 224 while leadership of the TC was allocated to France.

The objectives of the technical committee are to:

- facilitate dialogue among stakeholders including users, local or national water authorities, public or private water operators, non governmental organizations (NGOs) etc., so that the users' expectations are better taken into account and the management of water utilities by the relevant authorities is more transparent;
- specify good practices for better management of water resources and the patrimony of services;

### Millennium development goals

The UN Millennium Declaration was adopted by 189 world leaders at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000, who committed to "free all men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty" by 2015. One of the eight development goals for this purpose is to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe water.

- define quality assessment criteria and performance indicators enabling the results of the service delivered to be measured and compared with the objectives agreed upon between stakeholders;
- facilitate the monitoring of performance within a water utility.

### Globally relevant, locally applicable

The standards being developed by ISO/TC 224 are different from the usual product or analysis methods standards. They are intended to be used by water services operators as well as by all stakeholders. This implies that many different stakeholders participate in this work, such as representatives from national water authorities, local water authorities, consumer organizations, NGOs. National mirror committees of ISO/TC 224 participating member bodies have been invited to broaden the representation of their stakeholders.

ISO/TC 224 is developing, in accordance with ISO's global relevance policy, standards that permit the broadest possible use of them, while respecting cultural, socio-economic and climatic variations in different countries and regions of the world. The organization of water utilities falls within a legal and institutional framework specific to each country. The standards are designed to be flexible enough to allow them to be adapted by authorities that may be involved in the provision of water services at regional, national or local levels. Therefore, they do not prescribe the respective roles of various institutions/stakeholders nor define required processes. More importantly, these standards do not interfere with the local authori-

ty's general organization and management of their utilities.

### Assessing and improving services

Performance indicators are critical for assessing and improving services and ensuring the proper monitoring of implementation. Stakeholders may establish an appropriate number of performance indicators (PI's), a possible tool used for improvement, or other methods for checking compliance with requirements. The stakeholders may select the PIs from given examples or develop other relevant PIs, which consider the principles described in the standards. The methodology does not impose any specific indicator or any minimum value or performance range; it respects the principle of adaptability to local contexts, thus facilitating local implementation.

### Relationship with ISO management systems standards

Implementation of ISO/TC 224 standards does not depend on the adoption of ISO 9000 for quality management and/or ISO 14000 for environmental management. Nevertheless, these guide-

### About the author



**Laurence Thomas**, holds an MSc in Innovation (materials option), joined AFNOR in December 1987 as a standards engineer. From 1990 to 2004

she worked in the field of environmental analysis and more particularly that of water. During this time she was in charge of standardization of water quality at French national, CEN and ISO levels, and was Secretary of ISO/TC 147/SC 5, *Water quality – Biological methods*. Since January 2004, Ms. Thomas has been Secretary of ISO/TC 224, while continuing to deal with all aspects of microbiological analysis of water.



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lines are consistent with and supportive of ISO's management system standards. Implementation of an overall ISO 9001 and/or ISO 14001 management system may facilitate the implementation of these guidelines, and conversely, these guidelines may help achieve the technical provisions of ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 for organizations choosing to implement them. It has also to be noted that these guidelines are consistent with the principle of the "plan-do-check-act" approach, which proposes a step-by-step process, from objectives to assessment.

### **Bringing onboard all stakeholders**

ISO/TC 224 work is progressing well and arousing a growing interest within the international community. The number of participating countries has increased since 2001; the numerous comments received during the enquiry stage (about 350 pages) show the interest taken in this work. Several international organizations such as the department of Economy and Social Affairs of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Water Association and Consumers International are involved in the discussions. Professional international organizations like the Inter-American Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (AIDIS) and the African Water Association (AFWA), were mobilized and now play an important role in this work. A topic session devoted to ISO/TC 224 activities, organized by AIDIS and ISO/TC 224 will take place at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico in March 2006, with presentations of successful local action based on these draft or proposed ISO guidelines.

These standards establish a general framework, which responds to all existing situations, but which will require further development to meet local specifications and needs. ISO draft standards will be tested in large cities in developing countries. One or several specific documents of application for developing countries are expected to be produced. The ISO suite of standards for drinking water supply systems and wastewater supply services is expected to be published in 2007. ■