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Urban Wastewater Management in Transition

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Editorial

Willi Gujer, member of the EAWAG-directorate and professor for urban water management at ETH Zurich.

Urban wastewater management is perceived as a vast public effort. In Switzerland, we have accomplished the task by investing more than 60 billion Swiss francs, and the resulting infrastructure provides an immense service to those 97 % of the Swiss population who have access. One might think that all problems have been solved and that we could tackle new challenges.

Infrastructures grow old, become damaged and fail to function; society evolves and calls for innovation and often more; science progresses and provides new insights; well established concepts are further enhanced. What serves us today, will be obsolete tomorrow, must be adapted, improved and further advanced.

This issue of the EAWAG news discusses many aspects of urban wastewater management and presents them from a fresh perspective. This raises various questions. The answers may have large effects on the existing system: Is it sensible to control micropollutants and their effects on ecosystems by fighting the symptoms? Wouldn't measures at the source be the better option? Are consumers both able and willing to take greater responsibility in the future or is the concept of decentralized sanitation fantasy? Can we, in our federal state system, further improve the institutional framework, efficiency of decision-making, and security of decision pathways? Or do we have to rely more strongly on structures provided by the private sector? What are the risks of a damaged drainage system? How can we use our experience best to support developing countries in their decisions and progress? Etc.

Obviously, the drainage system that offers us great convenience and that we all have been enjoying for many years is far less static than we tend to perceive it as consumers and even as experts in the field. It is becoming clear that in addition to the traditional end-of-pipe solutions, processes in the socio-economic sector are gaining in importance today. We increasingly view urban wastewater management as an integrated system that, in addition to ecological and technical standards, must meet socio-economic criteria.

The required infrastructure must be vital and evolve with society, thus creating an interesting and fascinating field for study. What we present here as innovative and ambitious, will soon become routine, which then again is to be amended and questioned.

Urban wastewater management is in transition – and that is good!