

## Improving Access to Water and Sanitation: Rethinking the way forward in light of the Millennium Development Goals

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**M**ost of the world's governments and international agencies have committed themselves to the Millennium Development Goals, one of which is to achieve environmental sustainability. The water target set in relation to 'environmental sustainability' is:

- To halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water

In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development added a sanitation target:

- To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation

For billions of people, inadequate water and sanitation not only signals poverty, but contributes to its persistence. If these targets can be achieved, they will contribute to a number of the Millennium Development Goals, and not just or even primarily environmental sustainability.

Meeting these targets will be a major challenge. The water agendas currently promoted most vigorously in the international policy arena – Integrated Water Resource Management and Private Sector Participation – do not provide the basis for meeting such targets, whatever their more ardent supporters may wish to claim. Alternatively, simply urging or financing governments to invest more in water and sanitation infrastructure in

deprived areas is also unlikely to be effective. Ultimately, the challenge for international development agencies is not to decide how water and sanitation problems are to be solved and then to promote this approach internationally; it is to learn how to recognise locally driven initiatives that are likely to succeed, and find the best means to support them.

In this context, the targets also present timely opportunities. They provide the basis for questioning and improving upon the 'pro-poor' credentials of existing water agendas, including those being promoted internationally. Perhaps more important, they offer agreed criteria for deciding that locally driven strategies deserve international support, regardless of whether they conform with any particular model of water sector reform.

### Misinterpreting the global water crisis

The international promotion of integrated water resource management has been linked to a misleading narrative of a global water crisis. The basic message of this narrative is that the world is running out of water, that the consequences of this growing scarcity are increasingly evident, and that only by giving water resource conservation and management higher priority can this emerging crisis be averted. In this crisis narrative, current water problems are just a foreshadowing of the problems to come if the appropriate messages are not taken to heart.

### KEY CHALLENGES:

- The international development community needs to stop trying to agree on and promote particular approaches, and concentrate instead on assisting locally driven initiatives that work.
- Rather than treating water resource issues as generic 'scarcity' issues, address those resource problems that can be shown to affect the access to water of poor rural and urban groups.
- Rather than putting pressure on countries to increase PSP, address the causes of both public and private failure, and create the basis for informed choices to be made locally.
- Good local governance is key to meeting the water and sanitation targets, as it is in the public sector that many of the most critical decisions must be taken.

One of the indicators used to illustrate this emerging water crisis has been the amount of freshwater resources available per capita for a given country or river basin, with water stress said to occur if and when this indicator falls below 1,700 cubic metres per capita. With continuing population growth, the share of the world facing water stress is projected to grow to about 35% of the world's population by the year 2025. While the measures and interpretations of water stress are becoming more sophisticated, the presumption that water resource scarcity is at the root of people's problems in getting reasonable access to enough water to meet their daily needs is still an integral part of the global water crisis narrative. This is shaping the current discourse on access to water and sanitation, which in turn frames the policy response to the problem, which has been to promote cross-sectoral coordination through Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), in which water resource (and increasingly, sanitation) problems are treated as a generic 'scarcity' issue.

But water stress is a poor indicator, for it does not explain why so many people do not have access to adequate water and sanitation. Indeed, the statistics being used to monitor progress towards the water and sanitation targets seem to suggest that water coverage is actually higher in countries with less than 1,700 cubic metres of renewable freshwater resources per person. Thus it is hard to reconcile such statistics with the claim that water stress is a major factor preventing people from gaining access to adequate water and sanitation. This suggests that there is a problem with the indicators themselves and with the assumptions on which they are built.

IWRM will not ensure poor people gain better access to water and sanitation, since the principal reasons they do not have adequate access lie in entitlement failures, not water resource scarcity.

### Overselling private sector participation

The international promotion of private sector participation (PSP) has also been linked to an equally misleading narrative of public sector crisis. This has led to inflated claims for the private sector and large multinational water companies in particular. The basic message is that public utilities are under-funded, inefficient, overstuffed, unresponsive to their customers, easily manipulated by politicians to serve short-term political ends and, in low-income settings, are often providing subsidised services to the relatively well off while the poorest go without. PSP, its proponents claim, would bring finance and efficiency, and attend to the demands of customers rather than politicians.

Here again, the MDG targets are as unlikely to be met by more PSP as by more integrated water resource management. There is little in the centuries-old history of PSP to suggest that more private sector involvement would ensure that water and sanitation services reach the poor.

The large multinational water operators have understandably shown more interest in investing in large cities with significant middle classes than in the economically depressed towns and villages where most of those people without adequate access to water and sanitation actually live. In any case, many of the obstacles that hamper public utilities undermine private operators too.

### Challenges: The need to refocus on the water and sanitation targets and good local governance

*Local Solutions.* The water and sanitation targets present a challenge to the international development community to step back from trying to agree on and promote particular approaches to water and sanitation management, and concentrate on assisting locally driven initiatives that can realistically claim to be helping achieve the internationally agreed upon targets.

*Beyond IWRM.* In the long run, better water resource management may be critical to achieving sustainable improvements in water and sanitation provision. However, policies designed only with a view to conserving and managing water resources can also make it unnecessarily difficult to extend adequate water and sanitation provision to those currently deprived.

Rather than treating water resource issues as a generic 'scarcity' issue, it is important to address those resource problems that can be shown to affect the access to water of poor rural and urban groups (and possibly sanitation) and more generally to adapt the tools of IWRM, including demand-side management, to encompass issues of hygiene and health, improving access for deprived communities, and the like.

*Beyond PSP.* In the right circumstances water markets and PSP may be able to help improve efficiency and increase investment. But attempts to increase private sector participation can also create new regulatory and corruption problems, direct finance to urban centres and neighbourhoods that are already comparatively well served, and further polarise the politics of water and sanitation provision.

Rather than debating the relative merits of public vs. private provision or putting pressure on countries to increase PSP, it is important (for the international development community, including donors) to address the causes of both public and private failures, and create the basis for informed choices to be made locally.

*Good governance.* Ultimately, it is in the public sector that many of the most critical decisions must be taken, and it is when these decisions are based on good local governance that the targets are most likely to be met. This applies in both areas where water resources are scarce and areas where they are plentiful. Similarly, it applies in areas with privately operated utilities, in areas with public utilities and, perhaps most important of all for the water and sanitation targets, in areas with no utilities at all. ●

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