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Beyond inaccurate crisis narratives: meeting the water and sanitation MDGs

Gordon McGranahan

I. THE ISSUE AND THE OPPORTUNITY

Water continues to attract a great deal of attention in the international development community, and has become the focus of a wide array of research and development activities. New global and regional organizations, networks and partnerships have been established;⁽¹⁾ new global reviews of water use and water scarcity have been undertaken;⁽²⁾ and new commitments have been made to increase investments in the water sector.⁽³⁾ Targets for reducing the proportion of the world's population without adequate water and sanitation have been agreed upon and have become an

1. For example, the Global Water Partnership, the World Water Council and the UN Millennium Project.

2. Cosgrove, W J and F Rijsberman (2000), *World Water Vision: Making Water Everybody's Business*, World Water Council, World Water Vision and Earthscan, London; also Gleick, P H et al. (2002), *The World's Water 2002-2003, The Biennial Report on Freshwater Resources*, Island Press, Washington DC; Seckler, D et al. (1998), *World Water Demand and Supply, 1990 to 2025: Scenarios and Issues*, Research Report No 19, International Water Management Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka; and WHO (World Health Organization) and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) (2000), *Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report*, United Nations, Geneva.

3. For example, major water initiatives were announced at the WSSD in Johannesburg in August 2002 by the USA, which said it would spend up to US\$ 970 million over the next three years in the water sector; the EU, which at present spends more than 1 billion euros a year on its European Water Initiative; and US\$ 500 million from the Asian Development Bank for the Water for Asian Cities programme.



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important part of the Millennium Development Goals.

Unfortunately, there is still a cavernous gap between the “pro-poor” rhetoric of water crisis and response, and the vested interests and competing priorities that continue to drive developments in the water sector, internationally as well as locally. Even the global statistics, narratives and agendas fail to represent the interests of the rural and urban poor, whose water and sanitary conditions are meant to be their primary concern. Local deficiencies in water and sanitation services are often far worse than global indicators imply. As described in Chapter 2, hundreds of millions of households classified in official statistics as having “improved” provision still have unsafe and inconvenient provision. Contrary to the global water crisis narrative, there is little evidence that these deficiencies are the result of growing water resource scarcity.⁽⁴⁾ Low-income communities face a wide range of practical and political obstacles that widely touted global agendas, such as Integrated Water Resource Management and private sector participation, do not address.⁽⁵⁾

This makes it all the more important that we take the opportunity provided by the Millennium Development Goals to help realign water sector priorities, and secure more support for those local initiatives most likely to improve water and sanitary conditions for the hundreds of millions of currently deprived rural and urban households. More local evidence, knowledge and opinion will have to be brought to bear on the international agendas in order to achieve this. These local contributions may not be able to provide the basis for “best practices” that can be promoted internationally, but at least they should help challenge the “bad practices” that divert so many international initiatives from their stated aims. Ideally, they should also provide a better basis for identifying the sort of local initiatives that deserve international support.

4. McGranahan, G (2002), *Demand-side Water Strategies and the Urban Poor*, IIED, London, 67 pages.

5. McGranahan (2002), *op. cit.*; also UN-Habitat (2003), *Water and Sanitation in the World's Cities: Local Action for Global Goals*, Earthscan, London, 274 pages.



II. TARGETS AND INDICATORS

Indicative targets for water supply and sanitation coverage were developed by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council as part of the process leading up to the Second World Water Forum in The Hague, in March 2000. The targets were presented in the report *VISION 21: A Shared Vision for Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply and A Framework for Action: Achieving a Vision* by the Global Water Partnership. The targets to be achieved were:

- by 2015, to reduce by one-half the proportion of people without access to hygienic sanitation facilities (which was endorsed by the Second World Water Forum, The Hague, March 2000);
- by 2015, to reduce by one-half the proportion of people without sustainable access to adequate quantities of affordable and safe water (also endorsed by the Second World Water Forum); and
- by 2025, to provide water, sanitation, and hygiene for all.

The target for halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water was formally adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000 in its Millennium Declaration, which included it under the goal “Ensure environmental sustainability”. In August 2002, the international “environment and development” community met at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa, where water supply and sanitation again took centre stage as part of the ambitious WEHAB agenda.⁶ Through the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation that emerged from these deliberations, countries committed themselves to halving the proportion of people lacking access to proper sanitation and safe water by 2015.

These targets are set against narratives and policy agendas that are often contradictory and, in some cases, may undermine efforts to achieve the targets. At the same time,

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6. WEHAB: Water and Sanitation–Energy–Health and Environment–Agriculture–Biodiversity and Ecosystem Management.



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the lessons from local initiatives are not sufficiently integrated into a comprehensive, effective strategy to guide international, national and local stakeholders in reaching the goals. Similarly, local evidence of water and sanitary conditions is difficult to feed into the international system of water and sanitation indicators, which inevitably favours international comparability over local relevance, or even accuracy. *In any case, international initiatives tend to respond to threats of crisis rather than evidence of persistent distress.*

III. CRISIS NARRATIVES

The dominant freshwater narrative is one based on crisis, with an emphasis on increasing resource scarcity and excessively low prices. But this is misleading: freshwater scarcity at river basin, regional and global levels is not the reason why so many people lack reasonable access to adequate water and sanitation. Indeed, according to the admittedly misleading statistics, urban water coverage is actually better in countries with less water resources per capita, even controlling for countries' per capita income.⁽⁷⁾ More realistic assessments of how water resource problems affect the pursuit of water and sanitation targets are much needed, but have to be based on local rather than global narratives, and should be open to a diverse range of resource and affordability issues.

IV. INTERNATIONALLY DRIVEN POLICY AGENDAS

Private sector participation and Integrated Water Resource Management have both been promoted heavily in the international policy arena over the past decade, and water services have even been the subject of negotiations to liberalize international trade. None of these agendas really provides the basis for the major improvements financed by user fees in most low-income villages and urban districts, where neither water nor sewerage networks are likely to be economical, and water resource management alone is not sufficient to improve water and sanitary conditions. In

7. McGranahan (2002) and UN-Habitat (2003), *op. cit.*



partial recognition of this, local participation and community-managed water and sanitation have also received continued support in the international arena, at least as the means to reach those unlikely to be served by private operators or public–private partnerships. However, this support has been peripheral to the major direction of international water and sanitation policy.⁽⁸⁾

Integrated Water Resources Management is meant to overcome the many problems that can arise from the uncoordinated use of increasingly scarce water resources. While its goals may be laudable, it will not ensure that poor people gain better access to water and sanitation, since the principal reason they do not have adequate access lies in entitlement failures, not in water resource scarcity. From the perspective of water and sanitation targets, the tendency of Integrated Water Resources Management to emphasize conservation and economic aspects is problematic, since better management of upstream resources rarely improves access to adequate provision for currently deprived downstream residents. And demand-side management, a concept that has emerged along with Integrated Water Resource Management as a response to the prevailing, narrow supply-side approach, needs to pay more attention to securing better access to water for the poor, promoting sanitation and the hygienic use of water, and empowering deprived groups, especially women in low-income households.

The case for private sector participation in improving provision for water and sanitation relies heavily on the failures of public utilities. But there is little evidence in the long history of the private sector’s engagement in water and sanitation to indicate that it will help meet the MDG water and sanitation targets. Nor is there evidence that it will attract large amounts of private finance, de-politicize provision and ensure greater efficiency of the utilities – which were the justifications used to promote privatization.⁽⁹⁾ Rather than debating the relative merits of public versus

“There is little evidence in the long history of the private sector’s engagement in water and sanitation to indicate that it will help meet the MDG water and sanitation targets”

8. Budds, Jessica and Gordon McGranahan (2003), “Are the debates on water privatization missing the point? Experiences from Africa, Asia and Latin America”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 15, No 2, October, pages 87–114.
9. Budds and McGranahan (2003), *op. cit.*



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private provision, or putting pressure on countries to increase private sector participation, it is crucial to address the causes of both private and public failure (including corruption, land tenure issues and the lack of a sound regulatory framework preventing operators from ignoring the needs of economically and politically deprived groups), and create the basis for locally made, informed choices.

A third emerging policy agenda linked to private sector participation, **trade liberalization**, is also beginning to engage with water and sanitation services. Within the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), water services have been included at the request of the European Union. While, to date, no country has liberalized water services within GATS, it is important that liberalization of the water sector does not sideline community-managed services and private small-scale vendors, who are likely to continue to be important in securing access for low-income and marginalized groups.

Over the years, community-managed water and sanitation has also attracted the interest of international non-governmental organizations, international donor agencies and, to a limited extent, that of multinational companies searching for more cost-effective strategies to extend supplies. Defined broadly, community-managed water and sanitation describes the international agenda being pursued by a number of international NGOs (e.g. WaterAid), and advocated in at least one international manual.⁽¹⁰⁾ It could also be extended to include the efforts of many national and local civil society groups working to extend provision in low-income areas, often without international funding.

Many low-income groups have benefited from locally driven community-managed initiatives. Although most such initiatives are relatively small scale, some have reached hundreds of thousands of low-income people, usually through a combination of careful community management

10. Lammerink, M P and E Bolt (2003), *Supporting Community Management: A Manual for Training in the Water and sanitation sector*, Occasional Paper Series, IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, Delft/Haarlem, 113 pages.



to keep down unit costs (so that limited resources go further) and getting cost-recovery or charging for services (so that funds can be recovered for reinvestment in further extending provision). See, for instance, the work of:

- the Pakistan NGO Orangi Pilot Project in community-managed sewers in Karachi and in other cities in Pakistan;⁽¹¹⁾
- the work of various Bangladeshi NGOs in improving provision for water and sanitation for hundreds of thousands of low-income groups in Dhaka and Chittagong, with support from WaterAid;⁽¹²⁾
- the hundreds of community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in different Indian cities, arising from the work of the Indian NGO, SPARC, and its partnership with *Mahila Milan* (cooperatives of women slum and pavement dwellers) and the National Slum Dwellers Federation;⁽¹³⁾ and
- the community provision for water and toilets developed in Luanda, Angola, by Development Workshop–Angola.⁽¹⁴⁾

None of these programmes were without problems, and none could be considered as “perfect” solutions; their importance lies in their demonstration that it is possible to develop local responses that reach large numbers of low-income groups with significant improvements at relatively low capital costs (and, in some instances, with most of the costs recovered).

It is tempting to present community-managed water and sanitation as the locally driven alternative to the dominant

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11. Hasan, Arif (1997), *Working with Government: The Story of the Orangi Pilot Project's Collaboration with State Agencies for Replicating its Low-cost Sanitation Programme*, City Press, Karachi, 269 pages; also Alimuddin, Salim Arif Hasan and Asiya Sadiq (2000), *Community-driven Water and Sanitation: The Work of the Anjuman Samaji Behood and the Larger Faisalabad Context*, IIED Working Paper 7 in Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, IIED, London, 84 pages.

12. Hanchett, Suzanne, Shireen Akhter and Mohidul Hoque Khan summarized by Stephen Mezulianik and Vicky Blagbrough (2003), “Water, sanitation and hygiene in Bangladesh slums; a summary of WaterAid–Bangladesh’s Urban Programme Evaluation”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 15, No 2, October, pages 43–56.

13. Burra, Sundar, Sheela Patel and Tom Kerr (2003), “Community-designed, built and managed toilet blocks in Indian cities”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 15, No 2, October, pages 11–32.

14. Cain, Allan, Mary Daly and Paul Robson (2002), *Basic Service Provision for the Urban Poor: The Experience of Development Workshop in Angola*, IIED Working Paper 8 in Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas Series, IIED, London, 40 pages.



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international policy agendas of recent years. Community management does typically imply that users participate in the management of their water and sanitation resources and facilities, and some advocates of community participation are very critical of private sector participation as well as the “top-down” water and sanitation planning associated with public utilities. However, many of the most innovative and successful examples of community-managed water and sanitation saw themselves not as replacing public or private provision but as showing new ways in which public or private provision could reach poorer groups. The programmes mentioned above, in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Angola, were always intended as models and methods to demonstrate how much provision could be improved by local authorities or by community–local government partnerships. In addition, in many instances, community provision needs to draw on larger systems – for instance, on water mains or reservoirs.

Thus, community management can also be presented as complementary to private sector participation and Integrated Water Resource Management; an approach to be applied in areas where conventional public or private utilities cannot operate, or in conjunction with such utilities through what have come to be termed public–private–community partnerships (see, for example, the cases documented by the Business Partners for Development Water and Sanitation⁽¹⁵⁾).

Moreover, whether as an alternative to, or an integral part of, the internationally dominant policy agendas, if community management is promoted inappropriately, it too can override local evidence, knowledge and opinion. In discussions of how to achieve the water and sanitation MDGs, there is a need to find the best way of securing international support for the local initiatives most likely to help achieve the water and sanitation targets, not to define what those initiatives will look like.

15. <http://www.bpd-waterandsanitation.org/english/index.asp>.