

interview

The UK's International Development Secretary, Hilary Benn, revealed on World Water Day 2004 that UK aid would double for water and sanitation in Africa's poorest countries over the next three years. Clare Tawney meets Hilary Benn, and finds him to be an enthusiast for the water and sanitation sector, and a supporter of the objectives of *Waterlines*.

Mr Benn, What do you see as the main role of donor agencies such as Britain's DFID in helping developing country governments scale up water supply and sanitation for the poor?

The first thing is to raise the issue of the importance of water and talk about it. This was why I was very keen to talk to you and why I made the speech that I did on World Water Day, and why DFID is going to be doing a lot more on water. Every single year 1.7 million people die due to diarrhoeal diseases, and yet clean water would not only reduce these deaths, it would help girls to go to school, and it would have all sorts of other development benefits.

My second point is, in the end it is about countries doing it for themselves, but with our assistance. That's why I announced on World Water Day that we're going to double DFID's investment in water in Africa where we are most off-track for the MDGs for water.

Thirdly, thinking of the challenge, most of the growth in population in developing countries is going to be in towns and cities for the next 25 years, or so the forecasts suggest, so you're talking about a lot of infrastructure. How do we pay for this? Different governments in developing countries are grappling with how to make it happen. That is why it is very important to learn the lessons and understand how they can be applied and try to find out why faster progress is not being made and how we can harness the great interest of the many international organizations working on water and sanitation so that we can give a big push.

Clean water would make a major contribution. Look at the contribution that clean water made to life expectancy in our country. During the cholera out-

breaks in London in the nineteenth century John Snow was interested in what was the cause, and he persuaded the authorities to let him take away the handle on the pump in Broad Street [Snow was a local doctor who had noticed that most of the cholera deaths during a recent outbreak occurred among people who lived near or drew water from this pump]. The cholera subsided, and out of that emerged the enormous local government effort to provide water and sanitation that did more to transform life expectancy in this country than any other single thing that happened in the nineteenth century. This is the kind of challenge that we face if we are going to support countries to do it for themselves.

Is it a problem where governments are weak and ineffective, do we then feel that our hands are being tied in making aid benefit the poor?

Let's take the point about PRSPs (poverty reduction strategy papers), because that is where governments talk to the donor community about what they are going to do. Question: given that water is a big challenge, why doesn't water figure more prominently in those PRSPs? Lots of explanations have been advanced: is it because (1) we haven't talked enough about water, (2) responsibility for water rarely sits at the national or federal level – they've got education and health ministries but not a water ministry, or (3) is it because the political system that they have in the country isn't allowing people to articulate their demand for water?

I remember going to Tanzania last year. We went to visit a school and the whole village turned out and we had an hour-long conversation about the problems that were occupying them, including schools and so on. Then at the end I asked what was the one thing that was their top priority. And it was the women who put up their hands, and one of them, I'll never forget, had an old Coke bottle full of the dirtiest water you've ever seen, and she said, 'We'd like clean water!' and that was the message she wanted me to take away.

How do you connect that clearly articulated demand from people in one village in Tanzania to a political system

that must in the end be responsible for delivering improvements? It is not for donors to take the place of developing country governments – they must be accountable to their people and the political system must sort this out.

How can DFID staff retain professional credibility when opportunities for grass-roots involvement in development projects are now almost non-existent (with the advent of budget support [channelling funding into recipient government's programmes, especially their PRSPs]). Can DFID 'do' policy when its staff are in danger of losing touch with reality on the ground?

Actually budget support as a percentage of programme spending is just over 20 per cent, so the idea that we just make out cheques payable to governments is a myth. We work in lots of different ways, and that includes working with civil society organizations to support communities so that they can themselves make demands of government. Because in countries where capacity is the issue, on the one hand it's communities' capacity to make known their expectations of government, and on the other hand it's the capacity of government to deliver, which is why we are supporting them with budget support where it is appropriate or in other ways where it's not.

You mentioned earlier the option of privatization, and there have been some examples where it has been successful, and there have also been good examples of public sector reforming and being able to extend water to the urban poor. What is your view on making privatization a condition of aid?

It's wrong, and we don't do it: I changed our policy in March this year and it is published in a policy paper.¹ Donors *have* in the past linked particular policies with aid, and some of the international institutions still do. I think that as far as our relationships with development partners are concerned you have to let them take these decisions themselves because the evidence is that if you try to force people to do things they don't want to do it is not terribly successful.

All governments face choices about what they do, but what I am interested in is if you are serious about reducing poverty I would expect to see your budgets for health and education going up, and I would expect to see more children going to school. This is where I think we do have a right to form a judgement. First, is the consequence of a decision a government takes evidence that they are committed to reducing poverty – because that's what we're in business for – and secondly, do they uphold international law, norms and standards, and thirdly are they tackling corruption, so that we can be confident that the money we give is being spent in the way it was intended? So these are forms of conditionality that I think nobody is going to disagree with.

The second point I want to make is that there is a myth going about that all that DFID does in water any more is to fund privatization consultants. This is not the case: 95 per cent of the money spent on water goes to support public provision. On private sector involvement – and the evidence is mixed – I'm interested in what works. Let's not have an ideological debate. You show me it works – I'll support it. But if a developing country government like Ghana says, 'We think it would be useful to have a private sector management consultant to try and fix those leaks, or to try to be more efficient, and we would like technical assistance', should we say 'No, we know better'? No, I don't think we should. Instead we judge it on a case-by-case basis where developing country governments ask us to help.

Now, I recognize that some of those decisions are controversial within developing countries and other people will take a different view. In the end, we have to work with democratically elected governments and hope that the political process will sort things out.

In your view, to what extent do we now 'know what needs doing' (to quote the former Secretary of State), or do we need new knowledge and learning from field-based research?

This is a very interesting question. If we stop learning we'll be in trouble, we should always be big enough to admit that if there are things to be learnt we should ask the question and apply the knowledge on the basis of that. But

when it comes to providing water in rural communities, I would hope by now we have enough knowledge; it's how you make it happen, how you get the resources, how you get communities to take responsibility for it, how you keep it simple so it can be maintained. In relation to urban water supply, the difficulty is making it happen because of the scale of the challenge due to the growth in population, and the amount of investment that is required. I think we could do more collectively to try to quantify what works, and to shout about it and apply it. What do you think?

I think that a lot of the technologies are already there, but I think that, for instance, in the whole field of sanitation, we don't know why some communities don't see it as a very high priority—maybe this is to do with cultural differences. So when we come across new ideas, such as community-led sanitation in Bangladesh, is that actually going to work everywhere? That is going to require research because it is to do with how you are going to change people's behaviours. And we're doing the research. Robert Chambers at Sussex University is looking at just these questions.

We've talked a lot about investment, and clearly to meet the millennium development goals in the urban areas there is a need for huge levels of investment, but is there a danger that these countries, many of which have just been let off from debt repayments, are suddenly going to become burdened once again?

The issue with debt is sustainability. Supposing all developing country debt was wiped out in five minutes' time. Tomorrow morning, should developing countries, should they wish to, be allowed to borrow again? The answer depends on: can they afford it? Because, it's how most businesses are run: they borrow, invest and pay it back, and they grow and develop. Now, the increase in aid that has been committed during the course of this year is politically very significant. We're talking about an extra \$25 billion per year development assistance to Africa between now and 2010 and that's been the result of politics and people campaigning and so on. But in the end, what we're working to achieve

is for developing countries to raise their own resources by their economies developing, by people getting jobs, and being able to pay more taxes. That's how those countries will afford the investment in infrastructure that the private sector isn't going to look after.

You know, with mobile phone infrastructure – there's no problem – the fastest growing market for mobile phones is in Africa. But water and sanitation, no, we've got to help countries with support in order to raise the resources that they need and to find the most effective ways of putting infrastructure in place and then maintaining it. Because it's no good just installing the equipment, whether it's a pump in a village or a more sophisticated urban water supply and sanitation system, if you haven't got the resources to maintain it and keep it going. And that's about human capacity, and having budgets that allow countries to do all these things. One of the great benefits of debt relief is that when you're not paying the debt every month, that money's there, and you can rely on it to maintain your water system, buy drugs, train teachers, employ nurses.

So if we combine the benefits of debt relief, which delivers predictability, with greater certainty about future aid flows – and we are now able to make commitments on a three-year basis because we now have three-year budgeting in Britain – then we can give an indication to our developing country partners and they can make long-term plans.

One last question: Waterlines magazine is read by water and sanitation practitioners worldwide. Can you suggest anything we could do to improve our impact?

The short answer is: keep it up. I enjoyed reading the copies you sent me and it seems to me it is full of lots of practical lessons to be learned. And in each day we find something and think 'that's a good idea!' and somebody goes away and does something about it, that's when we are having the most powerful impact in life, in my experience. Thank you, Mr Benn.

References

- 1 Partnerships for Poverty Reduction: rethinking conditionality, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/news/files/conditionality-intro.asp>