

Editorial: Serving the urban poor

RICHARD C. CARTER

This issue of *Waterlines* addresses some of the issues surrounding water and sanitation services in urban environments.

These areas of habitation vary greatly in regard to their size, population density, topography, wealth, housing standards and infrastructure, and access to public services. In the context of this journal and its focus – low-income settlements in low- and middle-income countries – such habitations are nearly all fast-growing, under-planned, and under-provided with infrastructure and services. Their inhabitants are predominantly poor but they have well-developed survival skills. Many have left rural settings which they perceive as having less to offer in terms of opportunities and services.

On the face of it, provision of public services such as water and sanitation should be easier in urban environments than in rural areas with dispersed populations. In the urban environment, the concentration of population, the clear necessity and potential demand for water supply services and safe and private sanitation, and the existence of a cash economy (if limited) should make service provision simpler.

However, as anyone who has worked in such environments knows, the provision of urban water and sanitation services is far from simple. The living and working environment is complex, messy and difficult.

Urban settings are complex in social, institutional, political and economic terms. They may be ‘messy’ in the sense that they have developed in an unplanned way, and also in regard to the extent of environmental pollution with human, industrial and household waste. Consequently these environments may be difficult because of their social heterogeneity, the overlapping institutional responsibilities and limited financial resources, and because vested interests and politics can make planning and the implementation of plans challenging.

The technology by which urban water and sanitation services are to be provided would ideally be networked (i.e. piped). In the case of water supply, point sources (springs, wells, boreholes) are less than ideal because of water quality considerations. And yet large numbers of residents in unplanned urban settlements have to rely on such sources. In the case of sanitation, it is generally recognised that sewerage is too expensive an option, and so there are few alternatives to on-site/on-plot sanitation with facilities to empty pits periodically. And so many of the urban poor use technologies which are more appropriate in rural than urban environments.

However the approaches by which open defecation is reduced (or eliminated) and safe sanitation is introduced in rural areas cannot be directly applied in urban settings. The principles of community-led total sanitation (CLTS) can be retained, but the way in which they are applied has to change – as is articulated by Jamie Myers in his paper on urban CLTS. In low-density rural areas pit latrines can be sealed once full, and new pits constructed. Naturally this is much less likely

in dense urban settings, and so pit-emptying and faecal sludge management (FSM) become necessary. Priti Parikh and colleagues' paper describing the FSM strategy proposed for Freetown, Sierra Leone, residents addresses this subject.

William Acker and Moises Mabote describe their attempt to assess the risks to health posed by incomplete or ineffective sanitation infrastructure and FSM measures, through work undertaken in Maputo, Mozambique. They conclude that the usefulness of the assessments depends strongly on the scale at which they are undertaken, implying that the greater the detail which can be included, the better.

Regarding water supply, Yolanda Chakava and Richard Franceys discuss a number of networked and non-networked supply options for Nairobi's urban settlements. They conclude that, despite the inherent disadvantages of point sources, these may be the best interim solution. Dieudonné Uwizeye and Cosmas Sokoni discuss the practical difficulties of bringing networked services to low-income urban residents in Rwanda, when despite the provision of piped infrastructure real obstacles to access – financial and transaction costs - still persist.

Improving urban water and sanitation services especially in fast-growing unplanned settlements is not easy, but it is imperative that we make progress in this important area.

Richard C. Carter
Co-editor