

Editorial: January 2017: one year and counting

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One year of the 15-year period (2016–2030) of the Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) has passed. A number of conferences and commentaries have marked the occasion by noting some encouraging signs of progress, while still acknowledging the major challenges which lie ahead. Unsurprisingly, there is recognition that achieving the goals and targets will be even harder than arriving at agreement over their wording.

A number of background factors affect our sectors of work. Between 2015 and 2030, Africa's population is projected (United Nations, 2015) to grow by 42 per cent or nearly half a billion people. Asia's population will grow, too, by a similar number, although this only represents a 12 per cent growth in the continent's inhabitants. Other regions will grow more slowly if at all. Nevertheless, population growth in the least-served continents of Africa and Asia mean that about a million children will be born *every five days* over the SDG period, each requiring water, sanitation, and waste management services (not to mention food, shelter, education, healthcare, and eventually jobs). In the towns and cities of the less developed countries, there will be 1 billion more inhabitants in 2030 than in 2015, while rural population numbers will stagnate. It is likely that the still sizeable but only slowly growing rural populations will increasingly comprise elderly, disabled, and otherwise less mobile people. The management and financing challenges of both rural and urban services will grow, but for different reasons.

In terms of disasters and emergencies it is hard to know what 2017 and the remaining years of the SDG period will hold. Over the period 2000–2012 The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction estimated that natural disasters killed 1.2 million people, otherwise affected 2.9 billion people and caused US\$1,700 bn worth of damage worldwide (UNISDR, 2012). The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) estimated a total of 7,628 deaths, 411 million affected people, and US\$97 bn of economic damages in 2016 alone (CRED, 2016). The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2016) reported that there were 21 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2015, and nearly twice that number of internally displaced persons. Complex emergencies, in which political instability, conflict, state fragility, and poverty coalesce, appear to be increasingly common.

Political uncertainties in some high-income countries – exemplified in 2016 by the rise of nationalist votes and outcomes such as in the United States presidential elections and the British European Union membership referendum – contribute to an uncertain future for international cooperation.

In our own sectors we see the persistence of unsanitary and unhygienic practices (in general as reflected in the sanitation coverage statistics – never fewer than

2 billion unserved in the last 40 years; and for example in the high numbers of people practising open defecation in India, as reported by Hathi et al., 2016). Gender inequalities remain apparently intractable (WEF, 2016). And governments and their development partners seem reluctant to fully address what we now know are the principles of sustainable service delivery – professional (though not necessarily professionalized) management and sound recurrent financing.

A number of things are clear. We need good grounded research and analyses of practice in order to further refine our understanding of policies and practices which are fit-for-purpose. In some areas we need to test and evaluate new ideas, approaches, and innovative technical solutions. We need to see well-proven approaches and newly tested promising innovations becoming established into mainstream practice. And we need to significantly accelerate our progress towards sustained services for all, at standards which are acceptable, affordable, and manageable by service users. But four more imperatives are even more critical in this period of the SDGs.

First, as professionals engaged in water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH), and waste in low- and middle-income countries, we need to rededicate ourselves to the momentous task which faces us. Getting services to all those who do not yet enjoy them, and keeping them working, is a high calling.

Second, we need to continually develop our professionalism – our knowledge, expertise, and standards of work. For too long it has been acceptable in some places and in some aspects of our work for those with inadequate credentials but a do-gooding mentality to practise. Those who design, construct, implement, manage, monitor, and finance rural, urban, and humanitarian WASH services must be highly qualified to do so, and recognized professionally for their expertise. Those who are learning must be mentored by more senior professionals.

Third, our organizations – especially the international development partners – must act in a more unified way. Competition and inconsistency of approach must give way to the collaboration and harmonization called for many times including in initiatives such as the Paris and Accra declarations.

And finally our professions, our organizations, and we as individuals need to shape our mind-sets to focus increasingly on the resilience and permanence of the services we provide; to value and serve every human being, with due regard for any special needs that individuals or communities may have; and to pursue the goal of sustained services for all with an increased sense of urgency.

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