



Editorial: Why it's not enough for local governments and NGOs to simply serve more people

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Many people lack even basic services. Implementation of water and sanitation programmes, especially in rural areas, is mainly undertaken by (local) governments and NGOs – often supported directly or indirectly by international donors and NGOs. These implementing agencies and their partners are driven by their awareness of the numbers of people who are still not able to access even a basic level of service – around 844 million in the case of water, and 2.3 billion in the case of sanitation (data from JMP update 2017).

The access gap should not be the only driver of action. It is understandable that serving the unserved would be the main or only preoccupation of governments, NGOs, and their development partners; but it is not enough, for reasons which are increasingly well known and widely acknowledged.

Serving the unserved is easy; keeping the service working is not. Two underlying assumptions in the drive to 'serve the unserved' need to be challenged. First, that those who are 'served' no longer need attention; and second, that getting a service to the unserved is all that is needed to close the access gaps. These assumptions are both fatally flawed, simply because maintaining and improving services is far more demanding financially and managerially than providing them in the first place. Establishing the service is (relatively) easy. Ensuring that it is used and remains so indefinitely remains a huge challenge.

Both 'served' and 'unserved' demand attention. Consequently in order to increase coverage we need to focus on both the served and unserved, and most especially on the financing and management arrangements which will keep services working. It is necessary to pay attention to the 'served', so that they do not regress or slip backward as services deteriorate and fail. Extending access to the unserved is necessary too. Service providers and public authorities need to address the needs of both groups.

Subsidies are needed; subsidies are justified. There is increasing recognition of the fact that service users (for water at least) are usually unable or unwilling to cover the full costs of keeping services working. Tariffs or water charges can cover minor repairs, but even with low-cost technologies, major capital maintenance is often beyond the reach of service users. Public subsidies are needed for water and sanitation, as with most other public services. Moreover they are justified on economic grounds.

Management cannot be left to service users alone. Similarly service users (at least for water and anything other than the most basic sanitation service) cannot manage every aspect of the service on their own. Expecting service users to organize major repairs or unexpected system failures, or expecting

them to arrange the entire process of safe disposal of faecal sludge, is unrealistic. Management support, from the public and/or private sector, is necessary to keep services running.

External management and financing must complement what service users can do. It is by now very clear that help is needed from outside the community of service users, for both financing and management. In countries where water and sanitation services are well-organized and adequately financed – and where service users are relatively well-off – small subsidies and professional management of operation and maintenance are effective. Where local institutions are weak and there are inadequate financial resources from both service users (tariffs) and governments (from taxes and transfers), it is not surprising that progress to full coverage is slow.

Fundamental change is needed. In countries where management support and subsidies are inadequate – generally those which are struggling most to achieve progress – three things need to change. First, there needs to be general recognition of the logic of the preceding paragraphs. Business as usual – simply building more water supply systems or triggering more communities in community-led total sanitation (CLTS) programmes – will not get close to reaching the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) ambitions in many low-income countries.

Far larger recurrent budgets are needed. Second, governments and their development partners need to recognize that far larger budgets are needed both to provide management support to water and sanitation service users and to subsidize the more complex and expensive repairs which will inevitably occur sooner or later.

Success is not only about numbers served. Third, those implementing agencies, be they local government or NGOs, need to collaborate in efforts to bring about the systemic changes described above, and to strengthen the institutions on which sustainable services depend. Some governments, donors, and international NGOs are already taking a lead in these areas. All others need to play their part. It is no longer enough to see success simply in terms of laughing children playing under newly installed taps – success counted in terms of more people ‘served’. True success is about national systems comprising partnerships of public and private sectors and civil society reforming and growing in capability to better support water and sanitation service users. This is far more profound and far-reaching – and it is the only way in which the SDG targets will ultimately be met.

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