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# Editorial: Leave no one behind in rural water services

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In development work, as in many other areas of life, we have a natural human tendency to focus on the one thing – the single highest priority issue, or perhaps the current fashion – without recognizing that several things may be true or important simultaneously.

In recent years, and for good reasons, governments and international organizations have put greater emphasis on sanitation and hygiene than on water supply. After all, these aspects of WASH were seriously neglected in earlier periods, despite being known to be fundamental to human dignity and health. Similarly, we have recognized the rapid growth of unplanned urban settlements, and transferred attention to the very real needs of their inhabitants for water and sanitation services.

In other words, those working in the WASH sectors have tried to redress earlier imbalances by focusing on aspects which had previously been neglected. So far so good. But there is a danger in such well-intentioned re-focusing of attention that other aspects of our work will increasingly fall into neglect and inattention. I would suggest that rural water services face such a danger at the present time.

The disparity in access to water and sanitation services between urban and rural areas is well-known and consistently borne out in the reports and updates of the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP). The latest (2017) JMP report shows that the disparities between rural and urban water service access ('at least basic' services) in Oceania, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Least Developed Countries are 52, 39, and 31 percentage points, respectively. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), 43 per cent of the rural population of almost 600 million had 'at least a basic service' in 2015, compared with 82 per cent of the 365 million urban population. A greater absolute number of people in urban SSA enjoyed at least a basic water service than in the rural hinterlands.

The data also reveal that if rural populations have improved water services, they tend to be at a lower service level – for example point sources involving fetching and carrying – rather than water piped into the home. Furthermore, the challenges of 'reaching the last mile' and sustaining rural water services are well-known. Rural populations or parts of them can be difficult to serve with even a basic supply, difficult to supply at a high level of service, and difficult to keep served.

At the same time some demographic numbers and trends give pause for thought. While population growth rates are generally much higher in urban than rural areas, current UN population forecasts suggest that SSA's rural population (about 752 million) will still exceed its urban population (about 666 million) in 2030, the target year for the Sustainable Development Goals. Growth in rural areas may be slower, but the absolute numbers remain high.

Furthermore, those migrating to towns and cities seeking work and opportunity tend to be the more mobile, more adaptable, younger members of rural society.

Those left behind tend to be the elderly, people with chronic illness or disability, and people without education or skills to offer. Those left behind have never had much cash, and they may become even more cash-poor (notwithstanding remittances sent back by family members in the cities or abroad).

The implications for rural water services may include increasing difficulty in fulfilling community-level maintenance and repair tasks, and in financing the costs of repairs.

A number of initiatives are under way to reach rural people with water services. In some countries urban and small town water utilities and private operators are extending their reach into surrounding areas. In other cases multiple point water sources are being amalgamated under a single social enterprise or private operator. But such opportunities – so far – are only scratching the surface of a much bigger problem.

Among more remote and dispersed rural populations, community management 'plus' will be the only viable management option for the foreseeable future; but much greater attention needs to be paid to the technical and social assistance and financial subsidies which constitute the 'plus'. Asset registration and asset planning need to become routine for local governments, even in the locations which private operators cannot yet realistically reach.

Some areas currently lie beyond the reach even of a community management 'plus' model. Here self-supply on the one hand, and infrastructure provided by governments and NGOs and handed over to unsupported community management on the other, must serve until such time as government or its delegated operators can reach such people.

Overall what is needed is a systematic and strategic approach to rural water services, with the aim of redressing urban–rural inequalities. This must take into account context-specific demographic projections, continue capital investment in new infrastructure, undertake district-wide asset registration and planning, and provide targeted subsidies for major repairs and replacements.

For many neglected rural communities, 'safely managed' water services (piped into the home, available at least 12 hours per day, and fulfilling water quality standards) are a distant and unrealistic dream. The priority must be to deliver 'at least basic' services for all – an adequate service for everyone, rather than an ideal service for a few.

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