

Editorial: In a time of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter

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The COVID-19 pandemic and international reactions to the death of George Floyd have added to the edifice of inconvenient truths which tower over our world in the 2020s. The phrase ‘inconvenient truth’ received widespread exposure as the title of a film and presentation made by former US Vice President Al Gore in 2006. The film set out to educate the public (and our representatives in power) about the truths of global climate change. There seem to be three characteristics of inconvenient truths: first, they are largely true; second, they are deeply uncomfortable; and third, they seem to defy solutions, easy or otherwise. And yet, solutions must be found.

Alongside global climate change, other inconvenient truths of particular significance to the scope of this journal include the following.

We (the world, collectively) are not close to being ‘on-track’ to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets 6.1 and 6.2, namely, ‘by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all’ and ‘by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations’. It is not only the time scale which is overly ambitious (just over 10 years from now), but the intractability of some of the underlying issues bound up in these targets, including the low priority given to these sectors, inadequate budgetary allocations, staff and resource shortages in local government, and corruption.

Second, the achievement of the SDG targets is most ‘off-track’ in remote rural areas, which are conveniently invisible to national governments, off the itineraries of international donors, and genuinely ‘hard-to-reach’. Every report of the Joint Monitoring Programme highlights this disparity, the most recent (JMP, 2019) report showing that 7 (in the case of sanitation) and 8 (in the case of water) out of 10 people lacking even basic services live in rural areas.

Third, and unsurprisingly, those people who are most likely to be unserved or poorly served with adequate water and sanitation live in poor countries and occupy the lowest wealth quintiles within those countries. But there are also important communities of people in even the wealthiest countries (the USA, Canada, Australia) who are failed by their national governments.

The list of already acknowledged inconvenient truths is longer than this, but I want to draw attention to one which has been exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its coincidence with the Black Lives Matter protests.

Some people like the word ‘nexus’, signifying a connection or series of connections between important issues or other categories. The connection here is between those countries and citizens likely to be hit hardest by COVID-19, those at the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement, and our own water and sanitation sector. The connection is simple, stark and grimly inconvenient. If you are black, poor,

and powerless, then wherever you live you are most likely to be worst affected by COVID-19, most likely to experience discrimination and disadvantage, and most likely to be poorly served with water and sanitation.

A shocking new report came to my attention this week. It is a review of affordability of water and wastewater services in 12 US cities (Colton, 2020). In the wealthiest country of the world, for significant numbers of low-income households, water and sewerage services are unaffordable (more than, and in some cases very substantially more than, 4 per cent of income), to the point where disconnections, and mortgage foreclosures are the routine consequences. All the 12 cities investigated demonstrated the connection between relative poverty and unaffordability of water and sanitation. An earlier study (Mack and Wrase, 2017) went further, highlighting not only the connection between poverty and unaffordability of services in the USA, but identifying 'the prevalence of disabled individuals, as well as concentrations of Blacks and Hispanics. The data highlight that water affordability challenges are perhaps particularly stark for these two groups which have median incomes substantially lower than Whites'.

Many millions of people in high-, middle-, and low-income countries around the world still lack safe and adequate water and sanitation services. The inconvenient and uncomfortable truth is that the vast majority are poor and black, disabled, belonging to ethnic or indigenous minorities. The inconvenient question is whether their lives matter as much as those of white, wealthy, able-bodied, and comfortably powerful people.

COVID-19 has helped to expose the inconvenient truth that those living in low-income countries with inadequate water services and poor housing (many living in urban slums) cannot protect themselves against this new viral disease. Will we as water and sanitation professionals, and our governments, rise to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter?

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References

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