

Editorial: Healthy planet, healthy people

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MOSTLY THIS JOURNAL PLACES the spotlight on water, waste, and sanitation issues as they affect local households, communities, and individual nations. Naturally this local focus is set within the framework of international goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the human rights to water and sanitation. But rarely do we step back and consider the impact, relevance, and imperatives posed by wider global issues.

As I write, the presidential election in the USA is in its contentious and fraught final throes. The eventual outcome will affect the stance of that nation toward development cooperation, its engagement with environmental conservation and climate change mitigation, and its broader attitudes to international cooperation, for example through the United Nations and its agencies including the World Health Organization (WHO). Because of its global financial and political clout, the resolution of these matters will affect, one way or another, the rest of the world, right down to the poorest individuals and households.

I could hardly write this editorial without mentioning the pandemic which all nations are having to fight. The year 2020 has been remarkable not only for the emergence of the new disease, but also in the global recognition of its virulence, and both the common features and the differences in response by governments around the world. Like no other event in recent history – climate change included – Covid-19 has exposed both the importance of international cooperation and collaboration, and the flaws in such partnerships. I cannot help concluding that the response in my own country, the UK, could have benefitted much more from the experience of countries which have had to contend with even more serious viral infections such as Ebola virus disease. But that would require a healthy dose of humility and a reversal of the usual power relationships between ‘developed’ and ‘less developed’ countries – an admission of relative ignorance and inexperience which we cannot bring ourselves to make.

As I write this editorial, the global climate conference, COP26, should be meeting in Glasgow, Scotland. Its postponement (because of Covid-19), and the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement, are matters of global concern which will have a reach right down to local households and communities throughout the world. Furthermore, the postponement of COP26 demonstrates the world’s apparent inability to multi-task when two or more issues of global impact and importance occur simultaneously.

It is not only present-day events which have local impacts around the globe. The use and abuse of power and wealth from the beginning of human history has resulted in many ugly features of our world – the disparities of wealth between and within nations, the unequal treatment of women in society, discrimination against minorities, the power of global industrial corporations to damage the health of both people and planet, to name but a few. It is unsurprising that 2020 has seen the rise of

the current discourses around Black Lives Matter and 'Decolonization'. These affect many aspects of life, including the water and sanitation sectors.

Both present-day global events and the long histories of nations and empires affect how households and communities in low- and middle-income countries live today. This much is obvious. But so what? And in particular, so what for the subject of this journal – water, waste, and sanitation? I would suggest three broad conclusions.

First, globally important events such as national elections in states that claim to uphold democratic principles, international climate change negotiations, collaborations through international institutions such as WHO, and a broader commitment to nations working together for the common good, really matter and must be fought for. The world cannot afford narrow nationalism and the building of walls and barriers to international cooperation.

Second, responsibility for the planet and its people is far too important to be entrusted to cabals of commercial interests and the cronyism of political power. Every citizen's voice must be heard and channelled so as to exert the checks and balances needed by democracies when they are working at their best. Civil society must be as strong and as wily as political and commercial powers, but at the same time highly principled and committed to truth.

Third, if the Earth is to once again become a healthy planet, populated by healthy people and communities, enjoying sustainable water, waste, and sanitation services, then the contributions of many more local peoples must be heard. The definitions of wellbeing held by indigenous communities who have much longer experience of living with and in their natural environment have much to teach modern industrial societies.

Globalization and history, politics and economics, affect the lives of those in poor urban and rural communities who still do not enjoy basic water, waste, sanitation, and hygiene services. This is part of the explanation for the apparently intractable state of these aspects of multi-dimensional poverty. The more that WASH professionals, with others, can understand and tackle these underlying issues, the better.

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