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Editorial: Getting to first base in rural water services

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Rural dwellers are consistently left behind in water services

The rural water story in poorly served countries is fairly well known by now. Much progress has been made, but a substantial number of countries lag behind. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of safely managed water for all (i.e. water of World Health Organization quality standard or equivalent, supplied on the premises, and available at least 12 out of every 24 hours) is hugely ambitious and unlikely to be achieved.

The Joint Monitoring Programme of UNICEF and WHO introduced the term 'basic' a few years ago, to describe service levels which are adequate, but fall short of fully 'safely managed' services. This is consistent with the dictionary definitions of 'basic' meaning 'forming an essential foundation or starting point'; or 'offering or constituting the minimum required without elaboration or luxury' (OUP, 2021).

Whatever one's view on the realism of the SDG target, and whatever one's stance on the human right to water, most people would agree that getting 'at least basic' services to everyone should be a priority, as a matter of natural justice and equity. And yet rural water supply (like many other rural services) still represents a glaring and shocking example of global inequality and injustice.

The persistent inequity of access to water and sanitation services in rural compared to urban areas is well-established. The 2021 Joint Monitoring Programme report (WHO and UNICEF, 2021) notes that 'Eight out of ten people who still lacked [in 2020] even basic services lived in rural areas'. Exactly the same comment was made about the situation in 2017 (WHO and UNICEF, 2019) and in 2015 (WHO and UNICEF, 2015).

In 2020 more than 600 million people in rural areas globally still lacked 'at least basic' water services. This figure is down from about 1 billion in 2000, so progress is encouraging. However, 45 countries have less than 70 per cent (an arbitrary cut-off) of their rural populations enjoying at least a basic service. The numbers of rural dwellers in these 45 countries today exceed 350 million people, up from 327 million in 2000. In other words, in the worst-performing countries, the situation is actually getting worse not better.

Water services for many rural people are still not at a level considered to be an acceptable minimum. The remainder of this brief review asks why this is so, examines what is being done to address the problem, and explores the likelihood of change for the better. Many of the ideas are taken from my recent book (Carter, 2021) which goes into more detail on many of the matters raised.

Why are rural areas left behind?

Many rural communities are both out-of-sight and out of earshot of those who allocate national resources. It is easier for politicians to focus on the urban communities on their doorstep, where the needs for water and sanitation services are also

very real. The urban population without at least basic water services in 2020 is estimated as 175 million (WHO and UNICEF, 2021). The more limited access to services in rural areas is clear, although rural people do not necessarily blame their governments for this state of affairs (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018). Resources tend to be concentrated at the centre, while rural districts have to cope with grossly inadequate budgets.

This raises the question of the overall adequacy of national WASH budgets. The 2019 Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water (GLAAS) report (UN-Water, 2019) showed the profound inadequacies in national financing of drinking water supply. Fewer than 15 per cent of countries responding to the GLAAS survey reported that funding was sufficient to achieve national targets. The rural water funding gap – the difference between funds needed to reach targets and funds actually available – was largest of all the permutations (rural/urban; water/sanitation) at 78 per cent. In other words, for those countries that could report on this question, budget allocation was only 22 per cent of need.

Relatively few engineers and other water sector professionals wish to work in remote rural settings – for the same reasons that rural people themselves often wish to leave. Schooling, health services, jobs, as well as energy, roads, and telecommunication infrastructure, like WASH services, have received little investment, resulting in unattractive living conditions for people who are well aware of what towns and cities can offer.

The rural economy is generally much less wealthy than that of the towns and cities. If there is a relationship between economy and level of service – a co-evolution of economy and services, as proposed by Franceys (2019) – then perhaps it is unsurprising that rural services fail to keep up with their urban counterparts. However, in an era in which nations have pledged (in the Agenda for Sustainable Development) to 'leave no one behind' there is a strong case for redressing imbalances in service provision and consequent development opportunities.

What is being done?

The first water decade (the 1980s) taught the rural water sector the importance of focusing on people, their participation, and management by communities alongside 'appropriate' (i.e. affordable and manageable) technology. The best programmes addressed both the engineering and the social, economic, and management aspects of the subject well. But many simply paid lip-service to principles of community engagement; and too many got away with shoddy construction, too. These weaknesses continue to this day. The focus was on new services, not keeping existing ones working.

In subsequent decades we have learned the importance of sustainability and equity as key outcomes. Sustainability refers to the time dimension – services which, once up and running, continue to deliver water without time limit. Equity and inclusion principles are concerned with services reaching everyone – whole districts, provinces, and other sub-national administrative divisions being served. All must be included, regardless of gender or gender-identity, ethnicity, religion, health status,

disability, age or other category of potential discrimination. The desirability of these outcomes may be increasingly widely recognized, but they are hard to achieve.

Currently, an increasing number of influential organizations working in the WASH sectors (including rural water) take the view that failures and slow progress to date are symptoms of underlying 'systemic' weaknesses. This means that it is not a case, as it were, of changing a punctured tyre and continuing the journey, but rather that slow progress of development is symptomatic of problems in the whole system – the multiple actors, aspects, and processes that work together, more or less effectively, to extend access to sustainable services. Consequently the new strategy – so-called 'systems strengthening' – has to addresses weakness across the whole system.

This raises an important question about the degree to which weaknesses in one sector can be alleviated when there are deficiencies in all economic sectors. Some important systemic weaknesses relate to generic matters such as national policy on fiscal decentralization, public sector recruitment and pay, and the general state of the national economy. Such matters affect all sectors.

Furthermore, the 'system' is seen as complex in nature. This means, among other things, that it is impossible to predict how a change brought about in one aspect will affect the overall functioning of the system. Consequently, attempts to strengthen the system must be accompanied by close monitoring of the effects of those attempts, with course adjustments being made appropriately.

From appropriate technology to community participation, through demand-responsive approaches, via new management models and financing modalities, to today's emphasis on 'systems strengthening' via district-wide approaches and collective action: what will we see in the remainder of the SDG period and beyond?

What are the prospects for change?

As I look forward through the last decade of the SDGs, and up to mid-century, I see two contrasting or counter-balancing forces. On one hand there is the undoubted passion, vision, and commitment of large numbers of individuals and organizations, as well as rural communities themselves, who are hungry for real change. There is a groundswell of vitality and dynamism – sadly not generally matched by the commitment of governments and donors – which is pushing in the right direction.

On the other hand, the legacies of colonialism, deep global inequality, and the poverty of nations would indicate that positive change, if it is to occur, will take place very gradually. The divide between wealthy and poorer nations (Hickel, 2018) has been amply demonstrated in recent inaction over climate change mitigation, sharing of the Covid-19 vaccines by wealthy nations, and the shrinking of international aid budgets. I would like to be optimistic about the direction and pace of change of development in rural water, WASH more widely, and many other aspects of development, but the evidence would indicate that such optimism may be misplaced. As my own involvement in the rural water sector diminishes in the coming years, my prayer is that those who will take my place will prove my pessimism wrong.

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