

Editorial

Richard C. Carter

Introduction to the issue

At the start of 2022 we take the opportunity to do two unusual things, at least as far as this journal is concerned. First, we present a conversation between the four members of the editorial team, in which we range over the major environmental challenges faced by the planet, explore aspects of inequality, and highlight the importance of the politics and governance of water in its resource and service dimensions.

Second, we republish six papers which were previously issued behind a subscription paywall. This year it is our intention as a journal to transition entirely to open access, through the Subscribe to Open (S2O) model. This will mean that both authors and users have free-of-charge access to publishing and reading. We have chosen the six papers in this issue based on their quality and importance, span of coverage (across water, sanitation, and hygiene), and previous subscription-only status.

A conversation about global environmental challenges, unequal access, and the governance of water and sanitation

Richard Carter is senior editor of the journal. His interests lie in the development of groundwater, and especially its sustainable use in water supply for domestic and agricultural purposes. He led the conversation which follows with the newer members of the editorial team.

Leslie Morris-Iveson works as a water and environment consultant specializing in policy. Leslie has recently published a new book together with St. John Day entitled *Resilience of Water Supply in Practice: Experiences from the Frontline* (<https://doi.org/10.2166/9781789061628>), highlighting practical examples of how resilience is being implemented by water suppliers around the world.

Richard: ‘Leslie, tell us about your background, your journey in this field of work.’

Leslie: ‘I am an environmentalist who moved into the water and sanitation sector in the early 2000s. I have always been interested in the means of addressing environmental challenges, within an agenda of sustainability. I entered the water and sanitation sector at a time when we were just setting out on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and working out how to meet their targets. At that time, it felt very engineering and supply-chain driven. Improving access to basic services has been a major preoccupation for me, but especially in the context of the challenges posed by climate change – the biggest global threat we live with at the present time.

‘The thing that has particularly interested me is how WASH – which I feel has been dominated by community-based models that are not always suitable for every context – could evolve to take account of the more complex environmental challenges which we now face. The communities who need WASH have

other complex needs and face a range of massive risks not only due to the climate crisis.'

Richard: 'Can you say something about the motivating factors, the personal drivers, which have been important to you in your working life to date?'

Leslie: 'I was fortunate to get wide exposure to many different contexts and issues through my work with UNICEF and Oxfam. I saw many of the water scarcity/insecurity challenges at first hand, especially the inequalities between people struggling to get basic services and the wealthier and more powerful interests who take their privileged access to water for granted. In short, it's my indignation concerning the inequalities of access and opportunity which has driven me.'

Richard: 'Can you identify the key changes which you would like to see in the coming years, in order to start to redress some of the imbalances that you allude to?'

Leslie: 'I'd like to see a few things: first, a significant breaking-down of the walls between disciplines and interest areas – weakening the silo/sector mentality which operates currently. The food, nature, and land use agenda comes to mind. It would be great to see new faces and new voices, new collaborations emerging including with under-represented groups.

'It might also be interesting to re-look at the SDG [Sustainable Development Goal] model (evolved from MDGs), to ask is it even still relevant for the polarized and uncertain, risk-prone world we now live in. I believe much of the framework is still relevant (although it still leads to silos); however, mindsets have really changed. And it is not always clear how SDGs relate to the Paris Agreement, and the changes after the World Humanitarian Summit.'

Cara Flowers is currently an independent consultant interested in natural resource use, agriculture, and the politics of water governance.

Richard: 'Turning to you, Cara, can you tell us how you got into this field of work?'

Cara: 'I started out as a botanist, moving later into community agriculture. My early work in Belize made me question the lack of joined-up thinking or collaboration on how to meet the needs of local communities that lived next to a large conservation project. Later in Uganda I studied the use of water in smallholder tea production. Even then when I was working on the natural resources and science of water management, I was aware of the inadequacies of cross-sectoral collaboration.

'Later I worked in Palestine, and my eyes were opened there to the political and policy aspects of water governance, which extend far beyond the environmental dimensions. Increasingly, my experiences in engaging with the political aspects of water management have confirmed for me the importance of joining up our approaches to the natural and social science of our sectors with the political and institutional aspects. The prospects for new conversations are exciting, but slightly terrifying!'

Richard: 'Cara, how would you explain what has driven you to follow the career path which you have taken?'

Cara: 'I think I would put it similarly to the way Leslie explained her interest. It's about fairness and accountability in development and natural resource management. Imagine that you take a large pizza to share with a group of friends; but then one person takes far more than their fair share. We see straightaway, and know, what is likely to be unfair and unacceptable. Of course we might empathize with the reason our friend wants more of the pizza than us but we won't know unless we open up dialogue.'

'The present scenario in regard to water and sanitation access amounts to what others have described as a poverty tax. Those with the least are being asked to pay the most.'

Richard: 'What about the future, Cara – what change might make the biggest difference?'

Cara: 'Of course there is no single thing which is going to change the world. But we must learn the difficult art of dialogue – across sectors, between humanitarian and development actions, and in numerous other areas. It may be trite to say it, but without coordinated and joined-up thinking, dialogue and action, our effectiveness is seriously compromised.'

Dotun Adekile is a hydrogeologist with long experience in his home country, Nigeria, but also across West Africa and beyond.

Richard: 'Dotun, I know you have been closely involved in the response to the Boko Haram crisis in the north-east of Nigeria. You have some major concerns about the sustainability of humanitarian interventions there – can you tell us more?'

Dotun: 'Boko Haram's actions in Nigeria started about 12 years ago now. It is estimated that about 2.2 million people have been displaced over this period, possibly more. Some have been accommodated in IDP [internally displaced person] camps, and some have been returning home from the camps in recent times. There was an initial rush to drill water supply boreholes in the camps, and more recently in the communities to which displaced people are returning.'

'Many of the water supply schemes utilize solar pumping, with sophisticated and automated technology for keeping solar panels clean, controlling pumping, and providing compound security. The engineering is often superb, of a very high standard such as I have not seen previously.'

'My main concerns, however, are that the communities have no idea of the costs of running these systems, and so they don't know what proportion of the real costs they are contributing. Furthermore, the NGOs responsible for their construction move on, and the local government authorities (LGAs) are left to pick up the pieces. In the rush to construct systems, there has been no dialogue with the LGAs or the state level Rural Water Supply Agencies which ultimately have the mandate to provide services. Government has been

side-lined by the humanitarian implementers. The humanitarian agencies sometimes don't even know where the LGA office is to be found!

Richard: 'Dotun, I know too that the whole issue of groundwater regulation is something that concerns you.'

Dotun: 'Yes, here in Nigeria we have a federal government constitution, with semi-autonomous states. In the early days there was the expectation that the (Federal) National Water Resources Institute could regulate groundwater development – through issuing permits – nationally. This was absurd, for a country as large as Nigeria, with 2,000–3,000 drilling contractors!

'Subsequently some states have developed their own Water Services Regulatory Commissions, so bringing groundwater governance to a much more local and realistic level. I believe it is very important for resources to be managed, and policies to be determined, as locally as possible – so localizing the SDGs.'

Richard: 'Dotun, what important changes would you like to see, in order to transform our sectors?'

Dotun: '2030 is just around the corner. There are more people without even basic access to services in my country than in many others across the West African region combined. To increase access, the SDGs have to be localized by making the state and local governments aware of their responsibilities towards meeting the goals. The combined efforts of all the three levels of government have to be harnessed to increase the access.'