Briefing

Governance

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Water is central to global development agendas, but new approaches are needed if it is to contribute optimally, equitably and sustainably to human wellbeing and prosperity.

Although the MDG target on access to drinking water is considered achieved, at least 800 million people are still without adequate clean water. Instead of basing efforts on difficult-to-define 'access' and 'coverage', a new focus should be on assuring that everybody — rural and urban — drinks clean water all the time.

Entrenched rights to water for agricultural irrigation compromise climate and economic resilience. Laws, contracts and institutions that govern water ownership and allocation need to become flexible enough to deal with changing conditions.

Making the right to water a reality: tackling barriers to access and equity

Water is receiving much attention in 'post-2015' development goal processes and debates, and is sure to feature prominently in future global goals. However, some important issues related to water rights are not getting sufficient attention, given that they are central to achieving human wellbeing based on foundations of economic progress, equality, healthy natural systems and participatory governance. Water rights as they exist in the real world may differ from how they are defined and understood in global goals and targets or in legal frameworks. This briefing looks at two aspects of water rights at opposite ends of the water use spectrum: access to clean drinking water and rights to water for agricultural irrigation. It suggests reframing future water goals and targets to assure that these two needs are incorporated into efforts to achieve equitable and adequate provision of water for development, now and in the future.

Goals, targets and their barriers

Securing people's access to clean, adequate and reliable supplies of water is fundamental to achieving virtually any development goals. Improving access to clean drinking water and to water for agricultural irrigation are generally considered key aspects of poverty reduction strategies that must be linked to other aspects of human and economic development such as sanitation, basin and watershed management and urban infrastructure. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not include a goal specifically about water but instead framed water as an environmental management issue. "Halve by 2015 the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and sanitation" became a target under the goal for achieving environmental sustainability.

None of the goals, or any of their targets, address any of the other development uses of water, such as agriculture and pastoralism, which are essential to the livelihoods of most of the world's poor.

Although there are weaknesses and inconsistencies in different data sets, the MDG target on drinking water is generally considered to have been met, mainly through investment in infrastructure expansion (which has been the priority of many development agencies and countries). But according to the latest estimates of the Joint Monitoring Programme on Improved Water and Sanitation, 768 million people worldwide still lack access to safe drinking water and the number of people in sub-Saharan Africa without access increased by 63 million between 1990 and 2011.[1]

Set a global goal that by 2030 everyone drinks clean water all the time

These figures demonstrate that we are still far short of achieving a world in which everyone has adequate water for a decent life. There are also questions around the sustainability and equity of the progress that has been made. The World Health Organization, which, along with UNICEF, compiles progress data on the MDG water target, defines 'access' to drinking water as: "the source is less than 1 kilometre away from its place of use and it is possible to reliably obtain at least 20 litres per member of a household per day".[2] That definition is not only difficult to apply given the huge range of definitions and monitoring capacities in different countries;[3] it also overlooks a number of essential considerations, such as:

- **Does the infrastructure actually work?** And is the hard, grinding work of ongoing maintenance adequately financed and governed? In Burkina Faso, the water target is considered achieved when there is one borehole for every 300 people. But accessing the water is another story when 25 per cent of the hand pumps in the country are not functioning.[4]
- **Does access come with a price some cannot afford?** 'Payment at the pump' type systems may theoretically make water available to all, but require people to have ready cash every day, making it unattainable in practice for the poorest.
- **Is access open to all?** Social norms and power relations may determine how publicly provided or apparently open access water is actually allocated. For example, research in the pastoral Sahel uncovered a number of cases in which public wells were appropriated by powerful individuals for their personal use or profit.[5]
- **Does access extend to people living 'off the radar'?** Systems that monitor access to water may overlook the homeless and people living in 'illegal' settlements such as many urban slums. These groups may lack access to safe water even in wealthy countries.[6]

Water for agriculture, although not included in any MDG goal or target, is addressed in national development agendas in both developed and developing countries. Most national policies support irrigation-based agricultural expansion programmes for rural development. The result is that around 70 per cent of water withdrawals worldwide are applied to agriculture, and that figure is likely to increase.[7] In prioritising irrigation to this extent, national policies and programmes are failing to consider the consequences for other water rights and use. People like fishermen and pastoralists, who depend on customary water access for their livelihoods, are immediately affected, as are emerging water-using sectors like tourism. Over the long term, decisions made today may compromise sustainable and equitable supplies to all users later.

Learning from experience

Experiences from both wealthy and poor countries around the world offer insights into how water access and allocation can be more sustainable and equitable, so that water can make the best possible contribution to achieving a more just and prosperous world, even in the face of growing resource scarcity and competition.

Clean drinking water for everyone. In West Africa, too many rural water infrastructure projects that fail to sustainably provide clean drinking water for all have led the Global Water Initiative to take a different approach in its water programmes. Rather than focusing on population percentages with 'access', and on 'density' of water points, the initiative is aiming to shift policy and practice to assure that "everybody drinks clean water all the time" — not just those who can afford to buy it, or those who live conveniently close to infrastructure, and not just the portion of the population needed to achieve a fixed target.

Many people feel quite comfortable with setting a target of 80 per cent coverage, but what about the 20 per cent who are excluded? One of the biggest challenges to this approach has been to change mindsets, particularly of water sector staff. Having focused their attention on meeting targets for infrastructure and coverage, they find it very difficult to think in the simpler but also more demanding terms of getting clean drinking water to everyone.[8]

Equity and flexibility in times of scarcity. Foreign investment in land for agricultural production in Africa is driving the development of large irrigation systems and dams, affecting not only the land's traditional users but also many others — through upstream abstraction and changing groundwater levels. Climate change is expected to exacerbate the situation through increasingly variable rainfall patterns and the possibility of longer or more frequent droughts. IIED is advising governments to be cautious in offering water rights to investors or

'grandfathering' water rights in 50–99 year land contracts. Flexible approaches, such as contracts with provisions for periodic review and renegotiation (for example every 20 years), will be needed to assure that all users' needs can be met under changing climatic or economic conditions.[9]

The need for flexibility may be even greater in wealthy countries. By diverting water long distances for irrigation, agriculture has flourished in dry regions like the Mediterranean and the southwest United States. But over time, competition with other land and water uses has grown, creating an unsustainable situation. For example, in southern Spain, irrigation networks are reaching the maximum divertible supply while demand from other economic uses increases. The supply-led policies that made agricultural production possible and profitable in these regions are no longer appropriate or viable in the context of competing demands and climate changes. There is just no unused water left to capture and pipe at reasonable cost.

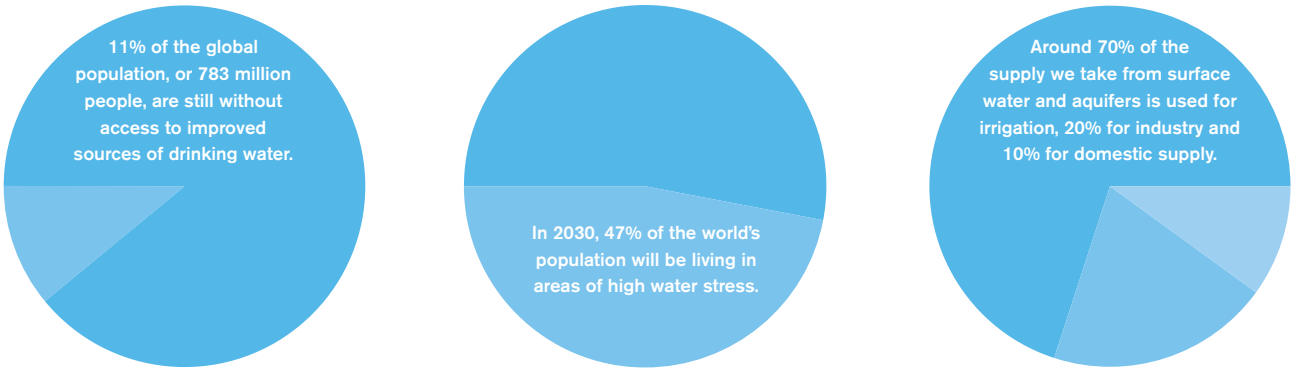
When long-term, entrenched practices need to change, multiple actors with vested interests are involved and controversy is virtually inevitable. Single measures like simply raising the cost of water have been shown to be ineffective and even politically disastrous, for example when farmers refuse to pay the higher rates.[10] In such cases, governments need to think deeply and structurally about new incentive packages to encourage efficient water use, while also reforming legal frameworks to allow more flexibility in allocating possibly dwindling supplies and in gaining greater negotiating power with rights holders.

Moving beyond access to equity and sustainability

Because water is a scarce resource (growing scarcer with economic and population growth and with local climate trends), its use will constantly be contested and renegotiated. This implies moving beyond technocratic prescriptions and target-based management to engage with the messy political economy of water. Water is no longer simply an issue for supply-side engineers, as building more infrastructure has reached its limits. In the context of improved human wellbeing, water 'access' and allocation should be guided by principles such as these:

- **Move beyond access, to rights.** Access to water is inextricably linked to rights, both formal and informal, legal and customary, universal and local. 'Everybody drinks clean water all the time' is clearly more measurable than 'universal secure access' or 'water security'. And assuring everyone drinks clean water all the time requires long-term obligation and effort, particularly in terms of maintenance and in removing barriers for the vulnerable. New infrastructure projects alone are not enough.
- **Give greater attention to equity.** Investment decisions that affect who gets water, how much and for what need to go beyond economic analysis to take a balanced look at the likely development outcomes. Questions that should be considered include who benefits, what are the costs for people's livelihoods and the environment, and what are the alternatives?
- **Prepare for a changing and uncertain future.** Climate, economic and demographic trends are expected to bring greater

Figure 1. Water: how many people still don't have access, how many might soon run short, and how irrigation dominates.



Sources: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation 2012; World Water Development Report 2012; World Water Assessment Programme.

competition for more unreliable and possibly scarcer water resources in the future. Water management systems will need to be more flexible than most currently are to deal with fluctuating future demand and uncertainty. De-linking water rights from land ownership is politically challenging and legally difficult, but may be necessary to manage water resources effectively in many countries. Where competition for available resources is increasing, mixed approaches including both regulation and incentives are most likely to lead to long-term behavioural change. Well-crafted incentives have the capacity to engage large-scale water users in seeking creative solutions to water management challenges.

Recommendations on global goals and targets

Water is high on the agenda of a number of global development processes, including those 'post-2015' processes working to decide what will succeed the MDGs after their 2015 target completion date. Consensus seems to be emerging on the desirability of a universal development agenda that is relevant to all countries. Water access and allocation are issues that are particularly suited to that approach, as water is a shared and finite resource essential to human development, for which the strategies and actions of one country may affect the options of others.

Setting a global goal that by 2030, everyone should drink clean water all the time could shift development thinking towards improving wellbeing and sustainability, and not just increasing coverage and the impossible-to-measure 'access'. The goal could also increase attention to sometimes-overlooked issues such as maintaining current infrastructure, deciding who should pay for and who should provide the upkeep, and ensuring that water is available to all every single day of every single year. It would also refocus our minds on how to meet the needs of the poorest: those unable, or unwilling, to pay.

Globally standardised targets are unlikely to be useful in addressing the growing challenge of allocating scarce water resources for economic development. Many parts of the world are bumping up against the limits of supply-side solutions already, especially for irrigation. Demand is likely to exceed supply eventually even in regions where some expansion is still possible. Indeed, the foreign investment in African agriculture suggests that competition for expanded supplies will be rapid and intense. More infrastructure can no longer systematically be relied on to meet the demands of new water users; it is time to turn to political processes in which competing needs for a finite resource are balanced and trade-offs are negotiated. Some will have to give up part or all of their existing water right.

Shifting from mainly engineering to political economy approaches will not be easy and is likely to be resisted, especially by entrenched rights holders and countries where supplies are still abundant. But increasing scarcity is one of the few certainties of our increasingly uncertain world, and equity and sustainability will only be achieved through a shared acceptance of the ongoing need for negotiation, flexibility and trade-offs.

Politicians have built their careers on offering more water to clamouring interest groups through infrastructure investment. How to make losing an existing water or irrigation right acceptable and politically painless may become our biggest challenge or target.

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Notes

[1] www.wssinfo.org / [2] www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/mdg1/en / [3] See p36 of World Health Organization and UNICEF. 2010. *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water, 2010 Update.* WHO Press, Geneva. / [4] RWSN. 2009. *Handpump data, selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa.* Rural Water Supply Network. www.rural-water-supply.net/en/resources/details/203. / [5] Thébaud, B., Vogt, G., Vogt, K. 2006. The implications of water rights for pastoral land tenure: the case of Niger. In: Cotula, L. (ed.). *Land and Water Rights in the Sahel.* Pages 41-60. IIED, London. / [6] UN News Centre. 16 September 2011. Rich countries fall short on providing safe water, sanitation for all – UN expert. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?newsid=39590&cr=sanitation. / [7] Alexandratos, N., Bruinsma, J. 2012. *World Agriculture Towards 2030/2050.* The 2012 Revision. ESA Working Paper No. 12-03. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome. / [8] Skinner, J. 15 March 2012. Clean drinking water is about people, not pipes. IIED blog. www.iied.org/clean-drinking-water-about-people-not-pipes. / [9] Skinner, J., Cotula, L. 2011. *Are land deals driving 'water grabs'?* IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/17102IIED. / [10] IUCN. 2006. IUCN contribution to water management and economic incentives in drought-prone regions. IUCN Information Paper for the Mediterranean Forum, Water and Drought. Zaragoza, Spain, February 2006.

Knowledge Products

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This paper is one in a series on 'Post-2015: Framing a new approach to sustainable development' examining how new goals and strategies can address priority development issues in a way that integrates their environmental, economic and social dimensions. The series is based on a framework developed by the Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda. The framing paper can be downloaded at http://pubs.iied.org/G03559. Further titles in the series can be found at www.iied.org/millennium-development-goals-what-comes-next

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