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Water supply MDG achieved ahead of target – now what?

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The Current Column

of 26 March 2012

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Bonn, 26 March 2012. Since the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, 22 March has been known as World Water Day. This year we had every reason to celebrate World Water Day. According to the UNICEF/WHO report entitled *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation. 2012 update*, the Millennium Development Goal for drinking water supply was achieved in 2010 – five years ahead of target. By 2015 88 per cent of all people were to have a supply of drinking water (in 1990 it was still 76 per cent). In other words, two billion more people have access to drinking water today than in 1990. This news is all the more spectacular when the associated effects are considered: fewer children are dying and fewer people are falling ill because they no longer have to drink dirty water, and more people can invest time in their education and their real jobs rather than spend it organising water to meet their daily needs.

However, the success varies considerably from region to region. More than half of all connections to a supply of water were made in China and India, while virtually no progress was made in sub-Saharan Africa, and things became even worse in Central Asia and Oceania. And it is primarily the urban population that has benefited from the investments. In the Least Developed Countries the figures remain much the same as before: only 11 per cent of their population is connected to a water supply, a mere 3 per cent in their rural areas.

A success story for the private sector, too

Private capital and private businesses have contributed, alone or jointly with public funds, to the improvement of urban water supply: between 1990 and 2000 the number of people supplied with drinking water by public-private partnership (PPP) projects rose from 6 to 94 million; by late 2007 the figure was 160 million. However, the global privatisation euphoria came at a considerable cost, if only because of poor government supervision. A study undertaken by the World Bank in 2009 that takes a close look at PPPs reports that 9 per cent of contracts concluded with

private businesses were terminated prematurely or simply not renewed on the grounds of poor work and overpriced water, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Of 65 countries examined, 24 have reverted to public drinking water supply.

While five water multinationals initially shared 80 per cent of the market in the developing countries, they are now having to compete with national enterprises, which are better at supplying smaller towns and communities than the big companies. Their market share is now around 40 per cent. This is an encouraging trend. PPPs, especially national ones, continue to be an alternative to public provision for developing countries, if government price and quality controls are effective. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

What the successful figures do not reveal

While the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 included the halving of the number of people not connected to clean drinking water, progress reports have had to use the vague term “improved access” in the absence of better data. They refer to improved access when a household has access to a source of water deemed to be qualitatively safe from a technical point of view. Besides domestic connections, that includes public taps, protected wells and rainwater collectors.

Improved access does not necessarily mean a reliable round-the-clock supply or even a house connection. Nor does the United Nations’ benchmark tell us anything about the quality of the drinking water or rationing, let alone the affordability of the water. Consequently, the number of people *really* being supplied with clean drinking water is probably many times smaller.

One example is South Africa, which is able to present some remarkable figures. While only 59 per cent of the population had access to clean drinking water in 1994, the figure had risen to 93 per cent by 2010. A closer look reveals, however, that,

in rural areas at least, the main sources of supply were pumps up to 200 metres from households. Water quality does not, in many cases, meet the standards of the World Health Organisation. Moreover, much of the new infrastructure can no longer be used because local communities cannot afford to keep it in good repair or because the connections were destroyed by incensed citizens unable to pay the prices charged for water. This example shows that technical access is only ever part of the solution: drinking water must also be clean and affordable for the poorest sections of the population.

The glass is still only half full

Despite the successes of recent years, 11 per cent of the world's population, or about 783 million people, continue to live without improved access to clean drinking water. In 25 countries, according to the UN report, women spend 16 million hours, men 6 million hours and children 4 million hours each day fetching and carrying drinking water. Supplying these people will be comparatively more difficult and more expensive. The majority live in the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, which are not easy to reach and can be supplied with clean drinking water only at considerable expense. The easy and rapid successes have been achieved

in recent years (borne along, for example, by China's and India's substantial economic growth), and every additional percentage point will be harder to achieve.

And even for those who, according to the UN report, today fall into the "supplied" category water supply needs to be improved: it must become more reliable, qualitatively better and affordable for the consumers. And the companies, whether public or private, must operate sustainably and efficiently.

The success in the case of drinking water supply must not allow us to forget that another important water-related Millennium Goal – halving the number of those without sanitation – will almost certainly not be achieved: the supply level has reached 63 per cent today, but the target for 2015 is 75 per cent.

The Rio+20 conference in June 2012 must help to consolidate the successes that have been achieved so far – and this through sustainable management – and to build on them. Nor must the Sustainable Development Goals to be formulated in Rio concern only water supply: 2.5 billion people have no sanitation – with all the adverse effects that entails for health and the environment.



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