Abstract

New targets for drinking water and sanitation were the prime water-related outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. They aimed at better health and development. The critical mass needed to implement them must be created, primarily at the local level involving the people, governments and non-governmental organizations but with responsive participation and large-scale contributions of the international community. Many issues still need resolution in the light of experience since the 1980s. Let us launch a second Water Decade in 2004, world-wide, but vastly different from the Decade of the 1980s; a new Decade that will ensure enduring commitment and maintain the momentum created in Johannesburg.

Keywords: Enduring commitment, Johannesburg targets for water and sanitation; Local level initiatives; New Water Decade

1. New targets with a moral and normative dimension

The agenda for drinking water and sanitation proclaimed at the U.N. Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat) in Vancouver in 1976 is still unfinished. According to that agenda “governments were to establish realistic targets and programmes to provide water and sanitation to urban and rural areas by 1990, if possible”. Twenty-six years after Vancouver and twelve years after the end of the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of the 1980s, new hopes were raised when the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration in September 2000 (UN, 2000) and resolved to halve the proportion of people who are still unable to reach or afford safe drinking water by the year 2015. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) recommended that access to basic sanitation be added to that Millennium Development Goal.

Some 1.2 billion people had no access to safe drinking water, and 2.4 billion were without adequate sanitation at the turn of the century; six thousand deaths of children happen every day as a result; the lack of water and sanitation remains one of the most appalling visible manifestations of poverty. Not only must the gap be closed; the world population will continue to grow. The year 1990 was agreed to
be the baseline for the new targets. On that basis, more than 1.3 billion people will need additional access to water supply between now and 2015 and almost 1.7 billion people to sanitation. This, therefore, is the time to act more decisively than during the last two decades. The time is ripe to conceive a second U.N. Decade for water and sanitation, worldwide though vastly different from the decade of the 1980s: a decade that will allow for continuity.

An additional moral and normative dimension was added to the new targets when the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) adopted General Comment No. 15 (ECOSOC, 2002) to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) in November 2002. The Committee determined that the right to water is inextricably related to the right to the highest attainable level of health and to adequate housing and adequate food. The right to water includes access to existing water supplies, freedom from arbitrary disconnection, adequacy of water for human dignity, life and health, and the treatment of water as a social and cultural good and not primarily as an economic good.

The Committee stressed the obligation of states parties to the Covenant to give special attention to vulnerable groups, e.g. women, children, and rural and deprived urban populations. States parties also have the obligations to ensure (through an effective regulatory system, monitoring, genuine public participation and the imposition of penalties for non-compliance) that water services which are operated or controlled by third parties (e.g. privatized services) will not compromise equal, affordable and physical access to sufficient, safe and acceptable water. Sanitation is recognized as clearly linked to water because of the resulting health effects and the exacerbation of poverty by unsanitary living conditions.

We must be watchful that the improvement of water supply and sanitation will not become a numbers game! Targets are important for the promotion of a goal, but without an implementation plan, they may not serve a useful purpose. Nor will the decisions reached at international conferences alone make a dent! It is rather another matter to get programmes going. And we must keep in mind that few of the obstacles hindering progress during the International Decade of the 1980s have been removed, especially the lack of people’s awareness of hygiene and stakeholder participation, devolution and empowerment, the funding of improvements for the poor, capacity building, making water supply and sanitation an integral part of socio-economic and water resources development, a lower-cost technology, large sums of money, and cooperation and collaboration within countries and with the international community. The new worldwide Decade would give particular attention to eliminating these obstacles. Many conflicting views as to how this may be achieved will be heard during the months to come. Some of the choices to be made are referred to below; one of the most difficult among them may be to decide which half of the proportion of people presently un-served should be the focus of our attention between now and 2015.

2. Fortunately, we are not starting from scratch

We are not starting from scratch as we move into the twenty-first century. The new target is not the Big Bang. The universe of water and sanitation is already expanding! Not even the Decade of the 1980s was the beginning. Many schemes were in place when the Decade started though often in poor operational conditions, and the rural areas and the subject of sanitation were badly neglected.

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1 Personal information on updated requirements obtained from the Joint Monitoring Office at WHO.
International cooperation and cooperation for water supply and sanitation also did not start in the 1980s. For instance, governments of the Americas and the Institute for Inter-American Affairs started programmes and projects during the 1940s. Many of the lessons we heed today were learnt then. The Charter of Punta del Este of 1961 prepared the ground for acceleration; it was followed by the Presidential Declaration, also of Punta del Este, in 1967 at which time the Alliance for Progress was launched. The Charter led to the first regional targets for water supply and sanitation, and triggered programmes in many countries, some of them still continuing. It gave priority to the under-served and poor, and to children. The Inter-American Development Bank and the Pan-American Health Organization joined forces; for years hence, the BID was often referred to simply as the “Water Bank”.

After the end of WWII, global cooperation began. WHO’s constitution of 1947 listed the improvement of environmental hygiene among the five priority programmes for health. UNICEF emphasized the provision of water and sanitation for children and schools. Soon, UNDP and bi-lateral cooperation programmes (e.g. those of France, Germany, the UK and US/AID) began to support water supply and sanitation. UNESCO’s programme for hydrological research assisted countries in mapping, monitoring, and managing their fresh water resources, especially in arid areas. Training programmes and research into technologies started to adapt “Western” technologies to the needs and potential of the developing countries. In the 1960s, the World Bank made its first loan for water supply. During the 1970s, cooperation gave priority to paving the way for the planning of more comprehensive national programmes. Sector studies were undertaken to identify potential investment projects and to guide the strengthening of national institutions, setting up human resources development and fixing tariffs, among other things. More and more countries included water supply and sanitation into their development programmes.

3. The Decade of the 1980s

But by the end of the 1970s, nearly 80% of the people living in rural areas were still without an adequate water supply and more than that without adequate sanitation. In the urban centers, more than two-thirds of people had services but these were often intermittent and poorly managed, and the social and economic conditions of the urban fringe emerged as a time bomb. The lack of water supply and sanitation in the rural and peri-urban areas became synonymous with social injustice.

The Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of the 1980s (IDWSSD) was to be a worldwide concerted attack on the persistent lack of drinking water supply and sanitation, to be carried out in a new spirit of cooperation, effectively planned, organized, monitored and implemented during a finite period of time. It was to make great strides forward for all people, though its priority was directed to the under-served populations so that, for once, the deprived people would benefit most. Water and sanitation improvements were to be made complementary to achieve the desired health benefits, the community was to be fully associated and programmes were to be closely related to those in other sectors. Aspirations and expectations were raised to levels never seen before—in hindsight, perhaps too high.

Halfway through the Decade, a survey revealed that sector performance improved in spite of the world economic climate, but the backlog of communities lacking basic sanitary services was still huge. Only in one sub-sector—rural water supply—did the number of people receiving new services between 1980 and 1985 outpace the growth of the population. Two fundamental issues remained unsolved, viz. sanitation improvements lagged behind water supply, and the deficits in rural areas were much higher than those in urban centers.
Nevertheless, 1,104 million additional people obtained access to safe water and 769 million to improved sanitation during the Decade. The winner was rural water supply, with 778 million additional people served; the loser was rural sanitation with only 344 million. But the Decade ended with 204 million not served in urban areas with water and 344 million not served with sanitation, and in the rural areas, 41% were still not served with water and 60% not with sanitation. In fact, the number of people not served in the rural areas increased during the Decade (IDWSSD, 1992). On this basis, was the Decade a success or a failure?

The order taken in Vancouver was too tall and time was not sufficient to live up to expectations. But overall the Decade was successful because:

- The proportion of people with new water and sanitation services exceeded population growth.
- With the strong political mandate which it was given at the outset, the Decade could serve more people additionally and more faithfully focused on the rural areas than the ten years that followed.
- It was launched after a preparatory three years during which in-depth assessments of problems, needs and capabilities were undertaken and mechanisms set up for making national plans with targets, and for consultations with bi-lateral and international aid organizations.
- Governments and ODAs achieved consensus on strategic approaches, and shifted the emphasis to rural and urban under-served populations, and supported health education and other measures rather than investment projects alone.
- Investment by countries and the external community increased dramatically, and ODAs agreed to exchange information on their policies and programmes between them.
- The Decade included effective regional reviews and assessments, and consultations with donors at the regional level.

On the negative side, the Decade did not adequately mobilize the participation of the people. Many NGOs were not brought into its mainstream. It fell short with respect to research and development for lower-cost technologies, and had few answers, yet, for water-scarce areas and the highly dispersed rural populations. It also did not highlight the ecological consequences created by untreated sewage effluents from the rapidly growing urban centers, and often its programmes went astray from other water resources developments. These lessons must not be forgotten while we plan for 2015.

Further, the national targets set by Governments were more realistic than the Vancouver proposal and that is what ultimately counts. There was not just the international Decade but, rather, each country had its own.

4. Renewing efforts during the 1990s

At the close of the Decade there was no explicit mandate to continue. Concerned governments and international organizations took it onto themselves to carry on. They created the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council as a rallying point for managers and experts from governments, ODAs, NGOs and the scientific community. The Council served to stimulate, coordinate and support the drive for more water and sanitation.

The new movement was to benefit from reduced costs of services through the use of more efficient and lower-cost technologies, and the protection of the environment, community management beyond
mere participation, and the strengthening of participatory and/or supporting institutions. Privatization emerged as an option.

The Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro resolved in 1992 that the improvement of water supply and sanitation must be an on-going priority. Agenda 21 underlined the importance of integrated water management, institutional reform, sound financial practices and the ecological effects of discharges of untreated sewage. More support for water supply and sanitation derived from the 1994 Ministerial Conference in Noordwijk, The Netherlands, and the International Conference on Water and Sustainable Development, Paris, 1998. The strategy during this phase was to rely on an increased level of communication, the involvement of an increasing number of stakeholders, community management and on “learning by doing”. Many NGOs joined and emphasized the needs and roles of the end-user. The review of experience and the evaluation of lessons learnt was focused on identifying instruments and technologies applicable under the conditions prevailing in the developing parts of the world. Governments and ODAs joined the Water and Sanitation Programme which was already in place for this purpose by the World Bank and UNDP.

By the end of the 1990s, 816 million people were served additionally with water and 747 million with improved sanitation (WHO & UNICEF, 2000). The winner this time was urban sanitation; the loser again rural sanitation which “captured” only 12% of the additional services. Of the 2403 million people still without adequate sanitation, more than 80% lived in the rural areas, and of the 1099 million still lacking a water supply, almost 90% were also rural. It appears that the sum total of additional services provided in the developing countries during the 1990s was lower than during the 1980s, and that the urban areas were making relatively greater strides than the rural areas in the earlier decade. However, the 1990s made great strides because:

- The 1990s relied successfully on an increasing level of communication among stakeholders.
- Community management emerged and was promoted as an effective alternative approach.
- The essential role of hygiene awareness was re-emphasized, as was the need to incorporate hygiene education into every programme and project.
- Research and development were accelerated and provided essential information, especially on the means of planning and implementing programmes at the community level.
- The exchange and transfer of information via modern communications technology was put in place\(^2\).
- NGOs participated at an increasing rate.
- The monitoring and reporting of progress was put on a permanent footing.
- We owe it to the 1990s and the Collaborative Council that water supply and sanitation have become priorities of sustainable development with new targets for 2015.

Yet, the staggering number of people without adequate services at the turn of the century demonstrates that the pace of improvements is likely to slow down further, supported by a political mandate with targets, even if the targets may again be too high. This was recognized when the Second World Water Forum and Ministerial Conference took place in The Netherlands in March 2000, when the Millennium Development Goals were announced by the United General Assembly in December, and ultimately when the World Summit on Sustainable Development adopted the new targets for 2015 in October 2002.

\(^2\) Sanitation Connection. [www.sanicon.net]
5. Towards 2015

Are “we” ready to take advantage of the past 20 years? Are “we” ready to move on? “We” are the women and men and their organizations at the community level and all the way upwards to the global level, who will implement this large undertaking.

It has already been said: if we compare the numbers of people who were provided with new services during the 1980s and 1990s with the numbers to be served additionally by 2015 (as shown above), we immediately understand that the task will be enormous. In the special case of sanitation, even halving the target of halving the proportion of people means adding more than what was achieved during the last 20 years. So, are “we” ready to increase the pace of improvements of sanitation by a factor of 4 over the next 10–12 years? I believe we are ready in many ways, but not in all. The last ten years demonstrated that, without a discernable political will, momentum will be lost. We also must have the critical mass! This is why a new worldwide Decade is needed. We need continuity.

Most of the key issues we are facing are country-specific and should be debated at the community and country level. But debate is also needed at the global level with the view to stimulate support and help. Few countries have yet adjusted their national programmes to the new targets. And we understand that the “army” to fight this “war” is often poorly equipped and poorly informed, and often unable to appraise the “enemy” as well as their own capacity and needs for support. The men and women fighting for water and sanitation improvements by 2015 are highly dispersed, often in the rural areas and not adequately supported or directed by a central structure. They need support.

So, this is my first question: are we ready not only in terms of the principles for action but also for making and implementing plans in the countries themselves, and for the tasks of keeping things on track and helping to maintain momentum? Are we confident that everything will proceed smoothly once the green light is given? I am not so sure, because of the quantum jump which is needed to reach 2015. And I will ask a few more questions concerning the country level simply to stress that point.

The concept of “halving” is challenging and hopefully realistic, though it is not clear which part of the population has been “singled out”. Sanitation in rural areas is an urgent priority but a large part of the population growth is expected in urban and peri-urban areas where hygienic conditions are even worse than in the rural areas. So, where should the focus be? Where to start and where to end? How to choose the best approach for thousands and thousands of communities? On health grounds? Or on the basis of economic criteria, or the rate of return? Or sustainability or simply the size of the target group? The answer “the people will decide” is not sufficient. Comprehensive water resources development is a big issue which must be addressed when plans are made. How will this best be done? Water demand versus availability, conservation of groundwater, fresh water ecology and the protection of fresh water quality must be considered, at least.

Technology has been said to be available but how are villagers or the deprived people of an urban slum to choose?

And what about service levels and the technological bottom line for village X or for village Y? The minimum amount of water? The imperative of drinking water quality? The minimum facilities for defecation? On-site sanitation or off-site sanitation? Or how to plan for stepwise improvements later on? Having raised such questions, I am nevertheless happy to agree with Vision 21 that all schools must be equipped with facilities for sanitation and hand washing by 2015, that 80% (why not all?) of primary school children will be educated about hygiene and public awareness of hygiene will be universal. These are clear and realistic targets—and they can be reached! But what about plans and targets for the rest?
How will the campaign for sanitation in schools and public awareness campaigns be led, and how will the necessary resources be mobilized and managed to make it a success? Or, how will health education be made successful, in the first instance?

Also how, by whom, and when will privatization be promoted and agreed upon, taking into account the stipulations of Comment No. 15 relative to the International Covenant? And how about some of the other controversial issues, e.g., cost recovery, tariffs, or cross-subsidization?

All of these questions are not new, but they imply that more is needed than just good ideas. The Decade of the 1980s sent shockwaves through the countries but the source of energy was more in New York than in the village or the urban fringe. In the 1990s, a ground-swell developed as part of the Vision 21 process. Now the critical mass for accelerating the pace of programmes towards 2015 must be developed! I do not think we have reached that point; I do not think we have the critical mass. Nor that interactive mechanisms and networks are in place everywhere, i.e., mechanisms for moving information up and down from one level to the other, and for analyzing needs and mobilizing support. About the huge sums of money needed, I do not even dare to think! Tens of billions of US$ have been invested by countries and the ODA community over the last 20 years and spending is increasing year after year. But much more will be needed.

Perhaps I will be told to be more optimistic. Well, I, for one, have learned my lessons during the Decade of the 1980s and the years since; I do not want to confuse optimism with foolhardiness when it comes to a task of this magnitude.

The previous paragraphs are intended to stimulate thinking about the task ahead in planning a new worldwide Decade. The questions must be asked because neither Agenda 21, nor the decisions and recommendations emanating from the other conferences, go beyond the usual generalities of such events. The “Shared Vision for Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply” (Vision 21, 2000) and its framework for action are different; it leads the way though it does not pretend to be a detailed road map for action in countries X or Y over the next 10 years.

Capacity in the countries, interactive mechanisms for support and responsive leadership is one side of the coin for success. The other side is political will in the long term. A new worldwide Decade launched by the United Nations this year or the next will be the best framework for addressing these two imperatives. It would also create the continuity which we need for not losing the lessons learnt during the last 20 years, and for dealing with the key issues which have been identified, such as:

- The incorporation of the experience of the past 20 years into innovative national policy and strategies, and the acceleration of a large number of local and national programmes, and the strengthening of local and national institutions to carry them out
- Advocacy and working within networks of partners. This already is moving ahead but needs extension. It must be planned just as much as engineering works.
- Setting policy and devising strategies, choosing the right criteria and taking the steps which will make them work; this will be plaguing us forever.
- Ensuring that water and sanitation programmes will, in fact, make their contribution to the overall goals of poverty alleviation and health improvement, of empowerment, devolution and the environment, and furthering the role of women.
- Promoting and setting up frameworks for community management of water supplies and sanitation in keeping with the principles of devolution and empowerment.
• Ensuring furthermore that water supply and sanitation are part and parcel of the management of water resources, e.g. ensuring the protection of groundwater supplies from drying up in poor arid areas, the prevention of the pollution of surface and groundwater, and the most effective use of the resources available.

• The mobilization of the country’s own resources and channeling them to priority populations and areas, in keeping with established criteria. Mobilizing, especially, resources in all the sectors which must make the new targets for 2015 a matter of their own concern, e.g. environment, health, water resources development, housing, public works and agriculture; much of the money we need is available in these sectors.

• Equally importantly, mobilizing money from external sources and the international and regional development banks, and ensuring that they are focused on countries’ priorities so that the money will trickle down to the levels most in need, including the end-user. In this connection, rationalizing and coordinating “type-2” projects.

• Resolving conflicts potentially inherit in the setting of financial policies for water and sanitation, especially with respect to the poor and under-served populations, and in privatization.

• Promoting and organizing extended research and development, and disseminating and using the results, with a particular focus on societal and funding mechanisms, lower-cost technologies and water resources protection and augmentation.

• Promoting an integrated approach without insisting that everything has to be integrated with everything, everywhere, all the time.

• Monitoring and feedback, providing up-to-date information and sharing experience.

• And last, but not least, maintaining the pace of progress, once accelerated, for at least 10 years.

This all may sound simplistic or stereotypical to some. It is not; let us not kid ourselves. Each of the items mentioned (and others which could be added) is a complex matter and resolution depends on leadership, capacity and resources at the country-wide level as well as globally. Each item is critical in making plans for the next ten years. Leadership must be responsive to needs rather than top-down. It must be diplomatic as well as substantive, and must meet high technical standards of quality.

Finally, one of the greatest risks confronting the new targets will require specific attention: the loss of political will and support. There are so many competing priorities and demands to be faced by political leaders at all levels that the risk is great that, sooner or later, the commitment made at Johannesburg for water supply and sanitation may erode. We must not forget that sanitation, especially, does not normally attract the attention of our political leaders. How can this be avoided?

The Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development includes specific targets for 2015 for seven subjects, of which water supply and sanitation is just one. In addition, it includes proposals for some 50 subjects covering many of the other components of sustainable development, some of which may look much more of a priority than sanitation. The fear that the political will and commitment to water supply and sanitation may fall victim to erosion is not too far-fetched. We have seen this happen during the 1980s. The best safeguard against this danger will be action at two levels, at least: in the individual countries and by the U.N. General Assembly. At the level of the countries, advocacy campaigns will be essential on a continuing basis involving government, the media and the community. As regards the United Nations, some of us may remember 10 November 1980, the day the General Assembly proclaimed the International Decade in one of its rare special sessions. The impact of the resolution it adopted on that day was initially great (U.N., 1980). But when a report on
progress was reviewed five years later, the many social and economic problems experienced at that time were too great for many leaders to stand fast. Sooner or later, the erosion began.

So to end on an optimistic note: over the last two or three years, the Secretary-General of the United Nations took an initiative and determined that water supply and sanitation required a special effort. This turned out to command political backing at the time of Johannesburg. Let us hope that this trend will continue. Let us hope that delegates to the session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2003 will not only approve the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation but will also follow the example of the resolution which it adopted in 1980 when the Thirty-fifth Assembly decided to launch the International Decade for water supply and sanitation. Let us meet the Johannesburg target for water and sanitation. Let us launch a second U.N. water decade in 2004!

References

WHO & UNICEF. (2000). Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report, WHO and UNICEF. These figures are not strictly comparable with the End-of-Decade numbers referred to before: they include information from the industrial countries of the North, and their collection involved household surveys, whereas the numbers for the 1980s were obtained through consultation with governments.