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# Editorial: Setting SDG ambitions in a realistic time-scale

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## SDG ambitions and realities

At the outset of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) period 68 countries are not on track to achieve universal basic water services and 89 countries will not achieve universal basic sanitation services by 2030 (WHO/UNICEF, 2017). Furthermore, the SDGs challenge us to go even further than basic service provision, through the introduction of new standards of 'safely managed' services. Based on simple extrapolations, even more countries will fail to achieve universal safely managed services by 2030 unless major changes take place in the next 13 years.

This gap between reality and ambition may provide the evidence and incentives which the sector needs to advocate for greater investment, deliver more efficiencies, and find better ways of doing things. It also reflects the world's normative position on these matters – that access to safe and affordable water and sanitation are basic human rights. For these reasons alone the SDG approach is the right one. However, there are also dangers in setting ourselves up to fail. Failure is not a problem in itself but the danger comes if actions today in pursuit of short-term targets come at the detriment of longer-term success.

## WASH development takes time

Historical precedent indicates that we are in a slow-moving sector where progress is often realized over decades, sometimes even centuries. Historic analysis from the UK on the expansion of water and sanitation services in one of the secondary cities, for example, shows a time span of about 200 years from no access to universal access (Gerlach et al., 2008). Broader processes of change in the sector reveal a similar pattern. Innovation has transformed many of our sister sectors such as telecommunications and energy, but in WASH many of the basic technologies have remained stubbornly unchanged for centuries. It would seem unlikely that technological innovation is going to transform the way that water is provided or human and other wastes removed and made safe. In this context, the SDGs can be read as a challenge for us all to cheat history. While we should seek those game-changing factors such as radically transforming investment levels or developing new silver-bullet technologies, we should also – perhaps more realistically – seek out those marginal gains in all aspects of our work that may cumulatively help deliver the SDG ambition.

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## Thinking long term

We believe there is a need to think through sector strategy and actions with the long game in mind. Thinking not just where we want water and sanitation to be in 2030 but what we should aspire to in 2090 – 100 years after the Millennium Development Goal baseline – and how actions today may shape the long-term success of the sector. Planning over such long time frames may not always be feasible when we are confronted with clear and urgent needs, but there are questions to be asked about the trajectories we set for ourselves.

We do not have all the answers but would like to pose some potential challenges and tensions that we may encounter. These draw on both contemporary experiences of how infrastructure trajectories set down centuries ago are shaping decisions in the developed world today, but also pose some challenging questions about today's approach to delivering water and sanitation in the developing world.

## Equality

We start with a controversial aspect. A cross-cutting element of the entire SDG agenda is to reduce inequalities both within and between countries. This agenda is clearly essential if we are to focus attention on those most in need and its value in that regard is clear, especially for those countries that are currently making good progress towards serving their populations – to ensure they do not leave anybody behind. The SDG baseline report includes new data that shows in-country water and sanitation inequalities across wealth quintiles. This indicates that there is a high degree of equality at either end of the national wealth spectrum. For example, in countries such as Jordan, with near universal basic access to sanitation, we see all wealth quintiles are relatively equal, while in countries at the other end of the scale, such as the Central African Republic (CAR) or Liberia, there is an equality of poor access. It appears that as we move from the worst performing countries to the best, we see a growth in inequality as the wealthy quintiles are served before others catch up and a new equality of higher access emerges.

The data just alluded to is of course a cross-sectional snapshot of different countries rather than longitudinal data over time. However, read this way, it suggests an interesting relationship between progress and inequality within our sector. Such debates are well rehearsed in the literature on economic development – with a contentious and not yet settled debate between those that believe inequality is an inevitable by-product of increased economic productivity, and those that think there is no such inevitability to that relationship, or that inequality reduces economic productivity.

The consensus is clear that too much inequality is a bad thing but there is evidence that some time-limited inequality is the logical extension of growing prosperity. We are not in a position to add to those debates, but we suggest that it seems infeasible for Liberia or CAR to undergo the transformation towards universal access without some time-limited growth in inequality. This may not be a widely accepted viewpoint but if we as the international sector are to support the long-term development of viable water and sanitation systems (understood in the broad

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concept of a viable ecosystem of infrastructure, institutions, and resource flows) then we may have to accept a growth in inequality in the short term with the long-term aim of truly equitable systems by 2090.

## Sustainability

During the MDG period it was widely accepted that there was too much focus on expanding access without adequate attention to the development of ongoing support systems. This was driven at least in part by governments trying to hit access targets but the result was high-levels of non-functionality and slippage, particularly in the rural water sector. Part of the lesson is that we can only have truly sustainable water and sanitation services when there is domestic and local capacity to manage systems – and this capacity is not always there. Outsiders can support domestic and local capacity development and, in cases of emergencies, can step in to plug gaps, but over the long term those services are only likely to be supported in places where sufficient capacity exists. To maximize efficiencies this may mean that we should be strategically targeting interventions within countries where they are likely to become self-sustaining over the long term. To interpret the equality agenda through a short-term lens then we may be tempted to encourage expansion of services among the very poorest, where capacity does not yet exist to sustain them. In contrast, over the long term it may be better to work with the poorest countries to develop systems that begin to address sustainable services for those already served, before the progressive realization of universal services to the poorest too.

## Planning for the long game

Looking to the long term, we must also consider how the infrastructure and management solutions we propose today will be laying down the best trajectories for what the sector will look like in 2090. In the context of climate change and water insecurity this is a particularly important challenge. The rural water sector has been a champion of the appropriate technology agenda with the idea that 'small is beautiful' and that locally appropriate solutions are king. This clearly remains a strong line of thought yet there are long-term questions regarding the resilience of systems that rely heavily on localized sources, often with systems constructed at a village level. In some countries, there is now an emphasis on 'thinking big' with the development or proposed development of large bulk water schemes to overcome source insecurities in rural areas. In India, parts of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat now rely on bulk water systems to provide hundreds of villages with reliable sources of water, while Ethiopia is considering plans to develop similar systems in its lowlands. The natural reaction of many is to be cynical of such technological solutions to these issues yet over the long term – thinking about 2090 – networked rural water supply is likely to be a big part of the solution. There may be economies of scale to be had from bringing together systems to serve many villages, rather than allowing each to fend for itself. Clearly, this will not be the answer in all cases – localized supplies

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are part of the continued solution in many rural areas of developed countries – but in the right situations poorer countries should also enjoy the multi-village systems which we find in many richer countries today. It is likely the solution will be a mix of localized and multi-centre systems, but thinking about the long term it is perhaps time the sector starts to 'think big' about what the long-term solutions to water insecurity may be in 2090.

Turning to urban sanitation, the SDG baseline report usefully highlights how much of the world relies on on-site sanitation rather than sewers. In this context, the sector is focused on developing effective and reliable faecal sludge management (FSM) systems within countries as the only viable solution for achieving progress by 2030. While this is undoubtedly part of the solution, there are few examples of viable FSM systems that are truly protecting public health in large cities in the same way that an effective sewerage system does. With the notable exceptions of Durban and a few other cities, the fragmented and partial nature of FSM chains often means human waste ends up being disposed of unsafely. If we expand our time horizon to 2090, perhaps support for the development of sewerage systems would not appear as unviable as many consider it to be, at least as part of the solution for cities. In any case many governments continue to aspire to sewerage systems even if we do not consider them an appropriate solution in the short term. It may be that the incremental development of infrastructural and management systems that we know can deliver this level of service is – or should be – part of the solution.

## Trying harder, or doing things differently?

The SDGs are based on similar logic to the 'big push' theory espoused by economists such as Jeffrey Sachs. The idea that if we can make a step change in our efforts we can overcome poverty and address all human need in a little over a decade. While such ideas are admirable, they have largely remained unfounded, and so we believe it is prudent to be thinking about the long term. After all, we have been chasing short-term targets for at least the last 40 years, with the UN Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade setting the target of safe water and sanitation for all by 1990. It may be 2090 or beyond before we truly realize our ambitions and so we should be thinking about how the actions we take today can truly support that long-term, truly sustainable development we all aspire to.

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