

WASH and inequalities

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have produced many important gains for people around the world, but these improvements have often failed to reach those marginalised or discriminated against. This briefing outlines the relationship between inadequate access to WASH and inequality at global, national and local levels.

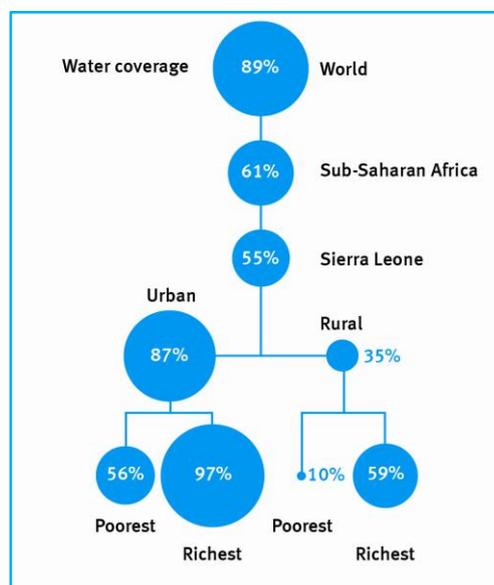
While the MDG drinking water target is on-track globally, largely due to progress in China and India, much of the developing world remains off-track, and there is a growing disparity between regions. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of people without access to safe water. Only 20 countries in the region are on-track to meet the MDG water target¹.

Progress on sanitation has been even slower. Despite the commitments made, the provision of safe toilets has not kept pace with the increase in population. There are actually more people without access to sanitation in the world today than there were in 1990². At current rates of progress, the sanitation MDG target may not be reached until 2025³, and in 2015 the numbers will remain unacceptably high, with 2.4 billion still lacking access to improved sanitation⁴.

There is inequality in WASH provision at the national level too. Figure 1, below, demonstrates the extent to which access to drinking water varies by wealth quintiles and rural/urban location. Market economies prioritise the most advantaged and governments typically focus on providing access to those who are easiest to reach and those with influence – the better-off and the politically powerful. Poor and marginalised people usually have least control over water resources, and are frequently last in line, despite the cost of a lack of access and the benefit from improved access being greatest for the poorest people⁵ and those in the most vulnerable situations.

Figure 1: Regional and country averages mask huge disparities

Source: JMP 2012 and Sierra Leone Demographic and Health Survey 2008



Inequalities are present in every country lacking safe water and sanitation. These inequalities predominantly affect individuals and groups suffering multiple human rights deprivations. Many patterns of discrimination, such as those based on gender, age and disability status, are consistent across the world. Other inequalities, such as those based on minority status or caste, vary across countries, but structural causes and patterns for these inequalities can be identified. For example:

- In South Asia, the poorest fifth of the population is 13 times less likely to have access to improved sanitation than the rest⁶.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, rich people are more than twice as likely as poor people to have access to safe water, and almost five times as likely to have access to improved sanitation⁷.
- Within countries there are extreme spatial inequalities, such as those experienced by communities in remote rural areas and slum-dwellers in urban areas.
- For families without a drinking-water source at home, it is usually women and girls who collect water⁸. This affects their health and wellbeing, prevents them having time for an education or economic activity, and can increase the risk of violence if they have to go to remote areas to collect water or compete for shared resources. A lack of safe and private sanitation has a particular impact on women, affecting their dignity and self-esteem, as well as their safety.
- Menstrual hygiene management has been widely neglected in WASH provision in homes, schools and public toilets, affecting girls and women's education, health and dignity.
- People with disabilities and older people commonly experience barriers in using WASH facilities. This affects their dignity and their health, especially if they have to crawl on the floor to use a toilet⁹.
- People living with chronic illness, including HIV, have increased need for water and sanitation, and often experience discrimination in accessing WASH.
- In all countries, there are also group-related inequalities, such as those based on ethnic and indigenous identity, race, language, religion, caste, and sexual orientation. These vary in different contexts, but are often compounded by discrimination and stigma¹⁰.

One of the greatest risks in discussing inequalities is that, to some extent, the greatest inequalities can become hidden because of people's acceptance of them within daily life. For people who are already marginalised because of where they live, or because they belong to a less powerful or discriminated group, access to water and sanitation is often a significant problem that becomes part of daily life. While people in low and medium income countries often highlight education and health as areas where there is inequality, WASH inequalities are often overlooked.

Where different forms of inequality overlap, they reinforce each other and create unique forms of discrimination and exclusion. Given the multi-dimensional nature of

poverty and the corresponding inequalities, the post-2015 framework will only be successful in reducing poverty if it recognises forms of inequality other than income.

Addressing WASH inequality in the post-2015 framework

The new framework and its outcomes and targets must be ambitious, relevant to both least-developed and middle-income countries, and embrace the human rights principles of universality, non-discrimination, participation and accountability to address the structural causes of inequalities. This means creating targets that account for poor communities as well as poor countries, and that recognise inequities and disparities within communities and countries as well as between them. Similarly, it is critical to strike an equitable balance between highlighting the current MDG targets that are most off-track – such as sanitation and maternal mortality – without emphasising them to the detriment of other outcomes or deterring integration and holistic approaches.

The importance of this approach has already been recognised by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation¹¹ and the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply and Sanitation¹². Any new framework should ensure consistency and coherence with the extensive work already undertaken by the Special Rapporteur and the JMP¹³.

WaterAid's vision is of a world where everyone, everywhere has access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030. We are calling for an integrated approach to delivering this vision. With specific reference to addressing inequalities in WASH access, our key recommendations are that the post-2015 framework should:

- Explicitly focus on reducing inequalities, and target the poorest and most marginalised people and neglected areas of development.
- Acknowledge that the poorest people may live in middle-income countries so targets must be relevant and meaningful for all countries, not only least developed countries.
- Recognise key principles and obligations from existing treaties relating to human rights¹⁴, strengthening mechanisms for civil society participation. The framework must also address the barriers to realising universal human rights so that member states can be held accountable for addressing these in order to achieve the framework's goals.

WaterAid contributed extensively to the UN's thematic consultation on inequalities in 2013¹⁵. While we broadly welcomed the outcomes of the consultation, it is crucial that any post-2015 framework goes further than the consultation report and fully acknowledges both overt inequalities relating to WASH – unequal access to water,

sanitation and hygiene – and how they reinforce other forms of inequality, eg education, gender.

Targets and indicators

Unlike the MDGs, where WASH was positioned under an environmental sustainability goal, the post-2015 framework should be designed so that inequality of access to WASH is effectively addressed throughout the framework. This means the

post-2015 goals must also reflect the central importance of WASH to health, education, welfare and economic productivity and ensure that the benefits improved WASH offers in these areas is recognised and measured.

WaterAid recommends that targets and indicators related to WASH in the post-2015 framework should be included to:

- Focus on reducing the time spent, usually by women and girls, collecting water and finding somewhere to defecate.
- Address the major barriers to access and forms of discrimination faced because of poverty, geographic location, ethnicity, caste, language and religion.
- Address inequalities within households and communities based on sex/gender, age, disability and health conditions.
- Include explicit targets and indicators relating to improvements in hygiene, particularly handwashing and menstrual hygiene management.
- Address access to drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene not only at household level but also in schools, health facilities, markets, transport hubs and workplaces.
- Ensure disadvantaged groups are meaningfully consulted in the design, implementation and monitoring of future policies and actions that address inequalities, so that services are accountable to all those who use them.

WaterAid's post-2015 vision

WaterAid's vision for post-2015 is an ambitious new development framework unifying poverty eradication and sustainable development objectives, supported by a renewed global partnership ensuring effective resource mobilisation and mutual accountability for progress achieved. To ensure that everyone, everywhere has access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) the framework should:

- 1 Include a dedicated goal on water and sanitation and set ambitious targets to achieve universal access to WASH by 2030 that prioritise the following¹⁶:
 - No-one practises open defecation.

- Everyone has safe water, sanitation and hygiene at home.
 - All schools and health facilities have safe water, sanitation and hygiene.
 - Water, sanitation and hygiene are sustainable and inequalities in access have been progressively eliminated.
- 2 Recognise that universal access to WASH is an essential component of an integrated approach to tackling poverty, hunger, ill-health and inequality.
 - 3 Recognise that achieving and sustaining universal access to WASH depends on establishing accountable systems for equitable and sustainable management of water resources.

Endnotes

- ¹ Calculated from WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2013) *Progress on drinking-water and sanitation, 2013 update*. Available at: www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/JMPReport2013.pdf
- ² WaterAid (2011) *Off-track, off-target: Why investment in water, sanitation and hygiene is not reaching those who need it most*. 1990 is the baseline year for measuring the MDGs. There were 2.4 billion people without sanitation in 1990, compared with the latest figures of 2.5 billion in 2013.
- ³ Calculated from WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2013) *Progress on drinking-water and sanitation, 2013 update*. Available at: www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/JMPReport2013.pdf
- ⁴ Calculated from WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2013) *Progress on drinking-water and sanitation, 2013 update*. Available at: www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/JMPReport2013.pdf
- ⁵ A study of the informal settlements in Nairobi showed poor people paying more than US\$6 per cubic metre for water during times of shortage – higher than water rates practically anywhere else in the world, and 20 times the amount paid for the same volume by those with piped connections. See Mehrotra S and Morel A (2004) *The case for water and sanitation*
- ⁶ See for example UNICEF (2010) *Narrowing the gaps to meet the goals*
- ⁷ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2010) *Progress on sanitation and drinking-water, 2010 update*. Comparison of WASH access levels between the richest and poorest 20% of the population.
- ⁸ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2010) *Progress on sanitation and drinking-water, 2010 update*
- ⁹ WaterAid (2012) *What the global report on disability means for the WASH sector*. Available at: www.wateraid.org/documents/report_what_the_global_report_on_disability_means_for_the_wash_sector.pdf
- ¹⁰ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water and Sanitation (2012) *Stigmatisation in the realisation of rights to water and sanitation*. Report of the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council. Available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/WaterAndSanitation/SRWater/Pages/Stigmatization.aspx
- ¹¹ Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water and Sanitation (2012) *Stigmatisation in the realisation of rights to water and sanitation*. Report of the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council. Available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/WaterAndSanitation/SRWater/Pages/Stigmatization.aspx
- ¹² WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme www.wssinfo.org/post-2015-monitoring/overview
- ¹³ Available from WHO/UNICEF JMP website www.wssinfo.org/post-2015-monitoring/working-groups/equity-and-non-discrimination
- ¹⁴ Including the human rights to water and sanitation as recognised by the UN General Assembly in *Resolution 64/292* and UN Human Rights Council in *Resolution 15/9 'Human rights and access to safe drinking water and sanitation'*
- ¹⁵ See UN Global Consultation on Addressing Inequalities www.worldwewant2015.org/inequalities
- ¹⁶ WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme shared vision for progressive realisation of the human right to water and sanitation. See www.wssinfo.org/post-2015-monitoring/overview for full technical proposals for post-2015 WASH targets and indicators.