

Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis

An Analysis of the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report

For the first time, the United Nations Development Programme's major annual report on human development makes an explicit link between water and the improvement of the human condition. Dr. Anders Jägerskog and Dr. Håkan Tropp of SIWI provide a first critical analysis of the report in this article.

"Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis," the 2006 UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) released in November, covers important aspects of the water and development agenda, including water and sanitation, water for human consumption, risk and vulnerability, water and agriculture and the management of transboundary waters.

The report correctly points out that the world's water crisis is not a crisis of physical water availability but, rather, is entrenched in asymmetric power relations, poverty and related inequalities. Furthermore, it notes

that if governments fail to address the water crisis, developing countries will not reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). If the issues are addressed in a coherent and systematic manner, the report argues, a quantum leap forward in human development could be triggered.

By viewing the water crisis through a power lens, the report underscores the importance of addressing politics and institutional development. While the water crisis is oftentimes reported in the mass media as a crisis in which "the world is running out of water," the HDR 2006 rightly says it is rather a crisis of governance. Poor people's lack of access to safe water and basic sanitation is not due to the quantity of water available on the planet but rather because the institutions set up to manage these issues are not up to the challenge. Compounding this is the limited political interest of the rich world to prioritise water and sanitation, an issue that seldom makes the headlines.

The report gives four major recommendations to the international community. First, water should be made a human right. The report argues that governments should clearly spell this out in their legislation. Such a right should among others entail a right to a minimum of 20 litres of clean water per person and day.

Second, governments should develop national strategies for improving the water and sanitation situation. These ought to include plans to overcome inequalities, clear financing provision and make water and sanitation a central feature of poverty reduction strategies.

Third, the donor community should provide up front financial assistance to efforts aimed at improving the water and sanitation situation in the developing world. Today, only 5% of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) is directed to the water sector. This makes it clear that the sector is not a donor priority in spite of the fact that 1.8 million children die silently each year as a result of the situation in the water and sanitation sector or that the water crisis decreases GDP with roughly 5% annually in sub-Saharan Africa, thus exceeding by far total development assistance to the same region.

Fourth, there is a need for a *Global Action Plan* that could address the water crisis in a serious manner. Efforts have been developed to address for example the HIV and AIDS pandemic through the Global Fund. According to the report, the economic rationale behind such an effort is compelling – for every USD 1 invested, the rate of return in terms of increased productivity, saved time and reduced health costs is USD 8.

A shift in paradigm 1: treat sanitation with dignity and respect

The report usefully puts the water and sanitation tragedy into the spotlight and through a historic comparison with the developed world, where about a hundred years ago massive government investments in the sector provided a great leap forward in terms of life expectancy and paved the way for rapid economic development. This clearly makes



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the case for increased efforts. Still, sanitation is normally treated with embarrassment and awkwardness in policy circles. Discussions focusing on urine and faeces in international meetings usually elicit a giggle, followed by silence. Politicians clearly do not perceive sanitation promises as ones which win or lose elections.

It is time for a change where toilets should be perceived as political monuments and a legacy worth pursuing. The report is progressive in that it puts strong focus on the stigma associated with sanitation. The stigma implies that not enough action is taken to address the human development costs associated with the lack of basic sanitation. In comparison, avian flu, while being a potentially large problem, but nothing near the water and sanitation situation, received much more support from donors recently. Presumably this was due to the fact that it had a potentially large effect on the rich world. The sanitary disasters of large cities such as Nairobi and New Delhi do not affect the rich world and have clearly not registered as a major issue in the capitals of developed countries. It is clear that there needs to be a shift in paradigm, where sanitation is treated with the same level of respect and dignity as the drinking water issue. Better disposal of human waste in combination with improved hygiene will undeniably function as a booster of economic and social development.

A shift in paradigm 2: elevating the importance of rain as the true water resource

One of the biggest water challenges of our time involves water resources for production of food and fodder. Again, the report correctly points to governance and policy failures as very important drivers of water scarcity. Nearly 80% of the water in developing countries is used by agriculture. Augmenting water supply by conventional irrigation will be very difficult for many countries, due to growing populations, lack of clarity and/or disputes over how to manage transboundary water, and a growing emphasis on maintaining environmental flows of rivers and lakes and groundwater aquifers.

There are evidently gains to be made from improved irrigation efficiency, but the report fails to point out strongly that there also needs to be a shift in paradigm of how rain fed agriculture is perceived. Improved agricultural productivity and production is viewed conventionally through an irrigation lens, but rain fed management techniques can increase dramatically incomes for poor farmers around the world. The majority of poor people in the world rely on rain fed

agriculture and it would thus be critical to view rain as the true resource, and not the water flowing in river. Such a change of mindset can have dramatic implications of applying “green water” technologies on a much broader scale. For example, agricultural extension services as well as much of research and development have conventionally focused on high yielding irrigated food crop varieties but much less so on traditional drought-resistant rain fed food staples. The sought-after food security needs a much better balance of the political promotion between rain fed and irrigated agriculture.

Water as a human right

The report takes a clear stance on water as a human right and it argues that the poor people currently underserved should at least be provided 20 litres per person and day. But why only 20 litres? The critical question here is how much water is needed to improve health and human productivity significantly as well as how much household water is required for development purposes?

Importantly, 20 litres/day/person should only be seen as a first stepping stone. Twenty litres of water is a good start for many people around the world and will mean that more people will survive. But will it be sufficient for massive economic development? Water as a human right does not only involve water and related services as such, but also includes issues of access to information, participation and justice and accountability. Hence, the report could have more forcefully analysed issues such as accountability and access to the political system as a stepping stone towards improved access to water resources and services.

Resolving water issues will boost human development

During recent years there have been many reports on the state of water resources and services in the world. One of the greatest benefits of the HDR is that it clearly shows that improvements of access to water resources and services inevitably will mean that more



Photo: Manfred Matz, SIWI

people have a fairer chance of realising their full development potential and break out from the vicious and downward spiralling poverty cycle.

In other words, by addressing water one will also address human development. This is the case many in the water sector also have attempted to put forth, but many times faced with low political will and understanding of water. The fact that the HDR has a far-reaching spread outside water circles will definitely make it easier to actually make the case why it is so important for human development to address equitable and efficient access to water resources and services.

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UNDP's Human Development Report is an independent report coming out of the UNDP Human Development Report Office every year since 1990. The stated goal with the report is to “put people back at the centre of the development agenda.” By providing normative development frameworks the human development approach has greatly affected the development debate in the world. The rationale behind human development is that people should be able to live in an environment in which they are free to pursue creative lives and at the same time have opportunities to develop their full potential – a situation in which large parts of the inhabitants of the planet find themselves in today. A major constraint to human development is related to the water situation in the world. Aply, the Human Development of 2006 focuses on the world's water situation.

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