

The Right (?) of ~~ACCESS~~ (?) to Water Supply and Sanitation (?)

A Polemic about Mixing Issues



Photo: Stephanie Blenckner, SIWI

Twenty-five years of on-the-ground experience in water policy advisory service has taught SIWI's Manfred Matz a lot. One lesson he has learned is that, not surprisingly, water professionals may say one thing but mean another. In this article, Mr. Matz describes how something as simple as terminology can cause confusion for those inside and outside of the water sector.

These days, one sees or hears phrases such as “water scarcity” and “climate change” quite a bit, both in the international mass media and in more specialised technical and scientific reporting. Even more so, such terminology is omnipresent in reports within the sector and political proclamations at water, development and environmental meetings.

Unfortunately, these and many other terms are being used to cover and explain any multitude of issues: the 1.1 billion people without access to a safe drinking water; Lake Victoria's shrinking water level; drought-sickened farmers in Australia and India committing suicide. The terms being used by water and other professionals to describe the problems are being used imprecisely.

This imprecision causes important ideas

and concepts to become unclear, confusing and off target. It is hard to avoid falling into the trap, too. When any of us are asked by a well-meaning journalist to provide a “one-liner” or a “sound bite” on problems related to water, it is difficult to go further and explain the differences between different water sectors, as well as their different implications and solutions.

A real challenge is this: to be precise and accurate, in scientific terms, but in a way the average person understands. To do this, let's go back to some basic water terminology and try to deflate some myths, misperceptions and misunderstandings which due to their uninterrupted and unimpeded repetition are, at best, confusing, and at worst, untrue.

Water scarcity, for example, is often used as a synonym for insufficient quantity and quality of water resources, but also to mean an insufficient supply of drinking water. From the resource perspective, the underlying problems of scarcity can perhaps be due to geophysical reality, climate change/variability or to the excessive use of the water resource in one sector and a resulting loss of raw water available for other users. The same term used in the water supply sector implies insufficient drinking water in terms



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of quality and quantity. This, however, is seldom caused by insufficient availability of water resources.

Rather, the true cause is simpler: non-existent or insufficiently performing service installations. Poor drinking water availability is usually caused by a lack of investment in water supply installations, or to a lack of well-managed, existing water supply systems. If management and cost recovery are not sufficient, the installation and service deteriorate, and people gradually get less drinking water. The problem has actually most often nothing to do with good management of water resources. The techniques and solutions involved are completely different.

The confusion caused when one says water and can mean either water supply and sanitation, or water resources, contributed to misunderstanding and impassioned debate over private sector participation (PSP) in urban water supplies. One of the main arguments against PSP was that water should not be privatised because it is a public good, without making a distinction between water resources and water supply services. There are in fact very few countries in the world which allow water resources to be private property and allow the trading of water rights. None of the promoters of PSP ever thought of privatising water resources. In almost all countries in the world water resources are considered a public good which are best controlled and managed by national or local government.

General Comment No. 15 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations – more popularly known as “the right to water” – adds to the confusion by mixing sub-sectors. The essence of what was intended to be described as a human right does therefore not become clear.

The same things happen on the “solutions” side: sometimes it appears that everything related to water might find its natural place under the heading of IWRM: water resource management, hydrology, cost recovery for water supply, drip-irrigation system evaluation, etc. These themes are addressed under “IWRM” at many conferences, seminars or other events. Clearly, water use sectors are part of IWRM and should be a part of IWRM discussion, but only regarding their specific impact on the quantity and quality of the resource. Cost recovery in drinking water supply, irrigation systems or any other water service sector requires concepts of utility rather than ecological management. Managing a natural resource, however, is a political task driven by long-term ecological concepts.



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Confusing the management of water resources with that of water uses is like confusing management of forests and furniture manufacturing. That former happens is understandable, but it leads to many problems. Mainly, it impedes sector-specific solutions. Water resource management should be driven more by a precautionary vision, while water services should underlie a more economic thinking. The mixing of terminology leads to incorrect conclusions, such as the oft-forwarded precondition for IWRM that several water sectors should be “integrated” under one roof. It makes sense, doesn't it, to combine a ministry for water supply, irrigation and water management?

Experience, however, has shown that the precautionary vision of water resources man-

agement is often lost when such solutions are sought, because the use sectors attract more attention. The inherent conflict of interest cannot be resolved reasonably by those responsible in institutions for water resources management as well as use. The traditional way of dealing with water resources prevails: that water is a raw material which can be exploited for the benefit of development.

Is this a dangerous marriage between modern IWRM protagonists and the more traditional water resource ‘users’? If it is, it speaks even louder of the need for all water practitioners worldwide to be precise.

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The Six Take Home Messages

1. Don't mix up terms that in different sectors mean different things; make clear which sub-sector you are referring to.
2. If a journalist asks you to summarise a water problem in one sentence, have the courage to ask for two sentences and make clear up front what you're talking about: water resource or water use management.
3. If you speak of or write about water use sectors under the heading of “water management,” be sure to concentrate only on the aspects regarding the resource as such: efficiency in raw water use, pollution and so on.
4. Have the courage to specify your main area of expertise. Are you a “water resource expert” or a “water supply expert”?
5. In any document treating several water sub-sectors, the water management and water use sectors should be clearly separated.
6. Integrating water resources management should not mean integrating all sectors into one organisation.