



Fostering equity and wellbeing through water: A reinterpretation of the goal of securing access



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ABSTRACT

Current approaches to the development of water services such as water supply, sanitation, and hygiene in the Global South are driven by the aim to secure people's rights to access such services. In this literature-based paper, we illustrate how such an interpretation of access limits the ability of development efforts in the sector to (i) address power inequities mediating access to water services, and; (ii) acknowledge and strengthen wellbeing factors implicated with water services beyond basic health. We argue that maintaining the current interpretation of access limits the ability of development initiatives in the water sector to address pressing issues mediating people's ability to benefit from water services. To address these limitations, we propose a reinterpretation of the goal of securing access in international development frameworks grounded in Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access and Amartya Sen's (1999, 2008, 2013) Capability Approach to human development. Such a reinterpretation strengthens the capacity of global efforts to improve water services to not only foster good health, but also address inequity and other dimensions of human wellbeing such as livelihoods and education.

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1. Introduction

Although water service development is often approached as a health issue (Konteh, 2009; Subbaraman et al., 2015), water services are also implicated with other dimensions of wellbeing. These dimensions include economic and political participation (Joy, Kulkarni, Roth, & Zwartveen, 2014; Larson & Lach, 2010; McMillan, Spronk, & Caswell, 2014; Nicol, 2000; United Nations, 2016b) and the ability to benefit from education and healthcare services, for example (Bartlett, 2003; Fontana & Elson, 2014; Koolwal & van de Walle, 2013). Recent work by Mehta (2014), Goff and Crow (2014), Subbaraman et al. (2015) and Crow and Swallow (2017) has challenged the current approach to water development in the Global South. These researchers point out the cross-cutting nature of water supply, sanitation, and hygiene arrangements and the wellbeing of individuals, and explore the implications of shifting from a sole concern for public health to a broader understanding of human wellbeing, including health. Such

efforts are contributing to an understanding of water services as necessary not only for human survival, but also for human flourishing.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)- which were universally adopted in 2015 and will guide international development efforts until 2030- have sought to acknowledge this cross-cutting quality of water services across diverse areas contributing to wellbeing such as inequality, industrialisation and sustainable cities and human settlements (Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2014). Unlike the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that guided development efforts from 2000–2015 (UNDP, 2016), the seventeen SDGs also include a water-specific goal (SDG 6) that aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (United Nations, 2015). This upgrading of water issues may be viewed as a recognition of the importance of water services to the lives of the poor and marginalised. However, both the MDGs and SDGs continue to privilege public health concerns by evaluating progress towards meeting SDG 6 and its constituent targets and indicators through the measure of access to drinking water and sanitation. In this paper, we argue that this interpretation of access masks two key elements contributing to the ability of individuals to flourish: wellbeing and equity.

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Focusing on the public health dimension of water services to the exclusion of dimensions of wellbeing such as access to education and healthcare, political participation and livelihoods limits the benefits that development initiatives in the water sector seek to realise for their intended beneficiaries. Furthermore, the current interpretation of access does not acknowledge that the ability of people to benefit from water services is not only a question of inadequate infrastructure; people's access to water services is also mediated by social power dynamics. For example, while an individual or household living in an urban informal settlement may have the right to benefit from the nearest standpipe, in reality their ability to benefit from it may be limited by control of the standpipe by a locally influential individual (McFarlane, Desai, & Graham, 2014). Alternatively, their benefit could be limited by an the ongoing marginalisation of the community and/or women (Anand, 2017; Bapat & Agarwal, 2003).

These points indicate that to broaden the benefits to people, water development efforts should (i) shift from the current emphasis on public health towards wellbeing and (ii) seek to better understand and address inequitable power dynamics keeping some people from benefiting from water services. The current interpretation of access focuses on the right to secure health benefits from water services, while ignoring whether people require water services to not only survive, but also to flourish. Furthermore, it does not acknowledge that people's inability to benefit from water services is also a result of marginalisation. What should water development efforts seek to achieve? Is survival enough? Or should water development be approached as an opportunity to foster the capacity of all people to both meet their basic needs and pursue their broader aspirations? In this paper, we propose an alternative approach to water development grounded in a reinterpretation of the notion of access so that efforts in the sector can equitably meet both needs and broader aspirations.

1.1. Method & structure

To propose a new approach to water development in the Global South, we begin by critically discussing the interpretation of access in the MDGs and SDGs. To do this, we engage with grey literature such as institutional reports and websites from United Nations development agencies from the early 2000s onwards to coincide with the institution of the MDGs and SDGs. We then draw on scholarship critiquing dominant approaches to water service development and empirical evidence from diverse geographical settings to highlight the relationship between water services and human wellbeing. Our analysis is also informed by key debates in justice theory and public participation scholarship, which provide the basis for critical engagement with the capacity of the current interpretation of access to adequately consider questions of equity and wellbeing. Our critique leads us to propose a new interpretation of access informed by Ribot and Peluso's (2003) theory of access and the Capability Approach to human development articulated by the Indian economist Amartya Sen (1999, 2008, 2013). These theories facilitate the articulation of a novel interpretation of access that seeks to overcome the shortcomings just identified. We argue that this interpretation allows development policymakers and practitioners to delve deeper into the lived experiences of intended beneficiaries of development initiatives and increase the potential benefits of these. Our argument leads us to reflect on the implications of our reinterpretation of the concept of access on the aims of the SDGs. It also directs us to reflect on its bearing on participatory approaches to development and more recent integrated approaches to water management that form increasingly important components of water development initiatives. We conclude by identifying a future research agenda that can contribute to the reorientation we argue for here.

2. The interpretation of water access in the MDGs and SDGs

How is access to water services interpreted in the MDGs and SDGs? Target 7.C of the MDGs sought to "[h]alve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation" (United Nations, 2016a), and was met in 2010, five years ahead of schedule (UNICEF/WHO, 2011, 2014). While this achievement represented a rare claim of success in efforts to achieve the MDGs, commentators such as Clasen (2012) and the Calgary Centre for Affordable Water and Sanitation Technology (2012) viewed this claim as premature. Clasen (2012, p. 1179) pointed out that the "water target does not fully address water quality, quantity and access – key components of the target that are fundamental to human health." Target 7.C was interpreted as relating to the goal of improved water services and sanitation (Satterthwaite, 2015; UNICEF/WHO, 2017); the ambiguity of the goals of either 'improved' or 'basic' water and sanitation, however, meant that the bar for the quality was set very low (Satterthwaite, 2016). For those beginning with no access to basic water and sanitation services at all, an improvement could equate to forms of access that do little to meet basic needs and enhance broader wellbeing.

Furthermore, while UN statistics record whether households have access to piped water on premises, they do not record whether this supply is reliable or safe (Clasen, 2012). This means that initiatives aimed at meeting Target 7.C interpret access as the right to water services, not the ability to benefit from such services. One can easily understand that having a piped water connection to the home is of little use if it unreliable and/or unsafe. Indeed, securing the right to water services does not evaluate how water services may hinder or enable "key capabilities required for lives, livelihoods and freedoms" (Goff & Crow, 2014, p. 169), nor how people actually access such services.

Disregarding such capabilities ignores that the nature and quality of water services is closely linked with the quality of life of people. In fact, former-Secretary General of the UN Ban Ki-moon acknowledged that a lack of sanitation impacts economic security (United Nations, 2016b) and the 2016 Human Development Report, *Water and Jobs* (UNESCO, 2016), underscored the relationship between water and livelihood security. Consistent evidence from across the Global South, including case studies from Fiji and Vanuatu (Carrard, Crawford, Halcrow, Rowland, & Willetts, 2013) and India (Agénor, Mares, & Sorsa, 2015) indicate that the amount of time spent by individuals – particularly women – in the collection of basic resources such as water impacts their capacity to engage in income-earning activities (Agénor & Agénor, 2014). A case study of the participation of women in income-earning activities conducted in Bangladesh also shows that the ability to engage in paid work has the capacity to increase the financial independence, status, and bargaining power of women within the household (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009). This increase in financial independence also increases child welfare, since women are likely to invest extra income into their children (Koolwal & van de Walle, 2013). For many men and women, the unreliability of water supplies and sanitation in their locality also leads to a competing demand for time between work and water collection, which further erodes the ability to access water and to earn an income (Bapat & Agarwal, 2003).

Additionally, the configuration and quality of water services has a well-documented impact on the capacity of people to access social opportunities such as education and healthcare. Evidence from Kenya, Ghana and Malawi highlights that uncertain and/or lengthy water collection times in many communities can restrict the ability of women and children to access education and healthcare (Nankhuni & Findeis, 2003; Nauges & Strand, 2013; Ndiritu & Nyangena, 2011). Recent research from the Philippines also indi-

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