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Editorial - Inclusive development and urban water services

Klaas Schwartz[a,b,*], Joyeeta Gupta[a,b], Mireia Tutusaus[a]

[a] Department of Integrated Water Systems and Governance, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands
[b] Department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for universal access to water and sanitation services by 2030 in Goal 6. This SDG Goal adheres to an inclusive development framework, focusing on social, ecological and relational inclusiveness. This overarching paper assesses the degree to which practices in water services provision are in line with the concept of inclusive development. The article argues that existing practices in water services provision deviate considerably from the concept of inclusive development. This deviation is explained by the findings that water utilities tend to prioritize commercial over socio-ecological objectives, in the way in which service differentiation is implemented in the water services sector and the complexities of layered power dynamics in low-income areas that can hamper relational inclusiveness. As a result, inclusive development in the water services sector is currently largely a 'nirvana concept', something that is striven for but unlikely to be achieved. Increasing the relevance of inclusive development (and thus achievement of SDG6), will require a substantial change in how water services are organized and what objectives in water provisioning are prioritized.

1. Introduction

With the adoption of the UN document on Transforming Our World through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNGA, 2015), providing water services to all by 2030 as articulated in Goal 6 has become a key objective of the international development community. The SDGs are anchored in a narrative that emphasizes inclusive development (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). Inclusive development represents a counter to the dominance of the neo-liberal approach which mainly uses (economic) growth as a measure of success, usually defined in terms of per capita income (Rauniyar & Kanbur, 2010). Inclusive development incorporates social, ecological and relational inclusiveness and, as such, goes beyond "the so-called triple bottom line approach", which combine "economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion" (Sachs, 2012, p. 2206) to prioritize socio-ecological justice (Fig. 1). Social inclusiveness focuses on ensuring a non-discriminatory and rights-based strategy to sharing the benefits of development. SDG 6 reflects this dimension through its emphasis on universal and equitable access to safe and affordable services and its anchoring in human rights. Ecological inclusiveness aims at ensuring that resource use and waste disposal is in line with maintaining the ecosystem services of our natural resources and that access to the benefits and risks of ecological services are fairly shared. In SDG 6, this dimension is displayed through targets on the protection of water-related ecosystems and reduction of environmental pollution. Relational inclusiveness implies wellbeing is improved, whilst inequality is reduced (Gupta & Pouw, 2017). This differentiates inclusive development from pro-poor development, which focuses on the wellbeing aspects (improving wellbeing of the poor). Pro-poor development, which takes place in a context of increasing inequalities is not considered inclusive development (Rauniyar & Kanbur, 2010). In SDG6, relational inclusiveness is visible through an explicit emphasis on equitable services and affordable access to safe water and sanitation services. Equitable services implies the "progressive reduction and elimination of inequalities between population subgroups" (WHO and UNICEF, 2015:5).

1.1. The shift towards inclusive development in the water services sector

In recent years, inclusive development has gained a foothold in the water services sector and is supported by two main drivers. The first is based on critical research, emanating mainly from political ecologists, which highlights the uneven development of the urban waterscape that characterizes many cities in the Global South (Rusca & Schwartz, 2014; Swyngedouw, 1997). Underlying this uneven development of basic water services is the way in which governments tend to allocate resources. Gugler (as cited in Bakker, 2003, p. 333) highlights that governments reallocate "resources with three goals: improving the

* Corresponding author. Department of Integrated Water Systems and Governance, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, Delft, The Netherlands.
E-mail address: k.schwartz@un-ihe.org (K. Schwartz).

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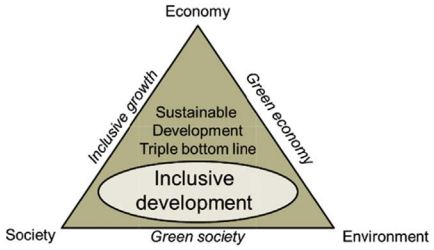

Source: Building on Gupta and Vegelin 2016

Fig. 1. Inclusive Development and lowering the centre of gravity of the 'Triple Bottom Line'.
Source: Building on Gupta & Vegelin, 2016.

immediate environment (of decisionmakers); assuring the continued collaboration of the middle class; and placating strategically elements of labour". The result is then that these "public resources are disproportionately spent on the privileged consumption of the few and conspicuous investment for the few in cities" (Gugler, as cited in Bakker, 2003, p. 333). As a result, the benefits and costs of urbanization and water access are not equally distributed, but rather result in "uneven development, social differentiation and variegated citizenship" (Ahlers, Cleaver, Rusca, & Schwartz, 2014, p. 2).

A second driver behind inclusive development is the increased attention to environmental challenges related to water services provisioning. Increasing urbanization, industrialization and climate change all have an impact on the ability of water providers to ensure service provision to consumers. In many Sub-Saharan countries, for example, water rationing is increasing rapidly. Countries like Kenya (Hailu, Rendtorff-Smith, & Tsukada, 2011) and cities like Lilongwe (Alda-Vidal, Kooy, & Rusca, 2017) and Accra (Stoler, Weeks, & Appiah Otoo, 2013) have increasing difficulty in accessing water resources of sufficient quality and quantity to provide water supply. Illustrative of this broadened and more environmental approach of water providers are the increasing popularity of water safety plans, which require risk assessment of all steps in water supply provision from catchment to consumer in order to ensure the safety and acceptability of water supply. In addition to the impact of environmental deterioration on water utilities, water utilities also increasingly aim to limit the impact of water provisioning on the environment.

The triple bottom line approach highlighted by the SDGs and the specific translation of this in SDG6 emphasizing social, ecological and relational inclusiveness suggest a consensus regarding the importance of inclusive development for the water services sector. In this special section we compare the everyday realities of water service provisioning with the discourse of inclusive development with the aim of determining what role the concept of inclusive development currently plays in the water services sector. This Special Feature focuses particularly on inclusive development in the context of the Global South where water needs are still mostly unmet and water sources face qualitative and quantitative challenges.

This introductory paper first explains the changed context that the SDGs provide for sustainable and inclusive water governance and the key dimensions of the inclusive development approach. After discussing the challenges of water service expansion to meet the growing needs especially in the urban water context, the paper contrasts the everyday realities of water services provisioning with the discourse of inclusive development based on articles that are part of this special section. Based on that comparison, the article then discusses the considerable divergence between the discourse of inclusive development and the realities of water provisioning in developing countries.

2. The challenge of universal access to water services

The major challenge of water supply and sanitation service provision, as also reflected by SDG6, lies in ensuring safe and affordable services for all. Globally, 663 million people lack access to adequate water supply services. Of these, about 319 million people live in Sub-Saharan Africa. World-wide more than 2.4 billion people are without adequate sanitation, of which 695 million live in Sub-Saharan Africa (WHO and UNICEF, 2015). The challenge of ensuring universal service coverage has increased through population growth. In fact, the absolute number of people without adequate sanitation in, for example, Sub-Saharan Africa actually increased over the 1990–2015 period (WHO and UNICEF, 2015) and will continue to increase in the period 2015–2030, providing a moving target for water service provision.

Apart from population growth, the continuing process of urbanization impacts universal service coverage. Not only has the speed at which cities are growing represented a challenge for water services provisioning, but also the way in which urbanization processes take place impacts the challenge of providing services. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest annual urban growth rate (UN-Habitat, 2008). However, "African cities are growing often in spite of poor macroeconomic performance and without significant direct foreign investment, making it next to impossible for urban authorities to provide adequate basic infrastructure or essential services" (Cohen, 2006, pp. 70–71). As a result, the annual urban growth rate (4.58%) is as large as the growth rate of slums (4.53%), meaning that in Sub-Saharan Africa urbanization is "virtually synonymous" with slum growth (UN-Habitat, 2008:22).

2.1. Service provision to informal settlements: technical and institutional challenges

Expanding services to informal settlements is challenging for two key reasons. First, the water provider faces technical difficulties that limit the utility from providing services to low-income areas. These technical challenges are associated with the conventional network technologies that water utilities usually employ. These technologies consist of "centralized water supply sources and wastewater treatment facilities combined with relatively comprehensive pipe networks for water distribution and sewage collection" (Whittington, Hanemann, Sadoff, & Jeuland, 2009, pp. 477–478). Expansion to informal settlements then requires "an enlargement of existing and building of new trunk mains, water treatment and wastewater treatment plants" (Bakker, 2003, p. 332) for which resources are insufficient.

Second, service expansion to slums is challenging due to institutional factors. First of all, the institutional environment may limit the ability of a water utility to expand services because of issues like jurisdiction (as the poor often congregate in peri-urban areas outside city limits), land tenure and the perceived risk that service provision to 'squatters' may legitimize 'squatting' and encourage new 'squatters'. Secondly, the water utility itself often has little incentive to expand services to low-income areas. Utilities frequently view low-income settlements as "problem areas, associated mainly with extensive illegal connections, low payments and a high rate of disconnection" (Heymans, Eales, & Franceys, 2014, p. 3; Adams & Zulu, 2015). Most utilities, thus, do not view "low-income areas as a 'business opportunity' but rather a burden or a risk" (Heymans et al., 2014, p. 3). As a result, "utilities in Africa tend to target 'high priority' areas for expansion where immediate financial returns are more promising" (Castro & Morel, 2008, p. 291; see also; Schwartz, Tutusaus, & Savelli, 2017).

2.2. Water resources availability and climate change

A second challenge for urban water services relates to the hydrological and ecological risks facing many cities in developing countries. A continuously growing and urbanizing population, with its multitude of demands for adequate services for existing and future generations,