

From the local to the global: does the micro-level matter in policy making for the Millennium Development Goals?

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Introduction

The Millennium Project Interim Report on Task Force 7 on Water and Sanitation (UN 2004) which is one of the most recent attempts to create a shared water vision in policy making. As such it can be seen, at least partially, to represent the international consensus on water and I use this report here to interrogate some of the assumptions and contradictions of these policies.

The Task force report is constructed around seventeen propositions which state the conditions and approaches considered critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals related to water and sanitation. This report is to be heartily welcomed for its attention to access rather than simply provision, its recognition of the need to make special efforts to secure water for the poor, and its advocacy of a holistic approach to water resources.

My main concerns with the Task Force report on water and sanitation are firstly, the absence of analysis, or even recognition of some of the micro-level processes which shape access to water. Secondly, there is a tension inherent in trying to achieve both efficiency of water provision *and* promoting equity of access, through the same strategies. Although it is impossible to detail micro-level processes in a report with a global remit, I am concerned that over-generalised policies, often based on conflicting assumptions, could be interpreted in ways which reinforce inequitable access to water, contrary to the very intention of the Millennium Development Goals. Improved access and water for the poor cannot be achieved simply by rephrasing policy but requires a whole-scale rethinking both of overall strategy and of approaches to implementation. Richer understandings of the micro-level social processes which mediate access to water throw light on some of the anomalies of international policy.

In this paper I will highlight a few of the areas in which international policy making seems deficient (using the Task Force report as an example), identify how understandings of micro-level processes could provide the basis for more flexible and nuanced policy and suggest practical measures for achieving this.

Participation, decentralisation and institutions

'Getting institutions right' is seen in international water policy as key to ensuring local participation, representation of felt needs, the equitable distribution of resources and sustainability. However, surprisingly little attention is given to which institutions achieve such outcomes and how they do this, nor to methods for tracking institutional processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The oft repeated mantra in water policy that water management should be decentralised to the 'lowest appropriate level' is usually interpreted as the need for local communities to assume responsibility for their water supply. Indeed the report, in line with other international policy, advocates the use of participatory processes at local level to 'unleash the energy and creativity of poor people around the world, and adequate resources' (UN 2004, Executive Summary:4). However a wealth of recent research on water-user associations and village level management structures

demonstrates the limitations of community and the ways in which such ways in which such institutions can reproduce hierarchies of power, and reinforce exclusion of the marginalised (Cleaver 2005, Joshi, Lloyd and Fawcett 2003, Odgaard 2002, Gonzales de la Rocha 2003).

The Interim Report of Task Force 7 does hint that there may be a tension between decentralisation and maintaining state control of water allocation in the interests of equity (Executive Summary:8). However, little attention is given to how assessments about such a balance can be made. The report also puts excessive faith in formal organisational solutions for securing equitable water governance and largely neglects an analysis of the informal arrangements and social relationships through which much water access is mediated.

It is clear that access to water can be secured through a range of institutional arrangements including land ownership, common property rules, market and state provision (Crow and Sultana 2002, Mehta and Ntshona 2004) and yet we have few examples of comparative studies concerned with intensive investigation of the workings and *effects on access* of different institutional arrangements. Crow and Sultana suggest that through a detailed analysis of the different characteristics of each (social dimensions: cost, labour, time, decision-making, historical trajectory or long-term dynamics, response to external shocks) it is possible to identify social conditions that ensure water security for some households and enterprises and water deprivation for others.' (Crow and Sultana 2002:711)

Poverty and paying for water

In tackling the issue of cost recovery the Task Force report exposes some of the deepest contradictions underlying international water policy making. The report, concerned with the overall aim of the MDGs in reducing poverty recognises the need for cross-subsidies, and assistance to the poorest in paying for water. However it simultaneously maintains an emphasis on the (unproven) benefits of *all* users paying for water and the *ability* of all to contribute to this.

'Governments must recognise that the financial burden of serving the poor cannot be borne by the poor aloneNevertheless, even in the poorest communities, beneficiaries can contribute through various forms of in-kind contributions.'(UN 2004: Executive Summary:8)

The report continues to make familiar assertions about the benefits of paying for water, contributions are seen to 'engender a sense of ownership, better commitment to proper care and maintenance of provided facilities, demand of accountability from service providers, and enhanced prospects of sustainability of service'(Executive summary :8)

Support for these propositions in research is weak. Paying for water does not automatically secure access as both payment and access are mediated through social and therefore power relationships (Cleaver and Elson 1995) Many of the urban poor slum dwellers, with insecure livelihoods, frequent mobility and no tenure of residence are unlikely to consider investing (money, labour, time) in water management systems from which they may not benefit over time (Joshi 2001). Research does however suggest that where payments are made (including payments in kind, labour contributions etc) they are disproportionately costly to the poor (Tod, Parey and Yadav 2003) and may indeed serve to restrict access to those who would most benefit from it . It is a fallacy to assume that substituting payments in

kind (often labour contributions) for cash is a benefit to the poor as such requirements are likely to be onerous and involve significant (even critical) opportunity costs and restrictions on their productive capabilities.

Generally, the propositions about cost recovery need to be based on better understandings of the livelihood constraints of poor households and of the inequities of intra-household command over labour, cash and other resources. Where tariffs (and exemptions) are decided and collected at community level, better understandings of how intrahousehold bargaining relates to participation in community level decision making and access to water resources outside the household are needed to ensure that the vulnerable receive water (WaterAid, no date).

Gender and empowerment

The current focus on gender in international water policy and in the Task Force report is welcome. However, it is unclear whether the report is taking a 'women and water' or a 'gender and water' approach and there is a lot of slippage between the two uses of the term gender. The report asserts that the burden of poor water supplies falls primarily on women and girl children. The evidence for the adverse impact of water related disease and disability on men and boys, as a result of their gendered livelihood tasks is completely absent and weakens the gender approach (Clever 2003, 1998).

There is the oft-repeated assertion that inclusion in water management can be an entry point for empowering women, despite a growing body of work which reveals that women may regard such management roles as an obligated burden and take action to avoid them.

Additionally there is a simplistic assertion of the benefits of improved water supplies for women, which almost totally ignores the social structures within which they negotiate their livelihoods. It is over-optimistic to assert, as the report does, that improved water supplies closer to home leaves women more time for productive endeavours, adult education and empowerment activities. The working of patriarchy class, caste and age relations mean that the benefits of improved water supplies are likely to impact on different women in very different ways (Joshi, Lloyd and Fawcett 2003). For example older women may be able to command the labour of younger women for water work, development projects may favour the disproportionate representation of elite women on management committees in the interests of efficiency. Very frequently alleviation of the burden in one area is cancelled out by increasing burdens in other areas. If gender equity is to be promoted through water interventions, then greater consideration of the inclusive/exclusive effects of local institutions and norms is required.

Implementation, mobilisation and costs.

Strangely, there is little in the report about *how* communities are to be mobilised to pay for, implement, manage and use improved water supplies. Additionally there is little recognition of the need for long-term processes of capacity building to ensure sustainability over time. Passing reference is made to introducing organisational incentives to ensure a pro-poor focus, and to the need to involve NGOs. But there is

no real consideration of *how* to support the role of field workers, community mobilisers and technicians, village health workers, volunteer managers and so on. Thus an understanding of the need for support at the interface between users/community and implementing/ regulatory organisations is missing.

Related to this point, the suggested methods of costing estimate only 10% of the total for hygiene education, training, institutional development and operation, and maintenance. This seems a gross underestimate, especially for low technology water supplies in remote and poor areas. House details the effort required to work successfully on one community based water project. This involved a slow and painful process of working with the community around political, social and economic power issues, gender equity and personal and cultural belief systems (House 2003). Building trust, capacity and inclusive water management in the community also involved the project staff learning negotiation skills, gender sensitivity and the need to confront their own prejudices. House estimates that this process took four years, and that without it the project could not have achieved its goals.

In summary , in translating the policies into effective interventions we still need to know more about which local institutions, mechanisms cultural beliefs and social practices promote equitable access to water, who benefits and who is excluded , the resource implications of socially informed methods of tracking water interventions and practical measures which can ameliorate the tension between effectiveness and equity goals.

Conclusions

The current focus on water for the poor is to be applauded. However, we need more incisive analysis of which are the primary factors which constrain access to water and which interventions might shift these.

It could be useful to pay attention to the following innovations in implementing pro-poor water policy:

1/ Establish Water Champions, to advocate for the water rights of the poor at micro and meso levels.

2/ Ensure all interventions introduce institutional process tracking mechanisms to monitor the inclusion of the poor (and their interests) in institutional arrangements.

3/ Develop a range of indicators (including social/political dimensions rather than just distance to water or quantity obtainable) to compile Access Audits for all water interventions.

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