Water and Sanitation Challenge in South Asia

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Globally 2.6 billion people do not use improved sanitation facilities, out of this 1.027 billion (40%) people live in South Asia, which is 64% population of the region. Some 716 million people in South Asia out of the 1.027 billion who do not use sanitation facilities practice defecation in the open and are exposed to severe health risks as well as adding to environmental pollution and a primary cause of water contamination¹.

The urban-rural disparity in the use of improved sanitation facilities is another important concern. The majority of the un-served 895 million are located in rural areas. Pakistan, Bhutan, India, Afghanistan and Nepal are confronting enormous urban-rural disparities in the use of improved sanitation facilities. This gap affects a significant number of people in Pakistan and India due to the size of their population. Urban-rural disparity in South Asia indicates a larger issue of severe social exclusion and injustice prevailing in this part of the world. The practice of open defecation due to lack of public amenities such as toilets is one of the foremost and immediate sanitation challenges in South Asia.

With the current rate of annual progress India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan will achieve their MDG target in 2047, 2030, 2029 and 2028 respectively.

Currently 211 million in the region do not use improved water facilities. The overall picture also masks regional as well as urban-rural disparities. Availability of adequate quantity of water is a huge challenge. So too are the challenges around water quality and the sustainability of services. Minerals including fluoride and arsenic have been found in several regions of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Disposing urban sewerage as well as industrial waste has heavily polluted surface water rivers, lakes and canals. Factoring in the water quality may change the above mentioned improved water use figures or deter progress. Depleting ground water, pollution of surface water, and source sustainability and security are the major future challenges in fulfilling the right to water in this region. Climate change will be adding to this problem as coastal ground water is being mixed with brackish seawater due to sea intrusion; and floods and cyclones are destroying water and sanitation infrastructure.

With increasing population and subsequent rise in energy and food demands, more water will be required for agriculture. Many countries in South Asia share transboundary rivers. In the wake of increasing energy and water demands, the tension may be increased over control of water, which will affect the already fragile political environment in the region. The challenge is to provide sustainable and safe drinking water services to all the citizens in South Asia as a public health intervention, keeping in mind the factors discussed above.

Toilets are often seen as unnecessary or unaffordable. In urban areas, low-income groups - particularly those living in informal settlements - often lack access to adequate water supply and sanitation. Sanitation in most countries is severely neglected by both governments and households. The number of toilets per inhabitant is generally inadequate, with no guarantee of their hygienic standards. Because of the lack of sanitation at the household level (or, in many cases, at any level), many people are forced to defecate in the open.

¹ Calculated from JMP 2010
**Implications on human development and environment**

Access to safe water, adequate sanitation and improved hygiene are critical to human development and well-being, reducing disease burden and deaths, increasing economic benefits, contributing towards human dignity – especially of women – and protecting the environment. The lack of access to water and sanitation has a severe effect on human health, exacerbates poverty and undermines economic development.

The worst victims of non-availability of these facilities are children and women. Inadequate sanitation may be the biggest killer of children under the age of five\(^2\). Historical as well as recent evidence shows strong links between improved sanitation and reduction in child mortality.

The burden of fetching water and non-availability of toilets in schools has severe economic impacts on girls and women. Hours are spent in fetching water which otherwise could be used for productive activities. Also carrying the water from long distances in severe weather conditions affects their health conditions. There is enough evidence that girls at a young age drop out from schools due to unavailability of toilets.

It is estimated that at any one time, nearly half the population of developing countries is suffering from health problems linked to inadequate water and sanitation. Approximately 4 billion cases of diarrhoea each year cause 2.2 million deaths, mostly among children under five – about 15 per cent of all deaths of children under the age of five in developing countries.

Overall the lack of access to water and sanitation hampers human development, social equity and environmental protection in long run. These conditions hamper achieving the dream of dignified lives, equality and thriving human development potential in the region and may undermine the efforts of development in other areas.

The current water and sanitation crisis in this region indicates towards a chronic problem of inequity and unequal power relationships prevailing in this part of the world. Often poor and marginalized groups are filtered out from accessing the services.

**Causes**

There could be many causes and bottlenecks of this dismal picture of water and sanitation in South Asia. However, low priority to sanitation and hygiene by governments and other development actors, inadequate institutional arrangement for the sector, insufficient monitoring, poor coordination and lack of accountability, inefficient resource utilisation and sustainability of institutions and infrastructure are commonly quoted bottlenecks.

**How do human rights address the sanitation and water crisis?**

Addressing water and sanitation as a human right moves the focus from technical solutions to ensuring that the political and legislative frameworks are in place to ensure access.

Recognising sanitation and water as a human right:

- Demonstrates that sanitation and water is a legal entitlement, not charity. Civil society can use the right to raise the political profile of the importance of access to services.

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\(^2\) WaterAid (2008) Tackling the silent killer
• Demands accountability of those responsible for ensuring sanitation and water is accessible to all. Individuals and groups can demand that this right is implemented through lobbying their governments, seeking redress from national human rights commission and courts or from international human rights mechanisms.

• Requires information sharing and genuine participation in decision-making. Although participation is now acknowledged as a development best practice, centralised planning processes remain prevalent, and can neglect the input of various users.

• Promotes equity and inclusion by focuses on vulnerable and marginalized groups, who have been historically discriminated against or neglected, such as persons living in informal settlements.

• Defines minimum requirements for water and sanitation.

What is the legal basis of the right to sanitation and water?

Several international and regional legal instruments, commitments are available to provide a strong basis for right to water and sanitation. Few of such are mentioned below:

• The General Comment 15, adopted by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2003 clarifies the content of the right to water and sanitation and outlines states' obligations in relation to this right as follows:

  The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses

• The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obliges governments to ensure that rural women have access to sanitation.

• The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes the right of all children to an adequate standard of living. The UN expert body responsible for monitoring the CRC has clarified that this entitlement includes access to clean drinking water and latrines.

Political declarations

• The 1994 Programme of Action of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, unanimously endorsed by 177 States, and the 1996 Habitat Agenda, unanimously endorsed by 171 States, recognize that the right to an adequate standard of living includes water and sanitation.

• In December 2007 at the 1st Asia-Pacific Water Summit, 37 countries from the region endorsed the "Message from Beppu", which recognizes "the people's right to safe drinking water and basic sanitation as a basic human right".

• The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has recognised the importance of safe drinking water and sanitation as mentioned in the SAARC social charter. Paragraph four of article III of the SAARC social charter states:

  States Parties agree that access to basic education, adequate housing, safe drinking water and sanitation, and primary health care should be guaranteed in legislation, executive and administrative provisions, in addition to ensuring adequate standard of living, including adequate shelter, food and clothing.
Third South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN) held in Delhi in November 2008 acknowledged the right to water and sanitation as follows:

*Recognize that access to sanitation and safe drinking water is a basic right, and according national priority to sanitation is imperative*

**SDPI's Thirteenth Sustainable Development Conference**

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) Pakistan is organising regional conferences on a regular basis since 1995 on different themes to address the challenges to sustainable development in the region. Each SDC is designed to be a forum for sharing and exchanging dialogues on sustainable development with practitioners, civil society and policymakers. Over 92 delegates from 11 countries participated in this three-day 12th SDC in December 2009. Thirteenth Sustainable Development Conference will be organized on the theme “Peace and Sustainable Development in South Asia: The Way Forward” from 21 - 23 December 2010, Islamabad, Pakistan. The papers presented in the conference are published and released in subsequent year.

Looking into the crucial role of water and sanitation in human development and the dismal picture of progress in South Asia, WaterAid Asia region in collaboration with SDC organizers have planned different sessions under the sub-theme of: **Water and Sanitation Challenge in South Asia**:

**The main objective of these sessions will be:**

- Sharing regional learning successes and challenges in promoting right to sanitation and water
- Advocating the central role of right to water and sanitation to sustainable development through this important regional policy conference
- Creating a platform to articulate regional vision for promoting right to sanitation and water

**Call for papers**

The papers are invited from practitioners, academia, CSOs on any aspect of the following three broader dimensions for promoting rights to water and sanitation:

**Improved accountability of duty bearers**

Ensuring accountability has been an important element in promoting right to sanitation and water. The right to water and sanitation means that access to water and sanitation is viewed as a legal entitlement, rather than only a moral priority. Those responsible must be held accountable to fulfil their obligations towards citizens. The papers could focus any aspect of citizen led processes promoting accountability for realising the right to sanitation and water. The major topic could be:

- Mobilizing communities-citizen actions to demand rights
- Working towards creating responsiveness and accountability among duty bearers
- Demonstrated results or realization of rights
- Promoting transparency and openness
Focus on vulnerable and marginalized groups

The right to water and sanitation focuses attention on groups that have been traditionally discriminated against or historically neglected due to structural causes. It obliges governments to use available resources in a manner that prioritises the extension of access to basic water and sanitation services to all their people without discrimination to fulfil the standards of human rights. The main topics could be:

- Demonstrated innovative approaches for reaching out marginalized groups
- Influencing policies to focus on poor and marginalized
- Successful campaigns resulting in public resources allocation for poor areas and people
- Enhanced capacities of poor and marginalized groups to demand rights

Increased participation in decision-making

The right to water and sanitation provides for genuine consultation and participation of communities in decision-making on service delivery and management of sanitation and water infrastructure. Although participation is now acknowledged as a development best practice, centralised planning processes remain prevalent, and can neglect the input of various users. The major topic under participation could be:

- Promoting citizens participation in decision-making (which may include strengthening the capacity of poor and excluded communities and civil society organisations to participate in the processes as well as willingness of service provider to ensure participation)
- Promoting tools, methodologies and practices for effective participation in governance of sanitation and water (this may include participatory methodologies, practices and tools adopted, documented and widely shared among CSOs)
- Promoting platforms and processes for participation including information sharing

Further details and sub-session focal person

Please send your abstracts, papers and other correspondence to Mustafa Talpur on following contact details. He will be the lead person in facilitating the session on “Water and Sanitation Challenge in South Asia”.

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