

Water, Sanitation, and the Climate-Change Vision Gap

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The collapse last December of negotiations over a new global agreement on climate change revealed a vision gap between rich and poor countries that must be bridged if future talks are to succeed. Developing-country delegates at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland, proposed dedicating 3 percent of revenues from carbon markets to help poor countries adapt to climate change, including preparing for increased water stresses such as floods and droughts. Although developed nations admitted that adaptation will cost poor countries billions of dollars, they rejected this proposal.

Ghana's delegate characterized this disagreement as a "vision gap" and Prodipto Ghosh of India called it "one of the saddest moments I have witnessed" in his 12 years of participating in international climate-change negotiations. At the final plenary session, Ghosh castigated the developed countries: "In the face of the unbearable human tragedy that we in developing countries see unfolding every day, we see callousness, strategizing and obfuscation."

Scope of the Water Crisis

One example of the "unbearable human tragedy ... unfolding every day" is the current safe drinking water and sanitation crisis, which Melanie Nakagawa of the Natural Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) International Program has called "the most poorly addressed environmental problem of our day." Indeed, nearly one billion people lack safe drinking water and two-and-a-half billion people lack improved sanitation facilities, according to a 2008 report by the World Health Organization (WHO) /UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation. Waterborne diseases, mainly diarrhea, kill over two million children each year—a mortality toll six times as large as the number of children killed by HIV/AIDS and four times as many as killed by malaria, WHO statistics show. Girls drop out of school at puberty because of inadequate sanitation and women in many countries spend hours each day hauling water. Economic

development is impeded, sensitive environments degraded, and social stability threatened by unsafe drinking water and inadequate sanitation.

Climate change will exacerbate this crisis and effective steps by rich nations to extend safe drinking water and sanitation are essential to equip poor countries to cope. Increasingly, leading US environmental groups—and the foundations that support them—are recognizing this need and are working to bridge the vision gap between environmental protection and meeting basic human needs.

New Programs, Partnerships, and Proposals

NRDC, for example, has launched a global safe drinking water program, funded in part by Wallace Genetic Foundation, to focus on the UN Millennium Development Goal of reducing by one-half by 2015 the proportion of the world's population lacking access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. NRDC has also focused on implementing the 2005 Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which elevated safe, affordable drinking water and sanitation to a top foreign policy priority and encouraged public-private partnerships. In so doing, it has joined an unusual alliance of development organizations such as CARE, WaterAid America, and Oxfam America, faith-based groups such as Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service, civic organizations including Rotary International, and other NGOs and business leaders.



A girl from the Nyangande Primary School near Kisumu, Kenya, participates in a school program promoting water, sanitation, and hygiene.

So far, the results are promising. A bi-partisan coalition in Congress appropriated \$300 million to implement the act for fiscal year 2008, with 40 percent targeted for use in countries of greatest need in sub-Saharan Africa. As President Obama noted in his Inaugural Address, “To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to . . .let clean waters flow.”

Increased funding by the US government is being complemented by new partnerships between foundations and the private sector. For example, the United Nations Foundation launched the Global Water Challenge (GWC)—featured in a session on business-foundation partnerships at the Fall 2008 EGA Retreat—to bring businesses and foundations together to fund safe drinking water and sanitation projects, especially in schools. (Half of schools worldwide do not have safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.) The GWC has already coordinated funding from the Acumen Fund, Case Foundation, Gates Foundation, Kind World Foundation, Wallace Genetic Foundation, Cargill, Dow Chemical Company, Procter and Gamble, and The Coca-Cola Company. Projects are identified and implemented by experienced development groups such as CARE, Catholic Relief Services, WaterPartners International, and World Vision, several of which had previously joined with other water and sanitation organizations to form an unprecedented coordinating network, the Millennium Water Alliance.

The lack of safe drinking water and adequate sanitation has also drawn the attention of groups interested in conserving biological diversity. Conservation International (CI), with support from the Wallace Genetic Foundation, recently mapped global freshwater biodiversity “hot spots,” many of which occur in rural areas where people desperately need clean water and sanitation. Consequently, CI has reached out to water development groups, including WaterAid America and Catholic Relief Services, to explore ways in which to collaborate in specific watersheds both to meet human needs and to protect threatened biodiversity.

In the United States, climate-change legislation has been drafted that includes adaptation assistance for poor countries. NRDC, Oxfam America, and other environmental and development groups have formed a working group to advocate designating a percentage of revenues from the sale of carbon emission allowances for adaptation assistance, including for safe drinking water. These provisions were included in the legislation that made it to the Senate floor in summer 2008, and prospects have improved with the new administration’s commitment to international leadership on climate change and to enhancing global security through “smart power.”

Funding Sustainable Solutions

The developed world should seize this opportunity to extend safe drinking water and sanitation to poor countries. The solutions are simple, known, and readily available. Development groups such as the members of the Millennium Water Alliance have extensive experience working worldwide at the local and watershed scale to deploy sustainable solutions that engage local communities and develop new leaders (usually women). The missing link is a commitment of the required resources from governments and private actors, including foundations. Helping to extend safe, affordable drinking water and adequate sanitation to the world’s poor is a simple but important step the rich regions of the world can take to bridge the vision gap and set the stage for a new international agreement on climate change. ■

Resources

World Health Organization: www.who.int

NRDC safe drinking water program:
www.nrdc.org/international/safewater.asp

Global Water Challenge: www.globalwaterchallenge.org

Millennium Water Alliance: www.mwawater.org