EUROPEAN

POLICYBRIEF

DEMOCRATISATION OF WATER AND SANITATION GOVERNANCE BY MEANS OF SOCIO-TECHNICAL INNOVATION

Introductory Policy Brief

July 2013

This is an Introductory Policy Brief, as the project is still in its early stages. It does not include research "findings" or "results", which will be available only in the second and third year of the project's life. However, the brief presents key arguments and evidence as well as policy implications and recommendations that are constitutive of DESAFIO's approach.

INTRODUCTION

A significant challenge for democratic politics. One of the most significant challenges facing the international community is the consolidation and expansion of substantive, not merely rhetorical, democratisation. This includes the **material aspects of democracy**, and particularly the democratisation of the government, management and access to goods and services that are essential for human survival and dignified life, such as basic water and sanitation services (WSS).

The mass mobilisations that have taken place in Brazil since June 2013 and that have captured the world's attention, highlighted the **paramount importance of material democratisation** for millions of human beings. The main target of these demonstrations was the need to improve the **extension, quality, and affordability of essential public services**, notably transportation, public health, education, and water and sanitation. The Brazilian example is very important because, in the last decade, the country has experienced unprecedented levels of poverty reduction, wealth redistribution and, more importantly, has seen an expansion of citizenship and democratic politics, which included the elevation of an industrial worker born in one the poorest regions of the country to the presidency.

The Brazilian example is quite pertinent for this Brief, as DESAFIO focuses primarily on Brazil, with complementary reference to Argentina and Colombia, to **draw lessons from recent and current experiences of socio-technical innovations** directed at tackling the challenge facing the democratisation process in relation to essential public services.

Evidence and Analysis

The nature of the challenge

The 2013 UN report on the progress made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) shows that despite considerable achievements in several areas, access to safe water and sanitation services **continues to be a major concern**. Although the report celebrates the fact that nominally the target of reducing by half the proportion of the world's population without access to "improved" water sources would have been met before 2015, it recognises that the quality and safety of the water provided in many cases are not guaranteed and that the actual "number of people without access to safe drinking water may be two to three times higher than official estimates" (UN, 2013: 47). In short, if we consider water quality and safety, **we are still far from meeting the MDG target for wate**r.

The situation is even **direr in relation to sanitation services**. The report confirms that over **one billion people worldwide still practice open defecation**, and that we are very far from meeting the MDG target of halving the world's population without sanitation by 2015 (UN, 2013: 48-49). We must remember that the MDGs aim at halving the proportion of the world's population without access to these essential services, which means that **a very large number of humans will continue to suffer from preventable diseases and early death even if the targets were met**. This means, according to probably too optimistic official figures that 0.7 billion people would still lack access to water even if we meet the MDGs, and 1.73 billion people would still lack access to some form of sanitation after 2015.

Latin America is one of the world's regions with abundance of water resources. Yet, according to official statistics, **4.5 percent** of the global population still lacking access to water **resides in the region** (around 7% of the region's population). The reality on the ground is much worse: according to recent studies around **60%** of the population that has access to water is affected by poor quality services (e.g. intermittence, low pressure, high water wastage, etc.). Moreover, **20%** of the population in the region lacks access to improved sanitation, a proportion that is **almost double in rural areas**. In general, rural areas and the urban poor, unsurprisingly, take the brunt of the unacceptable **inequality and injustice** reflected in these figures.

In the case of Brazil, the majority of the population (**82.8%**, 157 million people) has access to water supply. However, around **3.5 million people** do not have in-house water connections. In addition, the statistics do not account for the **highly variable quality** of the water services. Also, around **73%** of the deficit in the access to water supply is **concentrated in the rural areas** where 8.8 million people do not have adequate access to water (compared with 3.3 million people in urban areas). The poor are the most severely affected: around **75%** of the population without adequate access to water (approximately 9 million people) earns only half of the national minimum salary, and **47%** of this population (around 5.7 million people) have no or very limited formal qualifications.

The nature of the challenge that we confront is characterised by **protracted structural social inequalities** historically developed and reproduced along the lines of age, class, ethnicity, gender, and other power-based social divisions. These inequalities are the main **root causes** for the unacceptable conditions that the MDG targets aim to reduce and eventually eradicate. The nature of the problem that we face is mainly **socio-economic, political, and policy-institutional**.

Reference: United Nations (2013), The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013, New York: UN.

DESAFIO's assumptions

We approach this research on the basis on several assumptions derived from existing knowledge and evidence:

1) The main difficulties to meet the MDGs are neither environmental constraints nor the shortage of scientific and technical knowledge or the unavailability of technological solutions. The key challenges, risks, and uncertainties facing the international community in relation to the MDGs are mainly related to **socio-economic, political, and policy-institutional processes**.
2) It is increasingly recognised that some of the main reasons for failure in meeting the MDGs are derived from **deficiencies in the process of democratisation** of the government, management and access to essential WSS.
3) The extension of safe essential WSS to cover the unserved population **must rely on heavy state involvement**, and particularly on **heavy public funding**. It is not possible to rely on private funding to extend basic services to the poor and very poor. The provision of essential WSS **cannot be organised as a profit making activity**, whether by private or public organisations.
4) It is **unfair and undemocratic to transfer the responsibility** for funding and running essential WSS to the poor and very poor, as it is a primary responsibility of the state to guarantee universal access to these services.
5) Prevailing public policies in WSS continue to **alienate and exclude** common citizens and users rather than promote democratic practices.
6) The evidence shows that too often "citizen participation" in policy programmes means **"willingness" to accept decisions** already taken by power holders and technical experts with **little or no consultation**.
7) Users are often **reduced to the roles** of passive beneficiaries, providers of labour and resources, or mere clients of profit-oriented WSS. However, **substantive decisions**, for instance about how WSS should be financed and organised (e.g. should these be provided as a public good and a social right or should rather be considered to be commodities to be delivered commercially by profit-oriented private or public operators?) are imposed on the population, often with disregard for the fact that large citizen majorities oppose the initiatives, which has triggered **endless conflicts** in many countries.
8) These prevailing policies have created an imbalance resulting in the **weakening of local governments and civil society.** In many cases these authorities have lost the capacities they had acquired in the past to exercise democratic control and regulation over the management of essential public services such as WSS.
9) The fact that responsibility for WSS and closely related activities such as management of water resources or environmental and public health is often **fragmented across different sectors and levels of decision-making** hampers design and implementation of effective policies.
10) The production of scientific knowledge in this field continues to be characterised by **high fragmentation** between the natural, technical, and social sciences, which remains a significant factor affecting the pace of progress in tackling the challenges.
11) One of the key elements to achieve success in tackling the challenges lies in developing **higher levels of understanding** of
    a. the conditions, factors and processes that facilitate the **emergence of socio-technical innovations** to solve the crisis of WSS;
    b. the **critical requirements** to make successful socio-technical innovations **sustainable and replicable**;
    c. the **obstacles** to their sustainability and replication.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Successfully tackling the challenges identified requires radical **socio-technical solutions**. In particular requires **breaking with the prevailing status quo** dominated by technology-centred, top-down, often paternalistic and even authoritarian solutions in the provision of WSS that tend to privilege short-term interests over the common good.
2. Governments and international institutions should **stop promoting policies that privilege private profit over public benefits**, such as the privatisation and mercantilisation of WSS in their different forms. Public policies related to essential public services must be oriented at **strengthening the capacities of public authorities** to deliver and regulate the provision of safe quality services. Governments and international institutions must **invest heavily in the provision and long-term maintenance** of the required infrastructure and management operations. These investments must **privilege broad and long-term social "returns"** (in public health, quality of life, etc.) over short-term economic gains.
3. **Substantive democratisation** in the government, management and access to essential public services such as WSS requires **social participation and control over the decision-making process** by common citizens and users. This includes the scrutiny and democratic control of decisions about **how** water and essential services such as WSS are governed, managed, and distributed, **by whom**, **for whose benefit**, etc.
4. It also requires going beyond the dominant situation whereby international organisations and donors pay lip service to technical innovations but **in practice continue to favour the reproduction of a status quo** that privileges the interests of private corporations and profit makers over the needs of the poor and very poor.
5. There is a need to make policy and technology **subservient to the higher goals of achieving efficacy and effectiveness**, not just efficiency, in the delivery of WSS if we are going to meet the MDGs, not to say the full universalisation of WSS and other essential services.
6. Meeting the MDGs requires strong support from governments and international organisations to develop innovative socio-technical solutions for WSS that foster:
    a. **inter-sectoral cooperation** in the management of basic WSS, including providing strong support for the development of **public-public** and **public-community partnerships**;
    b. **inter- and transdisciplinary coordination** for the production of knowledge and the implementation of research results
    c. ensuring that policy design and implementation **are grounded on the principles of substantive democracy and citizenship**.
7. Governments and international organisations should support the development of innovative socio-technical interventions that promote the **active and meaningful, not merely tokenistic**, involvement of local communities and other relevant actors.
8. There is a need to **promote and invest in further research** to identify the existing barriers and opportunities for enhancing the access to water technologies, especially for those sectors of the population who are the main targets of the MDGs, the poor and the most vulnerable sectors, in particular women (who usually bear the burden of the household's social reproduction). These actors must be involved in **all stages of the research process**, from the inception through the design, implementation, monitoring, and validation.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

DESAFIO literally means “challenge” in both Portuguese and Spanish, the working language of our case study countries. This is because the guiding concept of our project is to contribute towards tackling what is arguably one of the major challenges facing Latin American countries in the twenty-first century: **eradicating structural social inequality** in the access to essential water and sanitation services (WSS). Our main tenet is that achieving the development goals set by the international community in relation to the reduction of poverty levels and enhancing environmental sustainability, crucially depends on **harnessing existing** and **developing new appropriate and innovative socio-technical solutions** for the provision of safe WSS.

DESAFIO aims to respond to the following questions: **How** can we harness existing and develop new socio-technical innovations in order to **change policies**, to **develop strategies and practical interventions**, and to **enhance policy learning** for tackling unacceptable inequalities and injustice in the access to essential WSS? What **conditions, factors and processes** facilitate the **emergence** of socio-technical innovations in this sector? What are the **critical requirements** to make successful socio-technical innovations **sustainable and replicable**? What are the **obstacles** to their sustainability and replication?

We argue that the main challenges facing the international community in this area are not merely technical or environmental, but are rather **grounded on and conditioned by** economic, socio-political, cultural and policy-institutional processes. Therefore, what is required is the development of appropriate and innovative socio-technical interventions, grounded on the **principles of substantive democracy and citizenship**, to facilitate the involvement of users in the identification of their problems and in the design, implementation and monitoring of socio-technical solutions. This is needed to enable the relevant actors, and most particularly local communities and governments, to achieve **efficacy and effectiveness, as well as efficiency**, in the organisation of universally available and safe essential WSS.

The overarching objective of our project is **assessing existing experiences** and **developing new strategies** that bring about sustainable, appropriate, and innovative socio-technical solutions to foster economic and social development through **social transformation in vulnerable communities**, particularly with reference to access to safe WSS. We seek to achieve this through **research and networking that actively engages** beneficiary communities, practitioners, local authorities, and other relevant actors in their planning, design, assessment, implementation, monitoring, validation, and diffusion.

For this reason, DESAFIO’s methodological approach is based on the **interdisciplinary coordination** between natural, social and technical scientists. It also adopts a **transdisciplinary approach**, developing a close interaction with non-academic actors who participate as research partners and collaborators in the production and validation of knowledge. Our project assesses recent and current experiences, and develops new interventions, in the design and implementation of innovative socio-technical solutions for the provision of WSS in **urban, peri-urban, and rural areas** of Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, with a particular emphasis on Brazil. Our core research work is focused on **ten case studies** that cover a range of situations and characteristics, from informal settlements in the urban periphery of world megacities (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) and in peri-urban areas of provincial capitals (Cali, Colombia), favelas located in the heart of booming mid-range urban centres (Recife, Brazil), to small rural villages (Mondomo, Colombia) and communities in semi-arid areas (Ceará and Minas Gerais, Brazil and Santa Fe, Argentina).

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME

Democratisation of Water and Sanitation Governance by Means of Socio-Technical Innovation (DESAFIO)

COORDINATOR

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SSH.2012.2.1-2. Social innovation for vulnerable populations

DURATION

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BUDGET

EU contribution: 999 972.80 €.

WEBSITE

www.desafioglobal.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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FURTHER READING

José Esteban Castro and Léo Heller (eds.), Water and Sanitation Services: Public Policy and Management, London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2009 (Hbk), Routledge, 2012 (Pbk). Also available as e-book.

This book is also published in Portuguese as: Léo Heller and José Esteban Castro, Política Pública e Gestão de Serviços de Saneamento, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, Editora Fiocruz and Editora UFMG, 2013.

Léo Heller (Ed.), Agua y Saneamiento: en la Búsqueda de Nuevos Paradigmas para las Américas (Water and Sanitation: Searching for New Paradigms for the Americas), Washington, D.C.: Pan American Health Organization, 2012.

Forthcoming: José Esteban Castro, Léo Heller and María da Piedade Moraes (Eds), O Direito à Água como Política Pública: uma Exploração Teórica e Empírica (The Right to Water as Public Policy: a Theoretical and Empirical Exploration), Brasilia: Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) (expected 2013).