



The Democratic and Transparent Governance of Water as a Goal Necessary to Meet the Objective of Environmental Sustainability and Building a Better World

The experience of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals

Achievement Fund (MDG-F)

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I. INTRODUCTION

From the beginnings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), many questions have arisen on their effectiveness and usefulness for solving the problems of world poverty. The MDGs have been criticized both from the point of view of their design and their implementation, with even the arbitrariness of their identification being questioned. Nonetheless, as Sakiko Fukuda underlines, the MDGs have been very successful as an awareness-raising tool among both donors and developing countries. They have been a force behind a commitment to the fight against poverty and a series of clear goals have been set as a model for a global accountability¹. The MDGs have succeeded in awakening a sense of urgency to solve the problems of poverty, they have laid the foundation for a multi-sectoral approach not merely based on financial income, and they have contributed to the intensification and channelling of national and international strategies towards common goals.

A good example of the drawing power of the MDGs is the [Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund](#) (MDG-F). The MDG-F was created in 2007 and is one of the largest investments specifically designed to help achieve the MDGs. With a total contribution of approximately \$900m, the MDG-F has funded 130 programmes in eight programme areas in 50 countries around the world and global partnerships and other initiatives on a theme of knowledge management. To improve effectiveness of the aid, every MDG-F-funded programme harnesses the collective strength of the United Nations, bringing several of its agencies together to address inter-institutional issues.

The MDG-F has been a wonderful opportunity as a laboratory of development. Multi-sectoral strategies have been launched to promote and accelerate the achievement of the MDGs, and many lessons have been learnt. In the area of environmental sustainability and water, the MDG-F has financed 28 inter-agency programmes over Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America with a budget of more than \$140m and a strong focus on the strengthening of governance, the reduction of inequity, the defence of indigenous rights and the mainstreaming of gender.

The MDGs Agenda has been a very positive tool for communication and political advocacy whose momentum it would be very good to take advantage of. Nevertheless, in this second phase of the Development Agenda for meeting the Millennium Declaration it would be necessary to go a step further and develop towards a political, strategic tool to help us improve development processes.

¹ July 2012, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr. Should global goal setting continue, and how, in the post-2015 era?. DESA Working Paper No 117

We are at a moment of reflection on what the MDGs Agenda has been and on our learning for a future development agenda. This working document analyses the effectiveness of the design of Goal 7, specifically in relation to the goal of access to water and sanitation (Goal 7C²). It assesses its effectiveness at channelling development aid and setting national priorities for solving the challenges of the human right of access to water and sanitation and the aim of including a specific target to cover the Democratic and Transparent Governance of Water is met. The arguments are based on the lessons learned from MDG-F programmes and the demonstrable success of the governance approach to access to safe water and sanitation. The document ends with a series of question to encourage debate on the pros and cons of the proposal made.

II. DISCUSSION: Reflections on the effectiveness of the design of Goal 7 to meet the challenges of water and equality and the struggle against poverty.

What is meant by the democratic and transparent governance of water?

One of the most widely-used definitions establishes that it consists of the set of political, legal, social, economic and administrative structures which ensure public management of society's water resources in an effective, transparent manner, while at the same time providing water services to the different levels of society, supporting the participation of citizens. This means also considering traditional organisational systems based on ideological values, ancestral customs and community decisions. For the purposes of this article, Democratic and Transparent Governance will be understood to be any form of social, accepted and socially legitimised organisation which has the objective of setting rules for the use and management of natural resources. These rules are clear, accepted by all the members of the community and give priority to the common good over individual benefit. This could be a water law, a hydrographical confederation, an indigenous forest protection committee or an elders' council.

² Goal 7C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Why would it be beneficial for the consolidation of democratic, transparent water governance systems to become an environmental sustainability goal?

In the last 15 years there has been intense debate on the various aspects which have weakened the design and implementation of the MDGs and which need to be improved in the Post-2015 Agenda. Prominent among them is the sectorialisation and simplification of the concept of development and a lack of attention paid to human rights and the problems of inequity, as well as the weak inclusion of gender as a transversal theme (2012, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr).

These weaknesses particularly affect the goal related to access to water insofar as the method of measuring its progress is concerned. Indicators are focused on measuring the proportion of people with access to improved water sources and services³. Data from these indicators do not necessarily reflect the complex realities on the ground, where access to safe water is conditioned by factors of governance and inequality and whose sustainability of access to safe water and sanitation depends on a complex multi-sectorial web and cultural peculiarities.

The success of the approach of MDG-F joint programmes to water is due to the attention paid to the strengthening of governance and the combination of infrastructure investment and integrated management of water resources, as elements of sustainability. These programmes have been among the most successful of the MDG-F, having contributed to establishing institutional and regulatory frameworks for the protection of water resources while respecting different cultural and social expressions. Communities have been involved in the design of infrastructure and have been trained and empowered, and the private sector has been involved through partnerships. The democratisation of the process and the establishment of fiscal and social monitoring systems for decision-making and the execution of projects have had a definite impact on the sustainability of actions. In addition to improving access to water, all this has improved the resilience of countries and communities which have organisational structures capable of reacting quickly and effectively to such events as natural disaster and other exceptional circumstances, as happened in [Guatemala in the San Marcos region](#) after the 2012 earthquake, in [Panama with the 2010 rains](#) or in [the Philippines with the typhoon](#).

The MDGs were conceived as an end, not a means, but **can we change this focus to include those "means" that experience has proved to be key to success in fighting poverty and for human rights?** All this, of course, is not to establish a set formula, but to create a set of possibilities that leave space for governance of the sector to be done in a way that is appropriate to each place and with respect for customs and traditions.

³ According to the joint WHO/UNICEF initiative for monitoring water and sanitation these are the definitions for improved facilities and services:

- **Improved sanitation facilities:** For monitoring purposes, this is understood to be an improved sanitation facility which hygienically separates human excreta and prevents their contact with humans.
- **Improved water sources:** This is defined as that construction through which or through its active management protects water from contamination, specifically from contamination linked to faecal material.

The 2006 UNPD human development report on water signalled Democratic Economic Governance of public services as a crucial challenge for developing countries because universal and affordable access to these services is essential to progress towards the MDGs. **Including a target on Democratic, Transparent Governance of Water in the development agenda could make it more effective for solving the remaining challenges of access to the human right to water and sanitation.**

In the next chapter, we shall present a series of reflections that justify the importance of including Democratic and Transparent Governance in the MDGs Agenda and which set out a series of possible benefits from doing this. These reflections are supported and inspired by the experience of the MDG-F programmes and are explained in detail in the next chapter:

- a) **The Democratic and Transparent Governance of Water would make it possible to solve the problems of access to safe water and sanitation in a more efficient and transparent way, addressing the problem from a multi-sectoral approach (integrated management of water resources).** Experience has shown that infrastructure alone is not always the solution to access to water and sanitation.
- b) **Including a goal related to the Democratic, Transparent Governance of water would contribute to providing the Development Agenda with tools to fight against inequality.** The Goal 7C focus on numbers or percentages of people with access to improved sources of water and sanitation has led, in some cases, to ignoring problems of inequality and of the need to protect the most vulnerable, against the desire to improve national average indicators.
- c) **The Democratic, Transparent Governance of Water contributes to the sustainability of water supply and sanitation systems and, therefore, to meeting the goal of more permanent access to water.** The democratisation of decision-making in MDG-F programmes for means of access to water and sanitation, through a transparent governance system, has offered communities benefitting from the programmes the opportunity to identify their needs and adapt them to their cultural and social contexts, contributing to the improvement of the efficiency and sustainability of actions.

III. DISCUSSION: Potential benefits of the inclusion of Democratic, Transparent Governance of water as a specific objective within Goal 7.

- a) **Democratic, Transparent Governance of water would make it possible to solve problems of access to safe water and sanitation in a more effective and transparent manner, addressing the problem from a multi-sectoral approach (integrated management of water resources).**

"Infrastructure is not always the answer to access to water and sanitation." Traditionally, the solution to the problems of water supply and sanitation has been sought in cement and concrete. The focus of Goal 7C on the number of persons with access to improved sources of water and improved sanitation has intensified attention on the construction of infrastructure and in the last ten years has helped mobilise billions of dollars from bilateral and multi-lateral aid and development banks.

This has had the very positive effect of improving the world situation, but the experience has also shown that infrastructure alone is not always the answer to the problem. There are plentiful examples of considerable investments being lost through abandonment or poor operation of the infrastructure built. The lack of cultural and social relevance, weak local buy-in and difficulty of financial and technical sustainability have frequently been the causes of this failure.

On the other hand, the large-scale mobilisation of funds for infrastructure construction has also opened the floodgates to corruption and in countries with weak economic and social auditing systems this has contributed to intensifying problems of inequity. This is particularly serious when the sources of funds are not repayable.

"Access to safe water is a multi-sectoral problem, one that is intimately linked to sound management of water resources (IWRM)." The study by UN-Water into the situation of water resources management for Rio+20⁴ shows us that in spite of advances from the Earth Summit Action Plan, Johannesburg 2002, countries still have a long road to travel to reach the goal, and most of them still face considerable challenge over the implementation of National Plans for the Integrated Management of Water Resources. It also highlights that an integrated approach to the management of water resources is essential to move towards a green economy, sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and the creation of natural means that are resistant to climate events.

A purely engineering approach to the problem of access to water and sanitation has given rise to its sectorialisation and separation from the natural environment as an integral part of the ecosystem and as a social and economic good. Nevertheless, as we mentioned above, infrastructure is not always the

⁴ Status report on the application of integrated approaches to water resources management. June 2012, UN-Water

answer to the problem of safe water supply and there is no shortage of cases of communities having water supplies or latrines which fell into disuse or were never used.

The inclusion of governance of water within the environmental sustainability goal would promote and foster the development of integrated water resource management strategies providing more sustainable and holistic solutions to the water problem and impacting in a more definitive way on access to water and sanitation.

Weaknesses in institutional management are one of the most significant impediments to guaranteeing the right of access to water, not only for human consumption but also for other vital uses.

The UN-Water report for Rio+20 emphasises that one of the principal challenges for the establishment of institutional frameworks for the governance of water is the definition of mandates, sectoral coordination, capacity, participation and awareness.

A good Democratic, Transparent Governance system helps to identify weaknesses and to develop mechanisms to improve the efficiency with which needs are met and services provided. Setting a goal related to this could help raise the profile of the importance of the effectiveness of institutional management to ensure the right to access to water and sanitation and to channel more effort and support in this direction.

b) Including an objective related to the Democratic, Transparent Governance of water would contribute to equipping the Development Agency with tools to fight against inequality.

The Goal 7C focus on numbers or percentages of people with access to improved sources of water and sanitation has led, in some cases, to ignoring problems of inequality and of the need to protect the most vulnerable, against the desire to improve indicator data (national averages). This, in some circumstances, has had the consequence of selecting the simplest and quickest strategies to increase the number of persons with access to these services, even if they are not the people who need them most or who have the greatest difficulty in gaining access, on account of their vulnerability. Examples include choosing urban rather than rural settings, and large populations rather than isolated, poorer ones. Even though these decisions improve the Goal 7C trends, they can have the perverse effect of deepening geographical, economic, social or racial divisions.

What have been the inequality-related factors Goal 7C has not been sensitive to, which have a decisive influence on the success of access to water and sanitation and its impact on the fight against poverty? There are several factors rooted in contexts of inequality which have an impact on the success of water and sanitation projects. We are conscious that keeping these problems in check forms part of the "how" of achieving the objectives set by the MDGs, but the thread argued in this article wishes to make it plain that some of these factors are so determinant that it is worthwhile to make them explicitly visible in the Millennium Development Agenda. Moreover, we can use the presentation of these elements as a basis upon which to justify the relevance of Democratic, Transparent Governance as a means of raising their profile. Nonetheless, we do not intend this article to be a thorough analysis of the issue of inequality and access to water and sanitation, which themselves constitute specific areas of study.

Among the most important determinants of inequality, towards which we consider Goal 7C is insensitive, the following could be mentioned:

- Lack of access to property / land use;
- Lack of institutional participation in the decision-making process;
- Limited political weight and capacity to monitor compliance with regulations and existing policies;
- Lack of access to water in terms of quality or quantity through competition with uses of water other than human consumption;
- The weakness or non-existence of mutual accountability systems and the existence of conflicts which establish power relationships against the most vulnerable populations.

The tools which consolidate Democratic, Transparent Governance contribute to a reduction in divisions caused by inequalities and to an improvement in national access to water and sanitation, taking conditions of poverty into account. How is this to be done? Through the democratisation of the decision-making processes, the application of a bottom-up approach making it possible to take account of the population's real needs with cultural relevance and social and economic sustainability, and through the establishment of mutual accountability systems. In addition, a transparent governance system is one which establishes appropriate measures to avoid the use of water and sanitation for political, economic and/or power ends, setting up objective processes and criteria for taking and implementing decisions.

The experience of MDG-F has shown how the democratisation of the process of decision-making for the construction, design and identification of infrastructure needs or for water resource management has brought with it the empowerment of the population, improved accountability and, consequently, has contributed to closing the divisions that create inequalities of opportunity and capacities.

This is what the indigenous populations of the Ngobe Buglé region of Panama said further to their being beneficiaries of a Democratic Water Governance programme and who, for the first time, had the opportunity to lead on their process, take responsibility for its success and seek out the most effective methods of managing problems related to access to water and sanitation, by consensus among the different power groups. Before the joint programme, they say, outsiders came, built water sources or latrines in dangerous places and if they worked at all, when they broke down they could not be repaired. Thanks to the governance system we have developed with the support of the joint programme, we have now been able to decide where we want to have the water, we have joined in the construction of the infrastructure and we know how to manage it if it breaks down; we have even succeeded in having people pay a maintenance contribution for the emergency fund. This project is theirs, and this has made a great difference to the outcome.

Another example is the Regional Fund for Water and Sanitation established in the Atlantic region of Nicaragua with the support of a joint MDG-F programme and which is managed by the Government with the participation of the communities which benefit from it and of civil society. In this Fund, both the identification of investment priorities, and infrastructure design and project implementation are carried out by a combination of local and national participation, in which external private investment and co-operation players join forces, and in which there are different degrees of accountability and social monitoring to ensure the transparency of the process. What is more, there is a working protocol which establishes the need for multi-sectoral intervention (education, construction, financial sustainability and integrated management of water resources) and which sets out how to consolidate a system for the governance of the infrastructure financed. Projects financed in this way have been more effective and sustainable, and have given a voice and opportunities to the most disadvantaged populations.

We are, therefore, convinced that including Democratic, Transparent Governance of water can contribute to mainstream the fight against inequality and poverty in the Millennium Development Agenda and more effectively achieve Goal 7C.

c) The Democratic, Transparent Governance of water contributes to the sustainability of water supply and sanitation and, therefore, to achieving the goal of more permanent access to water.

The experience of joint MDG-F programmes has shown a very positive impact in terms of sustainability from working supply and sanitation projects from the governance angle. The consolidation of democratic, transparent governance models on the ground and the participation of communities in decision-making over the design, distribution and execution of projects have improved the level of buy-in and with that, sustainability.

The multi-sectoral governance approach, which goes all the way from the empowerment of women to the strengthening of institutions, to the capacity to manage financial resources and to the technical maintenance of infrastructure with opportunities for the economic development of young people, has improved the impact of interventions to achieve Goal 7C.

In contexts of inequality, where the poorest communities have no ability to influence decisions, the models of Democratic, Transparent Governance have opened the way to a dialogue between central and local institutions, between different social and cultural models, and between different world views.

Governance has facilitated the recognition of the validity of alternative working methodologies and of important cultural elements that define the success or failure of centralised interventions. For example, cultural barriers to chlorinated water or the design of latrines to suit the physical characteristics of the target population, or climatic conditions or religious beliefs. Democratic governance is an opportunity to give a voice to the voiceless and to understand social and cultural barriers which can lead to the failure of projects.

A good system of Democratic, Transparent Governance helps transform beneficiaries into participants responsible for the success or failure of the initiatives supported by national or international institutions. It makes them masters of their own future and offers them the opportunity to identify the most appropriate solutions for their context and situation.

The relevance of this approach and the comparative success shown by it, as against initiatives focused solely on the construction of infrastructure, highlights the need to reconsider the formulation of Goal 7C and the importance of including the consolidation of systems of Democratic and Transparent Governance to ensure MDGs are achieved for the poorest.

IV. DISCUSSION: What should the Goal related to the consolidation of systems of Democratic, Transparent Governance be like?

The design of the form of a possible objective on the consolidation of democratic and transparent systems of water governance would require a broad-based debate between developed and developing countries to define an objective able to guide and produce effective changes, but with sufficient flexibility for it the ways of achieving it to be adapted to each country and region's sovereignty.

Moreover, if this objective were established, it would affect not only developing countries but developed ones too. In a world as globalised as this one, the problem of access to water in developing countries cannot be disconnected from patterns of consumption in developed countries, from rules of international trade or international companies' environmental management systems. Although the MDGs were designed from the developed countries to the developing countries, the moment may have arrived to ask if achieving them can be done solely through the cooperation route, or if they need to be institutionalised within the modus operandi of the developed countries. This is especially important in terms of environmental and water sustainability, as was shown in the Rio+20 summit. **Is this the moment to start to see what contribution the developed countries are making to the achievement of the MDGs beyond the role of donors and to strengthen accountability in this sense?**

On the other hand, questions will arise over whether an objective linked to governance can be measurable, a characteristic that infused the MDGs to ensure harmonised and comparable accountability. Nonetheless, **is this a realistic exercise given the limitations which have been encountered in the taking of objective, cross-checkable measurements for MDGs in the last 15 years?**

MDG indicators have been subject to multiple constraints in their adaptation at the local level and in their rigorous monitoring in places where access to information is restricted and they can lend themselves to manipulation by power groups. **Can we accept that there may be global goals or objectives that are not quantifiable, even though they can be measured qualitatively? Are there other forms of accountability that are not based on measurable indicators? Would it be reasonable to consider the inclusion of objectives that are not intrinsically objective but an essential means to achieve them?**

The intention of this article is not to give a recipe or comprehensive description of the design of an objective linked to Democratic, Transparent Governance, but to present a series of ideas and propositions for debate on the characteristics that this objective could have.

These characteristics are based on the experience of the MDG-F programmes and some would turn on definition of the objective and others on the identification and design of its indicators.

- **Its definition and concept should be multi-sectoral in nature**, focusing its attention on the provision of safe water and effective sanitation services, but also including such aspects as the protection of water sources, the promotion of patterns of behaviour around hygiene and health in the use of water and sanitation, the consolidation of organisational and management systems and the empowerment of the population to be able to take part in the decision-making process. Its definition and the development of its indicators should also include consideration of aspects related to conflicts between uses of water and the vision of integrated water resource management.
- **Definition of the objective should be concise, but flexible enough** to allow countries the freedom to establish the means to be used to achieve it and to be able to adapt it to each country's social and cultural context.
- **A focus on the human right to access to safe water and sanitation** would have to be included in its definition and objectives, to combat the application of other criteria for the prioritisation of interventions such as economic performance, the political importance of settlements, strategic interests, etc. As a human right this objective should promote its universality and inalienability, indivisibility, equity, participation and inclusion and the obligation for accountability in the governance of water.
- **Its definition should include a focus on sensitivity towards the most vulnerable populations and a guarantee of the exercise of the right to water without discrimination** of any kind on account of race, colour, sex, religion and civil status. With special attention to persons or groups of persons who have special difficulty in exercising this right, in particular women on account of the disproportionate burden that falls on them to obtain water. They should look to change inequality-related factors which affect progress towards the MDGs in a fair way.
- **Finally, the objective should involve the developed countries from the point of view of their co-responsibility for progress towards achievement of the MDGs** in the poorer countries, not only in their roles as donors but as actors with influence on international processes. Accountability in this regard and from accountability and as influential external actors.

V. FINAL THOUGHTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This article is intended as an invitation to reflection and debate on what the MDG Agenda has meant for the fight against poverty and the guarantee of the human right to water and sanitation, within the terms of Resolution 64/292 of the General Assembly of the United Nations, of 28 July 2010.

We hope with these reflections to contribute to the debate the role the MDGs have had in the development agenda regarding water and how a future design might be sketched out. A total of 28 joint environmental sustainability, water and sanitation programmes, implemented in parallel over 3 to 4 years in different parts of the world and different social and political contexts have given the MDG-F Secretariat a magnificent opportunity to accumulate a valuable body of knowledge and good practice, which we wish to place at the disposal of the international community to help and consolidate a stronger, more effective development agenda.

To this end, we would like to end the article with the questions that opened our discussion:

- **Should there be a specific objective related to the Democratic, Transparent Governance or Water?**
What effect would it have on areas such as environmental sustainability, climate change adaptation, food security and conflict prevention? How should it be defined and what should its indicators be?
- **What role would the developed countries and the private sector play in achieving and implementing this objective?**