

Water and livelihoods – what's new?

By Tamsyn Barton

The editor tells me there's been an unprecedented level of interest in contributing to this edition of *Waterlines*. We really struggled to choose between submissions – some excellent articles will have to go into later editions. Fortunately, with a topic like water and livelihoods, there's plenty of overlap with most themes which are likely to come up. As Patrick Moriarty comments in his overview paper, (Sustainable) Livelihoods Approaches, which have stimulated the focus on livelihoods in the water sector, have been described as 'applied common sense', so this edition is about sensible approaches to water-sector interventions, leaving plenty of scope for future editions.

Of course, the equation of Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) with common sense is a backhand compliment. There is a concern in some quarters that

the international development spin-doctors are promoting yet another miracle cure – with strangely familiar ingredients. Well, it is certainly not new. Sustainable Livelihoods thinking was first articulated in the 1980s in the rural development sector and was closely associated with the work of Robert Chambers and colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University in the UK. And indeed Sustainable Livelihoods has included in its ambit well-established ways of working such as participation, interdisciplinary work and a focus on policy as well as field level work. While some would see this as stealing the

credit, others find it useful in its very integration of so many existing approaches. Above all, many welcome it because of its very positive focus of building on the strengths of poor people, supporting them in the way they use assets, capabilities and strategies in order to make a living as well as avoiding compounding their vulnerability.

In the context of the water sector, SLAs have a particular value in moving the focus upwards and outwards from the traditional justification of water interventions on health grounds. The appropriate technology movement has not succeeded in moving engineers in many developing countries away from a narrow objective of high technical standards for assuring water quality towards a broader understanding of health in the context of the manifold links between poverty and poor health. An explicitly holistic approach might help.

A focus on poverty and poor people's livelihood strategies makes us analyse carefully what poor people are doing with water, and how the wider context changes that. This encourages another look at questions of financing interventions. The articles in this edition cover a wide range, but still cannot illustrate the full variety of contexts within the water sector where SLAs can make a difference. Sanitation and livelihoods probably deserves a separate edition.

Patrick Moriarty's article sets out what this broader rural development thinking in SLAs can bring to the rural water supply and sanitation sector. For a start it increases the range of benefits from water projects – beyond health, time and savings. The paper notes the good fit with Demand Responsive Approaches, and the implications for financing. A number of examples are mentioned, including a case-study on the Zimbabwe collector wells project – familiar to *Waterlines* readers. It concludes with practical implications for policy-makers as well as practitioners.

Two of the main articles which follow, as well as a shorter one by John Butterworth, deal with water management, traditionally within the field of rural development. In different ways they illustrate the trade-offs between people's livelihoods, tough choices which good livelihoods analysis will reveal.

The delivery of water is one way people can improve their livelihood



IT/Simon Ekless

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Tom Franks and Frances Cleaver bring a useful emphasis on stakeholders, the range of people with different interests in water with a case study from Tanzania. Integrated water-resources management requires negotiated consensus on water use, and their paper gives a sense of the challenges of doing this at the catchment level where conflicts are a daily reality, in particular over water for livestock. SLAs attempt to address issues at the different levels, bringing together national policy (macro) and ground reality (micro) level, but there are many key levels in between and the catchment lies at this 'meso' or middle level.

Watershed management is covered in both the main article by Kaushik Mukherjee and one by John Butterworth. The work done under the KAWAD project in South India – in particular the Water Audit – has revealed the tough choices in semi-arid areas. Again we are brought to recognize stakeholders, in particular those using water (and energy) for irrigated agriculture and those (women and the poorest) who have to collect water for drinking, cooking and washing. The paper draws clear implications for current fiscal policies of the State government from its analysis of competing livelihoods. There

are also implications for cross-sectoral links between agriculture and water supply – picked up by the Indian government in the watersheds plus approach cited by Butterworth.

More recently there have been experiments and debate about using livelihoods thinking in analysing and approaching urban poverty, so I was glad to be able to include a contribution from the urban context. It was a spell at ITDG, with its traditional focus on small producers and micro-entrepreneurs, that made me start musing about applying livelihoods thinking to water. A Kenyan colleague, Louis Othieno, was the one who brought my attention to water vendors, and Mike Albu who brought his experience in business development services to work with vendors. As water becomes an ever-scarcer resource in many areas, such as Kenya, a livelihood from water becomes a more and more obvious opportunity, and for some of the most vulnerable, a safety net. Water policies have been bringing the hitherto reviled vendors centre-stage in the search for solutions in improving access to water in informal settlements (as Peter Kolsky's Waterpoint notes too). Once again livelihoods analysis can stimulate creative policy change. Read on!

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