

Reflections on policy in Republic of South Africa

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We live on Earth, The Blue Planet, so called because two thirds of its surface is covered with water. So how come there is a lack of access to safe clean water in so many countries?

One reason is, of course, that most of that water is salt water in the oceans but even that wouldn't be a problem if we had real development. In fact in the modern world there is no good reason for there to be shortages of water anywhere. Not only is there plenty of water but there is an inexhaustible supply. Water cannot get used up - it is recycled however many times and in whatever way we use it by what we call the hydrological cycle, thus the supply is limitless.

The problem in the developing world is not a lack of water but the lack of infrastructure and it is this that I want to focus on.

The title of the day, Raising Horizons to Raise Water, is very heartening as it suggests rejecting the low horizons that tend to be imposed on the developing world today. I think that what we should be aiming for is WATER FOR ALL. Not just enough to drink, but PLENTY for washing, sewerage and the many other uses we take for granted in developed countries like Britain including recreational activities like swimming.

Coming back to the salt water in oceans - one solution is to remove the salt from seawater to provide drinking water. The technology for this is already available in the form of desalination plants. In fact because they are rich countries (because of their oil reserves) countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have been able to build desalination plants to provide sources of drinking water. The only reason this is not possible for coastal African states, for example, is that building and running these plants is expensive. Thus it is an economic problem not a technical or resource one.

So, why 'Reflections on policy in Republic of South Africa'? Well, for one thing I worked in South Africa last year, but also South Africa makes an interesting case study and raises some general issues about water and development.

People in South Africa use water in a number of ways. The Mutale river is in an underdeveloped region of South Africa in the North of the country near the border with Zimbabwe. The river is used by people of Mutele about 2 kilometres away. They collect drinking water, wash themselves and their clothes and their livestock drink from it - and it is not just the drudge of having to walk to the river to do these things at issue - simple tasks such as these can be really dangerous in a country like South Africa as there are crocodiles in the rivers which quite commonly attack people. One thing the women washing clothes do is to put acacia branches in the water between them and the rest of the river, not so much to keep the crocodiles away as to create a warning system - if a crocodile approaches it moves the branches and makes a noise, giving the women time to run away.

Current policy in South Africa will do away with this daily walking to the river and is being seen by many as a model for rest of world; The South African government has made a commitment to provide 25 litres per day per person to every person in the country in the next five years. Although South Africa is well developed this still represents a huge commitment to providing necessary infrastructure such as reservoirs and pipelines.

South Africa does have an advantage over most developing countries for, although it has only one natural lake it has a number of large man-made reservoirs throughout the country and is building more. Only this makes piped water viable.

There is a striking contrast between the region around the Vondo dam and the village of Mutele, discussed above. Notice the lush vegetation. There is a huge difference in the quality of life of the people in this area. Irrigation schemes have transformed lives, enabling people to move beyond subsistence farming and grow crops to sell. In contrast to Mutele, for example, there are lively markets selling locally grown fruit and vegetables, there is economic life and more contact with the rest of country - markets and produce even bring major roads. It is interesting to note that, providing water does not just mean enough to drink, water animals or grow crops, since water in excess of basic needs can open up new opportunities - for example brick-making is a common way of earning money in South Africa when sufficient water is available.

South Africa is a terrific example of the sort of forward thinking that I would like to see everywhere, although this should be tempered by recognising that we in Britain use something like 150 litres per day per person - a far cry from the 25 South Africa are aiming for.

I am uncomfortable with the fact that sustainability dominates discussion around water today. The South Africa project I was working on was funded by Department for International Development (DfID) and thus had a focus on sustainable livelihoods. DfID's literature on sustainable livelihoods explicitly states that there should be a focus on helping people understand the contribution their livelihoods make on the environment and promoting sustainability as a long-term objective. This is a cop out and clearly puts environment before people. What is usually concluded when working with this approach is that the best we can offer developing countries is subsistence agriculture. This is not acceptable. I would like to see a move away from the basic needs mentality and instead a real commitment to development. This means following South Africa's example and going further by arguing for clean piped water for EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE.