

Water and the New Urban Agenda – Tapping into the importance of partnerships between local government and NGOs.

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Executive Summary

This policy brief will examine the implementation of the New Urban Agenda as discussed at the World Urban Forum 9 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Specifically, this brief will consider the solutions which were discussed concerning the issue of providing clean and sanitary water to all. The brief will analyse the conclusions which were reached by panellists at the World Urban Forum 9 (WUF9) and argue that forming partnerships between local government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is a crucial and effective way of increasing water supply. The fact that governments should be very careful to stay away from forming partnerships with the private sector will also be discussed.

¹ United Nations, 'Sustainable Development Goals; Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all' (2015),

Introduction

2015 marked the year the United Nations released a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals with the intention of achieving these ends by 2030. These highly ambitious goals included a pledge to ensure access to water and sanitation for all (SDG 6).¹ As a result of the SDGs, UN-HABITAT held a conference in Quito, Ecuador in 2016 that outlined a New Urban Agenda, which aimed to actualise these goals in cities. In February 2018 WUF9, again ran by UN-HABITAT, was held in order to discuss the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

The so-called basic service of water and sanitation, is still very much basic. According to the UN at least 1.8 billion people globally use a source of drinking water that is fecally contaminated, 2.4 billion people lack access to

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/> [accessed 12th February 2018].

basic sanitation services, such as toilets or latrines and each day, nearly 1,000 children die due to preventable water and sanitation-related diarrhoeal diseases.² Finding solutions to these issues have always been high priority for governments worldwide, however a successful resolution is yet to be discovered.

Throughout the duration of the WUF9 there were several talks explicitly related to water and sanitation. They all emphasised the value of deeming water as a human right, instead of a market good in order to help the ‘furthest behind first’. The best way to achieve this was concluded to be creating fruitful partnerships that empowered local government. These proposed partnerships varied from ones involving NGOs to those involving companies in the private sector. I will argue that empowering local government is vital and that partnerships involving NGOs have the potential to have a very positive impact on the provision of water. However, the suggestion of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) is one that should be avoided as detrimental outcomes are likely.

Importance of empowering local government

Regulation and provision of water supply is an issue that ought to be tasked to the municipal

level of government as opposed to a national level. This is because local governments are able to allocate resources in a context-specific manner, meaning that communities will be catered for in the most effective way, as would not be the case if power was centralised. This empowerment should also see a state’s individual local governments working together in order to grow success. Panellists at the WUF9 organised session on [“Water to Sustain a New Urban Future”](#) expressed a strong interest in increasing the power of local governments, with one panellist, the mayor of Itacaré (Brazil), Jadson Albano Galvão, stating how authority being allocated at a municipal level had increased the efficiency of water supply in Brazil. He explained that the National Water Supply and Sanitation Policy in Brazil promotes greater cooperation between federal and local authorities and civil society, which results in a better regulated environment.

There seemed a strong sense amongst panellists in all the sessions concerning water that local governments are not, at current, able to tackle water issues on their own; therefore making partnerships essential. Ideally, national and local governments would have the resources to supply clean and

² Ibid.

sanitary water to citizens without the help of an external body, through an increase in fiscal resources. The source of this increase would most likely come from a rise in taxation or the amount of international aid received.

However, there is a lot of politics surrounding these matters, making them not necessarily easily attainable. Therefore, it is crucial that partnerships are built between governments and other organisations who can provide the missing resources and expertise. In the past, the most commonly formed partnerships have been those of a public-private nature.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that PPPs are perhaps not the best way to realise the goals that have been set, due to their problematic tendencies.

The problematic nature of Public Private Partnerships

Public Private Partnerships refer to a contractual arrangement between a government and a private sector entity.³ The issue first and foremost is that these private sector bodies are mainly interested in profit, meaning their intentions regarding helping

issues such as the water crisis are not principled, unlike NGOs. This lack of care for the aims of the project means that under the control of PPPs, development can regress, as has been seen with the adoption of a PPP approach within the NHS in the UK. Secondly, the claim that PPPs 'bring extra money' is not actually true. In many cases where PPPs have a monopoly, the price of water tends to be higher. For instance, in France where approximately three quarters of the water service is delivered through PPPs, a study showed that the price of water is 16.6% higher than in places where municipalities deliver the service.⁴ Furthermore, there is a severe loss of transparency that occurs once governments become involved in partnerships with the private sector. This is because private companies can and do withhold information on the grounds of commercial confidentiality.⁵

A new alternative? The key role of NGO's

NGOs are being increasingly considered as a more appropriate partner for governments, as opposed to organisations in the private sector. At the WUF9 there was a strong

³ BBC, 'What are Public Private Partnerships?' (2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1518523.stm> [accessed 12th February 2018].

⁴ David Hall (2014), 'Why public private partnerships don't work; the many advantages of

the public alternative', http://www.world-psi.org/sites/default/files/rapport_eng_56pages_a4_lr.pdf p. 31.

⁵ Ibid, p. 34.

emphasis on increasing partnerships between NGOs and local government, which appears to be the most appropriate course of action to take.

In the case of the WUF9 and discussions about water supply, various NGOs were present at discussions, sharing the way in which their organisations can improve the current situation. One NGO that specifically stood out was WaterLinks. This organisation is based in the Philippines and describes itself as a non-profit that links water operators in the Asia-Pacific region. So far the organisation has associations from 23 countries involved in 46 WaterLinks twinning partnerships.⁶ These sustained relationships draw on direct engagement and exchange of practical expertise. The chairman of WaterLinks, Arjun Thapan expressed his desire to expand these partnerships to local governments. The case for NGOs forming partnerships with local government was repeatedly presented in a convincing manner throughout the WUF9, showing that these partnerships are likely to move forward and progress.

Although these partnerships have shown they have potential, there are concerns which must

be considered. For instance, partnerships between NGOs and local governments can result in a reduction in the accountability of local governments. This is because populations are led to decrease their expectation of what local governments can or should be doing for them due to the fact that they are not the sole provider of resources.⁷ Ultimately, raising accountability of local government in disadvantaged countries is highly important in terms of achieving sustainable ways to improve living standards. Unfortunately, partnerships such as this can be detrimental to that goal, although they are far more suitable than the discussed alternative of Public Private Partnerships.

Conclusion

Overall it seems somewhat highly improbable that access to water and sanitation for all will be achieved by the year 2030. However, there are measures that can be taken to make this eventual goal more realistic. This policy brief has argued that the discussions made during the WUF9 regarding partnerships between local government and NGOs is a sensible route to take and should be explored. In terms of suggested PPPs, these should not be

⁶ WaterLinks, 'Twinning Partnerships Involvement 2008-2015' (2015), <https://www.waterlinks.org/water-operators> [accessed 12th February 2018].

⁷ Christopher Collier, 'Development, NGOs and Civil Society; NGOs, the poor, and local government' (1996), p. 120.

pursued as they will cause more negative, rather than positive outcomes. Ultimately, the WUF9 panellists showed an admirable attempt to discuss ways of implementing the New Urban Agenda in order to extend water to the ‘furthest behind first’, not just the furthest behind thirst.

References

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