

OPINION EDITORIAL

Water and Sanitation in Ghana: A Work in Progress

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INTRODUCTION

Having made considerable progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and following several peaceful democratic transitions, Ghana is widely regarded as a leading example for other West African nations to follow [1]. According to the 2019 WHO and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Report, approximately 81% of the Ghanaian population had access to at least a basic water service (i.e., an improved water source located within 30 minutes of travel time) in 2017 [2]. However, approximately 6% of the Ghanaian population still relies on surface water to meet their daily water needs, risking exposure to water-borne infections and other associated health complications [2].

From the sanitation perspective, eight in ten Ghanaians lack access to toilets, rising to nine in ten in rural areas [3]. An outcome of exposure to water-borne pathogens is diarrhea. Around 4,000 children die from diarrhea every year in Ghana and it has been estimated that improved sanitation can reduce diarrhea rates by 36% [4]. Therefore, providing better access to clean water and basic sanitation is imperative. Currently, non-governmental organizations such as WaterAid and Safe Water Network work alongside the Ghanaian government and communities to tackle these water issues in both rural and urban areas. In 2018, we visited Accra, Ghana's capital, to learn more about the country's progress towards the 2030 targets for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 (Water & Sanitation). In this piece, we reflect on prominent successes, challenges, and next steps pertaining to Ghana's advancement towards SDG 6 targets that we learned during our time in the country.

CHALLENGES

The difficulties in meeting SDG 6 in Ghana are characterized by regional disparities, social and industrial practices, and incomplete or stopgap solutions. Even though Ghana faces challenges related to water accessibility nationwide, there are stark differences between the issues in urban versus rural settings. Infrastructure is regularly overwhelmed during the rainy season, whereas water sources often run dry at other times of the year, particularly in the North. In rural areas, the lack of proper facilities is a key concern. Meanwhile, urban areas have been expanding due to the internal migration. This migration pressure has resulted in landfills that are improperly designed, marginal areas without proper services, and water points that lack potable water. Moreover, to satisfy surging demand, some people are building affordable houses without proper toilets, despite policies that prohibit this [3].

In Ghana, many people still practice routine activities that affect human health and the environment. One clear example is open defecation, practiced by 18% of the population. The problem: in some circumstances there is no practical alternative to open defecation available [2]. Another issue is high levels of pollution, especially from water-intensive industries such as agriculture, and illegal mining practices that lead to heavy metal contamination.

The sustainability of current approaches is another barrier. In the absence of adequate maintenance, sufficient supplies, and appropriate training for the personnel, new facilities alone do

not bring about a long-term solution. Lack of focus and commitment to the ongoing projects is another challenge when addressing issues related to WASH. At times, a lack of funding also limits the available actions to maintain and sustain a water facility.

SUCCESSSES

It is important to note that despite these shortcomings, Ghana continues to outperform many of its neighbours on these issues [5]. Furthermore, Ghanaian youth are also heavily invested in ensuring their country's progress towards SDG 6. Ghana's progress towards SDG 6 has been driven by a clear recognition of the importance of improving accessibility to WASH. This progress improves the lives of Ghanaians with spillover benefits such as time costs savings, including time lost from school, as well as reduction in transmission of water-borne infections, which affect both individual health and the nation's overall productivity. Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect a complete transformation to take place overnight; incremental progress is still progress, giving reason for continued optimism.

NEXT STEPS

For Ghana to meet its 2030 SDG 6 targets, an effective and lasting solution hinges on widespread collaboration, in which everyone pulls their weight and takes collective ownership of the country's water resources, rather than waiting passively for help to be provided. A multidisciplinary and integrated approach is needed to protect and improve Ghana's water sources. Community-led total sanitation (CLTS), an approach that WaterAid and other NGOs are working to implement, seems to have great potential in the country [6]. This strategy is based on respect for pre-existing indigenous social structures by harnessing them to communicate with people in rural communities [6]. It is frequently found to be more effective than approaches that do not involve the community [6].

A recurring critique is that although the government has strong laws and good policies, they fall short regarding their implementation. Sharing of

responsibilities through the CLTS approach can help to resolve questions of jurisdiction, while improving coordination between central government and local leaders. Greater engagement with the communities receiving support, and in particular allocating funding towards ongoing maintenance can help communities to sustain their improved facilities. Respect for community structures can also improve enforcement of these policies and limit non-compliance more effectively than instructions from outside the community. Moving forward, NGOs such as WaterAid are prioritizing greater inclusivity and equity in their water systems. Similarly, the Ghanaian Government has introduced guidelines for institutions to ensure inclusive facilities; examples include providing latrine facilities that are required to have an accompanying separate change room for girls to use for menstrual hygiene, complete with a full-length mirror, and making facilities wheelchair-accessible [6]. These are promising policies that must be put into action across the country.

CONCLUSION

Our experience in Ghana revealed that many of the water-related issues that the country faces are well understood, and that both the government and NGOs are taking promising steps towards addressing these problems. However, there is also an acknowledgement that these efforts cannot ultimately succeed and become sustainable in the long run without greater engagement at the community level that would complement government strategies. Empowering and educating individuals and communities about the key roles that they can play in securing and maintaining safe and universal access to WASH represents Ghana's best hope for achieving the SDG 6 targets outlined by 2030.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Ghanaian community members (University of Ghana, WaterAid and Safe Water Network) for sharing their valuable experiences. This opportunity was made possible through the Water Without Borders programme by the United Nations, Institute of Water, Environment & Health.

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