Water is a global issue and priority. WASH figures prominently in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The sharpening focus on water issues reflects keen awareness about water’s importance among international policymakers and within wide-ranging academic and professional fields. The right to water is increasingly seen as a core human right, and not charity or a luxury. Water challenges go well beyond drinking water. Improving health, assuring access to and the quality of education, and generating power all depend on water management. Water has special importance for women and girls who often, when asked, say that water is their top priority. Experts warn that rising demand for water among larger and better off populations strains finite water resources and sparks or accentuates conflicts: tensions over water resources in the Middle East are a prominent example. Ending hunger also demands water resources, well managed, for both agricultural productivity and better nutrition. Growing cities and less predictable climatic conditions magnify both the size and complexity of demand for water and sanitation.

MDG Target 7c defines a specific, quantified (if very broad) global water and sanitation indicator: “Reduce [by 2015] by half, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.” There is impressive progress in many countries to assure clean water supplies, though there is far to go and millions are not served at all. Sanitation, however, lags by any measure. At current rates, the world will miss the MDG sanitation target by almost 1 billion people and even if MDG targets were met, some 1.7 billion people would still lack decent sanitation.

Poor coordination among the many interventions across a complex WASH sector partly explains shortfalls in hoped for achievements and stubborn obstacles in the path. These coordination issues apply globally, within international institutions and strategic planning venues, and locally, within communities. Disjointed efforts are hardly surprising, given the many professions involved: engineers, doctors, financiers, and agri-
culturalists for example. Public and private actors, large and small, play parts and need to work in harmony, not dissonance, to assure clean water supplies to poor urban neighborhoods or to translate water basin plans into neighborhood action.

WHAT DOES FAITH HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Within this complex galaxy of institutions, countless faith-inspired organizations and leaders are engaged, many deeply and over many decades. Yet their roles are rarely acknowledged. Many lack a perspective on the roles they do and could play in addressing WASH challenges overall. They hold knowledge and experience that could enhance programs and enrich public appreciation of why WASH is so important. With better knowledge of what is happening and creative efforts to hone partnerships that link faith efforts to the broader policy and advocacy community, the vast resources that religious communities and voices offer could contribute far more than they already do to a vital global effort.

Starting with water advocacy, ethical imperatives involving water can move faith communities as few other development issues can. Water plays symbolic and practical roles for wide-ranging faith traditions. Water’s symbolism goes deeply into beliefs, history, and rituals. Because water is so vital to human survival, it takes on eminently practical aspects in religious practice. Water evokes a host of ethical and identity issues. But contemporary, practical needs and demands for water and sanitation are equally a focus for many faith communities. Theologies and beliefs around water are often linked to notions of social justice (for example coloring understandings of public and private roles and responsibilities). They can bring centuries of experience around the world to today’s debates about water ethics, for example grappling with priorities, privatization or water pricing issues, and on equity dimensions. At the community level, faith leaders engage pragmatically on planning and allocation of water resources, especially in rural areas.

Faith-inspired organizations implement a wide array of water-based development programs. Many work in hard to reach and poor communities so they are deeply familiar with the challenge of water security. Water is a leading priority for programs among the vast array of faith-inspired organizations (for example Islamic Relief, Catholic Relief Services, Adventist Relief and Development Agency, and World Vision). However, experience-based learning is very limited and poor coordination and insufficient and inefficient funding curtail efforts. Partly for this reason the voice and specific experience of faith actors is often poorly reflected in larger policy discussions.

ILLUSTRATING FAITH-LINKED EXPERIENCE

Systematic mapping of faith-linked water action is rudimentary and most information is partial and highly anecdotal. To a degree this makes sense as a rural water scheme in Ethiopia or support for water cooperatives by churches in an urban slum in Ecuador present highly local issues. What are commonly missing are probing assessments of impact and experience, for example in innovative community involvement or exemplary financing mechanisms. Links between local efforts and strategic planning and resource management are rare but are needed to achieve national WASH targets. A practical, workable tool to fill the gaps in knowledge and awareness could go far towards bridging gaps.

A few examples are cited here of bold programs involving faith actors that are not well known but should be.

In Ethiopia the United Nations Population Fund is working with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on a “development Bible” that links church holy days to development priorities. Hand washing and sanitation are highlights.

Muslim Aid supports an ambitious program of deep tube well development in Bangladesh aimed at addressing both the irony of scarce drinking water in a country with more freshwater resources than almost any other country, and the increasing contamination of water from shallow wells with arsenic.

The Inter-Islamic Network on Water Resources Development and Management in Jordan engages religious leaders with water education. Demonstration kits in mosques treat water discharged from ablution sinks, and mosque courtyards have small gardens of olive trees showing the benefits of greywater. Imams preach about good stewardship and water conservation. Teachers in local schools are encouraged to address the Islamic teaching about water use.

PRIORITY TO PARTNERSHIPS

Examples of working and encompassing coordination efforts that involve faith actors are rare. The result is redundant or less effective service provision. There are some
examples of coordination efforts, for example a World Council of Churches effort that encourages churches and faith based agencies to work together and to seek cooperation with other partners. Water has served as the impetus for interfaith ventures in several world regions. But the efforts have not received significant support and many have faltered. Further, what is needed are efforts to engage faith and other partners, so each brings their distinctive knowledge and skills to the challenge.

An exemplary partnership, Faiths for Safe Water, places WASH messages in faith-related media and messages from faith leaders in the public space. This interfaith water initiative, launched on World Water Day 2010, includes faith leaders from diverse religious backgrounds. The coalition’s aim is to make WASH a leading faith and policy priority. The effort centers on providing information and resources to clergy and congregations around the world. Awareness about WASH efforts and accepting WASH practices as an act of their faith are the goals and thus changing behaviors around water, sanitation and hygiene. A sermon theme: “together we can give life to hundreds of millions of people throughout the world.”

WASH in Schools is another successful model. A collaborative project launched in 2008 by a broad alliance of faith-inspired organizations, NGOs, corporations, foundations, and schools, its impetus is a recognition that without proper hygiene and sanitation facilities, schools can become breeding grounds for pathogens. Each year, children lose about 272 million school days due to diarrhea, and nearly a third of all school-aged children in poorer countries are infected with intestinal worms. This joint UNICEF/WSSCC (Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council) initiative is underway in several countries, including South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, the Philippines, Madagascar, and Senegal.

Faith communities help link spiritual learning with learning on water, sanitation, hygiene, and the environment. An important element here is explicit recognition that while materials on designs, strategies, approaches and results are widely available, what is needed is to adjust them for use in faith-based education and in developing school water, sanitation, and hygiene education programs. Because many schools around the world are supported by faith communities, they are well positioned to integrate water and sanitation into their curricula, making links with religious learning when appropriate.

WATER, FAITH, AND CONFLICT

Faith communities and leaders often confront water linked conflicts and have on occasion served as effective mediators and peacebuilders. These are roles that could be expanded with better knowledge and purposeful efforts.

An example of significant a mediation effort whose potential fell short of its promise was Bolivia’s Water Wars. During civil unrest in Cochabamba in 2000 sparked by disputes around privatization of the municipal water supply, the significance of religious themes and symbols was illustrated by slogans like “Water is God’s Gift and Not a Merchandise” and “Water is Life.” Cochabamba’s Catholic archbishop, tried to mediate the disputes, even locking himself in his office and offering himself for arrest. But the links were insufficient to bridge the divides and sadly the water drama continues to this day.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION IDEAS

1. Some common advice on strengthening faith development links applies with special force for WASH: engage faith leaders and communities early and often. Most faith leaders are well trusted in their communities and they have rich knowledge. They can be excellent educators for sanitation and safe drinking water initiatives. Programs to help faith leaders devise sermons to guide congregations on water practices are inexpensive and often effective.

2. Explore more opportunities to address water issues with interfaith approaches, nationally and globally. While water can be a potential source of conflict, it can provide opportunities for bridge-building in even the most difficult circumstances. Access to water and sanitation policies can offer a meaningful “safe space” to build interfaith partnerships. This can be particularly helpful in countries with deep religious divisions. Water initiatives can have very positive externalities in a peace building process if developing lines of communication and forging avenues of cooperation around water encourages dialogue between the two groups.

3. Focus on knowledge and information. Make sure that all faith leaders, as they consider topics for sermons or pastoral rounds, realize that good hand washing, and making sure water is clean, are the easiest and most effective paths to preventing the spread of disease. Proper sanitation is a bit more complicated, but as a lifesaver it must be well understood and it means changing expectations and
habits. Faith leaders and communities have a distinctive ability to convey such messages in ways that will be taken to heart. But they need to get the gist of the information in meaningful ways. The Center for Interfaith Action on Global Poverty with a global campaign: Ten Promises to our Children, in partnership with UNICEF and Religions for Peace, highlights hand washing and clean water as vital to saving children’s lives.

4. Dialogue and negotiations. Poisonous ideological and political debates, rightly termed water wars, detract from common efforts to move ahead. Heated discussions about privatization and discharge of public regulatory functions have derailed sensible reform schemes in far off corners of the world. Who better to help contestants to step back and reflect than spiritual leaders? Let’s try a dialogue in a place where water reform is inhibited by lack of communication or conflict and trumpet its results well beyond.

5. Accountability. Where communities suspect that private operators delivering water have undue focus on profits, or worry that government programs will not deliver what they promise, faith communities can help make accountability a reality. They are present on a local scale and have the trust of those they serve. They can use cell phones, posters, or a variety of other modes of personal and mass communication to reach out to their communities. Developing good tools using both traditional and modern technologies is a solid idea.

6. Reliable partnerships. For all the talk of public-private partnerships, there are too few examples of lasting partnerships that work. That’s partly because the assets that different parties, including faith communities, bring, involve far more than hard cash. “Softer” contributions, however crucial, tend to be less valued. This long-standing problem demands urgent and practical reflection. One step is to celebrate and analyze partnerships that really work as well as some where resentment and feelings of lack of respect detract from what can be achieved. Faith organizations need to become more savvy and more proactive in defining stronger partnerships. Groups like the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility can play a leading role here. Other examples of places to start are the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and Water for All.

7. Sincere and informed advocacy. The cause of water needs passionate advocates, working constantly to make sure funds are appropriated, that they are well used, that obstacles are removed, and that water does indeed top the priority list. Faith leaders should be in the vanguard of advocates. We should work together to make that a reality.


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ABOUT THE WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue works to build bridges between the worlds of faith and secular development. Established at the initiative of James D. Wolfensohn, then president of the World Bank, and Lord Carey of Clifton, then archbishop of Canterbury, WFDD responds to the opportunities and concerns of many faith leaders who have seen untapped potential for partnerships.