

Politicizing discussions on water governance Recommendations for creating equitable water futures in cities in the Global South

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Summary

While important on its own, ensuring the success of SDG 6.1 (clean water and sanitation for all) is crucial in an urban world experiencing multiple environmental stresses. This is especially important for cities in the Global South where more people are increasingly living in cities, and governments lack capacities, magnifying the scale and complexity of challenges. The stakes of not achieving SDG 6.1 in cities are high. Lack of affordable access to clean water has consequences not only for health and well-being,¹ but also for political outcomes such as deepening inequities in cities. Considering that the world will continue to experience environmental stresses including risks such as spread of disease, it will be low-income populations that will suffer the most.

Despite making some gains, the world is falling behind on reaching SDG 6.1. One out of four people lack access to clean and accessible drinking water (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank 2022). To maintain progress and make further headway, more funding and effort is required. Yet, official development assistance (ODA) has declined in the water and sanitation (WASH) sectors in the aftermath of Covid-19 (Nomura et al. 2023). Moreover, even stated gains are considered as under-reporting of shortages, especially for those living in informal settlements in cities (Beard and Mitlin 2021), or those experiencing homelessness (Meehan et al. 2022). These challenges underscore the importance of getting it right in ensuring clean and affordable water for all, especially low-income populations in cities in the Global South.

In addition to increasing funding for WASH, a deeper understanding of experienced water shortages, which may be invisible in global metrics, is crucial. Such knowledge could contribute towards the success of SDG 6.1. Based on published and ongoing research on water issues in Karachi, Pakistan, and Metro Manila, Philippines, the author suggests three recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Focus on links between water and informal settlements should be included in global monitoring frameworks.

Global monitoring frameworks, like the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, identify key metrics to measure progress on securing water for all. Yet, these metrics overlook crucial links between water access and status of housing tenure. Many in informal settlements are unable to get clean, regular, and affordable water. The links between housing tenure and water access (and price and quality of water) should be accounted in the JMP and other such policy frameworks to provide a more accurate understanding of ground realities for many.

Recommendation 2: Local governments and international development agencies should fund research co-created with local communities on water governance.

Deep water inequities come into being through governance patterns and urban planning. These inequities illustrate the political nature of water governance in cities. This understanding is required for creating more equitable futures in cities in the Global South especially considering increasing urbanization and multiple environmental stresses. One way to develop this knowledge is by co-creating it with urban poor communities that possess a deep awareness of their challenges. Local governments and international development agencies should fund such research to design effective policy interventions.

Recommendation 3: Local governments should play a strong role to ensure affordable and clean water for the urban poor.

As local governments have capacities, and bear responsibility to meet the needs of residents of cities, they should play a stronger role to ensure access to water, especially for under-privileged populations. Corporations, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations lack capacities and political clout in contexts where technical solutions alone cannot overcome deep-rooted challenges of governance and political will.

¹ World Health Organization, “Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)”.
(available at: https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash#tab=tab_1)

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1. Introduction

Enshrined in SDG 6.1 (clean water and sanitation for all) is the consensus on ensuring access to clean and affordable water for all.² While a goal worth pursuing on its own, the stakes get high as multiple environmental changes impose stresses on social and ecological systems (IPCC 2023). These stresses are unfolding in a world where most people are living in cities at any time in human history. In the Global South (Yiftachel and Mammon 2022), where governments may lack the ability to deliver basic services to entire populations, these challenges are magnified.

Yet, the world is falling behind on reaching the goal of universal water access. Despite some gains, a quarter of the global population is unable to access safe drinking water (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank 2022). Moreover, maintaining progress that has been made entails continuous effort and funding. Meeting SDG 6.1 would require increasing amounts of funds by countries and multilateral agencies. However, official development assistance (ODA) has declined in the water and sanitation (WASH) sectors in the aftermath of Covid-19 (Nomura et al. 2023). Yet, access to water remains necessary for life and health.

Even the stated gains in extending water services are considered by some as under-reporting the extent of shortages, especially in informal settlements (Beard and Mitlin 2021). This lack of attention to people living in precarious housing conditions bearing on their ability to access water has also been noted in the Global North, especially during the COVID-19 crisis (Meehan et al. 2022). Considering risks such as the spread of diseases and environmental pressures, ensuring universal access to clean and affordable water is urgent.

In addition to increasing funding for WASH, a deeper understanding is needed of experienced water shortages, which may be invisible in global metrics. Such knowledge could contribute towards SDG 6.1. Based on published and ongoing research on water issues in Karachi, Pakistan, and Metro Manila, Philippines, the author suggests three recommendations. One, global monitoring frameworks, such as the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, should consider including a focus on links between housing tenure and water. Two, local governments and international development agencies should invest in producing granular explanations of water governance with the help of urban communities. Three, since water is fundamental to life, governments should play a strong role in ensuring regular access to clean and affordable water for vulnerable urban populations.

² United Nations Water, 'Indicator 6.1.1 "Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services.'" (available at: <https://www.unwater.org/our-work/integrated-monitoring-initiative-sdg-6/indicator-611-proportion-population-using-safely>)

2. Recommendation 1: Focus on links between water and informal settlements should be included in global monitoring frameworks

Global monitoring frameworks, notably the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, provide crucial guidance to local and international experts working on water issues.

They direct attention and funding towards metrics that map and ensure progress linked with SDG 6.1. Considering their importance, it is imperative to analyze whether the JMP is adequately focusing on challenges related to water access, especially for the economically and politically vulnerable populations that live in informal settlements. Reports from the ground suggest that with its focus on global data, the JMP is prone to overlooking problems related to water access in the city, and thus underestimates the challenge (Beard & Mitlin 2021).

Ongoing and published research on Karachi, Pakistan, and Metro Manila, Philippines by the author supports this finding. It further illustrates that extant framings in monitoring frameworks like the JMP simplify ground realities of structural water inequities to the detriment of achieving the stated goal. These shortcomings affect all, but especially low-income populations that often live in informal settlements, are more vulnerable to multiple environmental risks, and have limited economic resources and political means.

The issue is not only that global data is unable to accurately report limited access to water in informal settlements (Beard & Mitlin 2021), or that countries are unable to provide data leading to gaps in information (UNICEF & WHO 2023). The challenge is that the link between housing tenure and water access in cities is not addressed critically in extant policy framings, including the ones followed by the JMP.

In JMP's service ladder framework for instance, the focus is on the level of service (water source on premises, away from premises) and the quality of water (unprotected well, river, lake etc.). Yet, how one gets access to water in cities in many places is dependent on where one lives. Despite comprising significant sections of urban populations in the Global South and the Global North³ (Meehan et al. 2020, 2022), people living in informal housing or experiencing homelessness are not being considered. Ignoring this deeply interlinked nature of housing and water is bound to overlook facts-on-the-ground and prevent meaningful progress on extending water access to the most vulnerable people living in informal settlements and those that are experiencing homelessness.

³ The categories of the Global South and the Global North are used as methods of inquiry to develop critical understandings.

Especially as urban populations experience multiple risks, this lack of attention prevents local and international water experts to be prepared. For instance, during COVID-19, low-income populations experienced housing challenges and lower incomes worldwide. Access to water became ever more important for individual and public health during that time. These global trends echoed in Karachi and Metro Manila, where communities in informal settlements, which were already experiencing water shortages prior to COVID-19 found it difficult to observe hygiene protocols as water shortages became more severe. People in Metro Manila fared worse as COVID-19 came at the heels of a city-wide water crisis in 2019. Poor rainfalls due to El-Nino led to historic low water levels in Angat, Ipo, and La Mesa reservoirs, which provide water to Metro Manila. In the city, households without formal housing tenure had 36% higher odds of experiencing the crisis as compared to others (Hussain et al. 2021).

One way to overcome the challenge of under-reporting could be to bring the relationship between water access and housing tenure in focus in policy frameworks, including the JMP. This means including metrics that highlight the varied nature of housing tenures in urban contexts, and their effects on access to clean, regular, and affordable water.

3. Recommendation 2: Local governments and international development agencies should fund research co-created with local communities on water governance

Developing a deeper understanding of water governance is urgent. Especially in the Global South, where infrastructures do not meet modern ideals, and increasing populations place pressures on government capacities, it is easy to place the blame on poor service provision.

Yet, water inequities in cities are not only about poor functioning of governments. They relate to how urban spaces are planned over time by governments and market players. Where people with low incomes can live and afford basic amenities like water is not happenstance but a result of governing priorities over time. In post-colonial contexts, governance patterns may also reflect biases against poor populations and other marginalized groups. Like many cities in the Global South, both these aspects are at play in Karachi and Metro Manila. Ignoring this political nature of governance related to water comes at a steep cost. Even where water delivery may be privatized as a panacea for poor formal governance, as in the case of Metro Manila, urban poor struggle to get a regular supply of clean and affordable water. Moreover, even within urban poor communities, the scale of water shortages may vary, with some households experiencing more severe conditions than others depending on their income and source of water (Hussain & Chaves 2023).

Shaped by past legacies and present trajectories of city-making and governance priorities, these reasons behind persistent water inequities highlight the political nature of water governance. They should be reflected in policy frameworks monitoring progress on goals like SDG 6.1.

One way to do so is for local governments and international development agencies (focused on ensuring universal water access) to fund research on water governance in cities. Hitherto considered passive recipients of development interventions, urban poor communities may be recruited in this effort to co-produce grounded knowledge. Field research conducted by the author highlighted that urban communities possess a deep awareness of multi-faceted challenges facing them in the short and long run. This vast knowledge can be useful in developing context-specific and effective interventions from the ground-up to contribute to improvement of living conditions in terms of water access. Comparative research could help in developing interventions across a universe of case studies.

4. Recommendation 3: Local governments should play a strong role to ensure affordable and clean water for the urban poor

In addition to including a focus on the links between housing tenure and water access in monitoring frameworks, local governments should also play a strong role to ensure affordable and clean water for the urban poor communities. This role could entail including urban planning departments in discussions on urban water supply to come up with context-specific solutions.

Where water supply has been privatized, local governments should continue to play a role. Private entities are not driven by utilitarian principles but bound by a calculus of costs and benefits. They are also not accountable to the people of the city. Within the Metro Manila context, for instance, the role of local governments is important. Services such as socialized housing have been devolved to local governments since 1992. To that end, local government units could consider providing some form of certification of residence on behalf of informal settlers to indicate that families are living in temporary housing, and that their resettlement to formal housing is in process (part of the Local Shelter Plan of local government units). In doing so, the state could enter in an agreement with private concessionaires (responsible for water supply since 1997) regarding installation of water infrastructure on government property or connections to the nearest existing water mains. Such a policy in combination with the implementation of housing programs could enable residents of informal settlements to access water through private concessionaires.

Where water supply has not been privatized, for instance in cities like Karachi, governments should pay attention to water needs of low-income populations, whether they live in informal settlements or regularized housing. It is the responsibility of governments, after all, to meet the needs of residents of the city, especially economically vulnerable communities. Private entities, including charitable organizations, lack the capacity and at times, vision, to ensure that everyone can access clean and affordable water in everyday living.

As the world continues to experience multiple risks, from the spread of infectious diseases to stresses on water resources linked with climate change and urban-rural water reallocation, water inequities are bound to sharpen over time. It is imperative to pay attention to ground realities in cities around the world, especially in the Global South where governments may lack capacities. As well, since legacies of governance and politics in some of these spaces are not well-defined in global water policy frameworks, it is imperative to develop granular explanations of desperate water conditions experienced by many. Without such an understanding, solutions are bound to fall short.

5. Background to the preparation of recommendations

Policy recommendations are based on ongoing and published research on water governance and challenges of urban communities in Metro Manila, Philippines and Karachi, Pakistan by the author. Carmeli Chaves (University of the Philippines) contributed immensely to research and recommendations on the Metro Manila case study. This research has been presented at various academic venues (115th American Political Science Association, 2019, 12th International Convention of Asia Scholars 2021, and multiple research meetings at the Univ. of Tokyo).

In the Philippines, research and recommendations were shared with policymakers (National Anti-Poverty Commission, Water Resources Management Office in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and the Senate of the Philippines), advocacy organizations working on urban water issues and members of urban poor communities in Metro Manila. Findings were also cited in a Senate budget hearing on environmental challenges in the Philippines (Senate session no.30, Nov 20, 2023).

At the Institute for Future Initiatives, the University of Tokyo, members of the Sustainable Development Goals Collaborative Unit (Kiichi Fujiwara, Kazuyo Hanai, Naosuke Mukoyama, Hideaki Shiroyama, and Masahiro Sugiyama) provided incisive comments.

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