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Partnerships for Development and the Provision of Water and Sanitation

Conditions and Limits

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During World Water Week in August 2011 – entitled "Water in an Urbanizing World" – UN agencies, experts, and donors will once more be promoting transnational public-private partnerships as a promising and innovative instrument for the effective provision of water and sanitation. In reality, however, many of them turn out to have deficiencies; some are even outright failures. There are specific conditions for success, and there are limits to these partnerships when used in difficult settings or for complex tasks. If the UN wants its partnerships to effectively contribute toward the realization of the Millennium Development Goals or other international goals, it needs to monitor and assess them in a more systematic manner. The Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 is a chance to initiate the necessary reforms.

Partnerships and the Human Right to Water

UN-documents on the Human Right to Water state that governments have obligations to ensure access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation under international human rights law. Yet, they recognize that some states may not be able to ensure the immediate realization of these rights. Cooperation with other public or private partners is therefore seen as an option for better water governance in developing countries. Many transnational public-private water partnerships work on implementing the water-related Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In doing so, they pursue different strategies such as facilitating the exchange of knowledge on technologies, policies, or best practice (e.g., the "Global Water Partnership"), setting voluntary standards (e.g., the "Alliance for Water Stewardship"), or providing services and enhancing capacities (e.g., "Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor").

Water partnerships claim to provide innovative concepts: An asset is their pooling of expertise and resources from international academia, civil society, and the private sector. They are said to approach local problems and challenges with bottom-up and demand-driven solutions. Hence, the partnership approach

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rhetorically promises innovative and effective service delivery and long-term development. On the other hand, water partnerships are contested: Critics suspect them to be attempts of "green washing" or – even worse – a mere profit-oriented push for the privatization of services. However, instead of an ideological debate, what is needed is a stringent performance analysis of public private partnerships (PPPs), as well as a reality check on PPPs' achievements and their limitations in realizing the Human Right to Water.

Access to Water and Sanitation in Urban Slums

Urban development and services to the urban poor – like access to water and sanitation – are major governance challenges. For example, the MDG-Report 2011 states that over 2.6 billion people still lack improved sanitation. Data given for 2008 shows that the proportion of the population using an improved sanitation facility did not exceed 31 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and 36 percent in Southern Asia. Moreover, the situation is critical in what we call "areas of limited statehood", for example in urban slum areas, where the state's monopoly on the use of force, its authoritative regulatory competences and its institutional capacities are limited. Every day, millions of slum dwellers in the urban South struggle to fetch water and find solutions for sanitation because the public water operators do not serve their settlements. Instead, owners of illegal bore wells and informal water tankers provide the communities with overpriced water. Slum dwellers use railway tracks and roads behind their settlements for open defecation. These practices cause a variety of problems, from a lack of water security to bad hygienic conditions and serious health risks.

Water partnerships that are active in these urban slums strive for developing baseline tools that are subsequently transferable to other settings. The partnership "Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor" (WSUP) is an apt example for this approach. According to their mission statement, WSUP intends to improve the lives of the urban poor in developing countries by providing role model services and by strengthening local water operators and other stakeholders to provide sustainable water and sanitation concepts. Currently, WSUP is running nine projects in Africa and Asia, for example in urban slums in India, Bangladesh, and Kenya. The partnership's projects show how a sincere evaluation of pilot projects may inform the design of subsequent projects – thereby improving chances for their success.

Regulatory and Social Contexts

WSUP has designed several water and sanitation projects in South Asia. These projects aim to provide low-income settlements with individual and customized sanitation solutions. They attempt to link the community with the responsible water operator and provide them with legally registered water connections. WSUP's water and sanitation projects in South India's megacity Bangalore, however, were not successful in linking up with the local water provider BWSSB. In addition, several problems emerged with regard to land use. Similarly, WSUP also experienced difficulties with its first water and sanitation project in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, mainly due to a lack of coordination with and support of public institutions.

But WSUP learned from these experiences. In their current Dhaka project, WSUP (in cooperation with the World Bank) was successful in initiating a so-called "Low Income Community Unit" (LIC Unit) within the public water operator. For the first time, a unit of the public water operator has been put in charge of cooperation with Dhaka's urban slum communities to provide them with public water connections. Moreover, the unit issued a catalog of clear-cut conditions on how slum dwellers can get their settlement connected to the pub-

lic water system, such as through the set-up of a well-installed Community Based Organization (CBO). WSUP's social workers provide support in establishing these and assist in drafting community action plans on water and sanitation. This approach not only safeguards the bottom-up design of the project but also helps to build local ownership and capacities.

As confirmed by the UN Human Rights Council's endorsement of the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights in June 2011, the state has a "duty to protect"; thus capacity development should be geared toward strengthening governmental oversight of PPPs' activities. Our examples demonstrate, however, that it is not only the lack of capacities but also the lack of political will that matters. Local key decision-makers determine agendas for action against or in favor of beneficiaries in low-income settlements. Property rights regulations such as ownership of land titles impact their willingness to act. In most cases, such conditions and conflicts of interests pose severe limits to a partnership's chances of success. In all cases, however, good project management should at least attempt to deal with these problems.

Institutional Design of Public Private Partnerships

How should a PPP project be set up to best handle such difficult conditions? We find that a sound level of institutionalization – in combination with sufficient flexibility to incorporate practical learning – is most relevant for the effectiveness of projects. This institutional design should then enable the PPP to develop and monitor customized projects that correspond with local conditions.

In Nairobi's biggest informal settlement, Kibera, WSUP is constructing sanitation blocks to provide water and sanitation services to the slum dwellers. Applying a participatory bottom-up approach in project implementation means that local water authorities and service providers as well as CBOs are already involved in the project's start-up phase. For example, in a stakeholder workshop announced by WSUP's community mobilization officer, existing private water tank owners met with the Informal Settlement Department of the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company, which is the local service provider. WSUP also consulted with "Wakara" – a group of people whose livelihood depends on emptying the pit-latrines within the settlement – to try and find ways of including their workforce into the project implementation. WSUP encouraged them to establish an association with regular membership, conducting technical trials for a portable solid waste disposal unit with the group. One of the (informal) water vendors, who is also the representative of the local CBO, became a coordinator for the community-project interface. His role is to help in the designation of land for building additional tanks and kiosks to mitigate the challenges posed by informal or customary land tenure.

The WSUP Nairobi office keeps close ties with the community through frequent monitoring visits and consultation meetings. This oversight is necessary as undesired side-effects and conflicts of interest cannot be ruled out. For example, in fostering the formation of groups and associations to work with, the project may involuntarily be taken advantage of by local "big" men or women. In general, however, we find that close interaction with the local community is crucial for a project's success; it strengthens a partnership's ability to secure local long-term support and attain sustained results.

Conditions and Limits

The well-directed development of capacities – both on the community level of the beneficiaries and target groups as well as on the administrative level of targeted authorities and municipal corporations – may improve the chances for sustainable project success. WSUP recognized this; they adapted their mission statement and now focus even

more on the development of capacities of local service providers. Partnerships need to be learning entities: If they do not constantly improve their means to cope with arising challenges in local settings they are doomed to fail.

Moreover, we find that partnerships tend to fall short of expectations if a "win-win" situation is not at hand and if tasks are instead difficult and complex. While digging a well or setting up a toilet block is technically relatively simple, securing its long-term operation and maintenance is far more complex. Projects may encounter geographical difficulties such as lack of space for communal toilet blocks, roads that are too narrow for trucks, rocky soil, or adverse gravity for drainage systems. Social and regulatory obstacles in terms of massive conflicts of interests and security issues; high levels of migration; contested and hierarchic power structures; ethnic heterogeneity; and corruption add to the complexity of tasks. In such contexts, we find that partnership projects do not exist or turn out to be failures – mainly because projects planners may have had good intentions but were never able to get plans off the ground.

Reforming the UN Institutional Framework

In June 2011, conservative US media criticized the UN's Environmental Program for the "administrative mess" in not managing its partnerships properly. While this may be downplayed as familiar attempts to discredit the UN, there are indeed deficiencies.

For example, the UN Commission for Sustainable Development lists in its database 348 partnerships that claim to contribute to the implementation of sustainable development. There is, however, no monitoring of whether these partnerships are at all active. There is an urgent need for an evaluation system that – guided by precise and transparent criteria – helps to identify failures, promotes learning on adequate institutional design and management, and informs which partnerships are successful and should therefore be upgraded. The Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 is an excellent chance to realize this component of the much needed reforms of the institutional framework for sustainable development.

These SWP Comments present results from the DFG-funded research project "Partnerships for Development in Asia and Africa", part of the Berlin Research Center "SFB 700: Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood".

The project team analyzes the work of 21 transnational partnerships, among them Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), the Global Water Partnership (GWP) and Building Partnerships for Development in Water and Sanitation (BPD). This paper also builds on our field visits to WSUP's work in South Asia and East Africa.

For more information please refer to the project's website (www.sfb-governance.de/ppp) and the SWP-Studie by Marianne Beisheim, "Innovative Governance durch Entwicklungspartnerschaften? Chancen und Grenzen am Beispiel transnationaler Wasserpartnerschaften" (forthcoming; www.swp-berlin.org).

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