

Linking water and food security on World Water Day 2012

Food security begins at home

The Hague/ Accra, 21 March 2012: On a day when the UN is highlighting water and food security, the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre is calling for policy changes to promote the use of water at home to boost people's livelihoods. Homestead-level, small-scale production from livestock and vegetable gardens make the difference for millions of poor families. IRC and partner organisations are pressing for the value of water use for food and income at household level to be accorded greater recognition and reflected in bylaws and local policies, as well as in the implementation of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programmes.

The promotion of domestic water supplies for productive use in addition to drinking, cooking and washing comes under the multiple-use water services (MUS) umbrella. This approach and movement, which IRC has been supporting since 2003, recognises that people require water for all their livelihoods needs. *"Many poor families in rural and urban areas do not have access to irrigated lands, or even rain-fed fields. For them, the homestead represents an important site of production, but one that is often ignored. And this is a site for which domestic supply systems can provide water,"* said IRC Director Nico Terra on the eve of World Water Day 2012. *"On this first World Water Day since the United Nations announced that the Millennium Development Goal for Water has been met, let's celebrate by lifting our horizons and recognising how water can also help to lift people out of poverty."*

John Butterworth, Senior Programme Officer at IRC, said that families earn an income and improve their diets when they can be productive at or near their homes. *"We only need a small amount of water for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene, but so-called domestic water supplies do something extra that is rarely recognised - food production at the homestead. For example, small gardens are frequently irrigated from domestic water supplies, and a few livestock may drink much more than their owners."*

Multiple-use water services address needs for water, food and income

In many countries, the use of domestic water systems for productive activities contravenes water use regulations, although families do it anyway. Such prohibitions may not only deny people their livelihood opportunities, but frequently lead to over-use and conflicts within communities.

IRC, together with partners in the MUS Group, has been developing the MUS approach as part of its innovation and action research in the WASH sector. This approach seeks to open up the scope of water interventions, and in consequence, encourage changes in water regulations and policies so that these can genuinely meet all people's water needs, particularly around the homestead.

Globally, interest in MUS is on the rise and there is increasing recognition of the relevance of this approach to meet the challenges of feeding a rising population. The MUS Group is a network of over 10 organisations, with more than 400 individual members. It acts as a platform for networking, promoting research and documenting and disseminating lessons related to MUS. IRC is currently hosting the Secretariat of the MUS Group.

Five country study on MUS

In 2011, IRC and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), carried out a study in Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, India and Nepal to assess institutional barriers to MUS, and to identify pathways for overcoming these. The study, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, identified a number of entry-points through which MUS could be institutionalised in each of the five countries. In Ethiopia, one 'best-bet' opportunity is to support the government in its development of a Self-Supply Acceleration Programme (SSAP), which acknowledges the use of water from family wells, for multiple purposes. In Ghana, Stef Smits, Programme Officer at IRC and current Secretary of the MUS Group, explained that the study *"...identified high potential for MUS as part of sector efforts to improve service levels"*. He adds, *"Critical thereby is not only to provide more water, but also to have water systems that bring water closer to the homestead, as that is where production takes place mostly."*

About IRC

IRC is a knowledge-focused NGO and think-tank based in the Netherlands that works with a worldwide network of partner organisations to achieve equitable and sustainable WASH services. Its roots are in advocacy, knowledge management and capacity building. IRC conducts activities on a global level and is active in countries such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, Honduras, India, Mozambique and Uganda.

Further information

CONTACT DETAILS

For more information on IRC or to schedule interviews with an IRC expert, contact Vera van der Grift at grift@irc.nl or by phone at +31(0)6 2019 5160.

For more information on the MUS group and the approach, visit the MUS website at www.musgroup.net or contact Stef Smits at smits@irc.nl and/ or John Butterworth at butterworth@irc.nl

For more information on World Water Day, visit www.unwater.org/worldwaterday/

RELEVANT MATERIALS

For policymakers: MUS policy brief www.rippleethiopia.org/documents/info/20090824-briefing-paper-1

For the media: Multimedia/ video – Keeping the water flowing www.musgroup.net/page/1461

For practitioners: IRC/ IWMI five country study www.musgroup.net/page/1451; IRC/ MUS technical paper – Climbing the water ladder www.irc.nl/page/49660 and MUS guidelines www.musgroup.net/page/1447