

# The Water Decade: Personal reflections

by John M. Kalbermatten

**The Decade 'has bequeathed to the world a glass of water half full and half empty'. That seems an apt assessment of the results of the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade.**

## Let's look at the half empty glass first

*Decade targets have not been reached.* Criticism about the unrealistic targets abounds. Personally, I wonder whether all these critics have ever bothered to read the Mar del Plata documentation, where it is clearly stated that the conference participants endorse the Habitat objective of safe water for all by 1990, but that they will *ask governments to define their own realistic national targets for the Decade.* Most governments did indeed provide their own targets at the UN General Assembly Meeting

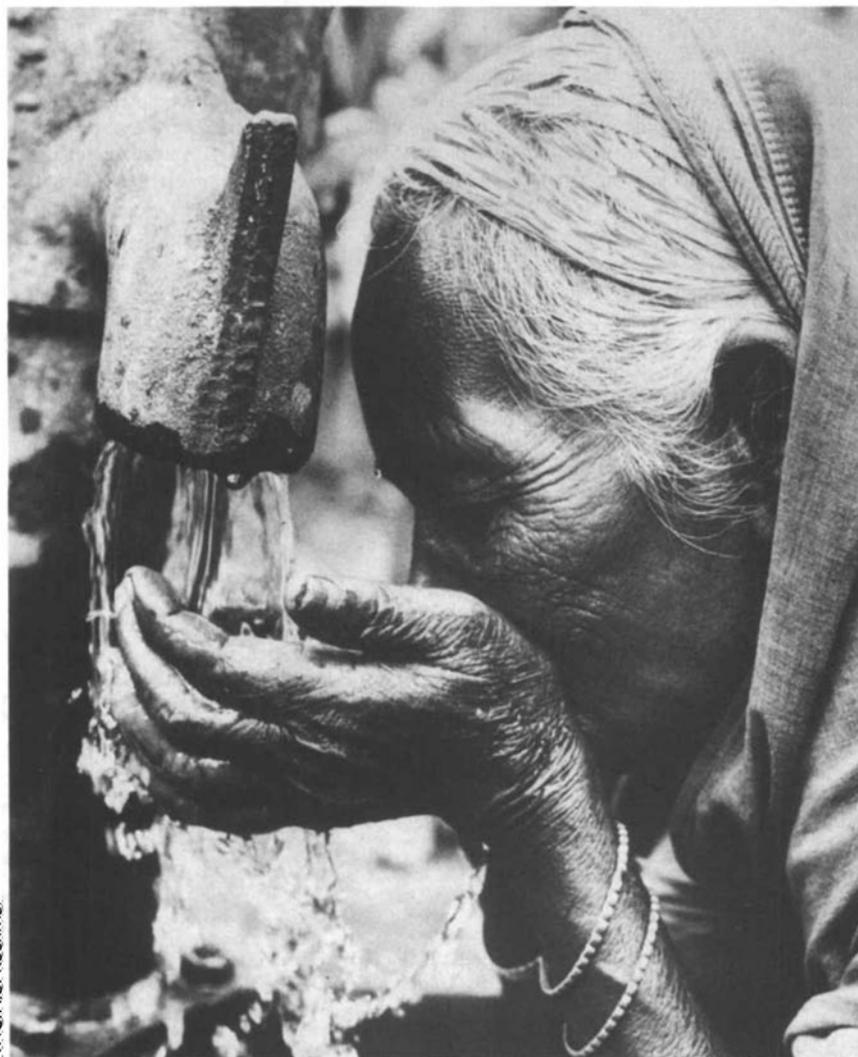
which opened the Decade, and these targets were frequently not exactly the goals of Habitat. There is no denying the fact that even the lowered ambitions were drowned in the red ink of the economic downturn of the 1980s, but let's not accuse the sector of being unrealistic. Better to be stimulated to take action by ambitious goals than to wring hands in impotence in the face of the challenge ahead. (Those interested in Decade statistics can read the Decade Assessment Report by the United Nations Secretary General, submitted to the organization's Forty-Fifth General Assembly.)

*Community and women's*

*participation took too long to be accepted.* Advocates of women's participation in the sector express frustration that Mar del Plata did not immediately result in projects with the full-fledged participation of women, and in projects emphasizing community participation. One could also ask why the water sector should be expected to accomplish in a few years what societies have taken decades to do, indeed have not accomplished yet? Of course, not enough has been done, and efforts must be continued, but acknowledging that progress has been made would probably encourage further advances more than the constant refrain that not enough has been done.

*Collaboration in determining and reaching common objectives is inadequate.* The Decade has brought together for the first time the UN Organizations and other External Support Agencies (ESAs) to review experiences, to learn from them and to collaborate in the development and implementation of policies and strategies. Yet the results of this collaboration remain disappointing. More time is spent pursuing the special interests of the collaborating institutions than is spent pursuing joint activities or resolving the conflicts which impede progress in assistance-receiving countries. A method of convincing institutional decisionmakers (who respond to political imperatives) to implement agreements reached by sector staff eludes us.

*Financial resources are constrained.* At the conclusion of the Mar del Plata conference, and during the period leading up to the official opening of the Decade by the UN General Assembly in November 1980, it was expected that both countries and ESAs would increase the flow of financial resources to the sector. Instead, largely as a result of the economic downturn created by the energy crises, financial support for the sector was substantially reduced. Another reason was the decision of UNICEF and USAID to downgrade interest and funds for water supply and sanitation in favour of Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) or, to put it another way, in favour of the quick fix to the



WHO/A.S. Kochmar

*Women's participation in water and sanitation projects is being acknowledged as vital to long-term sustainability.*

detriment of long-term solutions.

Yes, the glass is indeed half empty. Targets were not reached, even in those the countries presented as being in tune with their own technical and financial capacities. But unlike the Jeremiahs deploring unrealistic targets, countries did make honest, realistic efforts energized by their own target setting and the visibility their efforts received as a result of the Decade. Better to have tried and lost than never to have tried at all!

### **And now, the half full glass**

The very constraints imposed on countries and their external supporters by deteriorating economies has led to a fundamental re-examination of water supply and sanitation objectives and the methods to achieve them.

*Health, water and sanitation* At the start of the Decade, most organizations were just beginning to realize that dependence on the technological fix was a major problem preventing the achievement of expected health and economic benefits from water supply and sanitation projects. Today, project planners routinely incorporate hygiene education in water supply projects, recognizing that providing physical facilities is but the beginning of the solution. Considering water supply and sanitation as complementary for full achievement of health benefits is also accepted, though often not fully implemented because of financial constraints.

*Community and women's participation* Many professionals criticize the sector for the length of time it has taken to recognize the importance of community and women's participation in the long-term sustainability of projects. Today, it is a rare sector professional who does not accept and implement such activities, recognizing that they are essential for long-term sustainability. Now the question is how to accomplish the task effectively rather than whether or not to undertake it, and the community, especially women, have become active partners, not just passive beneficiaries, in project development and implementation.

*Financial considerations* With some exceptions, the recognition that the user has ultimately to pay for the service received is today accepted. The idea prevalent at the beginning of the Decade that



Sam Ouma/Panos Pictures

*Village women receive instruction in operating their new water pump from trained women.*

governments should provide services free is no longer popular. Efforts to refine understanding and methods to determine users' willingness and ability to pay, commonly referred to as effective demand, are being pursued and they include considerations of technology selection to ensure that the least-cost solution compatible with local conditions is selected. Financial support today is considered mainly within the context of sector cross-subsidies, or contributions towards the construction of basic needs facilities for the lowest income groups.

*Collaboration* The Decade has had an unprecedented impact on collaboration between ESAs active in the sector. Much remains to be done to translate this collaboration

into concrete activities at country level, but the dialogue between major financial agencies and NGOs offers the hope that the relative strength of both (financial resources and community-level action) could lead to a major expansion of efforts where they are needed most, among low-income populations in rural and peri-urban settings.

*Technology selection* The natural tendency of those active in the sector in both developing and developed countries has been to attempt to use those solutions in developing countries which have proven successful in developed countries. This reflected a desire to provide the same benefits, as well as the assurance of knowing the solution worked elsewhere. Regrettably, as could have been



*A clean, safe, convenient water supply will mean better health for this family in Papua New Guinea.*

predicted, many of the imported solutions were either not appropriate to local socio-cultural or economic conditions, or exceeded the capacity of local authorities to operate and maintain. Concurrent with the preparation of the Decade and continuing throughout it, serious efforts were made to re-examine the feasibility of using improved traditional technologies and adapting more sophisticated ones to local conditions in developing countries. As a result of major efforts undertaken by ESAs and countries alike, today the project planner has a wide variety of affordable, sustainable technologies from which to choose in any given situation.

Obviously much has changed during the Decade. Whether the glass is half full or half empty is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. The certain fact is that while the hoped-for quantitative results have not been achieved, the Decade has laid the foundation for much more rapid progress for the future, if the will and the resources to implement the lessons exist. Today, the sector is capable of developing and implementing projects which will be far more effective at a lower cost than ever before. Whether it will be given the means to do so depends on the political will of governments and ESAs alike. On those terms, the Decade is a success.

### **Sophisticated problems**

Having concluded that the Decade is at least a qualified success, I am

left with a profound sense of unease. No, it is not because I am pessimistic about the ability or willingness of those responsible for sector activities to act responsibly. I am, if anything, an optimist. However, the longer I am exposed to the needs of developing countries in the water supply and sanitation sector, the more I am coming to the belief that much of what we are doing is irrelevant, damaging, or, at best, not helpful. Let me explain.

The water supply and sanitation systems we use today were first developed and implemented thousands of years ago. The modern versions date back to the middle of the last century when the industrial revolution in Europe both required and made possible centralized water supply and sewerage. Since then, we have improved these solutions step by step, usually in response to the environmental damage we had caused by implementing a previous 'improvement'. As time went by our systems have become ever more sophisticated, and more expensive. And there seems to be no end in sight in this ever-increasing need for more sophisticated, more expensive technology. For example, it is estimated today that the cost of meeting present water quality standards (corrective action to overcome damage by previous solutions!) in the United States will amount to 88 billion dollars. It's the price of progress, I guess. Of course, these systems are not only expensive to build, but also expensive to maintain. So what's the problem?

The problem is that we expect countries with a much smaller resource base to travel down the same road to ever more sophisticated and more expensive technologies, which are becoming almost unaffordable to industrialized countries. We should instead re-examine whether, based on present scientific knowledge, our traditional solutions are indeed optimal, or whether there are other methods for those who have not yet sunk massive investment in conventional solutions.

### **Effective solutions**

This re-examination should start by considering water conservation (some states in the USA are beginning to mandate low-flush toilets) and reuse, continue by looking at various intermediate technologies, and end with the possibility of using the latest in space-age waste disposal technology — all in an effort to find the most effective solutions compatible with the environment and reflecting local socio-economic conditions. Environmental considerations should be stressed by favouring a circular (recirculation within an area) as opposed to a linear system (upstream abstraction — downstream discharge) of water supply and sewerage.

The feeling of unease which I have stems from the fact that there appears to be a lack of innovative thinking along the lines presented above, and that we may be unwittingly condemning our colleagues in developing countries not only to repeat our mistakes — but by exporting our conventional wisdom, we may indeed prevent them from finding their own better solutions to their problems. Hopefully, by exposing the limits of our ability to help developing countries improve their water supply and sanitation services, the Decade will encourage us to identify new and better solutions, more compatible with the environment and protective of our water resources. That would be a magnificent pay-off on Decade investments, but it may be too much to expect from one Decade. It is, however, a challenge for the future worthy of our best talents.

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