

gpgNet

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Reflections on the Debate

Topic #2: *The Public and Private Dimension of the Global Water Challenge*

Discussion Open From 10 March to 24 March 2003

The gpgNet Discussion Forum (www.gpgNet.net) provides a platform for public debates on key aspects of public goods - local, national, regional, and global. The views expressed in the Forum are those of the Forum participants and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the organization with which the participants may be affiliated, unless stated otherwise.

This discussion forum was organized at the time of the 3rd World Water Forum, which took place from 16 to 23 March 2003. It was a time during which a broad range of water issues acquired a high profile in political and media discussions. Participants in the gpgNet discussion forum were invited to focus on the public and private dimensions of the global water challenge.

More specifically, participants were invited to debate two opening commentaries. The first was provided by Lyla Mehta, sociologist and research fellow, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, United Kingdom.¹ The second commentary was prepared by Hakan Tropp, a policy analyst at the United Nations Development Programme.² While Mehta argued for a multi-faceted, multi-level approach that considers environmental, economic, socio-cultural and political dimensions of the issue of access for all to safe drinking water, Tropp's approach was one based on property rights, emphasizing the rights of local communities to manage water issues.

More than 80 contributions to the debate were received.

The main message emerging from these contributions is: *context-specificity* and *diversity of policy approaches*. Participants emphasized that the challenge of providing access for all to potable water assumes quite different dimensions in various contexts and regions throughout the world. There are no standard solutions to this problem. This also implies that the problem is neither just economic, social, cultural, or political; it is neither a matter of just more or different government intervention nor one of more or different market structures. In many instances, all these dimensions might come into play—in a context-specific mixture and balance.

Nevertheless, despite all the insistence in participants' comments on diversity and flexibility, it seems that there is agreement that four points are more generally applicable:

- It might always be best to pursue a *bottom-up approach* to water policy design and management, allowing local communities to identify the exact nature of the challenge in their respective locality.
- It is critical to ensure that *all have an effective voice* in the decision-making process.
- If safe water is to be there for all, it needs to be made—by policy choice and deliberate policy design—a global public good, i.e. a good there for all to consume. Thus, it would be critical for the international community, *one*, to recognize access for all to water as a *basic human right*, and *two*, to launch *international cooperation initiatives* to enable countries to realize this right, as for example, also stipulated by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).³

¹ The commentary drew on: Lyla Mehta. 2003. "Problems of Publicness and Access Rights: Perspectives from the Water Domain," in Inge Kaul, Pedro Conceição, Katell Le Goulven and Ronald U. Mendoza, eds., *Providing Global Public Goods: Managing Globalization* Oxford University Press 2003. To access the paper go to: <http://www.undp.org/globalpublicgoods/globalization/pdfs/Mehta.pdf>.

² To access Hakan Tropp's commentary go to: <http://www.sdn.undp.org/gpgn/topic02.php>.

³ Goal 7 of the MDGs stipulates that by 2015, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water should be reduced by half. See, for example: <http://www.undp.org/mdg/>.

In other words, the emphasis on context-specificity and community-based policy approaches does, in the view of participants, not preclude cross-border cooperation. Rather, in today's world of wide socio-economic disparity, the latter is often an important complement of the former.

Thus, the gpgNet discussion also shows that if the “right” goal is kept in mind, it is basically not difficult to see a feasible way forward. Political controversy arises when goals and objectives differ. So, a further message to take away from the debate is that access for all to potable water is not so much a technical issue. We know how we could resolve it and what the do-able policy options are in various contexts. The issue is more a political one of who derives what net-benefits from which policy path. Not surprisingly, a number of participants emphasized “voice”, especially the critical role of civil society and social movements in making sure that the concerns of all are being heard and taken into account in designing and implementing policy and management systems. *The public*, people at large, must be able to shape the *public domain* and the things, the public goods, that are in the public domain, at all levels, local, national, regional, and international. Even, if not especially, issues of privatization should be a matter in which all parts of the general public should have a say.