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PROMOTING ACCESS TO WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The human right of access to public water supply and sanitation (WSS) has been recently (2010) recognized and stated by the United Nations General Assembly. The human right to water and sanitation entitles everyone to water and sanitation services which are available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and seif. Therefore, in Romania, the challenge to reduce the urban/rural disparities in terms of ensuring people's right of access to public WSS systems adds another reason for the need to develop the water infrastructure, besides that of compliance with the EU water Directives.

Key words: *disparities of access, human right of access, public utilities, water supply and sanitation*

INTRODUCTION

Access to water and sanitation is one of the vital and stringent issues of sustainable socio-economic and human development, in most of the world, so there is a strong need to state and promote this issue as much as possible. Therefore, the relationship between access to water and sanitation and international human rights law has been clarified in the last decade, since in July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly has recognized that water and sanitation are a human right.
As we shall try to futher emhasize, understanding water and sanitation as a human right should have significant implications also for the regional and rural development. This right is now defined at the international level, and obliges Governments to take concrete steps towards ensuring access to safe water and sanitation for all, without discrimination.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Since the human right to water and sanitation entitles everyone to water and sanitation services which are available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and safe, we shall first try to find out practical definitions of those concepts.
Then we shall point out to the main three dimensions of access:
-the geographical disparities of available WSS services;
-the specific barriers or exclusion faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups;
-the financial affordability concerns.
Based on the highlighted characteristics of the WSS infrastructure in Romania, we may present these main three dimensions of equal access to water and sanitation in a conceptual framework and place the case of Romania within this framework in order to emphasize some current issues and challenges to be considered when promoting access to water supply and sanitation in order to comply with the EU Water Directives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The human right to water and sanitation requires a local assessment of needs and progressive implementing. Different

approaches, technologies and policies for WSS may be appropriate in different contexts, and a master plan needs to be in place to outline the steps towards universal access.

Ensuring affordable access to water and sanitation is a central step towards guaranteeing full enjoyment of the right, and special attention to groups which experience disadvantage, social exclusion or are vulnerable, is critical for ensuring that people are not excluded from enjoying this basic human right because of discrimination or neglect.

Therefore, the main principles of implementing the human right to water and sanitation, by providing equitable access to WSS systems are (UNECE-WHO, 2011):

-***Availability***: Under human rights law, there must be a sufficient number of water and sanitation facilities and water must be available continuously and in a sufficient quantity to meet personal and domestic needs, which includes drinking, bathing, hygiene, cooking and washing clothes and dishes. Determining the required amount of water and number of toilets will depend on a local assessment of community and individual needs.

-***Accessibility***: Water and sanitation facilities must be physically accessible within the vicinity of each household, school, health institutions, public buildings and workplaces. Accessibility requires taking account of the special needs of those with reduced mobility including people with disabilities and elderly people.

-***Affordability***: Water and sanitation and water facilities and services must be affordable to all people in a way which does not limit people's ability to afford other essential basic services. The affordability of water and sanitation includes construction, connection, maintenance, treatment and delivery of services. Water and sanitation services do not need to be free of charge for everyone, but solutions must be found to ensure that those living in poverty are able to access these services despite their limited capacity to pay.

-***Acceptability***: Sanitation facilities must be constructed in a way which ensures privacy and which ensures separation of male and female toilets in most cultures. Water should be of an acceptable taste, colour and odour.

-***Quality / Safety***: Sanitation facilities must be hygienically and physically safe to use. Water also must be of such a quality so that it poses no risk to human health.

To get sustainable and equitable access to water and sanitation, it will take a holistic approach, able to:

-integrate solutions for access to safe water and solutions for access to improved sanitation. While popular demand, and the attention of the authorities, is usually stronger for water supply than for sanitation, to ensure sustainability water and sanitation need to be approached together;

-comply with all the different dimensions of equitable access. The literature distinguishes at least three key dimensions: geographical disparities, specific barriers faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups, and affordability concerns.

A range of policy options are available to fight inequities of access in each of those key dimensions. However, it is also necessary to think in terms of an overall policy package, since there are important linkages between the different dimensions.

Although access to water and sanitation for all is a common aspiration and obligation for all countries, the performance to fulfil those aspirations and obligations is uneven.

The Millennium Development Goals call for halving the proportion of the population without access to improved water sources and sanitation by 2015. As of 2010, 2.7 billion people still lacked access to improved sanitation, facing enormous health risks.

Also, in 1990, 63% of the world people living in low and middle-income countries lacked access to a form of improved sanitation. It is true that by 2010, this non-access rate had improved by 19 percentage points, to 44%, but the situation is still worse in rural areas,where 57% of the population lack access to improved sanitation (Global Monitoring Report, 2012).The main reason why the sanitation target of the MDGs will not be achieved is the large urban-rural disparity of

access to WSS, (especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in some European countries)

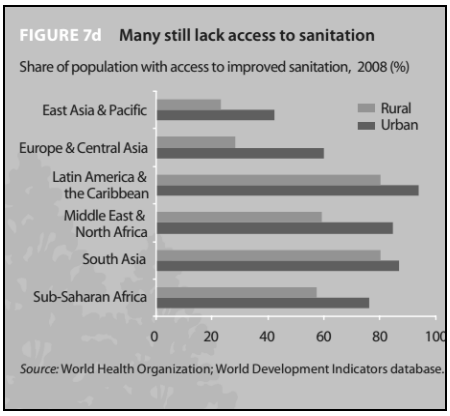

Figure 1 - Urban-rural disparity of access to water and sanitation worldwide

Source: Global Monitoring Report 2012, Progress toward the MDG, Food Prices, Nutrition and the Millenium Development Goals

At present (2010), 12 percent of Europe's population (about 110 million people) still live in homes that are not connected to a piped water supply. According to the best estimates of the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 13,000 children under the age of 14 die every year from water-related diarrhoea, mostly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECCA). Thus, despite normal aspirations, access to safe drinking water and to improved sanitation remains a challenge in several countries of the pan-European region, among which also in our country, in Romania.

Within each European country, access to water supply and sanitation is also inequitable. It does not affect human populations randomly; rather it affects mostly the poor and rural populations. Rural areas have consistently lower levels of access than urban areas to water and sanitation services.

The rate of access to water and sanitation by rural populations in the EECCA is 10 percentage points lower than that of urban populations (WHO-UNICEF, 2010). Across the entire pan-European region, rural households are 8 times more likely to lack access to piped water supply than urban households.

Unfortunately, this issue of rural-urban disparity of access to water supply and sanitation is very striking in Romania and we consider it to be one of the main features of the Romanian water infrastructure, as well as a major shortcoming for sustainable economic development, given that rural wastewater is simply discharged into the environment, polluting the soil and water (Frone Simona, 2013).

The actual development gap of water supply and sewage utilities not only hinders Romania from fulfilling EU water quality standards but also jeopardizes human and environmental safety in some regions and areas (mostly rural) and therefore inhibits the start up and development of new businesses (such as tourism business), capable to plenty use and enhance potential value of local natural and human capital (Frone Simona, Frone D.F., 2011).

As we shall briefly point out, the current situation of the water/wastewater infrastructure development is still critical in Romania, especially in rural areas at regional levels: inadequate water treatment, poor sewerage network and low access to centralized water and wastewater systems are the main weaknesses of this environmental sector.

Only about 65% of the population benefit from mains drinking water supply and indoor plumbing. This includes 98% of urban population and 33% of the rural population, quite low ratios in comparison with those in Europe, respectively 96 -100% of the population connected to public water supply network in urban areas and 87% in rural areas. Even worse, only 52% of Romania's population is connected both to water and sewage services and up to 70% of the wastewater is untreated or insufficiently treated and flows directly into natural receivers.

Thus, as we may notice from our graph in figure 2, in Romania the total number of localities with public sewer is only approx. one third (35.4% in 2009 and in 2010) of the total number of localities supplied with drinking water network (NIS, 2011).

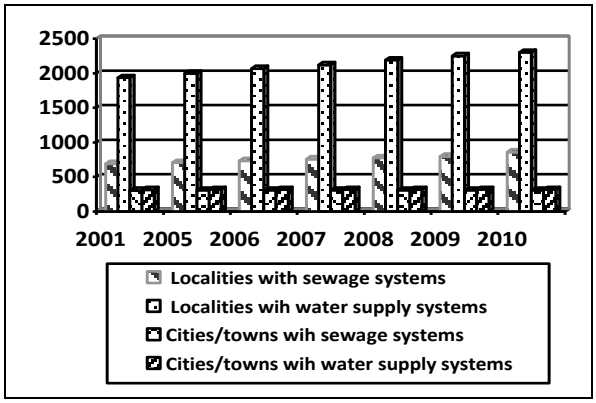

Figure 2- Evolution of the sewerage system as compared to the water supply network in Romania (total and urban)

Still, the situation in towns and cities is more balanced in the sense that almost all (97% in 2010) towns and cities supplied with drinking water, have also public sewerage, so the big gap between the two types of water services occurs especially in rural areas.

While on the whole country, only approx. 54% of the total rural localities (but 96% for cities and towns) are equipped with public water supply, some regions have a slightly better situation as compared to the national average (Southeast, West, Northwest and Center) the generally better economically and socially developed regions in Romania. Southern regions are below the national average share, these being in general less economically developed regions.

So, as regards the regional access of the population to public sewerage network, the development regions with the highest percentage of residents who have homes connected to sewage systems (of the region's population) are: 1.Bucharest-Ilfov region, with a rate of 81.5%, explained by the vast agglomeration of Bucharest; 2.Western region (Vest), with 48.1%; 3.Central region (Centru), with 49.6%. The lowest percentage of residents with homes connected to sewage systems relative to the entire population is in the less developed South Muntenia (Sud-Muntenia) region: 28.3%, meaning that access to WSS is definitely an issue of economic development.

We have also tried to express (Figure 3) the relative level of rural regional development of water distribution systems and public sewage networks, by using two synthetic indicators, namely:

Irureg1apa: Percentage of localities with drinking water facilities, out of the total number of rural localities in the region;

Irureg2can: Percentage of localities with sewerage network, out of the total number of rural localities in the region.

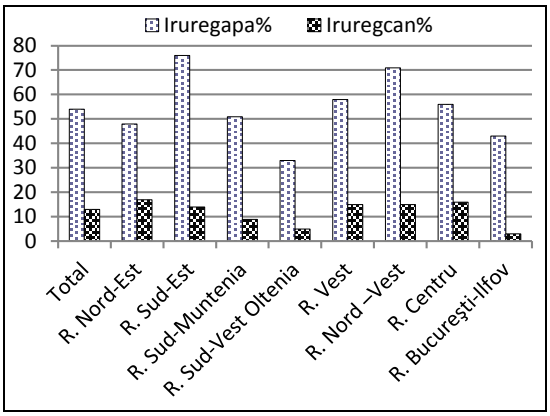

Figure 3 - Relative level of rural development in Romania of the public water and sewerage networks, by development regions (2009)

On the other hand, in terms of the endowment and access in rural areas to sewerage sanitation systems, the situation in Romania is particularly weak, accounting for only 13% of the national rural settlements, indicating a general state of rural underdevelopment, to be tackled by developing with massive investments the WSS networks and improving access of all categories of people to the water and sewerage (sanitation) public utilities.

CONCLUSIONS

We may conclude that in Romania, the main issues of the disparity of access to water and sanitation are the geographical disparities, represented by an important gap between the development of the water supply network and sewerage system, and between the urban and rural areas.

There are in Romania also other issues of disparity of access to water and sanitation services which are due to the other dimensions of access, so they are figured in the conceptual framework (table 1) but they are less significant and not analysed here.

Table 1. The conceptual framework of equitable access to water and sanitation: the case of Romania (RO)

Basic characteristics of water and sanitation services	**Access challenges**	**Equitable access dimension**
No physical access (no water available, water sources polluted, no facilities)	Certain areas of a country (rural areas, poor urban neighbourhoods, areas affected by environmental degradation or scarcity) have no physical access or have access of lower quality than other areas	Geographical disparities **RO**
Low quality of physical services (water contamination, discontinuous service)		
Good quality of physical services	Physical services are not adapted to the physical or cultural needs of certain groups (people with disabilities, schoolchildren, nomadic people)	Access by vulnerable or marginalized groups **RO**
	Persons belonging to certain groups are discriminated in the provision of physical and customer services (e.g. due to unsafe tenure, ethnicity or illiteracy)	
	The water and sanitation bill represents a too large share of disposable income for some households	Affordability by users **RO**

Source: Own interpretation and analysis for the case of Romania, based on the report *NO ONE LEFT BEHIND Good practices to ensure equitable access to water and sanitation in the pan-European region*, UNECE/WHO-Europe Protocol on Water and Health, 2011

In any case, the concept of human right to water and sanitation requires states to ensure that the cost of access to water and sanitation remains affordable and adequately reflects the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups, and secondly, that there is a safety net for those who can not afford to pay or who can afford to pay only a minimal fee.

For the period 2004 - 2018, total investments required in Romania for compliance with European Directives on drinking water and wastewater were estimated at the huge amount of 19 billion euros. The funds allocated by Sectoral Operational Programme (funded by the Cohesion Fund and national co-financing) and the National Rural Development Programme (funded by European Regional Development Fund for Agriculture) represent only about 17% of these needs [ANAR, 2010].

Therefore, implementing an integrated WSS network development strategy is still a challenge but also a must for a sustainable and equitable rural and regional development in Romania.

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