

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Bruce Gordon and Oliver Subasinghe on the 2019 Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water Report

Interview Transcript

Global Waters Radio: You are tuned in to Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the U.S. Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting-edge research from around the world.

This week on the podcast, we're speaking with Bruce Gordon, the World Health Organization's Coordinator for Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Health. Bruce and his team at the WHO recently collaborated with U.N. Water to publish the 2019 Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water Report—better known as the GLAAS report. It contains a treasure trove of data revealing the quality of water and sanitation performance around the world. This year's report surveys well over 100 countries, and Bruce is going to give us some of his key takeaways and share his thoughts on some of the factors shaping countries' progress—or lack thereof—when it comes to water and sanitation improvements. And for a donor perspective, we are also going to hear from the USAID Water Office's Oliver Subasinghe, who will give us a sense of how GLAAS report data help inform the Agency's approach to WASH investments.

So thanks to both of you for joining us, and Bruce, first over to you. Talk a little bit about the process behind the creation of the GLAAS report, and tell us how data from the GLAAS report helps inform countries' decision-making process for WASH investments.

Bruce Gordon: Well, first of all, 115 countries participated in the GLAAS report process this year. Every country has a kind of multi-stakeholder dialogue where they go through the questions, you know, associated with the GLAAS process. And they are looking in terms of trying to understand, in this case it was really what is the health of their WASH system? So we look at things like policies, targets, monitoring, institutional strength, coordination, all sorts of things like that. And even just this morning, I was, you know, speaking about one country that was interested in improving its sort of regulatory frameworks because this country realized there were some gaps and duplications in terms of responsible institutions.

But really, I think it's the country decision-makers themselves that are really looking at this; most of these folks are really fighting for WASH improvement. So, they might use the data in the GLAAS report, for example, on say the per capita spend that a country is making per person, per year, and they might be, you know, 'This, actually benchmarked against other countries in our region, this is low,' so they can make an argument to the Minister or Ministry of Finance to get some more funding. But really, I think, how does it inform decision-making? It's really in this case to say 'Okay, do we have those elements in place to have a, let's say, healthy WASH system. Is that system effective? And, you know, where are there gaps? And how can we fill them?

GWR: When it comes to improving WASH services and infrastructure, and then sustaining those gains, how would you describe today's funding outlook for water and sanitation?

BG: Obviously more financing is needed and we'll talk about that. But there is a lot that can be done, I think, with limited finances. And I think that is actually our main challenge here is if we can kind of acknowledge that there is a limitation to how much money can be mobilized, what are those next steps that a country can make as far as, you know, sort of a progressive improvement?

And I think some of that comes around, you know, the decision-making around what targets are actually reasonable. So coverage targets, and this very much relates to a country's ambition. Every country has to make individual choices that are kind of bounded by, sort of realism. And if they're not bounded by realism, then I think you lose this whole accountability piece. And what I mean by that is, you know, having a good defined target, add a monitoring system, and publication, publicly available information on how far you're getting toward that goal. And so that all that kind of information is published in the GLAAS report.

GWR: And so for you, what are some of the major findings or key takeaways from this year's GLAAS report?

BG: First of all, I think there is something in the report for everyone. And what I mean by that is there's many, many sorts of messages and findings, and honestly, some of them, you know, maybe even sort of conflicting. It's a very rich report, and you could drill down in many different areas. I think broadly, when you step back, for me it's, 'How are countries responding to the sort of SDG [Sustainable Development Goal] era and challenge? To what extent is the sort of policies, financing, human resource capabilities, are being put in place?'

Some of the major findings confirm probably a suspicion that many people have about a lack of progress toward the SDGs. But we can confirm it in a quantitative way. So, I think the first finding, you know, is that, that there is a major gap between what countries have identified as their own objectives as far as coverage and services, their national objectives and what is available to them to achieve those, and that gap is 61%. And when we look at other data on coverage, we can see that the rate of change that is required, you know, to meet their national targets is often a lot more—2, 3, 4, 5, 6% or more percent coverage increase per year that's required to get to where some of these countries have stated where they want to be. And we know that that those percentage increases have not been seen in history.

So there's a little bit of doom and gloom in the report, if you kind of drill down around the SDGs. There's some good news as well. I think the other piece is this system strengthening. And I think we should be a little bit careful when we talk about systems because it can mean sort of everything and nothing. One piece of the system for us is the strength of the institutions and particularly those institutions charged with planning and surveillance. We know on the surveillance side, you know, one easy thing we can do to look at the quality of the surveillance process or system is publicly available reports. There should be publicly available reports on such things, for example, as water quality, that's just good practice. And we know that less than a third of countries are making these reports available. So that's some key findings from my perspective.

GWR: So we are definitely seeing different levels of performance when it comes to making progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals, and

at least some of that disparity has to do with financial restraints. When it comes to fueling further progress in the WASH sector, are there any funding considerations you think don't receive enough attention?

BG: I think the efficiency of the spending is something that we don't talk enough about, because that is actually something that people have under their control. And there's many innovative solutions. I think we get a little bit intimidated by these huge sums of money, this sort of feeling of almost paralysis because the gap seems so big, but any improvement is good, and we have lots of examples of countries that have made tremendous improvements.

GWR: Well, with World Toilet Day coming up, are there any sanitation findings from the report you want to highlight?

BG: If we drill into sanitation and many in the sector concerned about, you know, the gap around fecal sludge management, and we know that many countries now that are kind of rolling up their sleeves and establishing policies on fecal sludge management. And we know Mali and Senegal and Zambia are countries that have recently done that, so that's obviously in the African context. So, I mean, there's a lot of really good stuff going on.

You know, one thing we've done with the GLAAS report is we have tried to kind of do an analysis between what the JMP [Joint Monitoring Programme] progress, in terms of coverage and use of wash services, and some of the things that we're seeing as far as the efforts of countries. You know, all the things I mentioned—the policies and institutions and the WASH systems—it's actually really, really difficult to find correlations when one looks at the sort of raw data to find what is the silver bullet, or what are the key ingredients to making sanitation a success. I don't think any of us would be here if we didn't feel like we could kind of promote and push for more and better WASH services in advance of just economic development. Because I think that, you know, yes, when countries advance and develop they are obviously going to improve their overall hygienic situation. But there are ways that can be promoted in advance, yeah.

GWR: Thanks, Bruce, and now let's bring in USAID's Oliver Subasinghe for a donor's perspective. Oliver, first let us know your role at USAID, and tell us, how does GLAAS report data come into play in terms of the Agency's approach to WASH programming?

Oliver Subasinghe: Yeah, thanks, Russell. So I'm Oliver Subasinghe, I work in the Water Office at USAID in Washington, DC. And we are the lead policy and technical office for the entire Agency on water security, sanitation, and hygiene. I currently serve as a communications and data advisor, where one of my responsibilities is to help effectively use data-driven evidence to inform our policymaking and also our programming, and GLAAS is a very important aspect of that.

GWR: So tell us how the GLAAS report helps the Agency analyze WASH opportunities in USAID partner countries?

OS: Yeah, so as a donor agency, the GLAAS survey results allow us to have informed and open dialogue with our partner countries, specifically about the level of investment that's going towards WASH service delivery, and also the policy environment for water and sanitation services. So at USAID we view water and sanitation as a system that needs strong governance and professional service providers, and needs to attract both public and private investors. And

the GLAAS report helps us provide a better understanding of how a country's system, and specifically some important inputs in terms of governance and finance and monitoring especially, can lay the foundation to improving WASH access in the long run.

More specifically, we use the data in two ways. So on a global level, we use the data from GLAAS, which is across countries and comparable, in terms of understanding what types of opportunities there are and countries to invest in water and sanitation assistance. And that's actually required by us under the Water for the World Act. So every year we designate what we call high-priority countries. And we look at two big criteria for deciding which countries are high priority. One is just overall need in terms of the WASH access levels. And the other is looking at opportunities, which includes the policy environment, investments going into the sector, and also the strength of the monitoring systems. And GLAAS provides invaluable data for understanding what that environment actually looks like in a country.

And then the second way we do it and probably the most important way we use the GLAAS data is on the country and regional level to identify gaps, to find common goals with our partner countries, and reinforce mutual accountability with us and with our partners. A great example of that, and a recent example, is in the southern Africa region. So our mission there, through its program called the Resilient Waters Program, has been working with partner countries in Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The program set up a series of workshops that utilized the latest GLAAS survey data, to understand, you know, where were their specific needs, where were their specific gaps, and that helped guide our program activities on the ground. So these workshops are basically building on the GLAAS process and allowed to get started with stakeholder buy-in from the very beginning, and having a clear vision for what we were going to contribute into the sector in each country.

So specifically one of the great outcomes of that was in Botswana, the GLAAS analysis highlighted that sanitation had lagged behind water supply in terms of progress, which is not uncommon across the world as you can see from the GLAAS report, worldwide, sanitation is greatly lagging behind in terms of both resources and also outcomes as compared to drinking water. So in Botswana, we use that information and work with the Ministry of Land Management to help them develop a sanitation roadmap, and basically helps define going forward what are some of the priorities and the pathways to get to improved sanitation access.

GWR: USAID has identified strong governance and reliable financing as keys to making sustainable WASH improvements. How does the GLAAS report give the Agency insight into a given country's approach to governing and financing its WASH sector?

OS: So the GLAAS report provides some great detail on the inputs and the policy environment and what's going into it. We can see which countries have policies or laws in place to advance universal access for water and sanitation. It's a survey that also includes if those policies are being implemented, and that's incredibly important to see that progression over time.

In terms of the financing side of the house, GLAAS has made a big effort to collect that type of information on financing the sector and budget into the sector. And you know, we're not there yet. We don't have a totally clear in depth picture in every country in the world. But there are more and more countries contributing that information. And then more countries that we can see a better, slightly better understanding of how much has been allocated to the sector, domestically, and also by international donors as well, like ourselves.

As Bruce mentioned, there's a great deal of challenges that our sector faces, globally. And especially for example on sanitation, and other challenges. But I think it's an exciting time, in that you have more interesting, usable data, and sources like the GLAAS report that can help us make better sense and monitor what's happening in the sector. And that's a good first step in terms of driving real change on the ground.

GWR: Well, thanks so much Bruce and Oliver for taking the time to speak with us. For more information on the 2019 GLAAS report, have a look at the links below. And as usual, be sure to follow the USAID Water Team on Twitter [@USAIDWater](#) and visit us online at [Globalwaters.org](#).

This is Global Waters Radio.