

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Eric Viala on Strengthening Water Security

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 are speaking with water expert and engineer Eric Viala. Eric has recently taken the reins as director of a new USAID-supported water security and resilience initiative in Africa's Sahel region, focusing on water security, land use, and resilience in Burkina Faso and Niger. Prior to assuming this position, Eric had for several years directed the USAID-supported Sustainable Water Partnership, or SWP. Focusing on strengthening water security, SWP has been active in Kenya, Tanzania, Nepal, Pakistan, and Cambodia, where it has worked with USAID missions and local governments to promote a participatory and holistic approach to water resource management that uses strengthened water security as a tool to improve public health, create new jobs and encourage sustainable economic growth, and promote political stability.

Eric, welcome, and to start things off, can you introduce yourself, describe the work of the Sustainable Water Partnership, and tell us about the strategic thinking behind SWP's focus on water security?

Eric Viala: Sure, and thank you for the opportunity to talk today. So my name is Eric Viala. I'm a French-American civil and water engineer. I have been working in the field for now close to 30 years. I have worked on the topic of water management in over 30 countries, and I was long-term in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco.

Two years ago, I came back to [Washington] D.C. to take the leadership of the Sustainable Water Partnership, which is a new program funded by USAID. This is the first program that looks at the big picture of water security. USAID, in the past 15 years or so has allocated most of its water funding to WASH, which is very obvious and immediate need in terms of water. But as we all know, water has other uses, especially in terms of food production. Food production is by far the largest user of water, and this is something that sometimes forgotten by lots of managers.

But water security is really the big picture of looking at all the users of water, all the competing and concomitant uses of water, and when you look at the planet, where you have more and more people, where you have economic growth, where you have climate change, when you have lots of challenges, water resources are under increasing pressure, so water security is really trying to provide the proper quantity and quality of water to different users.

Under SWP, we best define water security as an adaptive capacity to basically safeguard the sustainable availability, access, and safe use of water for, as I said, all users: Public health, livelihoods, ecosystems of course, and all those productive activities. So, in a few words, that's what SWP is about. We've been working in different countries, we've had activities in Nepal,

Pakistan, Cambodia, Kenya, and Tanzania. One thing we've done, we came up with what we call a water security improvement (WSI) process, which is a compilation of best practices on how to improve the water security.

And we have also a series of six toolkits that define how to conduct the different steps of the process. It's the idea that you need to have a participatory process, you need to be thinking in terms of systems, you need to of course, to take decision based on science and facts. You need to think in terms of sustainability and how to balance the different goals of economic efficiency, environmental soundness, social equity. You need also to think in terms of uncertainties.

We have to be humble, and know that we don't always know what's going to happen. We cannot always predict what's going to happen, especially with climate change. But you have to, from the very onset, define very clearly where you're working, with who you're working, on what issues you're working, and what's the time horizon that you're looking at. Those four dimensions basically define the water security improvement space.

GWR: Let's turn our attention to Kenya and Tanzania. As some of our listeners know, SWP has been quite active in the Mara River basin. Can you tell us a bit about that basin, and explain why SWP is choosing to focus on water resource allocation there?

EV: It's a transboundary river basin we are dealing with, between Kenya and Tanzania. It's always a little bit challenging to work in a transboundary setting, because you don't have an overarching authority that can arbitrate when you have differences between the two countries. Here, everything has to be done through negotiation.

We've been working on developing allocation plans on both sides of the boundary between the two countries, and also an overall allocation plan for entire river basin. This is still an ongoing process, but it definitely is the biggest achievement, because it's very challenging. And in general to talk about allocation planning, nobody wants to be told that they have to be reasonable. And they may have to give up some of the resources they think they are entitled to. At some point in the river basin, when the demands start bumping against the ceiling—which is availability—it's time to look at who is getting what and when, and for what. And putting everyone around the table and start talking about sharing limited resources, start talking about the fact that not everyone can take water whenever and wherever they want. That there is a limited amount, and some trade-offs are necessary to make sure that we don't end up with serious conflicts. The lessons learned on this endeavor are really amazing, and I think there'll be a lot that can be replicated elsewhere.

GWR: Let's turn to SWP's work in Cambodia. How does working in Cambodia compare to working in the Mara basin, and what sort of work has SWP been engaged in in Cambodia?

EV: It's an easier environment in a sense than the Mara, because we are inside Cambodia, so it's inside one country. We picked one river basin, the Stung Chinit river basin, that empties into the Tonle Sap lake, which is a central large lake in the center of Cambodia.

We conducted a very participatory assessment, where we basically working with local leaders, we assessed a certain number of dimensions of our water security improvement space. For example, we conducted a water quality survey, which was the first time anyone was looking at the quality of water; I mean, in those countries, if they do one test a year in one or two places,

that's about it. So everybody was very interested to see what the quality was. And we had some interesting findings regarding, for example, pollution by mining operations, and also agricultural pollution.

But that assessment also looked at other dimensions, such as biodiversity. We also looked at water balance during the dry season and during the wet season. But throughout the process, we were able to identify about 40 local leaders coming from local communities, farmers, forestry communities, even commercial farming, and fishing communities as well. And we really, our goal was to put them at the center of the decision-making process and to educate them as to what the situation is, and what the options are. And we were able to put them side-by-side with regional provincial authorities, and have all these people basically dialogue and decide together as to prioritize issues, and all this actually culminated with the establishment by the provincial governor of the river basin management committee for the Stung Chinit [river], which is a fantastic sustainable platform for the dialogue to continue. And for those local leaders and those provincial officials to form one big team that is together, will try to manage the best they can with the resources they have.

GWR: Your role with SWP has recently changed, as you have transitioned to direct a USAID-supported water security and resilience activity in the Sahel. Can you talk a bit about the type of water challenges the Sahel is facing, and how you think the WSI model is a good fit for this region?

EV: The Sahel is probably the poorest region in the world. I mean, we are going to be working in Burkina Faso and Niger. And these two countries in the bottom five, if not in the bottom three, in terms of the 188 countries listed in the Human Development Index. So we are really dealing with people and communities who are in the direst conditions you can find on this planet. So the needs are tremendous over there.

When you are looking at populations there that are mostly rural populations, and mostly, of course, farmers—and mostly subsistence farmers—they are always on the brink of disaster. And they're dealing with a set of both natural and socio-economic shocks.

They have floods, they have droughts, they have insect invasions, they can have livestock epidemics, they can have human epidemics. So they are dealing with all those situations—which means for the subsistence farmer, that the slightest disruption immediately brings you into disaster, into starvation mode for you and your family. So it's really a challenge and a massive need to help those populations try to get out of that subsistence mode, and try to have livelihoods that are a little bit stronger, a little bit more diversified. I think diversification is actually the most important solution.

So the program we have here, which was designed by USAID Sahel, is a very innovative approach where basically, we have three components. The first one is on water security, the second one is on land use and access, and the third one is basically called resilience.

Our challenge in this program is to try to help them get there and do as much as they can with the local resources, with the capacities of the people, with the skills of the people. And we'll see how far we can go. But it's a very, very challenging and very interesting endeavor we have ahead of us. And I'm personally very excited about it. And I'm also very thankful for USAID Sahel, especially, to give us the opportunity to implement this program. And I think it's a very visionary program, because, as I said earlier, in the Sahel we have to find a way to get those population out of subsistence farming, because they're always on the brink of disaster. And each time

something comes, we will have to go quickly, and massive amounts of assistance to save them over and over and over. And at some point, we have to stop spending our time and resources saving lives. We have to improve livelihoods so that people can save themselves. I think that's what I believe the USAID Administrator has in mind when he talks about self-reliance.

GWR: Well Eric thanks so much for taking the time to speak with us today. For more information on the work of the USAID-supported Sustainable Water Partnership or the water security and resilience activity in the Sahel, have a look at the links below. And as usual, be sure to follow the USAID Water Team on Twitter [@USAIDWater](#), and if you have a topic you would like to see us cover in a future edition of the podcast, drop us a line at waterteam@usaid.gov.

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