

OPINION

Deconstructing and remaking power dynamics in WASH

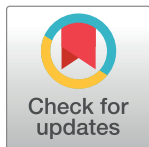
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The calls for “decolonizing” research and practice on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are relatively new [1], following scholarship in global health [2, 3], humanitarian assistance [4, 5], and more recently in climate change adaptation and disaster management [6]. Drawing on a rich body of epistemological critical theory, development practitioners have generally understood decolonization as a recognition and positive deconstruction of unjust practices and institutions of colonization, slavery and racism, and a rebuilding based on a respect for all the rights of human beings [1]. In the WASH sector, there is growing acknowledgement that income, race and geography still determine access to safe and affordable water and sanitation services, even in high income countries. The legacy of racism is evident from urban Flint, Michigan to rural Alabama, where African American communities have dealt with lead in their water and sewage overflows in their backyards. Native American populations are 19 times more likely to lack access to indoor plumbing as white households [7]. In Canada, boil-water advisories that indicate that water is unsafe for consumption have persisted in First Nations communities, sometimes for over two decades, despite government commitments and programs [8]. While globally, income continues to correlate with access, intersectional issues of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender clearly compound disparities. The recent call for deconstructing power dynamics reflects an acknowledgement that inequities within the WASH sector may themselves be roadblocks for confronting persistent inequalities in access to safe and affordable water and sanitation services. This opinion piece is inspired by a plenary discussion on “Dismantling Unhelpful Power Dynamics in WASH” at the Water Meets Health Conference, hosted by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in October 2023. It is an attempt to unpack how researchers, program implementers, NGOs, funders in the sector mirror historic legacies and inequities, and what we can do, individually and collectively, to become more equitable and just in our practice.

Dominated by engineers, public health experts and economists, many trained by elite institutions, the WASH sector has focused narrowly on solving technical and financial challenges to ensuring access to safe and affordable water and sanitation. Even international and multidisciplinary research teams are incentivized to use similar methods of enquiry, excluding the possibility that there are other credible ways of seeing and solving problems beyond what has been institutionalized at universities. Decolonization scholars sometimes refer to this as epistemic injustice or the “wrong done to somebody specifically in their capacity as a knower” [9]. In addition to devaluing local knowledge, they rely on short-term qualitative and quantitative studies and projects that extract data from low-income populations, often proposing a linear path between their research findings and development impact [10]. But without confronting

 OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Nagpal T (2024) Deconstructing and remaking power dynamics in WASH. *PLOS Water* 3(6): e0000262. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pwat.0000262>

Editor: Guillaume Wright, PLOS: Public Library of Science, UNITED KINGDOM

Published: June 21, 2024

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Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

the historic reasons and entrenched political interests that allow and perpetuate inequalities in access in the first place, these studies are at best ineffective and at worst strengthening the very structures that stand in the way of change [11]. It is thus not surprising that most WASH research and projects are deemed successful according to requirements set by funders and journals, and not by the individuals whose lives were studied or meant to be improved.

Acknowledging that research and practice in water, health or education shapes and allows power imbalances to persist is a first step in deconstructing them. What we do once we name these dynamics is important for instrumental reasons—not addressing these inequalities makes WASH research and programming ineffective—and for moral reasons—all human beings have intrinsic value and rights which our current practices do not respect. The literature on community-based and community-led development, coproduction of research and programming, and more recently localization—all point to an acknowledgement of human agency, understood as the “ability of individuals to set goals, understand and transform their environments and lives” [12]. Yet, putting these approaches into practice has been difficult because it requires shifting knowledge and resources away from those who hold political and economic power and to those who do not [13]. Thus, decolonization and localization can be a zero-sum game. The losers are either the privileged themselves or they are the “gate keepers” of privilege whose role it is to maintain the status quo by “constraining voice and choice” [14]. Neither privileged elites nor gatekeepers have reason to change the rules of a game which favors them. For example, *localization* entails moving priority-setting, decision-making and funding away from international development actors to local ones, especially to those who have previously not been seen as reliable or trustworthy partners [15]. Their agendas, methods and solutions may be at odds with those proposed by the local elite. These local organizers and researchers whether in Khayelitsha, South Africa or in Flint, USA are at the frontline of demanding better services from authorities, organizing members in their own communities, and sometimes stepping in to provide water and sanitation services especially during crises. *Community-led development* requires international actors to play supporting, not leading roles, allowing for complicated and time-consuming negotiations that reflect local power dynamics. *Accompaniment* expects an engagement beyond a time-bound project, and a final report of success comes from the ones being accompanied, not from funders or journals [16]. In practice, each one of these principles rebalances resources and challenges us to become more reflexive, moving beyond learned behaviors that protect our own status and that of the institutions we represent. There is no prescriptive roadmap, nor should there be, for establishing or strengthening non-extractive, equity and rights-focused relationships but three sets of actions that could move us in the right direction, emerged from the panel.

First, design and teach curricula that rigorously enquire why inequalities in access to essential services persist. For example, acknowledging that the thorniest problems may not be about engineering design or monitoring benchmarks will, at a minimum, challenge us to rethink what and how we teach. It will probably also require a fundamental shift in who evaluates the quality of research and the impact it has. As individual researchers and practitioners it is important to teach and learn how privilege creates an inevitable power dynamic; the process of co-producing knowledge is complicated not only by the lack of trust between those who have come up with prescriptions and those to whom the prescriptions have been presented, but also because in many cases, the holders of local knowledge may have come to deeply doubt themselves [17]. It is past time to acknowledge the continued dependence on extractive research methods, and to respectfully interrogate and integrate multiple ways of knowing and doing. Panelists noted that all WASH fora including conferences, online networks, and research consortia can become more welcoming of diverse voices, do more to welcome dissent and build relationships that are based on trust and not on patronage.

Second, all institutions involved in WASH, especially those who hold financial power—private foundations, bilateral funders, national governments—must commit internally to engaging in dialogue that moves them toward a common understanding of what it will take to address the power imbalances that prevent progress. A few of the transformations panelists brought up were committing to a more diverse leadership, instituting equity in compensation for similar roles and tasks across international organizations, moving strategy and agenda-setting away from headquarters, and reframing how progress is measured beyond quantitative metrics [18]. In practice, many of these changes will be tumultuous. They will challenge current leadership, upend budgets, delay programming, and anger constituents who have spent many years learning the funding ropes.

Third, embody and practice the principles of human autonomy by active learning and undoing bias. We all hold biases and are seldom forced to question them. Panelists focused on the crucial need to educate ourselves about the principles of decolonization, just as we learn about the fundamentals of public health, chemistry, or economics. Individual action whether through initiating and engaging in difficult dialogues with colleagues, or by taking concrete steps that signal a commitment to redressing power imbalance cannot be underestimated.

Undoing power imbalances in research and programming requires a shift in leadership, in who is invited to the table as an equal partner, whose voices are heard and how dissent and disagreement are handled. If safe and affordable water, sanitation and hygiene are fundamental human rights, all institutions and individuals associated with the WASH sector would do well to undertake deep self-examinations, take radical risks to reorder priorities, and commit to walking away from relationships that deepen inequitable relationships.

The article is inspired by a plenary discussion on “Dismantling Unhelpful Power Dynamics in WASH” at the Water Meets Health Conference, hosted by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in October 2023. The panel focused on the following: How do colonial and racist histories determine access to fundamental services? As researchers and practitioners do we confront these histories in our work? Are we complicit in strengthening the political and economic power structures that stand in the way of equitable access to fundamental services like safe water and sanitation? Whether as researchers, funders, non-governmental actors, or community activists, what must we do differently to dismantle the power dynamics that prevent universal, equitable access to safe water and sanitation? The plenary was moderated by the author, Tanvi Nagpal. Panelists were Anna Clarke (journalist, Pro Publica, USA), Phumeza Mlungwana (community organizer and activist, Asivikelane, International Budget Partnership, South Africa), J’Anna Marie Lue (PhD student and researcher, University of California, Berkeley, United States) and Conrad Prince (Decolonization Policy and Program leader, Save the Children, Canada). The author would also like to acknowledge framing discussions with colleagues Clarissa Brocklehurst, Jan-Willem Rosenboom, Joe Brown and Jennifer Davis.

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