Chapter 16
Ethical Dimensions of the Water-Related International Development Agenda

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Abstract The international development agenda was catalyzed into a higher gear during 2015, primarily through the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which cover a broad range of interlinked development issues. The overall development objectives of poverty eradication, universal health, universal education, removing hunger, and achieving gender equality squarely intersect with worldwide protection of water as a resource and its universal provision as a service. This chapter explores how water truly fits within this emerging international development agenda. Discussions revolve around the various water-related targets in the SDG framework and how human, institutional, and financial resources can be mobilized to achieve these targets. A number of emerging ethical dilemmas related to the scope of the targets, addressing complexity of targets and equitable mobilization of financial resources, are discussed. The chapter offers some insights into what the future might hold if the SDG framework is implemented in an imperfect way.

Keywords International development agenda · Sustainable development goals (SDGs) · Ethical dilemmas · Equity in development · Mobilization of finances

16.1 Overview of the Emerging International Development Agenda

16.1.1 2015 Agreements Pertaining to International Development

Let us start by taking stock of how the agenda for international economic, social, and environmental development has evolved in the past decade. Understanding this process will allow us to better understand the motivation of various parties and set us up for exploring the underlying ethical conundrums. Overall, three strands of
international dialogues that pertain to international economic and social development converged to their respective conclusion in 2015: design of a global development framework, creation of financial mechanisms to support that framework, and conclusion of a decade-long climate change debate.

Arguably, the most notable achievement of the year was a gathering of the world’s heads of state and leaders at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, which passed a resolution in September 2015 that formally approved the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015). This suite of 17 goals and underlying 169 specific targets was collectively termed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Annex 1 for details). The “2030” refers to the deadline for achieving a vast majority of the targets embedded within the SDGs by the year 2030.

Formulation of the 2030 Agenda was preceded by a global dialogue on mobilizing financial resources related to international development. The United Nations Third Financing for Development conference (held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 13–16 July 2015) was a gathering of world leaders to discuss the best ways of mobilizing finances to meet ambitious global development targets, which included the yet-to-be-approved SDGs. While the agenda for the conference was lofty – with an aim to “end poverty and hunger, and to achieve sustainable development” – the outcomes and actions listed in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) were business as usual (Kjorven et al. 2015; Chhibber 2016). Instead of making any new commitments to meet their lofty ideals presented in the AAAA, world leaders saw it as appropriate to suggest to developing countries that they should reprioritize their own investments and seek financial resources from the private sector (Montes 2016).

A third significant achievement was the 2015 Paris Agreement, which was signed by the world leaders gathered at the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Paris from 30 November to 12 December 2015 (Bodansky 2016; Schellnhuber et al. 2016). This agreement marked the culmination of a prolonged period of renegotiation of the 1992 Kyoto Protocol, another non-binding agreement to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. Several elements of this agreement were designed to motivate governments to take action so the trend of global warming could be restricted to a 2 °C change above pre-industrial levels. Achieving that broad goal would require significant voluntary reductions on the part of governments and investment of new funding to the tune of US$100 billion a year (Bodansky 2016). It was also agreed that the goals and targets of the Paris Agreement would be reviewed every 5 years and revised as needed. The Paris Agreement also left a number of open-ended questions pertaining to monitoring and measurements of achievements by different UN member states. The most notable challenge was to ensure “incrementality” of initiatives that could be claimed a response to the Paris Agreement; that is, incremental over and above the other initiatives that governments were already planning for in 2015 (Schellnhuber et al. 2016).


16.1.2 Some Innovations in the 2015 Agreements

The so-called landmark agreements in 2015, achieved under the aegis of the United Nations, brought about a number of changes that were somewhat unique in the history of international developmental policies. It is important to understand these unique elements to put them in historical perspective and dissect them for the purposes of examining the implicit and explicit ethical challenges.

First, the notion of universality of these agreements was the most obvious departure from the previous norms (Long 2015; Chasek et al. 2016). Most of the international dialogue and major previous agreements had adopted an ‘us-versus-them’ approach of distinguishing between developed and developing countries. It was previously implied that developed countries had achieved the pinnacle of social, economic, and environmental development, and thus were now in a position to offer their wisdom and largesse to other, less fortunate countries. It was also implicit that developed countries did not need to monitor or report on their own development trajectories. The SDGs and the 2015 Paris Agreement flipped that notion on its head, suggesting instead that every UN Member State should be equally and equitably subjected to the same set of development targets (UN 2015; Long 2015). That meant that the international monitoring and reporting regimes, which had traditionally been focused on developing countries, would now monitor those same measures of success for developed countries as well (Osborn et al. 2015; Dodds et al. 2017).

Second, the international leadership embraced complexity and rejected simplified and reductionist explanations of the development process. For example, many streams of dialogues taking place between 2012 and 2015 argued that the SDGs should not be more than 10 in number and each goal should not have more than four or five targets. Such an approach would lead to a manageable number of goals with the associated level of reporting that could be handled more conveniently by developing and developed countries alike. There was also a related argument that any number of goals more than 10 would be a hard sell politically to domestic audiences, and most people would lose interest because of complexity (Chasek et al. 2016). Despite having a counterproposal by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network – led by Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs and supported by a group of prominent world-class statesmen – that provided a 10-SDG model, the UN Member States opted for a much more complex version (Sachs 2014; SDSN 2014).

One may argue that this embrace of complexity was politically counterintuitive, and yet it prevailed for two reasons: a strong push by various lobby groups that wanted to protect their turf by ensuring an exclusive SDG for their own domain; and an extensive and expansive dialogue process that solicited over two million “voices” on sustainable development (UN-Water 2018). On the latter point, one may argue that those responsible for managing and synthesizing the voices also demonstrated direct or indirect influence by various lobbies. The somewhat surprising aspect of this process is that the UN organizations and agencies were part of that lobbying process, realizing that being left out of the SDG formulation process could spell financial disaster for
them. Starting during the mid-1990s, with Kofi Annan at the helm of the UN as Secretary General (1997–2006), the operations of UN organizations and agencies were increasingly under scrutiny and subject to ever-tightening financial controls (Blanchfield 2015). This tightening of the purse strings by the developed countries meant that those leading these UN organizations had to fight for a bigger piece of the pie that was shrinking overall. Against that backdrop, not having a dedicated SDG that served their agenda could be ultimately fatal for a UN organization.

Third, the notion of stakeholder engagement was pushed much harder in each of the three dialogue processes around financing for development, sustainable development, and climate change. The most notable of these engagements was the involvement of the private sector in the dialogue process. While the private sector still does not have a vote and in most situations is not even present at the negotiating table, it does have increasing influence on the thematic focus of the discussion, strategies for crafting future scenarios, and modalities of implementation of the future development agenda. A number of mechanisms that were established during Kofi Annan’s time as UN Secretary General now came of age and played a significant role in these dialogues. Founded in 1999, the UN Global Compact (https://www.unglobalcompact.org/) is a prominent example of such an establishment that was set up under the UN umbrella to engage corporate stakeholders – a group whose membership has grown to over 13,000 participants and other stakeholders. In parallel to the negotiations being conducted at the UN General Assembly and supportive work being undertaken by the various UN organizations and agencies, the Global Compact conducted its own dialogue about the relative significance of various development issues and provided input to the formal negotiating processes (Dodds et al. 2017).

Another form of stakeholder engagement was through a wide range of professional associations, nongovernmental organizations, lobby groups, activists’ organizations, and a range of civil society groups. In the same period of 2012–2015, when formal planning and negotiations were ongoing, these groups conducted their own dialogues and engaged with their constituents. The result was a richness of perspectives and ideas that were reflected in the form of the two million “voices” mentioned earlier. Inclusion of such groups in the COPs of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change had been a fairly regular feature in the twenty-first century but was relatively new to the UN negotiation processes.

Ostensibly, by having these broad range of stakeholders “informing” the formal UN negotiating process, it was argued that a greater level of representation had been achieved in the formulation of the goals and targets assembled in 2015. The veracity of these claims can be challenged; a more cynical perspective might claim that dominant UN Member States were still very much in the driver’s seat and were responsible for the architectural design of the development agenda – while these additional perspectives only filled in the finer details of what the development agenda would eventually look like.
16.1.3 Prioritization of SDGs

As early as 2015, there were ongoing debates among academics, experts, and UN officials as to which SDGs should receive the highest priority in terms of the sequence of their implementation and allocation of resources. Such debates were obviously based on different understandings of which elements could be considered the most crucial to human development. These conversations around prioritization of SDGs were also motivated by turf protection and assurances of funds allocation to a particular stream of activities. Several depictions of such prioritization have since emerged; four such examples are discussed here.

The first and most common example is using the first six SDGs as the top-tier goals, as shown in Fig. 16.1, claiming that eliminating poverty and hunger, assuring health, education and gender equality, and providing clean water and sanitation are actually the most critical components of human development. The argument further goes that achievement of other SDGs is dependent on having successfully accomplished SDGs one through six. A second and less common example, as shown in Fig. 16.2, claims that the first five SDGs are the most crucial ones. This argument relegates providing water and sanitation to a secondary tier of “services.” A third approach, also used commonly and shown in Fig. 16.3, depicts the SDGs in a circular representation, meaning that all of them are equally important and need to be achieved simultaneously. While this representation is commonly used for popular badges and logos, it doesn’t help reduce the complexity induced by having to deal with 17 SDGs or the 169 underlying targets. Figure 16.4 depicts a more nuanced and systematic fourth approach for prioritization of SDGs sequentially, ranging from peace, prosperity, people, and planet – playing upon the themes of the SDG formulation process. However, there are several competing versions of such tiered prioritization schemes, and no clear consensus has been achieved.

Fig. 16.1 A commonly used depiction of the SDGs. (Source: UN DESA)
Fig. 16.2  A less common depiction of the SDGs, which implies that SDGs 1 through 5 are more important than others. (Source: Statistics Canada)

Fig. 16.3  A ‘circular’ representation of the SDGs, showing equal emphasis on all 17
At first glance, such prioritization of SDGs appears to be rather superficial and not particularly meaningful. However, it actually is important in allocating resources and in defining international development priorities – particularly those employed by the United Nations and other development banks. It also plays into analyzing the ethical conundrums faced by governments: for example, feeding the poor and providing them with health services may take priority over protecting aquatic life forms and ecosystems.

16.2 Genesis of Water within the 2030 Agenda

16.2.1 A Brief History of Water in the International Development Agenda

The recognition of the significance of water to human development has been evident throughout much of the human history. In the more contemporary context, the earliest recognition dates back to the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, a global conference that highlighted the significance of water to human health and of aquatic ecosystems to the global environment (Biswas 2004; Mount and Bielak 2011). The resulting document, the Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, was strongly centered on the role of humans in environmental destruction and provided some rhetoric for the role of water in the grand scheme of global environmental issues (Mount and Bielak 2011).
The Stockholm Conference set the stage for a water-focused global conference in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977. The overall objective of that conference was “to promote a level of preparedness, nationally and internationally, which would help the world to avoid a water crisis of global dimensions by the end of the present century.” In his review commentary, Biswas (2004) claims that the action plan emerging from the Mar del Plata Conference addresses the essential components of water management: assessment, use, and efficiency; environment, health and pollution control; policy, planning, and management; natural hazards; public information, education, training, and research; and regional and international cooperation. A major achievement of the conference was to declare 1980–1990 as the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, which focused on people without access to safe water and adequate sanitation. However, the international community did not allocate the financial and technical resources needed to successfully implement the action plan or the water decade, the latter being the first of its kind (Biswas 2004).

During the 1980s, as the water decade unfolded, action on the ground ostensibly fizzled out. The ball was picked up again in 1992 at the International Conference on Water and the Environment in Dublin. The most significant achievement of this conference was the elucidation of the four Dublin Principles:

(i) Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment;
(ii) Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels;
(iii) Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water; and
(iv) Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good. (ICWE 1992)

The last two principles were particularly important because they introduced a new mindset in the international water agenda: recognition of the role of women in water management and identification of water as an economic good. In subsequent years, the Dublin Principles have been repeatedly mentioned as the bedrock of the international water development agenda.

Ironically, the other major conference in 1992 – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, commonly dubbed the “Rio Summit” – did not include an explicit mention of water. In fact, the word “water” does not appear at all in the resulting Rio Declaration. As the global leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro to discuss global mechanisms for achieving sustainable development, water did not figure in their discussions independently of the “environment” (Mount and Bielak 2011).

The next major milestone in the international development agenda was the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as world leaders gathered in New York in September 2000 to sign off on an aspirational and ambitious set of eight global development goals (UNU and UNOSD 2013; Fukuda-Parr et al. 2014). These goals, spanning the period of 2000 to 2015, set more modest targets when compared to the SDGs discussed earlier. MDG 7 had a sub-target MDG 7c that
aimed to “Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water.” Interestingly, sanitation was not included in the original target. That discrepancy was addressed 5 years later when the world leaders gathered in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2005 and created a Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to achieve the MDGs; sanitation was included as part of MDG 7c.

The next milestone in the water history was the declaration of water as a human right by the United Nations General Assembly in June 2010.1 It was the first formal recognition of the significance of water as a basic right, although many organizations had been making this claim for years and even decades (UN-Water 2013; UNU and UNOSD 2013). This resolution was nonbinding on the Member States and did not offer much in terms of specifics of how to achieve this human right. A subsequent resolution by the Human Rights Council in September 20102 offered greater detail about the responsibilities of the governments of the Member States. Some debate since then has revolved around the notion that the establishment of water as a human right may not be a panacea to the global water challenges, as it might appear at a superficial level (Pardy 2012).

This brief history generates some interesting ethical questions that will be discussed in the subsequent section in some detail: Despite spending half a century in various conferences, action plans, development agendas, and global targets, why do governments routinely leave out water as a significant element of their own development plans? Why is water, and even more consistently sanitation, added on to global development-related declarations as an afterthought? Why are the sustainability of water resources and the provisioning of safe water supplies often considered separately in the “environmental” and “developmental” agendas, respectively?

16.2.2 Lessons Learned from MDGs

In 2013, some UN leaders prematurely claimed that the MDG target for safe drinking water had been achieved 2 years in advance. However, it later turned out that the statistics the UN used were based on reported data on “improved drinking water source” and not “safe water,” as was included in MDG 7c. A 2017 report by the UN Joint Monitoring Programme recognized that over two billion people worldwide were without access to safe drinking water; and that the figure of 663 million people without access to an improved drinking water source was misleading (WHO and UNICEF 2017). At the same time, it was very clear that the world was actually very far behind in meeting the MDG target related to sanitation, which was missed by some 700 million people (UNSGAB 2015).

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1 United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/292. The human right to water and sanitation (3 August 2010).
2 United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/15/9. Human rights and access to safe drinking water and sanitation (6 October 2010).
A number of analyses have been undertaken as the MDG time frame came to a conclusion in September 2015, including by UNU and UNOSD (2013) and UNSGAB (2015). These analyses provide two broad categories of criticisms and lessons learned: systemic shortcomings in the design of MDGs and how they were perceived by governments; and inability to create effective processes and institutions that would help achieve the MDG targets.

The first criticism of the MDG water-provisioning target was that it dealt with fractions of populations and not actual numbers. In other words, as populations grew from the year 2000 to 2015, the target proved to be a moving one. This approach allowed significant “flexibility” for governments to fudge numbers as it suited them. It also flagged an ethical problem around equity and distributive justice: when you are aiming to provide service to only half the unserved population, it implies that the other half is somehow less important. This discrimination was clear when observing the differences in populations served: rural populations were particularly disadvantaged across the board (UN-Water 2014; WHO and UNICEF 2017). Even in urban settings, the lowest quartile in terms of income – the poorest of the poor – were the most significantly disadvantaged (UN-Water 2014).

The second, and somewhat broader, criticism of the MDGs was that these targets were by design isolated and segregated from each other. This fragmentation of targets meant that common synergies that could otherwise be achieved by joint implementation of MDGs were missed. While, conceptually speaking, provisioning of safe water could lead to reduction in poverty, enhancement of maternal health, reduction of infant mortality, and creation of better education opportunities for children, those cross-benefits were largely not achieved. The underlying problem was that the causal links between poverty and water security were neither quantified nor articulated adequately.

Another criticism was that national institutions were not developed or empowered to effectively invest in meeting the MDG targets (UNU and UNOSD 2013). The underlying challenge was that national development plans in general did not prioritize provisioning of safe water adequately. The lack of cohesion in governmental agencies was often exacerbated by international organizations and donor agencies, which tended to follow a development agenda of their own that was divorced from national priorities. Most of the international development aid that went into water-related projects tended to gravitate toward large, urban-centered infrastructure projects, while the most needy in peri-urban and rural areas languished (UN-Water 2014).

The United Nations Secretary General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB) took a highly critical view of how MDGs were implemented. It offered some concrete suggestions on how better to implement the new generation of targets emerging under the SDG framework (UNSGAB 2015). In particular, UNSGAB highlighted the global dimension of water, identifying several processes that operate at that scale, such as virtual flow of water embedded in internationally traded goods, intensifying water-related disasters as a result of changing climate, and threats to public health from water-transmitted diseases. It suggested that engaging the private sector in a more prominent way would help tackle global challenges, leading the
charge with innovations in water stewardship and creation of greater transparency in reporting on the water footprint created by the private sector.

UNSGAB also offered some structural recommendations to reset water development processes as SDG implementation was taking off in 2015. It suggested that a new intergovernmental committee on water and sanitation should provide a platform for governments to discuss water and sanitation challenges, review SDG implementation, and offer guidance to the United Nations and other international development stakeholders. It also recommended that a new UN Scientific and Practice Panel on Water and Sanitation could be mandated to accumulate global water data, stimulate pertinent research, and provide evidence-based, scientifically credible information to Member States. This new panel was envisioned to operate much like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the voice of climate scientists worldwide. While both of these suggestions appear to be quite reasonable, no further action has taken place on either of them. The ostensible reason is the hesitation to create new financial obligations for developed countries, but a deeper reason is the lack of appetite on the part of developed countries to create new UN institutions; a general skepticism about the level of inefficiency and red tape at the existing UN institutions plays into this mindset.

One UNSGAB recommendation that has been picked up and operationalized is to create a comprehensive and independently viewed global water monitoring framework. This framework focused on the indicators pertaining to SDG 6 on water and sanitation, and includes the work of three mechanisms: (i) WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP), (ii) the inter-agency initiative Integrated Monitoring of Water and Sanitation Related SDG Targets (GEMI), and (iii) UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS). As shown in Fig. 16.5, this trifecta of monitoring systems provides key information pieces about progress on the implementation of SDG 6 (see Annex 2 for a detailed description of SDG 6 and its targets).

### 16.2.3 Integration of Water into Various SDG Targets

During the development of SDGs, there was an intensive debate about whether water should be a stand-alone goal or be included as a specific target under other goals, as was the case with MDG 7c. The latter argument was that management of water as a resource and its significance in poverty reduction, human health, and education was so pervasive that targets blended under those regimes would stand the best chance of success. However, the previous experience of implementation of MDG 7c had convinced a majority of stakeholders in the international water community that embedding water targets under other goals leads to lower political visibility and consequently lower prioritization and investment (UNU and UNOSD 2013). At the end, the compromise was to have a dedicated water-focused SDG 6 and also embed numerous water-related targets under other SDGs.
It is strategically significant that a number of other SDGs contain important water-related targets. These include SDG 3, which deals with universal health and disease reduction: specifically, target 3.3 aims to combat water-borne diseases by 2030 (UN 2015). Similarly, target 3.9 aimed to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from water pollution and contamination by 2030 (UN 2015). A fairly significant public health care burden in developing countries relates to unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation and hygiene conditions – this important recognition was missed in the MDG regime (Prüss-Ustün et al. 2014; WHO 2019). Such cross-linkage of targets also makes it easier for policymakers in developing countries to visualize the savings in public health costs as a result of improved water quality and enhanced provisioning of sanitation and hygiene services (Prüss-Ustün et al. 2014; UNSGAB 2015; WHO 2019).

SDG 11, which focuses on sustainable urban communities, also includes a target 11.5, which aims to significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected by water-related disasters (UN 2015). It is interesting that floods are the water-related disasters most pertinent to urban settings, although droughts may also fall under this definition. Similarly, SDG 12, which focuses on sustainable consumption patterns, includes a target 12.4 that aims to achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes and to reduce significantly

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**Fig. 16.5** The global monitoring systems for SDG 6. (Adopted from UN-Water)
their release water by the year 2020. The scheduling of this target is interesting because it is meant to be achieved by the end of that year, and not 2030. While such a short time frame indicates a sense of urgency, one might legitimately express concern in the inability of governments and other stakeholders to achieve this result in such a short period.

The SDGs that relate to protection and conservation of ecosystems also directly include a number of water targets, while implicitly accepting the conservation of water resources and maintaining their quality as a major objective. For example, SDG 15 on terrestrial ecosystems includes target 15.1, which aims to ensure the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of inland freshwater ecosystems and their services by 2020. Once again, the 2020 timeline demonstrates the urgency of addressing this issue, while not necessarily reflecting governmental response and actions to meet this aspiration. The freshwater-related target under SDG 14 on marine resources is more indirect; target 14.1 aims to prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities by 2025. The primary source of land-based marine pollution is through rivers discharging high levels of pollutants and nutrients into coastal areas; so, while water quality is not explicitly stated, its significance is obvious.

The main reason for providing this description of other SDG targets that directly mention water is to demonstrate that the SDG framers do recognize the significance of water in achieving other targets. Even more important are the relationships with other development targets – related to poverty reduction, education, food security, and gender equality – that are well-established but not explicitly listed in the description of the respective underlying targets. The nature of those relationships would vary from country to country, dependent on the level of development, and correspondingly the national response to how water gets integrated into development plans would vary as well.

### 16.2.4 The “Sticker Price” for Water-Related SDGs

As has been the case with designing the MDGs, the development of the SDGs was mostly aspirational, with little attention paid to the details of how these goals and their underlying targets would be met. Most notably, the delineation of the financial resources needed to achieve these targets was not defined a priori. An early effort in this respect was a research study jointly conducted by the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) and the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD); this study estimated that the range of new investment could be anywhere from 1.8% of the global GDP to about 2.5% (UNU and UNOSD 2013). This range clearly demonstrated the level of uncertainty in computing a true “sticker price” for achieving the water-related SDG targets. In dollar terms, it roughly equates to US$2 trillion of investments, nearly quadrupling the current water market, valued at about US$500 billion (UN-Water 2018). The investment into the water sector by the international community remained at about
US$9 billion in 2016 (UN-Water 2018), which is not trivial but pales in comparison to the overall demand.

A more recent report by the UN indicates that the annual capital costs just to meet targets 6.1 (safe water for all) and 6.2 (adequate sanitation for all) are estimated to be US$114 billion (range: $74 billion – $166 billion) (Hutton and Varughese 2016). This estimate, which is about three times higher than the current capital investment, does not include the cost for operation and maintenance, monitoring, institutional support, sector strengthening, and human resources. Another report estimates that a new investment of US$7.5 trillion will be needed by 2030 to meet the existing deficiencies in the urban water infrastructure and to cope with future demands for services (McKinsey Global Institute 2016).

Given the significant shortfall between the current investments in the water sector and those needed to meet the water-related SDG targets, considerable rethinking is needed in defining innovative ways of mobilizing financial resources. One option is to get the private sector fully engaged, to bring in the requisite management capacity as well as the financial capital (Adeel 2014). However, such engagement would face several hurdles: creating policies that protect public interest and offer sufficient checks and balances over the private sector; creating sufficient incentives for the private sector to engage in a traditionally public sector–driven domain; and finding ways of overcoming negative public perceptions about the profit-driven nature of the private sector. Another option is to drastically increase overseas development assistance (ODA), but that does not appear very likely in the current environment, where most developed countries have been shrinking their ODA envelopes.

### 16.3 Ethical Challenges in SDG Implementation

#### 16.3.1 Achieving Equity Across and Within Countries

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the resulting SDGs, have notionally created the sense of universality for the first time, which translates into equitable achievement of water-related targets across and within countries. It implies that developed and developing countries, as well as privileged and marginalized populations, would all benefit equally from the achievement of SDG targets. However, that is easier said than done. The inherent differences in the levels of development between countries have deep-rooted reasons, ranging from colonial and postcolonial exploitation to differences in access to natural resources. A detailed analysis of these factors is beyond the scope of discussion here, but the question arises whether the SDG framework was intended to overcome, or is capable of overcoming, such differences. SDG 10, which ostensibly seeks to reduce inequalities within and among countries, has a number of targets that address economic growth, social inclusion, creation of equal opportunities, and enhanced representation (UN
However, one may argue that these targets are too diffused and generic to meaningfully move the needle on numerous measures of inequality. The most difficult aspect of achieving true universality in achievement of water-related targets is to overcome the differences that exist within countries and in sub-national jurisdictions. In most cases, geographical remoteness, lack of economic activity, and political marginalization all contribute to certain areas and communities being chronically disadvantaged. This becomes obvious when comparing the provisioning of water services in rich versus poor neighborhoods in urban areas and in urban versus rural areas (UN-Water 2014). The question is how to facilitate governments to overcome these trends and truly prioritize support for those who are most underprivileged.

In the leadup to the development of SDGs, the international community had extensive focus on the “bottom billion.” This is the global population that lags behind in all key indicators of development, including access to water and sanitation services, basic health care facilities, modern forms of energy, and sufficient level of nutrition (Sumner 2010). The argument was that if we can collectively overcome the challenges faced by the bottom billion, we would not only address a significant part of the global development challenges directly, but we would set in motion activities leading to true universal achievement of human, economic, and societal development. However, in the actual formulation of SDGs, this notion of prioritization of action for the bottom billion got lost.

16.3.2 The Dilemma of Pragmatism Versus Complexity

A follow-on to the notion of universality and global equity is that of complexity. The argument goes that the global development challenges are numerous and interlinked, and they need to be overcome in a diverse array of social, political, environmental, and economic settings. Therefore, to achieve true universality we must create a comprehensive and inclusive framework. Such a framework, by default, had to be very complex because the world we live in and the problems we are trying to solve are also very complex. Many experts who were involved in the formulation of SDGs truly celebrated their success in convincing world leaders to embrace this complexity – demonstrated by establishing 17 goals, 169 targets, and over 240 indicators (UN 2015).

However, a counternarrative offers a critique of this worldview. Governments, especially those in developing countries, are often hamstrung by the lack of human and financial capital; they are pursuing numerous development objectives that may or may not match the SDGs. Forcing them to retool their development policies to meet global objectives over a relatively short period of time can be traumatic. The most likely outcomes are that those governments might simply ignore the SDG framework and attempt to post facto claim that their development policies are addressing that framework. Another likely outcome is that governments do earnestly pursue the implementation of SDG targets, but fail due to lack of capacities,
bringing upon themselves international censure. Even developed countries such as Canada have been struggling to retool their federal sustainable development framework to match the SDGs, doing so in a very patchy and uneven manner (ECCC 2016).

This brings us to a truly difficult dilemma: should the international community embrace the complexity embedded in the SDG framework, knowing full well that practically no country will be able to achieve all of them? Or should it set a prioritization approach, as discussed earlier, and cherry-pick what appears more pragmatically achievable? The criticism of the latter approach is that it would punt the ball to future generations to tackle the most challenging problems while marginalized communities everywhere suffer. It is indeed problematic to consider that inappropriate or inadequate choices made in the course of SDG implementation could have long-lasting impacts, far beyond 2030, on generations of people who have not yet been born (Parfit 1982). So far, it appears that the international community has embraced the former, less-than-perfect approach. SDG-focused status reports presented to the High-Level Political Forum³ (HLPF) at the United Nations demonstrate that most countries are struggling to find trajectories that would lead to universality, particularly for provisioning of water services.

16.3.3 Mobilizing Financial Resources Equitably

As noted above, SDG implementation comes with a hefty sticker price. It may be argued that this sticker price is essentially a cost that the global community must pay to level the playing field for everyone. One may invoke Kantian principles for this approach by arguing that such balancing out of the level of development and distribution of resources is inherently the right thing to do. One may also invoke utilitarian principles by arguing that an even level of global development would maximize benefits to everyone — in particular, developed countries can benefit by creating new markets for their technologies, services, and expertise.

Having made those arguments, numerous geopolitical and neo-colonial considerations can trump a truly ethical redistribution of global wealth. Many parts of the world, notably the Middle East region, have faced political turmoil, outflux of refugees, destruction of economies, and an exponential increase in human misery. In the past decade alone, many countries have been riding this downward spiral driven by armed conflict: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, to name a few. It appears unlikely that the SDG framework could be invoked to undertake post-conflict reconstruction, even if political and armed conflict were to be eliminated anytime soon.

³The HLPF is the main United Nations platform on sustainable development. It has a central role in the followup and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level. It meets annually for 8 days in New York and receives status reports (known as Voluntary National Reviews) from the UN Member States.
There are also practical limitations to effective mobilization of financial resources and their equitable distribution. As noted earlier, in the Addis Ababa Action Plan, the global summit on Financing for Development put the primary burden of mobilizing resources on the governments in developing countries (Kjorven et al. 2015; Chhibber 2016). If passing resolutions at global summits was sufficient for mobilizing financial resources, most governments would already be on rapid development trajectories. Realistically, there is a need for significant investment in building the human, financial, and institutional capacity in developing countries. This is one aspect in which United Nations organizations and agencies have demonstrated significant progress (UN-Water 2018).

16.4 Observations about Possible Future Scenarios

A key lesson that was learned in the analysis of MDG implementation from 2000 to 2015 is that governments and international organizations are slow to react and respond to global development frameworks. In that case, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation was adopted toward the end of 2005 – some 5 years after the goals were adapted. In the case of the SDGs, it was thought that the initial preparatory phase would be considerably shorter because many countries and most stakeholders had engaged in the formulation of SDGs between 2012 and 2015. By the same token, inertia developed during the implementation of the MDGs from 2000 to 2015 would also carry forward – either negatively or positively.

However, irrespective of a more engaged planning process, the design of the SDGs remained primarily aspirational, lacking tangible and actionable details on how each target would be achieved. It took nearly 2 years to determine precisely the indicators that would be assigned to each SDG. While the implementation of the SDGs is arguably on a faster track, early reports to the HLPF indicate that the world is not on track to meet SDG 6 and other water-related targets (UN-Water 2018). Some of the institutional inadequacies and national capacity gaps encountered in the implementation of MDGs, as documented by UNSGAB (2015), have remained persistent and difficult to overcome, despite an ostensibly greater level of engagement around SDG implementation.

Compounding these global developmental challenges are the ethical considerations noted in Sect. 16.3, which are not being actively discussed. The notions of global equity, adequately dealing with the complexity, and mobilizing sufficient financial resources do not receive sufficient interest or attention in the international discourse. The international community seems to be consumed by short-term and acute challenges that can be considered “flavor-of-the-month” – such as terror attacks in New Zealand, Brexit, potential for Iran–US armed confrontation, Turkey–Syria border skirmishes, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – rather than long-term strategic and ethical considerations.
The HLPF, which should essentially take a step back and review progress systematically, is in itself a political entity that is open to the vagaries of geopolitical winds. The UN Secretaries General Ban Ki-moon and António Guterres have both attempted to create high-level panels comprising heads of state to directly investigate ways and means of overcoming the global water crisis. For example, Guterres and Jim Yong Kim (president of the World Bank Group from 2012 to 2019) convened a panel consisting of 11 heads of state and government. This High Level Panel on Water (HLPW) focused on ensuring the implementation of SDG 6 by championing a comprehensive way of managing water resources and improving water- and sanitation-related services. The HLPW presented its findings to the UN Secretary in March 2018 on how to motivate effective action and advocate on mobilizing financial resources (HLPW 2018). While its headline recommendations spoke about understanding water, valuing water, and managing water, it is still too early to determine the value of the findings beyond offering more generic platitudes.

It is challenging to forecast how the international community will eventually respond to the water challenges by 2030 and beyond. If climate change accelerates water scarcity and water quality problems, would the world respond more effectively? History shows that crises are unfortunately the most effective way of triggering action. That means effective action may come at a high cost in terms of impacts on individuals and societies. Our inability to effectively address the ethical conundrums discussed in this chapter might mean that those currently disadvantaged in the global community would likely bear the brunt of those adverse impacts. There are also invariably going to be bright spots where communities and countries take the framing of SDGs to heart and truly transform their development agendas.

At the moment, Bhutan seems to be one such bright spot. As a land-locked country located in the Himalayas, it has emerged as global leader in sustainable development (UNDP 2019). The most notable aspect of its development agenda is that it places equal emphasis on social, economic, political, and spiritual development; this approach is quantified through the Gross National Happiness index. It is a country that has truly enshrined the SDG framework within its constitution and development agenda, and that includes bold initiatives around carbon neutrality and achieving 60 percent coverage of its land area with forests.

The questions we have to ask are these: How many other countries in the world are willing to demonstrate the same level of commitment to sustainable development? And will the international community come to their aid?

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4 In Bhutan, Gross National Happiness requires that every citizen, to achieve happiness, is empowered to make decisions as part of a collective responsibility.
Annexes

Annex 1 – Over of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Goal 1: **No poverty** – End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
Goal 2: **Zero hunger** – End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
Goal 3: **Good health and well-being for people** – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
Goal 4: **Quality education** – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
Goal 5: **Gender equality** – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
Goal 6: **Clean water and sanitation** – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
Goal 7: **Affordable and clean energy** – Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
Goal 8: **Decent work and economic growth** – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
Goal 9: **Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure** – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
Goal 10: **Reducing inequalities** – Reduce income inequality within and among countries.
Goal 11: **Sustainable cities and communities** – Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
Goal 12: **Responsible consumption and production** – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
Goal 13: **Climate action** – Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy.
Goal 14: **Life below water** – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
Goal 15: **Life on land** – Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
Goal 16: **Peace, justice and strong institutions** – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
Goal 17: **Partnerships for the goals** – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.
Annex 2 – Description of SDG 6

GOAL 6 – Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

SDG 6 TARGETS

- 6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all
- 6.2: By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations
- 6.3: By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally
- 6.4: By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity
- 6.5: By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate
- 6.6: By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes
- 6.6a: By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies
- 6.6b: Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

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