IWRM Action Hub

IWRM TOOL - C5

Promoting Social Change

Summary

Changing the behaviour of water users and water managers towards more sustainable practices is a necessary step in achieving global water security. To achieve this, we must go beyond the typical technological or legal instruments and pay attention to the necessary changes needed in the deeply rooted attitudes in individuals, institutions, professionals, and social organisations. The Tools in this subsection introduce various social change mechanisms via youth engagement and empowerment, behaviour change communication strategies, and discusses the virtual and valuing water concepts and the importance of corporate stewardship.

Social Change in the Context of Water

Social change refers to transformations within the social structure, characterised by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organisations, and value systems (Form and Wilterdink, 2021 and de la Sablonnière, 2017). The impact of positive social changes in socio-cultural institutions, rules, behaviour, and value systems can create a great impact on water resources management. Indeed, there is a need to raise the environmental conciseness of water users by making them more responsible stewards. Change in people's mindsets is something that cannot be achieved overnight and requires time, however it has been successful (Laybourn-Langton, Quilter-Pinner, and Treloar, 2021).

Improved water governance is not only about the hardware and techno-engineering solutions but must also account for the mindsets in society and whether such mindsets are favorable for progressing sustainability in the water sector. Yet, initiatives focused on social change are often overshadowed by techno-fix solutions. Realistically, governments and varying social institutions

cannot “police” or “monitor” citizens every day. In this regard, it is important to positively change the mindsets of stakeholders and those in positions of power, which would encourage a respect for water as a physical resource, and the roles of water-related institutions (Tools B), policies (Tools A1), laws (Tools A2), and plans (Tools A3).

Driving Factors for Social Change

Social change is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and change in one sphere can affect other spheres of social life. Accordingly, we must be clear on the goal (i.e., what needs changing) and on the method (i.e., how to go about cultivating this change). Like many other social processes, there must be an impetus to ignite this change. Here are some common factors that have ignited social change processes (University of Minnesota, 2016):

- **Physical or Environmental**: Observed changes in the natural environment can trigger changes in society. The environment can be a sociological topic for four reasons; (i) major environmental problems are a direct result of human activities, (ii) environmental problems have potential impacts on people, (iii) solutions to our very own environmental problems require change in social-economic and environmental policies, and (iv) often, environmental movements and actions constitute a social movement (University of Minnesota, 2016). For example, we often see social change emerging or being triggered from many movements like the Green Belt Movement. In response to the needs of Kenyan women, for example, having reported changes in water levels of streams and food insecurity, Professor Wangari Maathai spearheaded this movement to encourage women to collectively act in the growing and cultivating of seeds to bind soil, storage of rainwater, food, and firewood.
- **Science, Technology, and Education**: Innovation in technology has resulted in a change in the way we address societal and environmental challenges. The emergence of new opinions, ideas, and thoughts and the development of science and technology have contributed towards societies having a more critical outlook. The role of education as an instrument of social change is widely accepted especially based on its contribution to the enrichment of one’s own understanding of themselves and the world (Chakraborty et al.,2018). Education, in this sense, initiates new ideas and values and it becomes the goal of the current and future generations to pursue and achieve it.
- **Cultural**: Cultural change and social change are interwoven. There is often a link between our beliefs, which is an element of our culture, and social institutions which is an element of our society. Change in one aspect of society can lead to, or even force, change in another aspect of society or culture (University of Minnesota, 2016). Hence, changes in ideas, values, and beliefs can correspond to a change in the whole social order. Communities are often their best own problem solvers due to their indigenous understanding (CARE, 2021). Therefore, if communities have the right attitude and education, once empowered, their ideas, values, and beliefs can be manifested into real change.
- **Politico-Institutional**: The State is often the most powerful organisation which regulates social relationships, as it has the power to legislate new laws, repeal antiquated ones, bringing about social change in society. Law can often reflect the will of the people. Meaning, it considers an evaluation of what human behaviour ought to be, an expectation of what it will be, and the reactions to particular behaviours. It also attempts to induce a particular kind of behaviour (Roach Anleu, 2009). For example, there are now laws which enforce the need for screening developmental projects to determine their environmental impact via Environmental Impact Assessments (Tool C1.06). When new water-related policies and plans (Tool A1; Tool A3) are implemented it restricts society, causing individuals to adhere to the new normal.

- **Collective Social Movement**: A social movement is regarded as an organised effort by a great number of people to bring about or impede social, political, economic or cultural change (University of Minnesota, 2016). Collective effort amongst persons in society to establish a new order of life can often bring changes in the existing social system, state, or country. Social movements arise when groups of people in society are discontented with the pre-existing social order and change is demanded. Take for example the Fridays for Future movement for climate change started by Greta Thunberg, a youth environmental activist, who demanded more action from politicians and society regarding the ongoing climate crisis.

Barriers to Social Change

Common barriers to social change in water resources management can include the following:

- **Social and Cultural**: This can be tied to the concept of "insularity" which is the lack of interest in cultures, ideas, or peoples outside of one's own experiences. Often, societies that are very traditional (i.e., having ingrained customs and habits) tend to hold strongly rooted customs, traditions, and beliefs due to cultural rigidity. This attitude in some ways can prevent the community from progressing. Take for example, the public perception and social acceptance of wastewater reuse (WWR) (Tool C3.03). Resistance to WWR projects has accounted for the failure of many reuse projects (Akpan, Omole, and Bassey, 2020).
- **Attitudinal**: Perception can create barriers to behaviour change, hindering overall social progress. For instance, the pre-conceived negative outcomes of performing a particular behavior by an individual, can result in that person questioning the effectiveness and need of the new action (Kittle, 2017). Overall, this perception can create a lag in change. For instance, while water scarcity may encourage communities to engage in rainwater harvesting, community members may think about the cost of setting up harvesting systems and they may also question the safety of consuming rainwater versus tap borne water. The economic cost and skepticism surrounding health consequences might discourage this community or individual from adopting the new behaviour. For example, in the Global Water Partnership - Caribbean Rainwater Harvesting Toolbox, it is mentioned that the practice of rainwater harvesting is considered to be outdated by many in the Caribbean region.
- **Individual and Collective Capacity**: Education helps to develop civic and productive skills, develops human talents and interests and serves as a vehicle for equity and greater social inclusion (Busemeyer et al.,2016) Hence, without education, social change can be severely impeded. To cultivate change in society we must therefore broaden an individual´s knowledge (Tool C5.04). As water professionals attempt to facilitate an adequate response to water-related sustainability challenges, societies across the world need to acquire **"water literacy"** which refers to the appropriate knowledge about various aspects of water use and management (Kitamura et al., 2014).
- **Policy and Institutional**: The existence of laws, policies, and regulations at local, regional or national levels, which hinder or prevent the adoption of sustainable behaviour can limit social change (Kittle, 2017). Corruption, inappropriate institutional arrangements, bureaucratic inertia, insufficient human capacity, and lack of investment funds are all drivers which affect governance of water (SIWI, 2016). For example: In Trinidad and Tobago there is no independent regulator of water resources, which in many cases have resulted in the nation's water utility (i.e., Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA)) exploiting the country's freshwater supply and disregarding operational efficiency (GoRTT, 2020). Therefore, lacking institutional arrangements have progressively entrenched wastage and hindered sustainable use and conservation approaches within nation`s water sector.
- **Infrastructure**: Physical and built infrastructure can hinder social change. A good example of

this can be how women may not be able to uptake safe menstrual hygiene management practices, partly because they don't have the required infrastructure (such as having water and soap in toilets to wash themselves). Similarly, the tippy-tap marks a way of overcoming a technological barrier to handwashing with water and soap.

Building Blocks of Social Change in the Water Sector

Social change in the water sector is extremely important, as we can expect to tackle greater water issues in the future. It will also require a paradigm shift in our current norms, attitudes, beliefs, and modes of operation, as we attempt to build more robust and resilient water sectors worldwide. Social change in the water sector can be powered through:

- **Social Inclusion**: Water is at the center of development but there are numerous instances where individuals or communities (i.e., women, youth, indigenous groups, and persons with disabilities) are excluded from its benefits. Practitioners must work to ensure the effective participation of these typically marginalized groups in the planning and implementation processes of water management (Tools B5). Youth groups, for instance, have been very effective at igniting social change, e.g., via Youth Communities of Practice (Tool B4.03) where mentorship, dialogue exchange, and learning can contribute to fostering broader social transformations.
- **Private Sector Engagemen**t: The unequal distribution of wealth, social unrest, climate change, decreasing biodiversity, and water shortages have pushed corporate leaders towards becoming more concerned about the challenges confronting the planet. This has led to a shift in their mindsets as they are now convinced that they must fundamentally change the operations of their companies to become sustainably effective. As such, global corporations must transition from the business-as-usual model and operate in new and fundamentally different ways that are underpinned by simultaneously being profitable, ethical, socially, and environmentally responsible (Mohrman, O'Toole, Lawler III, 2017).
- **Communications**: The targeted and strategic use of communication can change mindsets within society which can then result in new ways of approaching and tackling water resource management challenges. When an area of concern is identified, creating a cycle of information to encourage individuals and communities to adopt healthier and more sustainable practices can be essential in the overall social change process. Transitioning from ad hoc communications to well planned, audience specific communications with clear messages that resonate with targets, and persuade them to act is critical towards building change (Well Made Strategy, 2021).

Sub-section Overview

The Tools in this section provide a collection of concepts and notions that can serve as entry points for triggering social change towards IWRM implementation. They are aimed at mobilising and augmenting the socio-environmental consciousness of various actors, from the future generation to the business community to entire communities, via strategic communication methods.

- **Youth Engagement and Empowerment** (Tool C5.01): Meaningful youth engagement and the empowerment of youth is an intentional participatory process in which young people's ideas, expertise, experiences, and perspectives are integrated into thematic discussions. It is important to incorporate youth and include their perspectives into IWRM implementation as it

serves as a means of promoting social change within youth and future generations.

- **Behaviour Change Communication BCC** (Tool C5.02): Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) refers to the strategic use of communications to encourage individuals and communities to adopt healthier and more sustainable practices. The strategic use of communications towards targeting certain behaviors and barriers at the individual and community level is important in sparking social change in areas such as WASH.
- **Virtual Water** (Tool C5.03): Virtual water is water embedded in a product not in a real sense but in a virtual sense. This concept introduces the idea of water footprint, accounting methods, virtual water trade flows and how it can promote water efficient societies.
- **Valuing Water** (Tool C5.04): “Valuing Water” is a concept mobilised to raise awareness on the intrinsic value of water, its instrumental value, and highlights the essential roles which water plays in sustaining life, as well as relational value pertaining to managing the resource responsibly and ethically.
- **Corporate Stewardship** (Tool C5.05): Corporate stewardship practices in the water sector incentivise businesses to understand their water use and its impacts. This is critical as it allows companies to engage in Corporate Social Responsibility as they enshrine social and environmental concerns in their business operations.

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