

Rethinking water and sanitation services– can we balance immediate and future needs?

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The water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector has traditionally focused on increasing access to safe and reliable infrastructure to ensure social and economic development. However, many dominant delivery models for WASH services overlook implications for environmental sustainability, as this is viewed as something to ‘deal with later.’ With large investments that will be made in the coming years to meet the needs of unserved populations, new paradigms for provision of WASH services are needed to avoid significant environmental consequences that will have unequitable impacts for the most marginalized. The SDGs provide a framework to broaden our understanding of ways that the water and sanitation targets interact with other targets such as reducing inequalities, protecting ecosystems, integrated water resources management, and recycling and recovery of resources. In addition, these challenges are occurring in the face of accelerating social and ecological change, and novel service models must be resilient. In particular, climate change is expected to have large consequences for WASH systems due to increased variability of precipitation and water flows, and more frequent extreme events such as droughts and floods. Other important drivers of change will interact and further exacerbate these climate-related hazards, such as migration to areas with limited services, growing competition for water for productive purposes and poor governance.

This session invites papers that explore new paradigms for water and sanitation service delivery that consider how immediate needs can be met while ensuring future sustainability. We will explore whether social, economic and environmental goals can be achieved in a synergistic way, or what tradeoffs need to be made. We also invite papers that examine how the water and sanitation sector can adapt to climate change and other social and environmental changes.