



USAID/E3 Water Communications and Knowledge Management (CKM) Project

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Christian Holmes on Water, Jobs, and Gender Equity

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Global Waters Radio: You are tuned into Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the United States 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.

Today on the podcast, we're speaking with USAID Global Water Coordinator Christian Holmes. Chris is Deputy Assistant Administrator in the agency's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment (E3), where he is responsible for overseeing USAID's global water portfolio. Chris has also held high-ranking positions with the United States Trade and Development Agency, the State Department, USAID's Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

He's also served in the United States Army as Second Lieutenant, Civil Affairs, where he received the US Army Soldier's Medal for Heroism. Today, Chris shares his insights about the ways improved water supply, sanitation, and hygiene help advance economic development and gender equity.

Well Chris, as you know, water is a key driver of economic development around the world, and World Water Day's 2016 theme, "Water and Jobs," has reflected that.

Can you talk about the importance of water and WASH in this context, and discuss some of the ways water sector development contributes to improved public health and livelihoods?

Christian Holmes: Thanks very much. You know, I think when you think about water and jobs, you have to look at really the continuum of human development, and you know one obviously critical aspect of that is employment. But you really can't be adequately employed unless you begin your life so that you are healthy, and you have an opportunity to learn and compete. And I think one of the most important things that water programs do, and WASH programs in particular, is the way in which they are able to help reduce diarrheal disease amongst young children in the first two years of life,

ranging from all the way of helping children stay alive who suffer from diarrheal disease, to at the same time, having superb WASH programs—water and sanitation programs—that really reduce if not eliminate the prospect of stunting. Because as you know, small children that have up to six severe cases of diarrhea, often due to waterborne disease, face the prospect of physical or cognitive stunting, or both, and you know that is just a terrible fate to know that just because of these six cases of severe diarrhea while you are such a young child, that your entire life is adversely affected in that way.

And then I think the importance of water programs occur again later on in childhood, particularly in school, where it is so essential to have in schools a supply of clean water, adequate sanitation for young women—not only that, but also menstrual management facilities. And when that happens, when those services are provided, then children stay in school. That critical intervention, again, being such a supple intervention, can make a huge difference, if not *the* difference in one's development.

And then moving along in one's growth, of course, as one gets older, the opportunity to continue one's education and one's choice without being forced to spend one's life in search of water and adequate sanitation. In so many places we work, particularly in Africa, young women and men spend hours and hours every day just in search of water, which takes them away from any other activity that might be better for them, and their communities, and their futures.

So we have a whole wide range of programs that deal along this continuum. For example, in the WASH in schools, there is a program with the acronym known as SPLASH, which has been enormously successful in enabling young girls and boys to stay in school, and it's really been essential in their development. And then later on, when people get to the work stage, we have programs that basically support the creation of small businesses to provide water supply services and sanitation services to communities.

We recently have been looking at ways to really expand opportunities in the intersection between water and food production. The United States government, USAID, along with the Government of Sweden and the Government of the Netherlands, formed about three years ago a partnership which we named Securing Water for Food. And basically the idea behind that partnership was how do you increase food production, or at least maintain it, in areas which are very, very difficult in which to grow food, where there is a lack of water, and where the environment can be very inhospitable, as reflected by such conditions as land that is highly saline in content.

We've reached across the world, you know, to seek out great ideas and that's resulted in such progress as new approaches to drip irrigation, new crops that can grow in highly saline conditions, and we even went out on a Global Challenge asking the world for a new approach to be able to come up with small-scale desalination for brackish water, but to do it in such a way that you could use solar power, and to do it at the same cost that you'd be using hydrocarbon as a source of energy for the desalination. So, water programs can be very strategic and very tactical in terms of assisting people at different points in their lives in order to succeed and stay healthy.

GWR: And Chris, when we're talking about USAID programs in agriculture or other areas of the water sector, we know fostering gender equity is a strategic priority for the agency. Can you discuss how USAID's efforts to extend WASH coverage complement women's and girls' empowerment?

CH: I can. You know, this is a really critical field, and in some ways, it really relates to the question we talked about earlier, in terms of water and jobs, and really once again understanding the continuum of opportunity for young women and girls. And one of the things that we've learned that's really, really important is you have to have the right tools to be able to mainstream, you know, gender and opportunities for women in water supply and sanitation services. We have had this large project in Africa called the SUWASA project and what we've been looking at is how do you really engage women in points of great leadership in organizations that have kind of outsized impact that can influence large numbers of people.

In many cases, those organizations in Africa are the larger utilities, the water utilities, because they have huge reach, not just in urban areas, but in the periurban areas surrounding major cities. And in this program, what we've targeted on is working with utilities to increase the utilities' using and hiring women in senior positions of leadership, and at the same time, increasing the understanding of utilities as to the impact of their work on women. So I think finding the right points of influence, coming up with the right tools, the right indexes, it all you know makes a huge difference over the long term, to go beyond the desirable concept of really engaging women, to the specifics of engaging women in different aspects of water and different aspects of food production.

GWR: Well thanks so much, Chris. We're out of time for today, but want to encourage our listeners to stay tuned for future podcasts from Chris on Global Waters Radio, where he'll be sharing his thoughts on a number of other water-related subjects. And if you have any topics you'd like to see covered in an upcoming podcast, you can easily contact us at waterteam@usaid.gov.

This is Global Waters Radio.