

Cornell's Center for a Sustainable Future
Topical Lunch on access to clean water
September 2nd, 2009
12:30 - 1:30 PM in 300 Rice Hall

It is well known that access to clean water and sanitation can alleviate poverty through several means. Direct benefits of access include the reduction of illnesses caused by water-borne diseases, and indirect benefits include socio-economic and environmental improvement as people spend less time gathering water and/or less money to local water vendors. Similarly, sanitation infrastructure reduces significantly the pollution of water sources like rivers and lakes. It is therefore not surprising that access to clean water and sanitation are among the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

However, access to clean water is very unequal throughout the world and within countries. The problem is especially acute for populations marginalized by, for example, income, gender and/or ethnicity. In some cases, the main problem is a lack of infrastructure and adequate technology at the local level. In some cases, however, the problem is political, in the sense that groups do not receive adequate services because of discrimination.

The aim of the topical lunch is to start interdisciplinary communication among different researchers on the Cornell campus that ideally will lead toward a coordinated effort of studying the problem of water access. Specifically the conversation will focus on the following:

- Are participatory practices in planning and implementing water projects conducive to more equal distribution of public services? More generally, are there ways of organizing water delivery at the local level to ensure more equitable and efficient delivery?
- Are there technologies that are more conducive to delivering water sustainably in areas characterized by low income and low technical skills? Are there some technologies that are more equitable by design?
- What have been the best practices in delivering programs of infrastructure for water? What type of coordination among local, state, and federal governments is required, and where has this been relatively successful?