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Despite international aspirations to bring piped water to all by 2030, this is unlikely to happen in the predominantly rural habitations of sub-Saharan Africa. Realistically, in 2030, many millions of the region's rural people will still be dependent on unimproved groundwater sources, and those who do enjoy improved services will still be using wells or boreholes with handpumps.

More positively, the low demands from such point sources and the nature of the aquifers involved means that with few exceptions the available quantity and quality of the groundwater resource do not generally pose major constraints.

The development and management of groundwater resources for rural water supply currently leaves much to be desired. Poor siting of new boreholes, the uncritical use of standard designs, the inadequacy of construction supervision, and the perverse incentives perpetuated by some forms of drilling contract conspire to limit effectiveness.

The development of new wells and boreholes with handpumps is mostly funded by Governments, with greater or lesser support from donors, international agencies and international NGOs. As the clients they bear a heavy obligation to assure the quality and sustainability of the interventions which they pay for. The level of hydrogeological, engineering and socio-economic understanding of many such client organisations could be greatly enhanced. Understanding what it takes to deliver water services which are fit-for-purpose in terms of access, quantity, quality and reliability, while also being manageable and affordable needs to be pervasive among these organisations.

The paper calls on those client organisations which develop groundwater for rural water supply in sub-Saharan Africa to (a) develop their knowledge of the key issues involved in sustainable services, (b) to put in place the value-for-money assurance mechanisms needed, and (c) to promote sound understanding of sustainability concepts among their local Government, private sector and NGO partners.