

Politics of water

Sean Furey lists 10 ways to talk to a politician about groundwater

When ranked by trustworthiness, politicians often come bottom of the pile. But society needs politicians – men and women who have to make difficult decisions on behalf of others. The decisions they make affect all of us in our daily and professional lives.

For drillers, suppliers and hydrogeologists these can be policies around what mineral and groundwater resources can be exploited; on taxes on equipment and services; on regulations of how drilling should be done, environmental regulations and what permissions are needed; or on spending priorities that may create or wipe out work opportunities.

In late October, a small crowd gathered at the celebrated Geological Society of London. It was a meeting for the UPGro programme – Unlocking the Potential of Groundwater for the Poor, a major research initiative to improve the understanding of groundwater resources across sub-Saharan Africa and how they can be used to benefit everyday citizens.

Doing good science is vital but won't achieve anything if political leaders, from local government to the UN, don't know that the science exists, don't understand it and don't know how to use it.

At our meeting we were taking advice from three senior African leaders in the water sector who have spent their careers shaping both science and policy: Dr Callist Tindimugaya, the commissioner for water resources planning and regulation in Uganda; Prof Moustapha Diene from the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal, and chair of the African Groundwater Network; and Prof Muna Mirghani, from Sudan, currently at the Technische Universität Berlin, but who has for a long time worked on the technical and political management of water resources of the River Nile basin.

Dr Tindimugaya also gave the prestigious 2017 Ineson Lecture at the Geological Society and was preceded by Dr Guy Howard from the Department for International Development (DFID). Together, they offered advice on how to engage political leaders and their technical advisors on groundwater issues:

Understand the questions and problems faced by the political leader: For groundwater, the questions that a political leader is likely to want answers to are:

- What is the contribution to economic growth and creating jobs?
- Where and how much groundwater exists in my district/region/country?
- How accessible is it and how much will it cost to abstract?
- What are sustainable rates of abstraction? Could we exceed those for a short time if there was a drought?

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From left to right: Dr Jan Willem Foppen (IHE Delft, Netherlands), Dr Callist Tindimugaya (Ministry of Water & Environment, Uganda), Prof Muna Mirghani (Technische Universität Berlin, Germany), Dr Prof Moustapha Diene (University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal), and Prof Alan MacDonald (British Geological Survey, UK)

- What is the quality of the water and how much will it cost to treat?
- What is the cost benefit of developing groundwater, and how does this compare to alternatives?
- Do new technologies, for example for drilling or pumping, greatly increase value or reduce costs (or ideally both)?
- What can groundwater contribute to agricultural productivity and/or energy generation?

Don't wait, engage early: If you are researching a topic or planning a big project: be ready to share now what is being done and the direction you are taking. If you wait until you have a final result or plan, there is a danger that the politician thinks you have a hidden agenda. Use meetings and working groups to get some feedback and build appetite for your project.

Choose the right time to talk:

Influencing change is a time-sensitive business: there will be periods in the cycles of elections, strategic planning and budget setting when political leads and their assistants will be looking around for solid, defensible ideas, and there are times when they will be so busy with other matters that they will have no interest or bandwidth to take in new ideas. Finding those windows of opportunity ahead of time and being ready for them is vital.

Approach indirectly: Decisions are often made at a technical level, particularly in national ministries, and political leaders generally learn about issues through their assistants. So it is important to build their confidence and trust both in you as the messenger and in what you are proposing to them.

Be clear: Often a lot of time and effort is spent getting the attention of politicians, and if successful, the window of opportunity is generally very short, so be very clear about what you are asking for, and why.

It is too easy to focus so much on getting attention that when you finally get it, the moment itself is wasted because you don't have a clear message.

As much as possible, it should address the problem that the political leader is facing, and your proposal should be clear and actionable, and honest about costs, risks and timescales.

Such data should be as robust as possible – political leaders and their advisors generally have a good nose for thin marketing flimflam.

Use simple language, but don't oversimplify your message: Nobody likes to be patronised, but equally be careful about using technical language and concepts. This is a particular problem for groundwater, because it is an invisible resource that is widely misunderstood: even highly educated non-specialists imagine vast underground lakes or rivers.

Use memorable anecdotes to tell a bigger story: Good, short, punchy stories are important, because they can be used as anecdotes to explain why what you are doing is great and important.

These stories should not be afraid to cut across projects where there is a common topic, such as finance, gender, climate change or governance.

A good anecdote will be passed on from a technical advisor to their minister who uses it when talking to the press, the public or their superior. One thing that makes this business so tricky is the trade-off between presenting a simple, clear case while also being realistic and robust

Politicians have to make trade-offs: Whatever the level, a political leader can't keep everyone happy all of the time. In fact, they are doing well to keep some people happy some of the time.

So, if you are asking for a change to a law, regulation, policy or investment decision, you are asking them to antagonise another stakeholder who does not agree with your change or stands to lose out.

Equally, there may be other supporters and allies for your cause. For example, if you are asking more money to be put into drilling or infrastructure programmes, then a budget somewhere else has to be cut to pay for it.

Consider the pushback the political leader may face, and also the political opportunities for them. Ultimately, those who will be paying for implementing your recommendations need to be on board.

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Practical, visible solutions are more likely to get traction: The public visibility of practical solutions and infrastructure is often why they attract more political support than equally important, but less visible, interventions, such as education and ongoing development of drilling and groundwater professionals, as well as

environmental management.
As this mindset is unlikely to change, it is on us to make the invisible more visible and be willing for political leaders to take credit for the risks they have been taking on our behalf. Because like it or not, we need them, and they need us. ♥



Sean Furey

Corruption can create a brick wall for rational argument: Corruption can lead to evidence being completely ignored and is difficult to deal with. It may seem tempting to join the collusion to get things done, but this just feeds the problem and short-term gain leads to long-term pain. If you meet a brick wall, look for another entry point.

Sean Furey is a water and sanitation specialist at Skat Consulting, based in St Gallen, Switzerland. He is co-lead of the sustainable groundwater development theme of the Rural Water Supply Network (RWSN) and leads the knowledge broker team for UPGro (Unlocking the Potential of Groundwater for the Poor)