

BBC fails to respond on repeated overstatements of evidence on human access to "clean water", despite upholding previous complaint

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4 May 2016

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Evidence on the lack of global data on water safety

UNICEF and WHO stated in 2012 that it was:

"likely that many hundreds of millions more [than 672 million] will still lack sustainable access to safe drinking water".

"...there is no evidence that the so-called "improved" technologies do provide safe water or adequate sanitation.

Moreover, the concept of safety and reliability of water sources and of adequacy of sanitation facilities from a user's point of view, key to any analysis of the status of the water supply and sanitation sector, have until now been overlooked in the monitoring process. In some locations, for instance, an unprotected household well may provide a better supply of water, both in terms of quantity and quality of water, than a household connection that may be subject to intermittence and poor water quality. The concept of sustainability (both in terms of service and environment), present in the Target 10 definition, is not addressed by indicators 30 and 31. Finally, affordability is only implied, but not clearly stated."

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Task Force for the Implementation of the Environmental Action Programme for Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia
Conference of EECCA Ministers of Economy/Finance, Environment and Water and their partners from the OECD
17-18 November 2005, Yerevan, Armenia
<http://www.oecd.org/environment/outreach/35372500.pdf>

"COMMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

Given the lack of nationally representative data on drinking water quality and safety and the high costs and technical difficulties of collecting such information at a large scale, the Inter-agency Expert Group on MDG Indicators endorses the use of this indicator on the use of an improved drinking water source as a proxy for access to safe drinking water.

The proxy indicator does not reflect the time spent on getting water from improved sources not on premises. Sustainable access is currently not measured for reasons of a lack of common understanding of what constitutes sustainable access and how to reliably measure it."

<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mi/wiki/7-8-Proportion-of-population-using-an-improved-drinking-water-source.ashx>

"While target 7.C explicitly refers to access to safe drinking water, the indicator does not measure quality directly, and the assumption that improved sources are more likely to provide safe water than unimproved sources is misleading."

Human Rights and MDGs in Practice:
A review of country strategies and reporting
United Nations
2010

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HRAndMDGsInPractice.pdf>

"At the current rate of progress, 672 million people will not use improved drinking water sources in 2015. It is likely that many hundreds of millions more will still lack sustainable access to safe drinking water"

UNICEF/WHO 2011

www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/report_wash_low.pdf

"The JMP [official monitors] also tempered any celebrations with a warning that the data collected only measured access to improved water sources – those that adequately protect the source from outside contamination – rather than assessed the quality, or reliability of the water supply, or whether water sources were sustainable.

Testing the quality of the water at a national level in all countries was too expensive and logistically difficult, said the report. "As a result, it is likely that the number of people using safe water supplies has been overestimated."

The target for sanitation is one of the MDGs that is most off-track. Globally, it is predicted that the target will not be reached until 2026."

Millennium development goal on safe drinking water reaches target early
6 March 2012

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/mar/06/water-millennium-development-goals>

"A new report (pdf) from World Health Organisation and Unicef says that 1.8bn people are estimated to use a source of drinking water that is contaminated with faeces."

2014

Over 1bn people drink water contaminated by faeces

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/sep/02/sanitation-contamination-world-water-week>

2013: BBC upholds complaint on "met" global "clean" water target

BBC reference: CAS-2236086

Note: The BBC replied not to the actual complaint but to a web form submission "to help the BBC deal with and track the complaint in view of past BBC failure to respond to complaints of inaccuracy in global poverty reports."

10 July 2013 at 17:55

Subject: Editorial complaint

To: barbara.plett@bbc.co.uk

Dear Ms Plett,

I am writing about the online article "UN urged to embrace 2030 goal on ending extreme poverty", of 30 May 2013.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-22719812>

I am sorry to say that there seem to me problems which amount to breaches of the editorial guidelines on due accuracy, when viewed either separately or in combination.

I hope the BBC will agree that the matters reported on are major matters, and that that is especially true in light of the forthcoming negotiations on new global goals. Currently the public has the opportunity to use information from the media to consider what policies and future goals should be, and inform policy-makers of those views, especially in the next two years. It would be a shame if politicians and bureaucrats made mistakes on policies or goal setting in part because of the media.

I realise that much of the content mentioned below may not have originated from you personally.

The article seems to me likely to give a significant proportion of the audience misleading impressions through the following words:

....

4. *"The Millennium Development Goal for access to **clean water** has already been reached".*

This conflates MDG 7,

*"Ensure **environmental sustainability**"*

with target 7C,

*"Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to **safe drinking water and basic sanitation**"*

and indicator 7.8:

*"Proportion of population using an **improved** drinking water source".*

<http://mdgs.un.org/UNSD/MDG/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm>

The error overstates progress both in terms of the number of goals met, and in terms of the evidence for the water being clean. The research is on "improved", not "clean" water sources, as is evident from the website of the official monitors:

<http://www.wssinfo.org/data-estimates/graphs/>

...

7. All three of the "related stories" to which links are provided twice, have factual errors.

I recognise that the editorial guideline on links refers to links to non-BBC material. However, in this case it seems to me that the errors in the linked material are of relevance to an assessment of whether due accuracy is achieved overall by the article of 30 May.

The overall error is to conflate goals with targets and/or indicators, giving the public the impression that one or two of the eight Goals have been achieved rather than subsidiary targets or components of targets related to specific indicators.

...

b) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-17270014>

*"UN meets Millennium Development **Goal** on drinking water"* [see above];

.....

[From Audience Services to News Online:]

11 July 2013

To: NewsOnline Complaints

{Complaint title:} Breach of due accuracy in major matter

{Complaint:} "UN urged to embrace 2030 goal... ", 30 May

Below is an edited version of selected points from a complaint to barbara.plett@bbc.co.uk yesterday, 10 July. I send this version to help the BBC deal with and track the complaint in view of past BBC failure to respond to complaints of inaccuracy in global poverty reports.

Parts of the article seem to breach guidelines on due accuracy and major matters, when viewed either separately or in combination:

....

4. "Goal for access to clean water has already been reached" conflates MDG 7 (environmental sustainability), target 7C (safe drinking water/sanitation) and indicator 7.8 (improved drinking water).

It thus overstates progress in terms of both number of goals met, and evidence for the water being clean. The official monitors' research is in fact on "improved", not "clean" water sources:

<http://www.wssinfo.org/data-estimates/graphs/>

...

7. All three "related stories" conflate goals with targets and/or indicators, wrongly claiming that poverty or water goals were met.

.....

25 July 2013

From: newsonline.complaints@bbc.co.uk

...

4) The clean water reference has been changed to "improved sources of water".

...

7) The reference to the poverty line has been amended in the news story amongst the "related stories". The other two are David Loyn authored pieces

- I've passed your email on to him to consider whether his piece needs amending.

Thanks again for getting in touch.

Regards

BBC News website

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/handle-complaint/>

.....

2014: After BBC fails to answer complaints to Audience Services, Head of Editorial Complaints is informed of "major error" that BBC understated UN Millennium pledges. He promised to reply but waited a year and then claimed he did not understand.

*"the Millennium Development Goals were agreed by all the countries of the United Nations and the big aid agencies in the year 2000 [!] ...
...So the whole [water] goal's about halving the proportion.... between 1990 [!] and 2015."
"we scrutinised [!] the goal of halving the proportion of those living on less than a dollar a day in our last edition"*

More or Less, BBC World Service 10 March 2012

http://aod-pod-uk-live.edgesuite.net/mpg_mp3_med/podcast_migrated/p02rzhdh-moreorless_20120309-2350a.mp3?_gda_=1439586159_bc77a4325b50ecbaabc770051104052e

Invited comments on provisional response 1300394
6 February 2014

"More or Less of 10 March 2012...

"the Millennium Development Goals were agreed by all the countries of the United Nations and the big aid agencies in the year 2000."

More or Less makes a major error. The MDG targets ...are in fact easier than the pledges in the Millennium Declaration of 2000. The latter is a UN General Assembly resolution. A major difference is that the resolution's pledges were not backdated, and are therefore to, for example halve the proportion of people in 2000 on under "\$1 ", not the 1990 level."....

[The programme contradicted itself by saying it had scrutinised the goal while confusing it with the more ambitious UN pledge.] "

2014: Unanswered complaint. There are "No safety stats on water" globally, which means economists do not in fact have "purchasing power parity" statistics for global poverty claims. More or Less World Service and Radio 4, broadcast 16/19 May 2014, and associated web pages. BBC breaches requirement to answer complaint.

Complaint submitted to Audience Services via web form 26 June 2014.

No human acknowledgement sent, though website did acknowledge receipt of complaint to World Service.

"...Subjective elements to "purch. power parity": eg shelter, food, water, etc differ across countries.

No safety stats on water."

.....

2015: Six weeks before the UN Summit. BBC again told "UN does not have safe water statistics." BBC breaches requirement to answer complaint.

"Millennium Development Goals: What are they?"

1 July 2015

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-33313366>

Complaint: CAS-3430579

11 August 2015

Conflation of Millennium Declaration and MDGs

..."Safe water" claim misleads. UN does not have safe water statistics.

...

BBC does not report actual pledges of 2000 even though reaffirmed by world leaders in 2013.

Details: poornews.org

millenniumdeclaration.org

http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/2015/june_july.pdf, page 128.

Trustees say it would be editorial decision not to mention baselines.

But BBC staff either

a) always make "editorial decision" to omit actual pledge or

b) do not know what pledges are.

Both are systemic failure.

It is a waste of public money for BBC to make programmes to inform people on MDGs or give media training without informing public of pledges their leaders made.

.....

3 July 2015: More or Less points out, as it did in 2012, that there are no global safety statistics on water. In August the audio is no longer available. BBC has apparently breached its guidelines in removing it without acknowledgement.

Six weeks before UN Summit: "There are no stats for clean water" or needs of the poor, so it is not clear why BBC is justified in claiming extreme poverty was "halved as UN promised". Unanswered complaint on Business Daily (World Service).

Business Daily
broadcast 3 July 2015

Complaint submitted 14 August 2015 around 8.30 am similar to the following:

....

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02vmb4z>

Intro:

"number of people living in extreme poverty has been halved as the UN promised" -

a) not well-sourced: World Bank does not consider changing needs or estimate changing prices faced by the poor. There are no stats for clean water....

URL for above complaint confirming acceptance by the BBC complaints system on 14 August 2015:

<https://ssl.bbc.co.uk/complaints/forms/review/?id=GGU51MRINI6GMQU1I0P8RR8HCU&uid=962454628#anchor>

No email acknowledgement received.

Two months before the UN Summit: BBC tells children humans halved number of people without safe water, despite upholding complaint in 2013 that there are no such statistics.

The passage also confuses the UN pledges with the easier MDG targets of more dubious formal standing.

"It was the start of a new millennium, which marks a thousand years. Global leaders agreed that we should all do more to fight poverty, so that the new millennium would be better than the last.

189 countries agreed to work together to achieve eight [!] big goals by 2015 - called the Millennium Development Goals.]"

[Some well-known MDG targets are easier than what leaders actually pledged at the Millennium Summit]

"Simple things like safe drinking water and a clean home are crucial...

In 2000, world leaders agreed to try and reduce the number [!] of people suffering in this way by half.

This [!] target has been met."

Have we achieved the Millennium Development Goals? - CBBC Newsround
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/33382023>

12 July 2015

One month before the 2015 UN Summit: Unanswered complaint:
"Errors despite BBC/Trust earlier accepting facts...No stats on water safety". "BBC are stopping people" from holding governments to account "by not giving correct information on pledges."

23 August 2015 submitted via web form: CAS-3445371

CBBC (Children's BBC)

Have we achieved the Millennium Development Goals?

12 July 2015

bbc.co.uk/newsround/33382023

Errors despite BBC/Trust earlier accepting facts

Please see CAS3430579 etc and unacknowledged complaints c.12-15 August.

25/7/13: News Online email stated BBC corrected article: "clean" water statistics to "improved sources".

No final reply or ref. no. yet on complaint 11/7/13 via complaint form, re link to "water goal met" article.

19/6/15:ESC decision: Trustees state MDG4 easier than 2000 pledge.

bbc.co.uk/newsround/33382023

"Have we achieved MDGs?"

"2000 [!]...189 countries agreed 8 [!] by 2015 called MDGs [!]...goal 4...5".

Misleads as elsewhere.

"goal in 2000...cut in half no. [! - %] with hunger...15 yrs later, no. on \$1.25 cut in half."

Well-sourced?

1.MDG target is 25 yrs.

2.How can we know target met, if no stats on inflation faced by poor?

"safe water, clean home...In 2000, leaders agreed to try [!]...no. [%] suffering in this way by half. This target has been met".

1.MDG target as reported on, is 1990-2015;

2.No stats on water safety.

2nd clip: *"1 in 8 don't have enough food"*.

But estimates are only on calories. FAO state "food inadequacy" is higher.

Report talks of causes of poverty.

BBC are stopping people from holding govts to account by not giving correct information on pledges.

Links to:

/newsround/17282732:

"Safe [!] water targets...reached" "88%...clean [!] water; 2 bn more..safe [!]" ">800m...dirty water".

[later note: complaint should read "almost 800m"]

programmes/p02w3ddk,

newsround/33481418

may imply leaders in 2000 set the generally easier MDG targets.

Clip, 45sec: *"set 15 yrs ago"* incorrect.

Evidence: by2015.org, [poornews.org]

Email copied to Chief Complaints Editor: "There are no UN statistics for "clean" water"

25 September 2015 at 14:43

Fwd: BBC Complaints - Case number CAS-3445371-NGRCXY

To: cheryl.taylor@bbc.co.uk, jessica.cecil@bbc.co.uk

Dear Ms Taylor,

This unanswered complaint may be of relevance to BBC coverage surrounding the Global Goals.

There are no UN statistics for "clean" water or for inflation faced by the extremely poor. The MDG targets with easier 1990 baselines were not agreed by the UN in 2000.

Evidence: ungoals.org

On 25 July 2013 News Online accepted that the UN does not have the clean water statistics, and amended an article as a result.

Bold and underlining added later.

Best wishes,

Matt Berkley

.....

22 September: Trust "notes" message to Chairman, "BBC set to misreport UN pledges again....BBC has also reported non-existent statistics for safe water".

28 September: BBC broadcasts huge Global Citizen Festival and sells the recording around the world, again confusing world leaders' pledges with easier targets, and using the non-existent "safe water" numbers.

Date: 16 September 2015 at 20:36
Subject: Fwd: Urgent: BBC set to misreport UN pledges again at next week's Summit
To: trust.enquiries@bbc.co.uk

Dear Ms Fairhead,

...The BBC has also reported non-existent statistics for "safe" water...

From: **Trust Editorial** <TrustEditorial@bbc.co.uk>
Date: 22 September 2015 at 15:49
Subject: RE: Urgent: BBC set to misreport UN pledges again at next week's Summit

Dear Mr Berkley

Thank you for your email of 16 September 2015 to Rona Fairhead.

We have noted the points you have raised and have added this email to the complaint from you that we are currently considering. We will respond substantively shortly.

Unacknowledged complaint: "UN does not estimate changing need, inflation faced or water quality."
Business Daily, broadcast 22 Sep 2015.

No email acknowledgement from Audience Services after web form complaint confirmed as received on 3 Nov 2015 at about 7.15 am. URL for confirmation web page was:

<https://ssl.bbc.co.uk/complaints/forms/review/?id=M7592VCC4RJ6O2HMTQVBKCCBA6&uid=695467160#anchor>

World Service Radio

Complaint category:

Factual error or inaccuracy

...

Complaint title:

Contributes to failures: accuracy and impartiality

Complaint description:

Business Daily 22 Sep 2015.

Contributes (with other material complained of) to misleading impressions on UN pledges and poverty, and to imbalance of views.

See CAS-3340770, 3430579 etc, unacknowledged complaints:

poornews.org/somebbcunanswered.zip.

....

Guest's statement not well-sourced; no other views aired:

"we do know...number...in extreme poverty has halved".

That is just an opinion.

In fact UN does not estimate changing need, inflation faced or water quality.

...

BBC: "The goals on....and clean water were met ahead of time".

Complainant: "The statistics are not on clean water but on "improved sources"."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-34347198>

CAS-3556479

5 Nov 2015

Complaint Summary:

Not duly accurate: UN "clean" water goal "met"

Full Complaint:

A. Video, 00:08:

"The goals on....and clean water were met ahead of time".

Not duly accurate.

The statistics are not on clean water but on "improved sources".

Why does this matter?

Evidence:

*"indicator does not measure quality directly....the assumption that improved sources are more likely to provide safe water than unimproved sources is * misleading *."*

Human Rights and MDGs in Practice: A review of country strategies and reporting UN 2010

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HRAndMDGsInPractice.pdf>

*"At/current rate/672 million people will not use improved drinking water sources in 2015. It is likely that * many hundreds of millions more * will still lack sustainable access to * safe * drinking water"*

UNICEF/WHO 2011

www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/report_wash_low.pdf

BBC has already upheld complaint on this:

CAS-2236086 resulted in email from News Online 25/7/2013:

"4) The clean water reference has been changed to "improved sources of water"."

Same error as:

- unanswered complaints CAS-3430579 and CAS-3445371;
- unacknowledged complaint 14/8/15 on Business Daily;
- mentioned in unanswered complaint emailed to BBC World News 27/11/14.

B: Handling complaint:

BBC repeating same error and failing to respond to complaints despite previous correction.

Please answer the other complaints.

Thank you.

Above was acknowledged:
From: bbc_complaints_website@bbc.co.uk
5 November 2015 at 15:04
...CAS-3556479-42JQW

No reply on BBC Youtube video:
"accuracy problems about goals on poverty and "clean" water as described in [unanswered complaint]"

13 November 2015
CAS-3568785

Complaint Summary:

Accuracy problems as in [unanswered] CAS-3556479

Full Complaint:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK2lr2yOXm4>

The video has accuracy problems about goals on poverty and "clean" water being met, as described in CAS-3556479-42JQTW and follow-up CAS-3568729-KN5W2Y.

Further note for both this complaint and those:

Contrary to popular belief, there is no 1990 baseline given in the MDG target for water:

<http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=indicators/officialist.htm> .

The OECD Secretariat stated a 2000 baseline was agreed:

millenniumdeclaration.org/mdgwaterbaseline.pdf , page 4.

From the UNICEF/WHO database, the estimates for proportions of people without "improved sources" of water are:

1990: 23.6%;
2000: 17.5%;
2015: 9.1%.

There was not an official "halving" between 2000 and 2015 of the proportion without so-called "improved sources".

Data from:

<http://www.wssinfo.org/data-estimates/tables/>

Please see the last three lines on the left hand side, third column of data.

The figures I give above are the result of subtracting from 100% to give proportions of people estimated as lacking access.

Also, the Youtube text description states that the global aim is to

"eliminate poverty...over the next 15 years".

But as I wrote in CAS-3555804: "CAS-2476017 (2013, still unanswered at Stage 2) stated,

"8. Proposal is not "eliminate" but 3% (c.250m people)."

...

Evidence - first part of:

<http://strikingpoverty.worldbank.org/conversations/commission-global-poverty-share-your-ideas-measuring-extreme-poverty>"

.....

Above acknowledged as received:

From: bbc_complaints_website@bbc.co.uk

Date: 13 November 2015 at 19:33

...CAS-3568785-BXSMCL

...

...we aim to investigate and reply to you normally within up to 20 working days...

.....

BBC repeats the claim that the UN statistics are on "clean" water

"It's estimated that 650 million people around the world still don't have access to clean water."

World Service

Business Matters

World Water Day - how music can improve sanitation

Web page dated 22 March 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03npvx9>

BBC persists in claiming that the MDGs with easier baselines were agreed in the year of the historic Millennium Declaration

"In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Development Goal was to halve the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation by 2015. We failed spectacularly - by 700 million people"

At 10 minutes 13 seconds

[A Dirty Secret](#)

Radio 4

4 April 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b075pc0h>