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Greenland - far from reaching The United Nations Millennium Development Goal - Why?

By Kåre Hendriksen, Associate professor Ph.d., Arctic Technology Centre, Technical University of Denmark

Far from all households in Greenland have piped water, just as a good part of the population has to leave their black wastewater to plastic containers ('honey buckets'). Consequently Greenland is far from meeting The United Nations Millennium Development Goal. There is a social as well as a geographical inequality. Typically, it is the socially disadvantaged families who do not have running water. Sanitation is a virtually unknown phenomenon in the smaller settlements.

The lack of access to piped water and sewer reflects some key issues:

- It may be technically challenging to ensure adequate water supply at a number of Greenlandic settlements. Large parts of the High Arctic Greenland are desert, and many settlements are located on small islands without large water reserves. Caused by climatic and geophysical conditions, a sewage system are costly to establish and operate, and it requires adequate water supply.
- The political and institutional challenges: water and sanitation in small settlements seem to have a low priority compared to investment in other forms of infrastructure and social facilities in the major cities.
- For all Greenland settlements are all infrastructure like electricity, water, sewage etc. based on island operation. And through the latest decades, the former nationwide technical organization – that were responsible for the establishment and operation of infrastructure – has been divided into sectors in a number of independent companies, with no financial incentive for cooperation. This means that coordinated rationalization gains are not exploited, whereby infrastructure cost, especially in the smaller settlements, will increase significantly.

The factual distribution of households respectively tap water and sewer connections across settlements types will be presented, like the social aspect will be elucidated. It will be discussed why Greenland does not have greater priority to meet The United Nations Millennium Development Goal (which should be within reach), and what can be don to reach the goals.

I would appreciate to be awarded a 40-minute talk, as it will give time to present the factual situation in Greenland and discuss the actual barriers for ensuring water and sanitation for all households.