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Evaluating the Hidden Costs of Drinking Water Treatment Technologies

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Abstract: Drinking water treatment technologies are largely evaluated based on metrics such as contaminant removal efficiency, capital costs, and health impacts. However, the potential for safe water technologies to lead to positive health outcomes depends greatly on user satisfaction, consistent and sustained operation, and financial viability. In this perspective, we argue for the importance of engineering, public health, and economics researchers to assess the “hidden” costs of drinking water treatment technologies, including affordability, labor burden, user acceptance, and the (often) gendered nature of these. Neglecting these factors underestimates the full costs of drinking water treatment technologies and overestimates the potential for treatment options that require substantial behavior change and time to succeed. Here, we present a set of user-centric evaluation criteria for water service providers, practitioners, governments, and other stakeholders to consider when deciding which drinking water treatment technologies to implement, scale-up, or take to market.

Despite the vast resources and time allocated to promoting and deploying safe water technologies and practices, over 2 billion people worldwide still lack access to safely-managed drinking water services¹. Drinking water treatment technologies are typically evaluated for effectiveness through lab testing and small-scale field pilots before being installed in households and communities. In the last few decades, many researchers, companies, and NGOs have promoted safe water products based on narrowly specified criteria. For example, engineers might advocate for particular technologies because they are “low-cost” (e.g., solar water disinfection (SODIS)²) or “simple and user friendly” (e.g., ceramic filters). Despite widespread usage, the definitions of “low-cost” or “user-friendly” remain vague³ in the literature and tend to refer to the technology itself rather than the user experience. Social scientists have led safe water interventions focused on instilling behavior change, raising awareness about the importance of water and hygiene, and educating end-users about health risks. However, these campaigns have often underappreciated the realities of highly limited resources, highly stressed time budgets, and the low capacity for behavior change that results from these conditions⁴. Furthermore, these interventions almost never confront the social stereotypes and consequences of water treatment being considered “women’s work”.

Drinking water treatment technologies targeting the removal of microbial and chemical contaminants have been tested and implemented at various scales, including at the point-of-use

(household or individual scale), point-of-collection (community kiosks, shared water sources), and municipal-scale (centralized water treatment plants). User time burdens may be most obvious in home water treatment technologies but unaccounted-for costs are also present in community-based and piped networked systems, especially when centralized treatment technologies are unreliable or incompatible with intermittently supplied water and electricity failures. Further, most utility-scale evaluations are currently conducted from the supplier's perspective rather than that of the users.

In this paper, we argue that the evaluation criteria of water treatment technologies that researchers, technology developers, and implementers typically use are overly-narrow, underrepresenting the true costs of water treatment technologies to users and decision makers (households, communities, institutions) who choose to invest in safe water. A more comprehensive set of evaluation criteria from the user's perspective would facilitate more realistic and equitable assessment, and help elucidate why so many highly-promoted safe water approaches are abandoned after a short uptake period^{4,5}. The objectives of this paper are to: (1) discuss limitations of existing approaches used to evaluate and select drinking water treatment technologies; (2) present more user-centric evaluation criteria that incorporate neglected costs and burdens of water treatment technologies; and (3) inform future data collection strategies to advance monitoring towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) related to safe water provision.

Dimensions of Existing Evaluation Criteria

Researchers have studied and evaluated drinking water treatment technologies across three main fields: environmental engineering (contaminant removal efficiency, material/energy costs, environmental impact)⁶, public health (adoption and consistent use, reduction in disease burden)^{7,8}, and economics (willingness-to-pay, implementation cost)⁹. While domain-specific evaluations from these fields have been published in the academic literature, there are few existing frameworks for comprehensively evaluating water treatment technologies.

Technical evaluations of water treatment technologies are typically guided by two frameworks developed by the World Health Organization: the Guidelines for Drinking Water Quality¹⁰ and the International Scheme to Evaluate Household Water Treatment Technologies^{11,12}. The Guidelines¹⁰ set health-based standards for microbial, chemical, and radiological contaminants and recommend acceptability thresholds for constituents impacting water taste, odor, and appearance. The International Scheme¹³ ranks household water treatment (HWT) technologies based on their effectiveness at removing bacteria, viruses, and protozoa¹⁴. In addition to these frameworks, a product guide by UNICEF (2020)¹⁵ ranks a range of household filters based on their technical efficacy, flow rate, operation and maintenance, capacity/lifetime, transportability, price, installation, and safe storage. The WHO frameworks and UNICEF product guide primarily focus on water quality and technical performance, omitting any in-depth assessment of user-centric metrics such as time and financial burdens placed on households for proper technology operation and maintenance. Others have put forth broader frameworks^{16,17} to rank HWT technologies, incorporating sustainability (environmental impact, supply chain), technological

performance, financial viability (capital and operating costs), and ease of use. However, these frameworks were designed only for HWT technologies and do not consider gendered burdens.

Health impact evaluations of water treatment technologies typically measure and report field indicators related to water quality (e.g., fecal indicator bacteria concentrations in effluent water), technology usage (e.g., presence of a chlorine residual for chlorination technologies), and health (e.g., under-five child diarrhea prevalence^{18,19}). Field studies of water treatment technologies are often finance-limited, precluding the ability to collect longitudinal data^{20,21} on multi-year technology usage and performance. Furthermore, because severe outcomes of interest such as child mortality are rare, small sample sizes may prevent precise estimation of health benefits. There is ongoing debate on whether infectious disease and child growth outcomes should be the primary foci of water treatment impact evaluations^{22,23}, when access to safe water has other important quality of life benefits such as reduced stress and increased time savings, well-being, and security. Very few water treatment evaluations have measured these non-disease outcomes.

Economic evaluations of water treatment technologies in low- and middle- income countries typically use surveys to document stated willingness to pay (WTP) or sell products to measure effective demand (the ability and willingness to pay). Contingent valuation surveys obtain stated WTP for non-market resources, such as a water treatment technology not yet commercialized or for receiving improved quality of water supplied from a utility²⁴. Since stated WTP can be biased upwards, some economists use revealed preference to value goods and services by measuring consumer behaviors. For example, one could measure the money households spend on fuel to boil water to approximate their WTP for improved water quality^{25,26}. Studies that sell or lease services or products (e.g. at randomized offer prices) are considered to be more robust because they can directly measure effective demand for water treatment technologies (and sustained demand²⁷, if they continue to monitor user payments for services). Generally, real-money auctions have identified very low effective demand for HWT technologies, with most households being unwilling to pay the market price^{28,29}. Evidence suggests that households have higher demand for receiving improved water quality services at the point of consumption^{30,31} (e.g., treated utility water, vended water)³² when they are not responsible for maintaining and operating a treatment technology.

Although a few studies^{33,34} have generated evidence for long-term maintenance costs, these dimensions are rarely included in technology evaluations. This may be the result of challenges to securing funding for conducting long-term follow-up studies after the intervention period ends. Furthermore, these studies do not acknowledge any gender disparities that may exist in decision-making power (regarding purchasing durables or consumables) or responsibilities related to routine operation and maintenance. Decision making by governments, utilities, or other stakeholders for investments in water treatment infrastructure thus tends to be driven by capital cost and technical performance. These evaluations are used to implement new technologies, but neglect critical factors such as unpaid labor and time spent on water treatment, long-term maintenance costs, and user convenience, acceptance, and satisfaction. It is important to develop broader, more comprehensive evaluation criteria to capture these omitted costs because: (i) they

are not equally borne by all people; and (ii) omitted costs can partially explain why technologies fail to be consistently used or scaled up.

Proposed Dimensions of Additional Evaluation Criteria

In this section, we present existing evidence from the literature on affordability, labor burden, user acceptance, and the (often) gendered nature of these. Drawing on this broad literature, we outline appropriate indicators and criteria for evaluating water treatment technologies from a user-centric perspective.

Affordability of water treatment

Whether or not a technology is affordable is dependent both on its *cost* to the user and to the user's *ability* to bear the cost. The global water sector literature often refers to drinking water treatment technologies designed for low-income households, such as chlorine tablets or ceramic filters, as “low-cost” – a term that suggests affordability. There is no clear definition of this widely-used term, however³. The literature, especially work focused on low-income regions, also tends to use stated WTP as proxies for affordability, though stated WTP is unable to distinguish willingness- from ability-to-pay^{35,36}. Affordability has remained a poorly defined aspect of water access, although the data typically show that the poorest pay disproportionately more for service, often having to gain access through informal means³⁶.

In classical microeconomics, the concept of water “affordability” considers water as just one good among many in the household budget³⁷. Most actual affordability measures are therefore presented as ratios, with some measure of household income or total household expenditures as the denominator³⁸. The most commonly-used measure is the Conventional Affordability Ratio (CAR), or the average household water bill, plus any additional financial costs incurred in storing and treating water^{39,40}, divided by household income, household expenditures, or, when estimated for a region, the median household income. A more nuanced measure is the Potential Affordability Ratio (PAR), or the cost of an essential-needs or “lifeline” water volume⁴¹ divided by the same denominator used to calculate CAR. Some analysts prefer the PAR to the CAR because a lifeline water volume is the more appropriate way in which to judge affordability, though what that level should be is usually a social and political negotiation⁴². In these measures, water costs are often defined as ongoing costs, which may not include capital costs such as drilling a private well or installing a rooftop storage tank. Counting the full lifecycle costs of ensuring safe drinking water would make for more realistic affordability ratios, but these are difficult to calculate in practice⁴³. The calculated affordability ratios are compared to a threshold or benchmark ratio, ranging from 1.5% to 3% of household income depending on the agency setting the threshold; a ratio above the threshold is considered “unaffordable”.

A key critique of both the CAR and PAR measures is that their denominator, measured as income or expenditures, does not account for non-discretionary essential expenses such as rent and food. From the human right to water perspective, water is not “affordable” if paying for safe water forces

a household to cut down on other essential expenses⁴⁴. In the Residual Income Approach (RIA), a concept borrowed from the affordable housing literature⁴⁵, the affordability ratio is calculated using the cost paid for water relative to household income less essential expenses. Another critique of affordability measures where the household is analyzed as a homogeneous unit is that affordability is, in practice, not gender-neutral. Insights from feminist research have helped unpack the complex social relationships that mediate control of water as well as money⁴⁶. This literature argues that the commodification of domestic water (and, by extension, water treatments) marginalizes women who may not control the household budget for purchasing water or water treatment methods⁴⁷.

Going forward, we recommend collecting data to calculate the PAR as an improvement over characterizing a technology as “low-cost”, a blanket term that lacks an expenses denominator. The PAR is a better measure than the CAR because it can be calculated at a human-rights compatible volume of water, such as 50 liters per person per day⁴⁸ (or another agreed-upon lifeline volume). A measure such as CAR might find safe water affordable even if households are under-consuming water in order to keep other costs down³⁸. Measuring consumed volume is a challenge when there is no piped water supply, but studies have shown that it can be estimated^{49,50}. Although an RIA-type approach is more compatible with the human rights foundations of the Sustainable Development Goals, this measure is more demanding of data, and data collection is itself a non-trivial cost. Overall, a PAR-type measure is more feasible for low-income settings. Both the CAR and the PAR can be used to determine the level of subsidies, if needed, to make water treatments more affordable for the median household.

Table 1. Measures of Water Affordability

| Measure | Formula | Limitations |
|---|--|--|
| Conventional Affordability Ratio (CAR) ^{39,40} | $\frac{* \textit{Cost of water consumed}}{** \textit{Household income or expenditures}}$ | Does not consider that households may use less water than needed Ignores essential expenses such as food and rent |
| Potential Affordability Ratio (PAR) ⁴¹ | $\frac{\textit{Cost of lifeline water volume}}{\textit{Household income or expenditures}}$ | Difficult to agree upon a lifeline water volume*** Ignores essential expenses such as food and rent |
| Residual Income Approach (RIA) ⁴⁵ | $\frac{\textit{Cost of water consumed}}{(\textit{Household income} - \textit{food and rent costs})}$ | Does not consider that households may use less water than needed High data collection costs |

* Cost of water consumed includes the water bill and cost of water storage and treatment

** Regional median values of household income or expenditures could also be used as the denominators for CAR and PAR

*** Lifeline volume refers to the first tier of utility-supplied water (at a low or zero cost) to meet people's essential needs, sometimes declared to be 50L per person per day⁴⁸

Labor burden of water treatment

Social norms in many countries dictate that women (and girls) be the primary parties responsible for storing and treating drinking water^{51–53}, though there are exceptions⁵⁴. That women are likely to be responsible for safe treatment and management of domestic water is routinely taken for granted at national and international policy levels⁵⁵. The “enabling” components of sustained water treatment programs, such as education, peer-to-peer outreach, or community mobilization³, mostly target women and these programmatic costs are rarely quantified. HWT is most obviously “women’s work”, but treated water provided even at utility or community-scales often calls for some degree of gendered labor (e.g., storing and managing water provided intermittently).

Data collected to assess the impact of safe water technologies treat the household as the relevant unit of analysis, and do not disaggregate labor costs by sex within the household. If the labor is unpaid, as domestic labor tends to be, it may not be counted at all. The general paucity of sex-disaggregated data^{52,56} makes it difficult to estimate who within the household may have preferential access to safe water, and whose labor goes into collecting, storing and treating water. Social expectations that managing water is women’s work, combined with safe water technology evaluations that neglect any unpaid labor costs to use and maintain the technology, inadvertently lead to more, and uncounted, work for (mainly) women and girls. In effect, impact evaluations that are gender-blind support technologies that are gender-unequal⁵⁷.

Several studies discuss women’s labor in relation to drinking water, but the vast majority of these focus on fetching water. With few exceptions^{58,59}, the health impacts of a female body doing the work that is elsewhere done by pipes are not analyzed; this is in stark contrast to the several thousand studies that carefully estimate the health impacts of (un)safe water on children. Only a few studies^{21,60–62} reported on the effort and time needed to treat water, separately from the effort of collecting and storing it. However, studies in Zambia⁶³, Morocco⁶⁴, Brazil⁶⁵, and India⁶⁶ report measurable time savings for women upgrading from less reliable mostly untreated water supplies to at-home or reliable piped water supplies⁶⁶. The labor burden associated with operation and maintenance of standard HWT technologies can be approximated by summing the active and waiting time periods involved in treatment practices (**Table 2**). Based on these time values, treating enough water to meet a household’s basic needs could take up to *several hours per day* (using a daily treated average of 50 L/person for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and hygiene). Even if households treat water only for drinking (spending approximately 30-60 minutes daily), additional time is still required to clean the treatment systems and water storage containers and to procure any necessary consumables (e.g., filter media, fuel) on a recurring basis.

Table 2: Characterizing labor burdens associated with HWT technologies

| Household Water Treatment Technology* | Standard treatment steps** (active user input and waiting times as well as flow rates are shown in blue) | Environmental conditions or maintenance needs |
|---|---|--|
| Boiling ⁶⁷ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bring a pot of water to a rolling boil for 1 minute (time to boil ranges widely (2-12 minutes), based on water volume, pot material/shape, starting temperature, power source). 2. Wait 30-45 minutes for water to cool naturally to room temperature and store in containers. | fuel/power source (wood, coal, gas, electricity), storage containers |
| Solar Disinfection (SoDis) ⁶⁸ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fill multiple bottles with water and expose to sunlight for at least 6 hours (if sunny) or 2 days (if cloudy) | sunlight, plastic bottles |
| Coagulation + filtration | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add coagulant to water and stir vigorously for 10 minutes 2. Wait 30 minutes and filter water through cloth into storage container | dispose settled flocs, coagulant procurement, storage container |
| Flocculation + chlorination (e.g., PUR packets) ⁶⁰ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add one PUR packet into 10L of water and stir for 5 minutes 2. Wait 5 minutes for solids to setting and filter water through cloth into storage container 3. Wait 20 minutes (contact time) before first use | PUR packet refills, storage container |
| Solid Tablet or Liquid Chlorination (e.g., Aquatabs ⁶⁹ or Waterguard ⁷⁰) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add 1-2 chlorine tablets (or 1 cap-full, 3mL liquid chlorine) into 20L water and shake or stir 2. Wait 30 minutes (contact time) before first use | low turbidity water, chlorine refills, storage container |
| UV Disinfection | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fill water container 2. Turn device on (average flow rate: ranges widely based on device) | low turbidity water, electricity, UV lamp refills, storage container |
| Biosand Filters ¹⁵ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pour water into filter 2. Wait for gravity-driven flow of water through filter (average flow rate: 15 L/h) 3. Collect water in storage vessel below | when flow rates are reduced below user acceptability, manually swirl top layer of sand, dump out dirty water, and clean the diffuser plate, outlet tube, and lid (cleaning frequency ranges on order of weeks to months) |
| Gravity-driven membrane filters (e.g., Lifestraw 2.0) ¹⁵ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pour water slowly into pre-filter mesh 2. Wait for gravity-driven flow of water through the filter (average. flow rate: 9 -12 L/h) 3. Collect water in storage vessel below | backwash every 2-3 days, replace membranes, storage container |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Ceramic filters (e.g., candle or pot) ¹⁵ | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pour water into filter 2. Wait for gravity-driven flow of water through filter (average flow rate: 2 - 5 L/h) 3. Collect water in storage vessel below | brush ceramic candle/pot and bucket bi-weekly, replace fragile ceramic candles, storage container |
|--|---|---|

* The treatment technologies presented here have variable removal efficiencies for protozoa, bacteria, and viruses and will require proper maintenance and upkeep of water storage containers. Most of the technologies also do not remove chemical contaminants, with the exception of filters.

** Treatment steps were summarized based on technology user manuals.

Monetizing non-market “care work”⁷¹ could facilitate greater emphasis on the time burden for women, but remains controversial. Some studies value women’s water-work at the minimum wage; others use a fraction of the minimum wage to impute a more modest value, especially where actual employment options could be low⁷². A second option is to estimate the time cost of managing a technology, and valuing it at some fraction of the median or average hourly wage for “unskilled” work⁷³. A third option is to value women’s labor by a fraction of the average hourly wage by income quintile; this method acknowledges earnings differentials across socio-economic strata but implicitly places a higher value on the labor of higher-income strata⁶⁶. All three options are rooted in the opportunity cost of domestic work. A fourth option is to consider the replacement cost value of care work, meaning, estimating how much someone else would have to be paid to do the work that is otherwise done “for free”⁷⁴, or how much would have to be paid to purchase an equivalent good or service (e.g., treated water from tankers).

Stress caused by having to treat water (on top of the existing stress of managing and rationing in water-deprived areas) is another important dimension to characterize. Research on poverty and on scarcity overall has argued that people who are always short of money, time, or both, suffer levels of background stress that then act as a “bandwidth tax”⁷⁵. In the case of water treatment, the “bandwidth tax” may result in women failing to use chlorine daily, maintain a water filter, or boil water, because adding one more time commitment to a day already filled with chores and anxieties can be overwhelming (**Table 2**)⁷⁶. A sustainable water treatment system would then be one that does not add to this “tax” but is able to alleviate it. To our knowledge, no studies of maintaining and using safe water technologies have accounted for stress impacts on the user.

Going forward, we recommend collecting data on the unpaid time costs borne by users of safe water systems, at all relevant scales. Specifically, we propose that nationally representative household survey programs (e.g., Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) include questions to capture the gender of the primary duty bearer for water treatment and the time spent on all water management practices (including fetching, treatment, and storage). We urge future research to take seriously the unique stressors faced by low-income families and characterize the stress burdens on women that are imposed by, or alleviated by, effective water treatment technologies. We also suggest that, should such labor be monetized, the replacement cost method be used since it is usually closer to the market value of care work than an arbitrary fraction of an arbitrarily-picked wage – especially where women’s earning opportunities are limited.

User acceptance of water treatment

User adoption and preferences have been documented mainly for water treatment approaches at the household, or point-of-use (POU) scale. The most common of these are: boiling, filtration (biosand, ceramic, membrane, etc.), disinfection (UV, solar, chlorine, etc.), and coagulation/flocculation. Proponents of HWT technologies claim that they: (i) are cost- and time-effective in comparison to establishing centralized treatment infrastructure⁷⁷; (ii) empower underserved communities to take water quality into their own hands¹⁷; (iii) have the potential to meet WHO guidelines for drinking water quality⁷⁸, and (iv) can address upstream recontamination of intermittent water supplies. Advocates in favor of “point-of-collection” community- and utility-scale treatment⁷⁶ argue that HWT schemes could divert attention and resources⁷⁹ from advancing access to piped water supplies and are limited by inconsistent adoption^{5,80}, which prevents the realization of desired health impacts⁸¹.

Researchers have developed different methods and frameworks to define and operationalize “usage”, “uptake”, “adoption”, “compliance”, and “adherence”. Although the terms “compliance” and “adherence” are often used interchangeably to characterize the extent of HWT technology use, researchers define these terms variously as the frequency of use of treated water⁸², proportion of drinking water treated⁸³, proportion of treated water consumed⁸⁴, or correct, consistent, and sustained use of HWT technologies⁸⁰. Furthermore, these terms put the burden of intervention success (or failure) on the user rather than on the implementers and designers⁸⁵. Reygadas et al⁸⁶ present a framework that builds on components including adoption (initial acceptance), knowledge, resource access, habit, and exclusive use, defined distinctly for procuring and consuming treated water. Daniel et al.⁸⁷ characterize HWT adoption by analyzing the interactions between different socio-environmental characteristics and behavioral determinants (e.g., existing pre-intervention HWT technologies, perceived water quality threat, access to piped scheme). Sobsey et al.¹⁷ estimate user adoption using self-reported or measured data collected during or after installation and rank technologies based on “sustainability criteria” factors impacting HWT adoption and sustained use (e.g., supply chain requirements, water volume produced, treatment cost, ease of use and time treating water). The evaluation literature has not converged on a single definition of “adoption”, though correct and consistent use are essential for these approaches to yield health benefits⁸⁸.

Existing evaluations of HWT technologies have collected extensive data on the regularity and extent of user adoption. Significant reductions in user adoption have been measured in households using solar disinfection in Nepal (78% adoption during-study compared to < 9% post-study)⁸⁹ and UV disinfection in Mexico (68% device acquisition compared to 40% exclusive use during intervention periods).⁹⁰ Recent evaluations of HWT technologies^{21,91} found that confirmed use (i.e., observed treated water presence initially and after 9-14 months) declined for biosand filters in Nicaragua (95% to 78%), electrochlorinators in Haiti (39% to 13%), and ceramic-bromine filters in both Kenya (89% to 68%) and Haiti (93% to 50%). Other studies have raised concerns about the need for high sustained usage of HWT to generate health benefits.^{79,80,83,84} Notably, HWT products did not reduce child diarrhea prevalence in two recent large-scale randomized

trials in Kenya and Zimbabwe^{8,92}. We note that, as discussed above, the burden of consistently using treatment technologies within households (and many communities) falls on women, though this gender aspect usually goes unmentioned in studies that have quantified user adoption.

In addition to user adoption, researchers have also collected data on the interlinked concepts of *user preference, acceptability, and satisfaction*. Researchers have measured these concepts by asking users to: (i) rank product preference^{93,94}; (ii) describe products' aesthetic and aspirational design appeal, convenience and ease of use, and connection to social status or cultural/religious beliefs⁹⁵; (iii) rank or describe perceptions of drinking water quality based on water taste, odor, and appearance⁹⁶; and (iv) share perception of risks associated with untreated water⁹⁷. Broadly speaking, these various studies suggest that HWT technologies requiring extensive time for consistent use (such as manual chlorination or SODIS) are often not preferred. Few to no studies have carefully documented the technical skills required for HWT technology installation, operation, maintenance, and repairs, and the availability of reliable local material supply chains and manufacturing capacity for HWT products.

The same indicators used to evaluate user preferences and satisfaction for HWT technologies can be applied at the community- or utility- scale. However, we found only one study⁹⁸ that measured users' willingness to contribute money or time towards the operation and maintenance of community-owned groundwater defluoridation plants in India. A majority of drinking water treatment plants are currently evaluated from the perspective of the utility or provider. The International Benchmarking Network for Water and Sanitation Utilities provides data⁹⁹ on indicators relating to water service coverage (water production/consumption, service quality, piped network performance, non-revenue water), financial performance (revenue, operational expenses, tariffs, assets/investments, poverty indicators, cost), and customers (residential/commercial/institutional users, population served). Affordability metrics have traditionally been concerned with setting tariffs so they can cover the cost of service³⁸, which is also a utility-centric perspective. We note that some metrics, such as non-revenue water from a free lifeline volume, are preferable from a utility perspective when the non-revenue water allowance is low, but could be preferable from a low-income user perspective when the allowance is higher; this is one example of how evaluations that center the provider can be in conflict with evaluations that center the user. In order to develop solutions to context-specific water supply challenges, utility managers, community operators, and policymakers need more information about costs and benefits from the user perspective.

Going forward, we recommend that all evaluations of drinking water treatment technologies implemented at the household-, community-, or utility-scale include indicators (or rankings) of user acceptability and taste, especially when alternative water sources are available. We also recommend transparency on how "adoption" or correct and consistent use is being defined, how its extent is measured, and who is expected to do the work of adoption. If reported use is the main measure, it should be asked with reference to water most recently collected or currently stored for drinking, and ideally supplemented by observational indicators (e.g., is water currently in the

treatment device) or water quality measurements (e.g., chlorine residual measured in drinking water to be consumed by users)¹⁰⁰.

Towards A User-Centric Evaluation Approach

The literature on safe drinking water has already shown that many existing drinking water treatment technologies have not achieved widespread adoption at different scales (in particular HWT). In this perspective we (partly) explain these failures as a consequence of their designers' and evaluators' incomplete acknowledgment of their user costs and experiences. In **Table 3**, we propose a minimum set of user-centric criteria to more accurately evaluate the (gendered) user burdens associated with water treatment in terms of affordability, time, and labor. Additionally, we include specific evaluation indicators related to real-world performance, financial viability, and user acceptance and uptake of water treatment technologies. We hope these criteria will lead to water treatment options that minimize the time burdens of treatment and maintenance, and for which realistic measures of affordability can be estimated. While we place user experience at the center of the evaluation process, we recognize the importance of consulting additional stakeholders (e.g., local leaders or government officials) to solicit feedback on the feasibility of, and potential negative consequences of, a water treatment technology prior to implementation. We believe these proposed evaluation criteria are particularly important for technology developers, companies, service providers, and governments who make decisions about what types of treatment technologies to commercialize and implement, which then create the choice set that users (households, communities, institutions) have when they want to invest in safer water. For example, including the indicators outlined in **Table 3** when choosing a water treatment technology could better facilitate efforts to meet UN-SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and simultaneous efforts towards other synergistic goals including good health and well-being (UN-SDG 3). Estimating the unpaid labor costs borne by women and girls to use and maintain drinking water treatment technologies is compatible with the goal of gender equality (UN-SDG 5). Such considerations can avoid the promotion of water treatment technologies that purport to be gender-blind but are, in fact, gender-unequal.

We believe that the user-centric evaluation approach proposed herein can help integrate research conducted across different fields and further strengthen the methods currently used in engineering, public health, and economic evaluations of drinking water treatment technologies. Establishing comprehensive evaluation criteria to guide the development of new water treatment technologies is especially salient with increased attention to novel chemical contaminants in global drinking water supplies (e.g., microplastics, per- and poly-fluoroalkyl compounds, pharmaceuticals, other micropollutants). In addition to establishing drinking water quality guidelines and standards, international regulatory agencies have a critical role to play in promoting more comprehensive, gender-sensitive guidelines for evaluating water treatment technologies. Researchers and international agencies should also play a more proactive role in making their evaluations transparent and accessible; many low-income markets are currently selling ineffective water treatment devices that users think “treat” their water.

Increasing financial investments in monitoring and evaluation programs that leverage participatory research methods may aid in data collection efforts to characterize – and make more transparent – the effectiveness, unpaid costs, benefits, and risks from the end-user standpoint. In turn, incorporating user preferences, gender-specific stress and labor burdens, long-term maintenance needs, and realistic affordability ratios into future drinking water treatment evaluations will help the development and adoption of technologies that are more likely to equitably and sustainably increase safe water access.

Table 3: Minimum Set of Criteria and Indicators for Evaluating Water Treatment Technologies

| Criteria Dimensions | Indicators | Potential data sources (or data collection methods) |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Affordability | Potential Affordability Ratio (PAR) (PAR = Cost of lifeline water volume divided by household income or expenditures) | Prices at local store for consumables, water bills Household income and expenditures data from publicly available household surveys (e.g., Demographic Health Surveys) |
| Effective Demand | Willingness and ability to pay (\$) for capital and operation costs | Sales data Real-money auctions (e.g., take-it-or-leave-it at randomized price points, Becker-DeGroot-Marschak) Contingent valuation surveys |
| Labor Burden | Daily time required to operate technology to treat household's essential water needs | Technology user operation manual User surveys of time spent on water treatment and by whom |
| | Gender of primary duty bearer for using water treatment technology | Surveys with active users |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| User Acceptance | Consistent Use (e.g., treatment technology is being used on most recently collected water for drinking) | Evaluations or surveys with active users Water quality, source type, and treatment data from publicly available household surveys (e.g., Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) |
| | User satisfaction with technology, and with taste, odor, and sight of treated water | Evaluations or surveys with active users |
| Technical Performance | Contaminant removal efficiency | Lab experiments Field pilots |
| Health Impact | Relative reduction in diarrhea prevalence or enteric pathogen infection burden | Surveys of users Collection and analysis of human samples Hospital data |
| | Stress caused by responsibility for water treatment | Interviews and focus groups to understand stressors |

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