

October 2008 action:

Unclogging the sanitation crisis

RESULTS
the power to end hunger and poverty

“Without sanitation, disease control and poverty eradication are impossible. Without accelerated progress towards meeting the 2015 Sanitation Goal, none of the other MDGs will be achievable either.”

Tackling a global crisis: International Year of Sanitation 2008 (published by UN Water, 2008)

TAKE ACTION: In the run up to World Toilet Day (19 November 2008), write a letter to a local or national paper to draw attention to the global sanitation crisis.

Introduction

There are 2.6 billion people in the world today for whom a toilet represents a life-changing dream, a dream of better health, higher incomes, more education, higher social status, greater societal inclusion, a cleaner living environment and, for children, a better chance of living to celebrate their fifth birthdays.

Sanitation for all requires neither colossal sums of money nor scientific breakthroughs. Using existing, proven approaches and technologies, and for about US\$ 10 billion a year – less than one percent of global military expenditure – the world could meet the MDG sanitation goal (to halve the number of people living without access to basic sanitation by 2015). Just 10 years later, by 2025 it is possible that everyone could have a toilet to use.

The scale of the problem

Latest indications show that some 2.6 billion people, more than 40% of the world's population do not have access to basic sanitation. Moreover the MDG on sanitation remains the furthest off track with many predicting that on current trends it will likely not be met in some regions until the 22nd century. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia remain most off track with sub-Saharan Africa likely to have 91 million more un-served in 2015 than was the case in 2004. Although an additional 1.1 billion people gained access to sanitation since 1990, the overall number of people without access to sanitation actually increased by 30% - making sanitation one of the few MDG targets where the trend is regressive i.e. the problem is getting worse.

The problem of poor sanitation looks likely to be further exacerbated in the future as continued population growth and rapid urbanisation mean that

within thirty years up to one-in-three people will live in slums with inadequate or no sanitation.

Why sanitation matters

Sanitation is a vital goal in itself but it is also a prerequisite for achieving other goals. The lack of progress in sanitation is severely hampering progress towards meeting other MDGs, most notably in poverty reduction, infant and maternal mortality rates and gender parity in education.

- *Sanitation is vital for human health*

Readers of 'The Lancet' – a prestigious medical journal were recently asked to name the greatest medical advance in the last century and a half. Their conclusion: better sanitation.

1.8 million people die every year from diarrhoeal diseases, the vast majority being children in the developing world. Improved sanitation can reduce the morbidity rate associated with diarrhoea by up to 32%, helping to prevent many thousands of unnecessary deaths every year. It is also worth considering that in sub-Saharan Africa more than half of all hospital beds are occupied by patients suffering from preventable diarrhoeal disease. Improving sanitation would free up precious money and resources which could be spent on other pressing health issues.

Though less life-threatening, the problem of intestinal worms is particularly acute in many parts of the developing world, with around 130 million cases every year. These worms have a particularly adverse effect on the health of children and can lead to the loss of up to one-third of the nutrient value of their food, often leading to severe malnutrition.

There are also strong links between poor sanitation and acute respiratory infections such as pneumonia and other communicable diseases including TB.

- *Sanitation promotes human dignity and social development*

Lack of adequate sanitation forces millions of people to defecate in the open. Aside from the obvious health implications of doing so, it is a source of personal embarrassment and can reduce their social standing in their communities. Poor women and girls often face further risks of sexual harassment and rape in using shared toilet facilities or relieving themselves in the open.

Inadequate sanitation in schools has led to wide gender discrepancies in primary school completion. Where no toilet facilities are set aside for girls, parents often won't allow their daughters to attend school. This is especially true once they have started menstruating and need somewhere safe and discrete to attend to their needs. Such factors have resulted in one-in-four girls dropping out of school compared to a figure of one-in-seven for boys. It is estimated that over 190 million school days would be gained each year if the sanitation goal were met

- *Sanitation is a sound investment*

Compelling, evidence based analysis shows that sanitation is among the most cost-effective interventions available to developing countries. It has been calculated that \$3.8 billion is needed every year to achieve the sanitation MDG target in off track countries, the economic benefits of making this investment are thought to be in the region of \$35 billion. This means that sanitation investments yield a return rate of \$9.10 for every \$1 invested, a remarkable rate of return by any standard.

Why are we failing?

- *Inadequate prioritisation*

Governments in developing countries have failed to give adequate attention to sanitation in their national development plans, often considering sanitation to be a household responsibility and not the responsibility of the national government. Very few countries make specific budgetary provisions for sanitation, with sanitation funding often grouped into the broader

category of water and sanitation, with the lion's share earmarked for water. Donor governments have also failed to adequately prioritise sanitation as is made evident by looking at the amount of aid allocated to it.

- *Inadequate investment*

Although international aid has been steadily rising, the share of that aid going to sanitation has actually been falling, a factor which must be immediately remedied if progress is to be made. Although disaggregated data on DFIDs spending on sanitation is difficult to come by, it is estimated that less than 1.5% of its overseas development aid goes towards sanitation.

- *Inequitable coverage*

Sanitation services invariably fail to reach the poorest and most vulnerable people. What little investment in sanitation there is often focuses on large-scale sewerage systems and piped networks that tend to benefit wealthier urban areas. Resources often go towards improving existing networks rather than expanding access to rural or urban slum areas which rarely benefit those living in rural or urban slum areas.

Poor sector co-ordination and monitoring at the global level has resulted in a failure to target aid at the poorest countries with the lowest levels of access to sanitation. From 2002-2006, Least Developed Countries received less than a quarter of available aid for sanitation whilst middle-income countries received a significantly larger share.

What needs to be done?

- National governments and the donor community must urgently redress the low levels of financing and priority afforded to the sanitation sector
- Appropriate mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that sanitation services reach the poorest and most vulnerable
- Developing countries need to make a serious commitment to addressing weak sector governance at the local level. They should urgently address the weaknesses of agencies that are responsible for delivering sanitation
- Global leaders must step up to their responsibilities with renewed vigour and determination