

Fact Sheet

Water: A Matter of Life and Death

There are more than one billion people who lack access to a steady supply of clean water. There are 2.4 billion people — more than a third of the world's population — who do not have access to proper sanitation. The results are devastating:

- ◆ More than 2.2 million people, mostly in developing countries, die each year from diseases associated with poor water and sanitary conditions.
- ◆ 6,000 children die every day from diseases that can be prevented by improved water and sanitation.
- ◆ Over 250 million people suffer from such diseases every year.

Access to water and sanitation, so crucial for human well-being and development, has now become a priority for the international community. To underscore the need for immediate action, the United Nations has designated 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater.

Although essential, freshwater is unevenly distributed: while 70 per cent of the world's surface is covered by water, 97.5 per cent of that is salt water. And of the remaining 2.5 per cent that is freshwater, almost three quarters of that is frozen in ice caps.

While in most regions there is still enough water to meet everyone's needs, it needs to be properly managed and used. In today's world, much water is wasted or used inefficiently, and often demand is growing faster than the supply can be replenished by nature. While competition over water resources can be a source of conflict, history has shown that shared water can also be a catalyst for cooperation.

Key Statistics

- ◆ About 70 per cent of all available freshwater is used for agriculture. Yet because of inefficient irrigation systems, particularly in developing countries, 60 per cent of this water is lost to evaporation or is returned to rivers and groundwater aquifers.
- ◆ Water withdrawals for irrigation have increased by over 60 per cent since 1960.
- ◆ About 40 per cent of the world's population currently lives in areas with moderate-to-high water stress. By 2025, it is estimated that about two thirds of the world's population — about 5.5 billion people — will live in areas facing such water stress.
- ◆ More and more of the world is facing water shortages, particularly in North Africa and Western and South Asia.
- ◆ Water use increased six-fold during the last century, more than twice the rate of population growth.
- ◆ Water losses due to leakage, illegal water hook-ups and waste total about 50 per cent of the amount of water used for drinking in developing countries.
- ◆ About 90 per cent of sewage and 70 per cent of industrial wastes in developing countries are discharged without treatment, often polluting the usable water supply.
- ◆ Freshwater ecosystems have been severely degraded: about half the world's wetlands have been lost and more than 20 per cent of the world's 10,000 known freshwater species are extinct.

- ◆ In areas such as the United States, China and India, groundwater is being consumed faster than it is being replenished, and groundwater tables are steadily falling. Some rivers, such as the Colorado River in the western United States and the Yellow River in China, often run dry before they reach the sea.
- ◆ The task of carrying water in many rural areas falls to women and children, who often must walk miles each day to get water for their family. Women and girls also tend to suffer the most as a result of the lack of sanitation facilities.
- ◆ At any one time, half of the world's hospital beds are occupied by patients suffering from water-borne diseases.
- ◆ During the 1990s, about 835 million people in developing countries gained access to safe drinking water, and about 784 million gained access to sanitation facilities.

Meeting the Global Targets

The 147 world leaders who attended the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 adopted the target of 2015 for halving the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, countries agreed to a parallel goal to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without proper sanitation.

The cost of upgrading water supply and sanitation to meet basic human needs in developing countries is

estimated to run about \$20 billion a year — current spending in those countries totals about \$10 billion each year.

Estimates for the level of global investment required in all forms of water-related infrastructure vary widely, although there is wide agreement that the present investment level of \$70-80 billion a year needs to be substantially increased. According to some estimates, up to \$180 billion is required annually.

While there is agreement on the urgent need to improve water management, there are policy differences regarding how best to do this. Some contend that access to clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right for which governments are obligated to provide services. Others maintain that water is an economic good that should be provided in the most cost-effective way, including market-driven schemes and privatization of certain components of water delivery as options. Many governments have pursued a hybrid approach.

Countries that have concentrated efforts on improving access to water and sanitation have made progress. In South Africa, for example, 14 million people out of a total population of 42 million lacked access to clean drinking water in 1994. But in seven years, South Africa has halved the number of people who lack access to safe water — ahead of schedule. If the present targets are met, South Africa aims to provide everyone with clean drinking water and sanitation by 2008.