

World water and sanitation crisis urgently needs a Global Action Plan

The 2006 Human Development Report calls for 20 litres of clean water a day for all as a human right

Cape Town, 9 November 2006—A Global Action Plan under G8 leadership is urgently needed to resolve a growing water and sanitation crisis that causes nearly two million child deaths every year, says the 2006 Human Development Report, released here today.

Across much of the developing world, unclean water is an immeasurably greater threat to human security than violent conflict, according to the Report, entitled *Beyond scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*.

Each year, the authors report, 1.8 million children die from diarrhoea that could be prevented with access to clean water and a toilet; 443 million school days are lost to water-related illnesses; and almost 50 percent of all people in developing countries are suffering at any given time from a health problem caused by a lack of water and sanitation. To add to these human costs, the crisis in water and sanitation holds back economic growth, with sub-Saharan Africa losing five percent of GDP annually—far more than the region receives in aid.

Yet unlike wars and natural disasters, this global crisis does not galvanise concerted international action, says the 2006 Human Development Report (HDR). “Like hunger, it is a silent emergency experienced by the poor and tolerated by those with the resources, the technology and the political power to end it,” says the Report. With less than a decade left to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, this needs to change, stress the authors.

G8 countries must take action

“When it comes to water and sanitation, the world suffers from a surplus of conference activity and a deficit of credible action. The diversity of international actors has militated against the development of strong international champions for water and sanitation,” says Kevin Watkins, lead author of the 2006 Human Development Report.

“National governments need to draw up credible plans and strategies for tackling the crisis in water and sanitation. But we also need a Global Action Plan—with active buy-in from the G8 countries—to focus fragmented international efforts to mobilize resources and galvanize political action by putting water and sanitation front and centre on the development agenda,” he says.

The Action Plan would act as a ‘virtual mechanism,’ says the Report, which cites the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—run by a small secretariat with minimal bureaucracy—as a useful reference point.

“I fully support the call for a Global Action Plan to tackle the growing water and sanitation crisis,” said UNDP Administrator Kemal Derviş. “As the 2006 Human Development Report highlights, each one of the eight Millennium Development Goals is inextricably tied to the next, so if we fail on the water and sanitation goal, hope of reaching the other seven rapidly fades.

“Either we take concerted action now to bring clean water and sanitation to the world’s poor, or we consign millions of people to lives of avoidable poverty, poor health and diminished opportunities, and perpetuate deep inequalities within and between countries. And we have a collective responsibility to succeed,” he said.

Governments should spend 1% GDP on water and sanitation

The HDR 2006 recommends that in addition to creating a Global Action Plan, the following three foundations are crucial for success:

1. **Make water a human right—and mean it:** “Everyone should have at least 20 litres of clean water per day and the poor should get it for free,” says the Report: While a person in the UK or USA sends 50 litres down the

drain each day by simply flushing their toilet, many poor people survive on less than five litres of contaminated water per day, according to HDR research.

The Report advocates for all governments to go beyond vague constitutional principles in enabling legislation to secure the human right to a secure, accessible and affordable supply of water. At a minimum, this implies a target of at least 20 litres of clean water a day for every citizen—and at no cost for those too poor to pay, stress the authors.

2. Draw up national strategies for water and sanitation: Governments should aim to spend a minimum of one percent GDP on water and sanitation, and enhance equity, the authors urge: Water and sanitation suffer from chronic under-funding. Public spending is typically less than 0.5 percent of GDP. Research for the 2006 HDR shows that this figure is dwarfed by military spending: In Ethiopia, for example, the military budget is 10 times the water and sanitation budget—in Pakistan, 47 times.

The Report's authors urge all governments to prepare national plans for accelerating progress in water and sanitation, with ambitious targets backed with financing to the tune of at least one percent of GDP, and clear strategies for overcoming inequalities.

3. Increased international aid: The Report calls for an extra US\$3.4 billion to \$4 billion annually: Development assistance has fallen in real terms over the past decade, but to bring the MDG on water and sanitation into reach, aid flows will have to double, says the Report.

It states that progress in water and sanitation requires large upfront investments with a very long payback period, so innovative financing strategies like the International Finance Facility are essential. This would be money well-spent, according to the authors, who estimate the economic return in saved time, increased productivity and reduced health costs at \$8 for each \$1 invested in achieving the water and sanitation target.

What could progress mean for the poor?

The 2006 HDR estimates the total additional cost of achieving the MDG on access to water and sanitation—to be sourced domestically and internationally—at about \$10 billion a year. “The \$10 billion price tag for the MDG seems a large sum—but it has to be put in context. It represents less than five days’ worth of global military spending and less than half what rich countries spend each year on mineral water,” says the Report.

The human-development gains would be immense, stress the authors. The Report shows that closing the gap between current trends and the MDG target on water and sanitation would save more than one million children’s lives over the next decade and bring total economic benefits of about \$38 billion annually. The benefits for Sub-Saharan Africa—about \$15 billion—would represent 60 percent of its 2003 aid flows.

As it now stands, the world is on schedule to reach the MDG on access to water—largely because of strong progress in China and India—but only two regions, East Asia and Latin America, are on track for sanitation. Moreover, this global picture masks real problems: On current trends sub-Saharan Africa will reach the water target in 2040 and the sanitation target in 2076. For sanitation South Asia is four years off track, and for water the Arab States are 27 years off track.

Measured on a country-by-country basis, this means that 234 million people will miss the water target, with 55 countries off track, and 430 million people will not reach the sanitation target, with 74 countries off track, says the Report.

“Can the world afford to meet the costs of accelerated progress towards water and sanitation provision?” asks lead author Watkins. “The more appropriate question is: Can the world afford not to make the investments?”

Cost of the crisis

“Delivering clean water, removing waste water, and providing sanitation are three of the most basic foundations for human progress,” says the 2006 HDR. But 1.1 billion people do not have access to water, and 2.6 billion do not have access to sanitation.

The Report adds: “ ‘Not having access to clean water’ is a euphemism for profound deprivation. It means that people walk more than one kilometre to the nearest source of clean water for drinking, that they collect water from drains, ditches or streams that might be infected with pathogens and bacteria that can cause severe illness and death.”

‘No access to sanitation’ means that in slums like Kibera, outside the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, people defecate in plastic bags—known colloquially as ‘flying toilets’—and throw them into open sewers in the street because they have no other option.

And the poorer you are, the more you pay for clean water, according to HDR research: The poorest households of El Salvador, Jamaica and Nicaragua spend on average over 10 percent of their income on water. In the United Kingdom, spending three percent of family income on water is considered the hardship threshold.

Indeed, HDR 2006 highlights huge disparities in the prices that people pay for water. People living in urban slums typically pay 5-10 times more per litre than people living in high-income areas. And people living in the poorest parts of cities like Accra and Manila pay more than the residents of London, New York and Paris.

One-third of all people without access to water fall below the \$1-a-day absolute poverty threshold. Another third live on no more than \$2 a day. In sanitation, the poorest two-fifths of households in the world account for more than half the global deficit, according to the 2006 HDR. These figures are not evidence of causation—people might lack water and sanitation because they are poor, or they might be poor because they lack water and sanitation—but the numbers do signal a strong two-way relationship between income poverty and deprivation in access to water, the authors stress.

And the public-versus-private debate on water is not helping the poor, argues the 2006 HDR. “The debate over the relative merits of public and private sector performance has been a distraction from the inadequate performance of both public and private water providers in overcoming the global water deficit,” says the Report.

Beyond the household

The poor need ‘water for life’—for drinking, cooking and washing—as well as water to grow food and earn a living, says the Report. Yet poor farmers face a potentially catastrophic water crisis from the combination of climate change and competition for scarce water resources, stress the authors.

The great majority of the world’s malnourished people—estimated now at 830 million—are small farmers, herders, and farm labourers. Climate change threatens to intensify their water insecurity on an unparalleled scale, with parts of sub-Saharan Africa facing crop losses of up to 25 percent. At the same time, competition over water to produce food is escalating at an alarming rate in developing countries, with political and economic power, not concern for poverty, acting as the driving force, says the Report.

Shoring up the rights of the rural poor, increasing their access to irrigation and new technology and helping them adapt to inevitable climate change will be imperative to ward off disaster, contend the authors.

Faced with these challenges, need for increasing cooperation across national borders to ensure water security for the poor is more tangible than ever, as by 2025, over three billion people could be living in countries under water stress, says the Report.

That said, the 2006 HDR challenges predictions that increasing competition for water will inevitably provoke armed conflicts. The Report finds, in fact, that cross-border cooperation over water resources is already far more pervasive and successful than is commonly presumed. India and Pakistan, for example, despite two cross-border wars and constant geopolitical tension, have for half a century jointly managed shared watersheds through the Permanent Indus Water Commission.

“Managing shared water can be a force for peace or for conflict, but it is politics that will decide which course is chosen,” says Watkins. The 2006 HDR stresses that the right political choices on water and sanitation could in fact hold the key to solving the global crisis, as history demonstrates.

History shows the crisis can be fixed

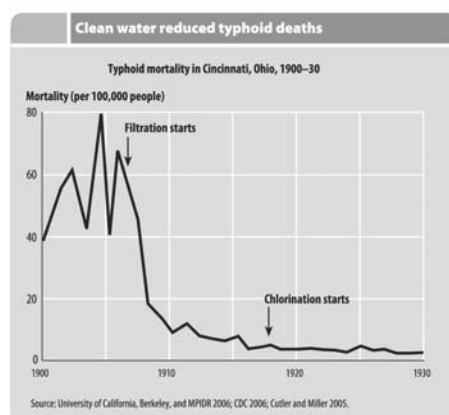
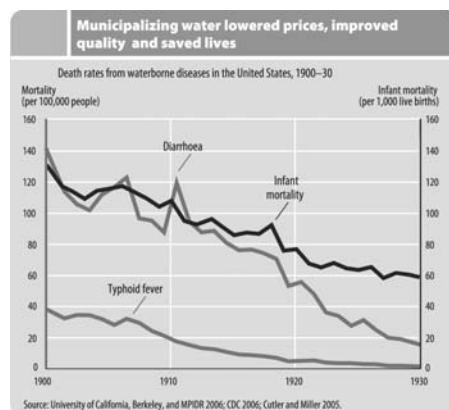
Just over 100 years ago, infant mortality rates in Washington, DC, were twice what they are today in sub-Saharan Africa, write the authors. Water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid fever accounted for 1 in 10 deaths in US cities in the late 19th century, with children the primary victims.

The Report recounts that in the UK and elsewhere, people were getting wealthier through the industrial revolution, but not healthier. The poor moved from rural to urban areas to benefit from the boom while overwhelmed cities turned into lethal open-air sewers, and epidemics of typhoid and cholera regularly swept through cities like New Orleans and New York.

In the hot summer of 1858, the UK Parliament was forced to temporarily close during what became known as ‘The Great Stink,’ caused by sewerage flowing into the river Thames. For the rich, it was a nuisance. For the poor, who got their drinking water from the river, it was a killer.

By the end of the 19th century, governments recognized that the diseases associated with water and sanitation could not be contained in the cities’ poor tenements; it was in the greater public’s interest to take action. In the UK, US and elsewhere, massive investments were made in effective sewerage systems and the purification of water supplies to great effect. No other period in US history, for example, has witnessed such rapid declines in mortality rates.

This change reflected a rare instance in history where a major social ill was successfully resolved. And it could happen again, says the 2006 HDR: “Resolving the water and sanitation crisis could be the next great leap forward for mankind,” says Watkins. “We urgently need history to repeat itself—this time in developing countries.”



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BROADCAST FOOTAGE ON THE 2006 HDR IS AVAILABLE under embargo from Wednesday, 1 November at <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/media>. For broadcast enquiries, please contact Boaz Paldi, boaz.paldi@undp.org, +1 917 213 7520.

ABOUT THIS REPORT: The Human Development Report continues to frame debates on some of the most pressing challenges facing humanity. It is an independent report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Kevin Watkins is the Lead Author of the 2006 report, which includes special contributions from UK Chancellor Gordon Brown, Nigeria’s former Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, President Lula of

Brazil, Former US President Jimmy Carter, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Report is translated into more than a dozen languages and launched in more than 100 countries annually. Further information can be found at <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006>. The 2006 Human Development Report is published in English by Palgrave Macmillan.

ABOUT UNDP: UNDP is the UN's global network to help people meet their development needs and build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working as a trusted partner with governments, civil society and the private sector to help them build their own solutions to global and national development challenges. Further information can be found at www.undp.org

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