



Safe Drinking Water in Cities

United Nations statistics on safe drinking water provision throughout the world indicate a slight improvement in recent years: between 1990 and 2002, approximately 1.1 billion people gained access to an improved source of drinking water, an increase in global coverage from 77 per cent to 83 per cent.

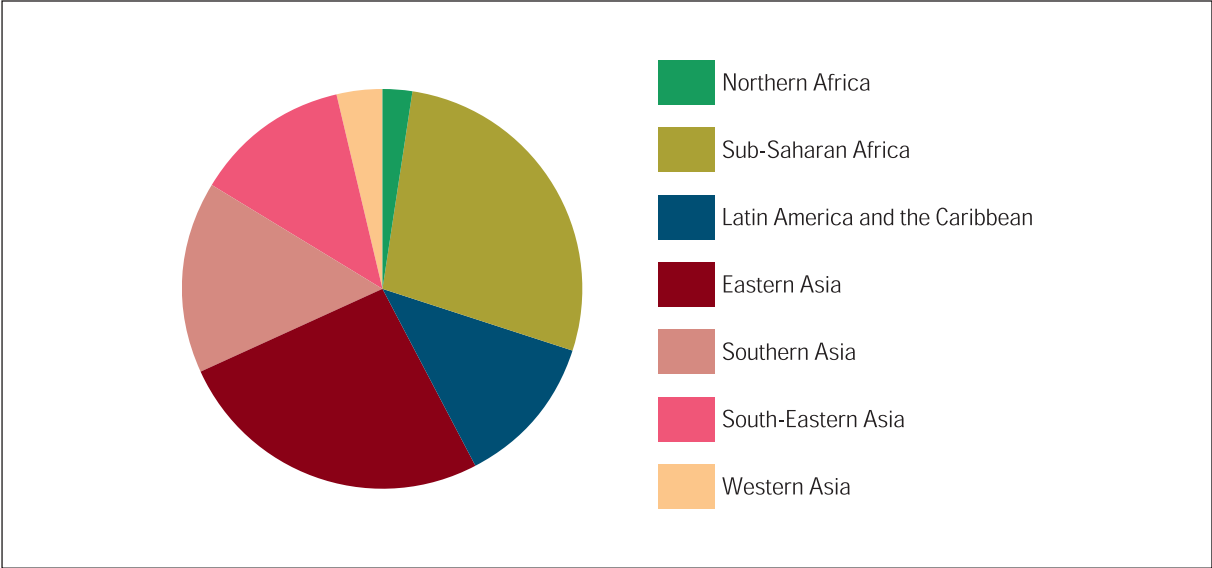
1. Access to safe drinking water is, however, unevenly distributed around the globe. Significant disparities exist on several levels. First, safe drinking water is unevenly distributed between the urban and rural populations of the world: 95 per cent of the world's urban dwellers have access, but only 72 per cent of the world's rural population has access.
2. Per capita water consumption levels vary widely between rich and poor nations, with the former consuming 10 times more drinking water than the latter: 500 to 800 litres per day compared with 60 to 150 litres per day.
3. Asymmetries exist in water access and water management between high-income countries experiencing low population growth and low-income countries facing rapid population growth and water scarcity problems. And fourth, there are extreme differences in the quantity and quality of water that rich and poor households can obtain within the same city in different parts of the world.

Some of the disparities in drinking water provision are clear, but others – particularly intra-city differences in access and consumption – are less evident, as they are often disguised by aggregated urban data that averages out quantity and quality of water among those having access to safe water and those who are frequently deprived. This results in a single, and misleading, estimate of access to safe drinking water in a city.

Current United Nations statistics, which use aggregated data, confidently report that 95 per cent of the world's urban population has "improved" water provision. At least 12 countries with low or middle income levels even report that they have 100 per cent coverage. More than 15 countries that perform poorly on a number of health indicators linked to living conditions also report that their national water coverage is above the world's urban average (95 per cent); and 44 countries (18 in Africa, 12 in Asia and 14 in

Latin America and the Caribbean), each with slum populations representing at least one-fourth of their total urban populations, report that water coverage is almost universal – as high as 90 per cent.

Distribution of urban population lacking improved drinking water by region, 2003



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