

# WHD FEATURE



## **A water and sanitation crisis for billions**

Hundreds of millions of people in poor in city slums around the world do not have access to toilets and are forced to use the outdoors. According to UN research, there were 2.6 billion people in 2002 living without the dignity of clean water, sanitation or waste disposal.

An estimated 79 percent of them live in India and China, compared to 12 percent of the global figure in sub-Saharan Africa. But only 19 of the 30 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are believed able to meet Target 10 of Millennium Development Goal 7 on halving the population without sustainable access to water and sanitation by 2015. The magnitude of the problem is expected to rise as 60 percent of the global population makes cities its home by 2015.

The provision of sustainable water supplies to hundreds of millions of city inhabitants is a global crisis, which manifests itself in following ways:

- Over 1 billion people in the world remain without access to safe drinking water. Most lack sufficient supplies at an affordable price and are forced to expend extreme efforts, a lot of time and finances to get water.
- Explosive urban growth experienced over the last 25 years, which remains unchecked today, is depleting previously bountiful water supply.
- Half of the urban population in sub-Saharan area and southeast Asia has inadequate provision of water.
- World Health Organisation and UNICEF estimates show that 44 million (or 15 percent) of urban dwellers lack 'improved' provisions (i.e. water from either public stand pipes, boreholes or protected dug wells that provide at least 20 liters per person per day within 1 kilometer from their homes). This includes 98 million (or 7 percent) of people in Asia, and 29 million (or 7 percent) in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Lack of clean water and basic sanitation occasions 6,000 preventable deaths of children under age 5 from diarrhoea.
- The economic impact of inadequate water supplies and basic sanitation is equally disastrous. For example, the economy of Peru lost US\$ 28 million from cancelled



exports and US\$ 147 million from lost of tourist earnings as a result of cholera epidemic in 1991.

- In East Africa, interviews at 16 sites in 9 towns show that women in households without piped water spend an average of 92 minutes daily collecting water.
- Between 20 and 30 percent of the urban population in middle income countries purchase water from vendors at prices 10 to 100 times higher than municipal supplies.

“Among the roles sanitation plays in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals is eradicating poverty and hunger by improving vitality and productivity of people and ensuring that the food they eat goes to feed them and not the worms that make them sick,” said Professor Albert Wright, Coordinator of the Millennium Development Task Force on Water & Sanitation

Adding insult to injury, the poor in many African cities have continued to pay up to 20 times more for water than those with access to municipal supplies.

Over the last five years, the world has made commendable strides towards meeting Target 10. But a complex web of constraints has hindered steady progress. These include an inability to service scattered rural communities, the high level of poverty among target groups, financing shortfalls, a lack of political commitment at all levels of government, and weak local administration.

The Task Force on Water and Sanitation believes that if the 1990-2002 trend in coverage prevails, the world will not meet the target – which in reality means providing water and sanitation for as many as 2 billion people (or 370,000 people daily) up to 2015.

To help meet the MDGs, UN-HABITAT’s Water and Sanitation Trust Fund, which received initial support from Canada, Norway and The Netherlands, has extended its Water for African Cities Programme from 8 to 24 countries. It has also made the possibility of expanding the Programme to secondary cities in the less developed countries in Asia with support of the Asian Development Bank for the Water for Asian Cities Programme.

The agency has also been involved in series of water actions worldwide:

- Managing the Water for African Cities programme in which it works with city and local authorities, national governments, the private sector and civil societies to tackle water crisis in African cities. Currently it runs pilot in seven cities -Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Abidjan (in Cote d’Ivoire), Accra (in Ghana), Johannesburg (in South Africa), Lusaka (Zambia) and Nairobi (in Kenya). The African Development Bank has expressed interest in joining its second Phase by injecting about US\$360 million in investments.
- UN-HABITAT has joined the Asian Development Bank in the Water for Asian Cities Programme, which is expected to generate US\$500 million in investments to 5 Asian cities. Already, 6 cities in India have received US\$200 million while the government of The Netherlands has donated a grant of US\$3 million.

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In its effort to steer and monitor progress towards meeting Target 10, the Water and Sanitation Task Force has identified five guiding principles and 10 critical actions. These include – but are not limited to – committing donors to refocus their assistance to least developed countries, getting governments to reallocate finances to the unserved communities, and a global recognition that mobilizing the poor holds the key to meeting Target 10.

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*Journalists around the world are encouraged to write similar stories about meeting the MDGs in their own cities about slum upgrading.*

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