

WORLD FACING "SILENT EMERGENCY" AS BILLIONS STRUGGLE WITHOUT CLEAN WATER OR BASIC SANITATION, SAY WHO & UNICEF

New report warns that vicious cycle of ill-health and poverty could defeat human development efforts, with children the first to suffer

New York/Geneva - More than 2.6 billion people – over 40 per cent of the world's population – do not have basic sanitation, and more than one billion people still use unsafe sources of drinking water, warns a report released today by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF.

Entitled *Meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) drinking water and sanitation target - A mid-term assessment of progress*, the report details the progress of individual countries, regions, and the world as a whole between the MDG baseline year of 1990 and the half-way mark of 2002. It makes two significant predictions on reaching the 2015 goals¹, based on progress to date:

- The global sanitation target will be missed by half a billion people – most of them in rural Africa and Asia – allowing waste and disease to spread, killing millions of children and leaving millions more on the brink of survival.
- The world is on track to meet the drinking water target.

The severe human and economic toll of missing the sanitation target could be prevented by closing the gap between urban and rural populations and by providing simple hygiene education, say WHO and UNICEF.

The agencies warned that a global trend towards urbanization is marginalising the rural poor and putting huge strain on basic services in cities. As a result, families living in rural villages and urban slums are being trapped in a cycle of ill-health and poverty. Children are always the first to suffer from the burden of disease caused by dirty water and poor hygiene, while the wider impact of unhygienic environments drags back economic progress and erodes good governance.

"Around the world millions of children are being born into a silent emergency of simple needs," says Carol Bellamy, UNICEF's Executive Director. "The growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots in terms of access to basic services is killing around 4000 children every day and underlies many more of the 10 million child deaths each year. We have to act now to close this gap or the death toll will certainly rise."

"Water and sanitation are among the most important determinants of public health. Wherever people achieve reliable access to safe drinking-water and adequate

¹ Eight Millennium Development Goals were agreed by the Member States of the United Nations at the Millennium Summit in 2000. The targets state that the proportion of people worldwide not having access to an improved water source and the proportion of people worldwide not having access to adequate sanitation facilities should be halved between the baseline year of 1990 and 2015.

sanitation they have won a major battle against a wide range of diseases," says WHO Director-General Dr LEE Jong-wook.

Developing regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, are most at risk. But the report also highlights some worrying trends in the industrialised regions², where coverage figures for clean water and basic sanitation facilities are estimated to have decreased by 2 per cent between 1990 and 2002. In the former Soviet Union, only 83 per cent of people had access to adequate sanitation facilities. With economic and population pressures growing, these percentages could decrease.

The consequences of inaction today are severe, according to WHO and UNICEF. Diarrhoeal disease currently takes the lives of 1.8 million people each year – most of them children under five - with millions more left permanently debilitated. Over 40 billion work hours are lost in Africa to the need to fetch drinking water. And many children, particularly girls, are prevented from going to school for want of latrines, squandering their intellectual and economic potential.

Reversing this trend and moving towards universal coverage for water and sanitation will take more than money, said Bellamy and Lee. National policies based on the principle of "some for all" rather than "all for some" have been the key to improvements in many countries. And at the local level, resources have to be retargeted to include the poorest communities, with local government and the private sector co-operating to bring affordable solutions.

"To meet the 2015 targets, countries need to create the political will and resources to serve a billion new urban dwellers, and reduce by almost 1 billion the number of rural dwellers without access to adequate sanitation facilities. Otherwise we risk leaving millions, if not billions, out of the development process," says Dr Lee.

WHO and UNICEF say the report, which is the first in a series looking at progress in water and sanitation coverage, should be a wake-up call to all global leaders. Every country still has work to do to eliminate disparities in basic services and the data shows clearly how that can be done before the MDG deadline of 2015.

There are also some very encouraging signs. Great gains in water and sanitation coverage have been made against considerable odds in many countries. This progress came as a direct result of political prioritisation and a drive to find locally effective solutions.

"This report is important because it proves that significant improvements are possible in a short space of time, even in the poorest countries." says Ms Bellamy. "By identifying trends now, and committing to course corrections, we have a real opportunity to ensure that by 2015 these basic essentials of life are available to all."

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² See Annex for the MDG regions and the countries they include.

ANNEX 1 – Progress Overview

Progress towards the drinking water goal:

The world appears on target to reach the MDG drinking water goal of reducing the number of people without access to an improved drinking water source³ to 800 million by 2015. Over the past 12 years, WHO and UNICEF estimate that an additional 1.1 billion people have gained access to an improved source of drinking water – bringing global coverage rates up to 83 per cent, from 77 per cent in 1990.

South Asia shows the greatest gains in drinking water coverage, increasing from 71 per cent to 84 per cent. Great progress has been made in India and China. But Asia still accounts for two-thirds (675 million) of the people worldwide whose drinking water still comes from unsafe sources like rivers, ponds, and vendors.

Sub-Saharan Africa has shown patchier progress. While countries such as Angola, Central African Republic, Chad, Malawi and Tanzania have all increased drinking water coverage by over 50 per cent, the region's overall drinking water coverage has increased by only nine percentage points since 1990 - to 58 per cent - leaving 288 million people still with no choice but to rely on water that could leave them sick or dead.

In addition to the encouraging progress made by individual countries across the globe, much of the new coverage in developing countries has come from water piped directly into homes. Roughly half of the world's population now drinks piped water. WHO and UNICEF stress that substantive economic benefits will result from this increase⁴: piped water into the home is associated with the greatest improvements in household health, and frees women and girls from the burden of water carrying, giving them greater time for work, family and school.

Progress towards the sanitation goal:

While more than 1 billion people have gained access to basic sanitation services, population growth has outstripped our efforts, translating the numerical gains into much smaller gains in proportional terms. In 1990, 49 per cent of world had access to basic sanitation facilities. Today, that figure has increased by only nine percentage points, leaving us way behind schedule for the 2015 MDG target (75 per cent coverage). If this trend continues, the world will miss its sanitation pledge by over 500 million people.

Eastern Asia shows the greatest increase in coverage, from 24 to 45 per cent, fuelled primarily by gains in China. But Asia is still home to three out of the four people worldwide who don't have use of even a simple improved latrine. Over half of all

³ Improved drinking water sources include: household connection, public standpipe, borehole, protected dug well, protected spring, rainwater collection.

“Evaluation of the Costs and Benefits of Water and Sanitation Improvements at the Global Level”, commissioned from the Swiss Tropical Institute by WHO in 2004, estimated that, for every US\$1 invested in water and sanitation improvements, the economic benefit would be between US\$3 to US\$34 - depending on the type of water system and region in which the investment occurs.

people living without improved sanitation live in India (735 million) and China (725 million).

Sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, has the lowest percentage of people with access to basic sanitation facilities – 36 per cent, an increase of just four per cent since 1990. In the developing world as a whole, only 49% of people had access to adequate sanitation facilities, while in the world's developed regions, 98% of people did.

Worldwide, Benin, India, Madagascar and Myanmar made especially rapid progress towards the sanitation target. But only two out of the world's nine developing regions - Eastern Asia and South-eastern Asia - are on track to meet the sanitation goal, with north Africa and Latin America very close behind.