Prevention of adequate sanitation is crucial

Progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on sanitation is considered to be the most lagging of the MDGs. More than 2.5 billion people – roughly 37% of the world’s population – still lack what many of us take for granted: access to adequate sanitation. A total of 1.8 billion people have gained access to adequate sanitation since 1990. The number of people resorting to open defecation – the riskiest sanitation practice – has decreased by 271 million since 1990. But 1.1 billion people, or 15% of the global population, still practise open defecation. Twenty countries, mostly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, account for over 80% of open defecation in the world.

In the meantime, unsafe water and inadequate sanitation and hygiene are significant contributors to the 1.8 million deaths caused by diarrhoea every year and millions more suffer from intestinal worms, schistosomiasis and trachoma.

Lack of access to improved sanitation is also holding back progress on other MDGs, including child and maternal health, nutrition and education, as well as affording dignity and empowerment especially to women and girls.

The economic justification for investing in sanitation is clear. Every US$1 spent on sanitation brings a $5.50 return by keeping people healthy and productive. The potential global economic gains from investing in sanitation and water are estimated to be $260 billion per year. Poor sanitation, on the other hand, costs countries between 0.5 and 7.2% of their GDP.

As the MDG period draws to a close, new global challenges of rapid urbanization, increasing water scarcity and pollution are emerging. Wastewater is increasingly viewed as a resource that can play an important role in urban water and food security. This new paradigm demands increased attention to safe wastewater management and reuse alongside urgent efforts to increase access to basic sanitation.

Campaign approaches are effective and are needed to catalyse action, bring together practitioners around common messages, and kick-start implementation. With the final drive towards the 2015 MDG deadline, a unique window of opportunity exists to scale up adequate sanitation.

WHO will play a key role in supporting the campaign and focusing efforts on wastewater management objectives.

WHO role

WHO provides the global normative guidelines of the safe use of wastewater excreta and greywater and promotes their implementation through a concept of sanitation safety planning.

WHO promotes adoption of health-based targets and regulations and provides capacity building to Member States to promote effective risk management practices to sanitation practitioners, communities and individual households. WHO also co-leads global monitoring of the Public Health and Environment Call to Action for Sanitation

The WHO Department of Public Health and Environment (PHE) works to promote a healthier environment, intensify primary prevention and influence public policies in all sectors in order to address the root causes of environmental threats to health.
MDG targets on water and sanitation through the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.

What WHO is doing

WHO carries out its activities in response to evidence of where the greatest health burdens exist, and where the greatest differences can be made. Therefore, activities focus on poor communities that are lacking adequate sanitation.

This includes rural and urban areas. There are specific regions where the lack of coverage is most acute, e.g. in the smaller urban centres and rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and large cities with vulnerable water systems, e.g. in Asia.

Sanitation safety planning

WHO will support the scaling up of good sanitation practice, encouraging the application of its guidelines for safe wastewater reuse and in supporting the development of sanitation safety plans.

Revision of the 2006 WHO Guidelines for safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater in agriculture and aquaculture.

WHO is working on water quality and health to review and update the 2006 guidelines, taking into account new evidence to be presented in a set of harmonized guidelines covering the water cycle for drinking-water, wastewater and recreational water.

Capacity development on safe use of wastewater in agriculture

WHO recently completed a series of five regional workshops on safe use of wastewater in agriculture with FAO, UNEP, UNWDPC, UNU-INWEH, IMWI and ICID. The workshops brought together multi-disciplinary groups to examine the opportunities and risks of waste-water use from health, agricultural productivity, environment, institutional and economic perspectives. The workshops covered 72 countries in five regions. Development of Phase 2 is underway.

Coordination with stakeholders in the UN-Water wastewater task force

WHO participates in the UN-Water wastewater task force, which plays a leading role in supporting the post-2015 development agenda on wastewater.

Cooperation with UNHABITAT on urban sanitation and wastewater management

WHO and UNHABITAT share a common mandate on advocating sustainable wastewater management. Wastewater largely emanates from urban areas and is often discharged untreated into the environment. WHO and UNHABITAT collaborate on the application of sanitation safety planning in urban areas, and on sustainable treatment systems.

Under the call to action, WHO and UNHABITAT will further develop opportunities for scaling up wastewater collection treatment and reuse, including innovative approaches to low-cost sewerage, decentralized systems and improved urban planning approaches in order to maximize opportunities for wastewater reuse. The two agencies will also develop risk assessment tools for urban areas.

In addition, in support of the Joint Monitoring Programme, strategies for improved urban sanitation and wastewater monitoring will be developed to better target investments to unserved communities.

Key publications

- Guidelines for the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater (2006) available in English and French
- Information kit (2008) on the Guidelines for the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater
- Information kit (2010) on the Guidelines for the safe use of wastewater, excreta and greywater
- Report of the first, second and third consultative workshop on the WHO/IDRC/FAO project “non-treatment options for safe wastewater use in poor urban communities

WHO contact

Kate Medlicott, Technical Officer, Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Health
Department of Public Health and Environment, World Health Organization
20, avenue Appia, CH-1211 Geneva 27
Tel. +41 22 791 3183, E-mail: medlicottk@who.int